

ART & THE POWER OF HEALING





WRITTEN BY:

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Annie is a health educator and nurse in the making. She is passionate about creating safe spaces for everyone to find belonging and connection. She loves to learn about health and wellness, and being able to use her knowledge to help empower others to be their healthiest and happiest selves. She believes that knowledge is power, and that everyone deserves equitable opportunities to access education, healthcare, and community support. Annie was born and raised in Utah, and loves calling this state her home. She is passionate about protecting our environment and making the world around her a better place. You can find her riding her bike, playing up in the mountains, or cuddled up with a good book after work. Say hi next time you see her around!

HOW ART CAN HEAL

A few semesters ago, I was given an assignment in my anatomy class – to use an art medium of my choice to share anatomically correct information with an audience. My professor left the project fairly open to our interpretation, albeit following a few parameters to meet the requirements for the assignment. I have never considered myself to be much of an artistic person, even though I do consider myself to be someone who has a meaningful and profound relationship and appreciation of the arts... I just tend to enjoy what other people create, rather than making it myself. For this project, I was a little stumped at first, but then I started to think about all the times I felt overwhelmed by my emotions and turned to what I've always found to be a positive outlet for me – writing poetry. Before I jump in any further, I want to state that I am by no means a poet in any formal sense. I just write what I'm feeling and try to somehow format it in a way that adds emphasis to the specific words I want to stand out or rhyme. Over the years I have found that writing in this way when I'm trying to process a lot of big feelings helps me to unpack all the layers and hidden meanings to whatever it is I'm feeling. Sure – I might be feeling angry, sad, or happy, but why am I feeling that way, and how else can I say that to represent how I'm feeling without using those basic words? How can I use my words to paint a picture of how I am feeling, rather than just stating what the feeling is? For me, it's a cathartic exercise, even if I'm not impressed with the final product or don't feel like sharing it with anyone. It's just for me, and I think that's why it can be such a healthy outlet.

So anyway, back to my semester project. I decided to write poetry about anatomy. And as I began to sift through possible topics that could evoke an emotional response from me, in the only way I knew how to write poetry, I settled on female reproductive anatomy. At the time, a lot was happening in the world concerning women's bodies, and as a woman passionate about my independence and autonomy over my body and my decisions, I felt helpless to address the social issues at hand. I write about this, not to make a political statement here, but to help you as the reader to understand my motivation to write about my selected topic. It was something that felt overwhelming to me, with a lot of layers and big feelings to unpack – similar to the things I had written poetry about before. I did my best to research existing works on female reproductive poetry and found the field severely lacking in works similar to what I was envisioning. I took what inspiration I could and began to write. What I thought would be a page, maybe two of rhythmic choppy verses turned into 11 pages of pouring out my heart and soul, expressing years of feeling slighted, objectified, and othered, making space for myself and my feelings about what it means to be a woman, not only anatomically as a female, but as someone who identifies as a woman in social terms as well. And as I began to write, and as I began to release the dam of carefully bottled emotions into my poem, I began to heal. Not in the sense that everything magically became right in the world, or that I just got over it and accepted that this is the way that things are, but in the sense that I realized I had grown into such a strong and resilient person through everything that I had experienced, that I knew that I was going to be ok. No matter what happened in the world, I would find a way for me to be ok, and I wouldn't let my rage, despair, or helplessness drown me.



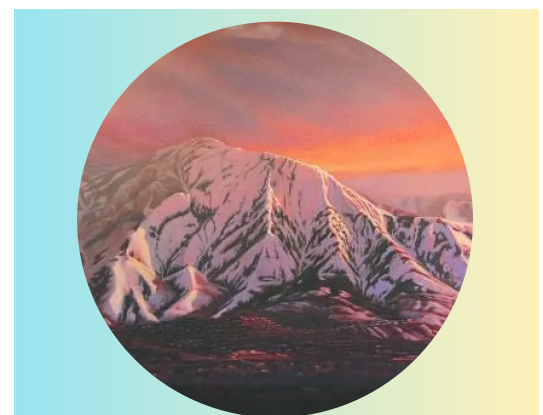
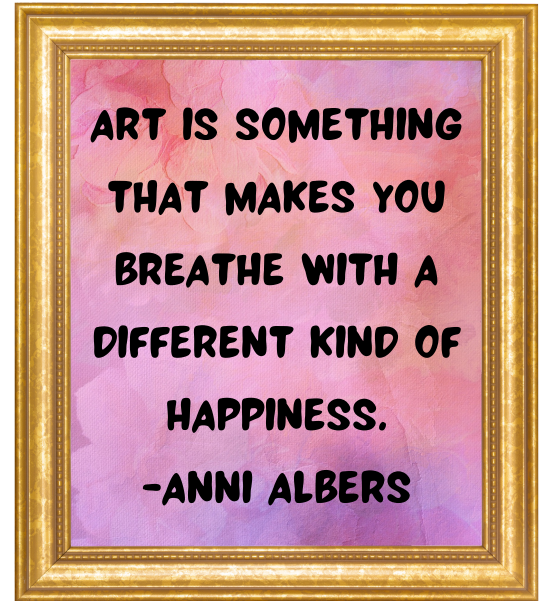
So, while I found the experience of writing the poem itself to be healing and cathartic, I was nervous to share my poem with my class. This was a condition of the semester project; each student needed to present their project to the class, share a little bit about their research and creation process, how their project was anatomically educational, and why they chose this topic for their project. I knew this requirement going into the project, and while I had shared my poem with a few select friends and other professors I had connected well with, sharing my heart and soul with strangers felt like a whole different beast. I had shared my poem with people already established in my support system, people who I knew would only offer me positive, supportive, and constructive feedback. I didn't think I could count on the whole class to be so welcoming and understanding, especially when it felt like the world was already so divided about this very topic in the current climate. That being said, I was so astounded when I read my poem to my class, and the response was overwhelmingly positive and supportive. I had no idea that the words I had written so tenderly and passionately for myself had the power to make others feel so seen and heard. Yet there I was, empowering others by sharing my feelings and experiences through art. There I was, making myself vulnerable in order to make a space for anyone who resonated with how I felt or what I had experienced. There I was, giving myself and others hope for the future, hope for the world around us, hope for their own healing journeys.





From emotional outlets to community connections, there are countless examples of how the arts can help heal and be good for our wellbeing. Artistic expression has long been a foundational piece of the human experience, telling the stories of those who came before us and illustrating the beautiful and dark history of the world. Art has a means of connecting us to our communities, cultures, experiences, and the world around us. Many over the course of history have used art to make a statement to the world, making the most of the way art gives a platform and voice to the voiceless, the marginalized, the ones who feel othered, the misunderstood.

The intersection of art, wellness, and healing can be found in countless places across our society, perhaps most intriguingly in healthcare. Art therapy is now common practice in patients struggling with mental health issues, overcoming trauma, grief or loss, battling cancer, recovering from a stroke, and more. Art therapy has found to be an effective motivator in helping patients address significant mental and physical health issues through artistic expression. Additionally, it has been found that creating or even just seeing art can have positive impacts on the brain. Positive effects of art include increased serotonin levels, increased blood flow to areas of the brain associated with pleasure and rewards, increased sense of hope for the future, improved focus, increased self-esteem, increased ability to process emotions, improved communication, increased sense of connection and belonging, and fostering new ways of thinking through the creation of new neural pathways. So, whether you enjoy creating art and expressing yourself, or appreciating the artistic expression granted to others, my hope for you is that you can find a way to let yourself be vulnerable and connect with yourself or the world around you through the arts, and be reminded how beautiful, remarkable, challenging, eye-opening, complex, profound, devastating, exhilarating, precious, and extraordinary this experience called life is.



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