

***Poetic Collage as a Response and an Invocation:***

by Wendy Miller

The feminist art critic, Lucy Lippard (1983) says that one of art's functions is to recall that which is absent -- whether it is history, or the unconscious, or form, or social justice. What is absent in health? What is absent in ill-health? What is present? When I first starting working with medically ill patients in 1986, it was a conscious choice, not only how to begin the shaping of my clinical practice, but a choice in activism. I felt that health was the next political arena for me. I believed that a revolution of consciousness was going to take place in the field of mind-body health. And that has proved to be true, not only in terms of health and healthcare, but in the various uses of integrative arts medicine. The work grew out of my experience with my own immune system illness, Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS), and how that experience intersected with my career, my art, my hopes, my dreams and my experience of my own "Authentic Self" or what could be called *my own voice*.

Coming out of the illness/healing period, I felt I knew something very subtle and deep about the intricate process of healing. I knew there were relationships of layering between the emotional (our actions and reactions), biographical (our unconscious responses to internal family dynamics), biochemical (hormonal, neurological, physical responses) and spiritual (values and assessments of meaning) parts of ourselves. I knew that it was important for these parts to come into harmony or congruence with one another. I knew that imagery or mythopoetics was a language subtle and layered enough to capture the signposts for health. I longed for people who could "interpret" physical image differently than me -- people who understood the immune system, the brain, the endocrine system, the

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acupuncture points, the places in the body that I knew were being expressed, and expressing themselves, in imagery.

I collected pictures and words about illness and healing. I believed that in putting them near each other, something significant would become revealed. Like my CFIDS client Katie, who, amidst her tears and fears, would find these tiny moments of respite:

It was not an opening, more like a cracking, a violent cracking. I would sit and look out my windows for hours, look at the bay, the birds, and nothing was working in me, nothing would 'go'. I didn't care about anything. I wonder now, though, if all that staring fed me in some way that I don't know. It didn't bring me solace or peace, but my eyes were doing the seeing and my conscious mind was getting nothing from it. I could have been watching a blank wall for all I felt, but I wonder if it was feeding me. I think my eyes were taking in some other place or part of nature like birds that come and go at different times of the year and how do all the eels in the world know to go to the Sargasso Sea to breed, and then they die and the babies swim back, and ....There must be some center core part that is missing that knowledge about how things live and die and grow and are reborn or recycled. I'm starting to feel like I did when I was a kid, you know just more certain that there is a life process. But I was stripped down to nothing. Remember that New Years eve when I realized that every breath I had ever taken was for some other reason, some other person.

As Katie began to say yes to the life that was hers, dry as it seemed,

there were these exchanges where she would move into food imagery. There she was, smiling, off of the sweetness of caramels, imagining the yes of their presence in her life, something way off limits in her healing diet, as she attempted to rid her system of the interplay of sugars and yeast and environmental molds and toxins. Her being would light up, and lighten up, as she drew out her words and her insights slowly, meticulously like the heating of caramel.

**How can I get the caramel to cover me so I can stay in my center? How can I get the caramel to drip over my own internal judgments? How can I learn to BE?**

**My body is giving me an answer to stay in the caramel. I think it's about repetitive rhythms. They are good for me.**

Psychiatrist and artist Charles Johnston (1984) writes that "health is as much a function of internal listening as it is external intervention." Creating provides a vehicle for listening --- listening to and from oneself; listening between selves; listening to the uniqueness of these exchanges. "When germinal levels of experience are engaged in an integrated way, it is obvious that identity is not a static entity that changes only as the result of an applied force. The person knows themselves firsthand as self-generating and self-directing, creative in the deepest sense." Johnston (1984)

Being alive  
is a dual responsibility:  
to our shared frailty,  
on the one hand,  
and to all we can create,  
on the other.

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The mutual responsibilities  
of the ill to express  
and the healthy to hear  
meet in the recognition  
that our creativity  
depends on our frailty.  
Life without illness  
would not just be incomplete,  
it would be impossible.

Arthur Frank (1991)

A healing relationship is reminding the other person of his/her strength -- overlaying the layers of authentic MEness so they can finally relate to one another. Helene Cixous writes about this creatively as making love between the texts. That makes a lot of sense to me. And so I write:

What is the foreplay between art and intuition, molecular healing and Sleeping Beauty? How does the brain dance with the kisses of music? What wild and crazy positions can we find ourselves in together when psychoneuroimmunolgy unfolds inside the clay hands and finds itself being molded in gentle coils and placed inside a dark urn wrapped in oxides and seaweed. The veiled thoughts will walk along the streets of healing like visible shapes with coy darting eyes. And what will they see? Just what will they see in the land of symbology and time? The power of emergence. The virus unfolds its own coded language into the hidden jewels of metaphor and myth, And Sleeping Beauty dreams on, for

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it is in her bed of unconscious rest that all the inner  
soaring discovers its own order of time and place. Time  
has its own time. We can honor it or we can resist it.  
We can part the waters, Moses, or we can let our hair  
grow long through the hundred years of sleep. What, oh  
what, is the major thrust of resistance to the time it  
takes to live, in sickness or in health?

### Resistance within Imagery Work

Take the image of looking at the world through a venetian blind. Do you filter out the blind or do you see the sky as having lines? Such is the issue in medical illness counseling with so many of these immune system illnesses. It is also the issue in taking responsibility for guiding people to say yes to life, in sickness or in health, to being able to say yes even when what is life is life under such different conditions than any other time or expectation. What is physical and what is neuropsychological? It becomes a problem of distinction and separation: not knowing what to filter out and what to leave in leaves people very disoriented. The same is true in imagery when people are trying to decide what to listen to, i.e., what counts and what doesn't? It's like learning to hear your own voice, to have it carry the content rather than the description of the content.

Listening is a crucial ingredient for healing. Listening closely and saying yes to the small seeds of mythic truth that speak through our body-souls. Listening deeply to the complexity of imagery as it meanders in its connection to the Self. The filters of doubt and fear and hope and needs and shoulds come in and we get confused. But every once in a while, an image will appear so different than the various voices of the mind, of the personality, of the collective even, and it will hold the potential for belief and trust, just a slight moment, as the pervasiveness of illness and all its pains and

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sensations continue to surround it almost immediately, but these moments build when they are collected, witnessed, recorded as noticed remnants of our experience. As more and more of them happen, a dialog is built up with an inner being, some call it self healing or self awareness or the sensory organ of the immune system or the Self.

But the resistance is very real and pervasive. It needs to be honored, to be moved along in a parallel process because it is like an island within the waters of one's psychic wound, and as illness progresses through a system, this island holds the resistance AND the potential.

“Careful honesty is required because images never lie. In fact, they often know exactly what they want, and can rebel when they are misunderstood.....the technological age is propelling us into a space quite unrelated to our instincts. We have forgotten how to listen to our bodies... We can turn ourselves over to medicine without ever questioning what the body is trying to tell us. To our peril, we assume it has no wisdom of its own and we attempt to right out physical ills without making the necessary psychic corrections. We may temporarily succeed but the body has its way and soon after symptoms appear, attempting to draw our attention to some basic problem. If we ignore the small symptoms, the body eventually takes its revenge.”

(Marion Woodman, p. 26)

## TINA AND QUALITY-OF-LIFE THREATENING ILLNESS

Tina - so small and thin with a concave chest, environmentally ill and chemically sensitive to what became almost everything and everyone. People passed her like a ball between the 'physical' doctors (internists) and the 'mental' doctors (psychiatrists). She was filled with feelings of abandonment by the medical profession. Her internal mechanisms and

strategies resonated with this abandonment, and together, they set up another more psychological and cellular process also in need of healing to be able to survive this journey. Within her cells, she carried her parents relationships to their bodies -- the ones they needed to develop for survival. As Holocaust survivors, their choices seemed intellectual, austere and barren to her. Yet there they were. Her survival was to be connected; her parents survival was to be disconnected. Something very painful and relentless was pushing through her and no one seemed equipped to find it or help her, nor could she let them in, though she so tried.

To say yes to a process so convoluted, so lonely in its individualized form, it seemed impossible. The task of unfolding in one's own way and in ones' own time. How to live through the years of pain and illness and come out recognizable, come out OK. She weighed 95 pounds. She could eat nothing except rice and potatoes. As the months passed, the doctors suggested IV foods. Everyone waited.

Like a plant in your living room, arriving full and of itself, you water it, it weakens; you move it towards the light, it wilts; you water it more, you water it less, its leaves continue to brown, to fall; you feed it, you cut it back, it darkens as new growth curls away from itself. The caregivers become frustrated, mistrust their own abilities, ask for advice, make up songs, conversations, musings. It will not grow healthily. Eventually, everyone wishes for it to be gone just so the painful confrontation can be gone, no knowledge, no hope, nowhere to go.

No one knew what to do for Tina. Eventually she had no choice but to strengthen her own trust and her own ability to listen. She could not abandon herself and yet she was biochemically depleted. She had to do the hardest job psychically with the weakest amount of energy. Before Descartes, body and soul were not separate. As they became separated, so our image world lost its way, towards ourselves. It left us birthing alone, or so it seemed.

Tina got very sick. The physicians could do no more, nor could they have her in their offices. They sent her to the psychiatrists. She told them there was a gas leak in her home. They thought for sure it was her deep emotional trauma. It turned out she was right. She ended up living in an environmentally protected bubble, away from the physicians, away from her family. Her mother went to visit. For her, she thought it was worse than Auschwitz. The complexity of cellular layers was beginning to reattach to her. The complexity of mind-body fusion grew.

The task of being with someone in that long, slow, arduous process -- continuing to say yes to the lived life that was. Saying yes to the sadness, yes to the deep sadness that surrounds. Trying to come out recognizable yourself, knowing that there is something beyond the sadness and the losses, invisible as it may seem. The task of holding onto faith while being a creative detective in this land of imagery, art, movement, and health. The task of waiting for the wait to settle. In breath. In warmth. In the ever so sensitive relationship evolving.

## NATHAN AND LIFE THREATENING ILLNESS

Nathan -- an artist and law librarian with five years of melanomas showing up on his chest.

**“What is growing inside?”** he asks.

**“What does it look like?”** I ask.

He answers, **“I can’t grow until they stop growing.”**

He comes to to my office to get “his emotions off his chest.” He draws an egg birthing. Emotions are very scary for him. They seem out of control. He uses yellow tape to cover a dot on the page, a hole he has made. It is so much work to learn and discern what information to listen to from the doctors and what choices to make. He draws a white half circle as what he knows from the doctors, on top is a smooth rock with a lot of layers

floating and hovering. He doesn't want to touch anything because it may upset something.

We begin to construct some art pieces while we spend time together. We want to find out what enlivens him. He creates a dome, a storehouse of information which is organized in his own way. He doubts it is organized well because he is the only one who knows how to find things. He sees it as big and swelling. Doubt is the resistance here. He doubts his own creative/spiritual awareness and potential. We hold the content AND the form and let it appear and see what it needs. We discover through slowly entering the image that in fact he spends a lot of time incubating and painting here and eventually, up against his own language of doubt, he comes to realize that the dome is his brilliance. He needs to listen to it even though there are pains in the chest. The dome is also like a cave. We go inside the dome and take out whatever we can find; bring it out in the light to look at it. There is a little boy playing with toys. The smooth thing is the little boy. The cave is sheltering him. Nathan tells the little boy, age 3, he is there but the boy doesn't listen. Inexperience is the resistance here. The unconscious has not been attended to yet. Later, the boy turns around, he is bald headed. He says:

**You take better care of yourself. Please. Then you are taking better care of me.**

Nathan doesn't find this earth shattering, but it has, in fact, shattered an invisible wall within.

My role is keeping track of the process, all of its history and all of the places we have been. The little boy came out of the pain in the chest, out of the smooth rock with the layers floating, out of a place of order only he understands. He discovers that the little boy is not good at common sense. He's good with emotions. He's always there. It turns out he has wisdom which Nathan can trust. As a little boy in life, Nathan had a bad temper. He

was often told that he didn't have to get upset over this, whatever the situation may have been. But here we are now -- and we do have to get upset over this, information gets jumbled all around, and chaos comes up. The little boy used to let anger out and everything would fall apart. Now Nathan invites the little boy to come to him, upset or not upset, just to come. They play together inside a chest full of toys.

Over time, as images evolve, the little boy appears to have disappeared from our work, but the chest remains. Nathan says,

**The secrets that the kid had were in there but I never paid any attention to them. Rather than opening and closing the chest, I want to keep the chest open. The things inside are basic things about myself, about relationships and about my art, my painting.**

This image helps aim our awareness - we are shifting to a different level, from a focus on personal self to a relationship with a higher self. We take the chest up -- up to a mountain. Nathan rides down on it, all on his own. It is a painted paper chest, and it needs no brakes. We repeat this action many times over time, internally and aesthetically, as he often feels that what he sees is not enough. We go into the body with this process of riding, riding trust and protection. He listens and hears,

**Hold on, that's fine. Make sure you are anchored to me. Watch the wind. All you have to do is worry about not falling off. You're going to have to balance a little. (He was worried the chest was closed at the end of the rides.) You'll know when to open it. It's closed because it's traveling. Closed or open, it is always tied to you.**

Our moments are soft with sound. He is coming alive: his time for new wisdom to come alive is happening right now, among us and between us.

**Ride down; don't effort at it. Let go. It's letting go**

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**time. Let the wisdom operate. Ride me rather than  
pulling the reins.**

Trust and protection are the movement here. The man holds on so he is protected and not worried about any “bumps”, as he calls them now.

**No really they are holes in the road. I can do things  
without figuring it all out.**

He is more prepared to figure out what is really important to him. He has more information on how his emotions work. He has healing within him, and he knows it. It can be fun to pay attention. It's his choice. He can go through life without paying attention or he can listen and pay attention. It's become his choice,

The language of metaphor is such a yes language in its holism. Our entire work is about chests and bumps and holes, but we do not call it cancer, because that is not the name of the image we are riding. Yet we are always talking about cancer. We are saying yes to the lived life outside the body, inside the body, in between us, and the life that has come to meet us to help us live the life we are saying yes to. These moments are the moments that transport beyond questions of living or dying, healing unto life or unto death.

Tina and Nathan are alive and well, neither one living life under the ill conditions any longer. They are awaiting the moment for their moments, here with us. Their bodies as containers have strengthened to be able to hold the complexity of their healing processes. Their moments turned into pulses, turned into voices, turned into forms, turned into processes of strength and wellness. What do we really know about the process of saying yes to life as it takes us, alone, in spite of ourselves, towards ourselves?