

Together We Heal

Throughout history humans have turned to the arts to heal. Our earliest ancestors used dance, storytelling, and painting to heal from loss and to honor the dead. Researchers at Stanford University's Center for Art and Healing found that when subjects emotionally, physically and/or psychologically damaged by personal injury or by great loss participate in creative

activities - either as creator or as audience - their brain waves shift. Through listening to music, dancing, writing, painting, and other creative activities people move from a place of devastation and pain to a place of peace, nurture, and, ultimately, strength.

Eminent mythologist Joseph Campbell said that creativity is a form of participation with the Divine. Through the arts we move in to the flow of grace and find the peace that comes with making meaning of our lives and

restoring ourselves to dignity.

On September 11, 2001 the United States experienced the most tragic loss this country has ever known. Not only were thousands of lives lost but so was our faith in our security. For the first time America was dealt a brutal - and personal - reminder of our vulnerability. The reverberations of this loss have continued through this year underscoring the fragility and the preciousness of what we once may have taken for granted.

Gloucester is a city steeped in loss. Reminders of our history of loss are written on the walls of City Hall and carved into plaques along Stacey Boulevard. Is it any wonder that Gloucester is also a city steeped in the arts? This city - through our history of loss and our tradition of art - has much to teach the entire country at this time.

The American Association of Museums (AAM) has initiated a call to the American artistic community to band together as the anniversary date of

September 11th approaches to present our communities with programs that offer healing through the power of art.

When the North Shore Arts Association initiated work on two programs - an art exhibition and a performance program - I was invited to be on the committee. At the time I was facing personal loss that cut deep in to my sense of my own identity. I felt drained with nothing left to give. I didn't see how my participation could contribute anything - either to the programs or to my life. But then art worked its magic.....

Artist Judi Rotenberg was painting in her studio on the morning of September 11, 2001. She was creating a series of floral paintings based on *The Song of Solomon*. On one she wrote the words: "This is my Beloved. This is my Friend." Her husband, Richard Ross, was leaving on a business trip that morning. He gave her a goodbye kiss and then commented that she must be painting that one for him since he was both her beloved and friend. A few hours later he was aboard American Airlines Flight 11 when it collided with the World Trade Center.

Gloucester police officer Mark Foote was among those who went to New York as part of the recovery team. Through photographs he documented the devastation, the recovery workers ceaseless efforts, and the poignant grief of the thousands of people who brought flowers, presents, candles, and letters to the work sites. In one memorable photograph shot down a NYC street, the Empire State Building disappears into smoke and mist. Beyond it - nothing. In the foreground is a Gloucester Police cruiser.

As the committee began to assemble artworks expressing the bravery of generations of heroes, I saw a pattern I had not anticipated.

Painter Waldo Peirce immortalizes Gloucester's great hero A. Piatt Andrew in a towering portrait. A fourteen year old girl from Orleans, France willingly gives her life to help rid her country of oppression and sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington immortalizes her in a statue that becomes a beloved centerpiece of our city. Gloucester sculptor Ken Hruby

expresses the legacy of his Viet Nam experience in bold constructions. Walker Hancock sculpts a magnificent angel tenderly cradling the body of a fallen soldier to honor heroes of World War II.

Everywhere loss is transformed into a celebration of the human spirit through the grace of art.

Performance artists are eager to add their gifts to the effort. Windhover's Ina Hahn and Carl Tomsen of Dancers Courageous agree to dance for the September 8th performance. Musicians gather. Tony Hilliard will sing. Kristina Martin assembles a choir of children. The Egmont Trio adds chamber music, Herb Pomeroy and his trio suggest a rendition of "September Song". Nan Webber offers a reading of Toni Morrison's "The Dead of September 11th". The Poet Laureates of both Gloucester and Rockport - Vincent Ferrini and Suellen Wedmore - contribute their healing words. Everywhere artists reach out to the community offering beauty and consolation.

Undertaking a project of this size takes monumental time and effort. Those of us on the committee work non-stop - scheduling and arranging, preparing press kits, trying to raise funds to cover the staggering costs of transporting and insuring art, making posters and programs, arranging food and drinks for the reception after the performance. It is exhausting. But in all the flurry of activity and the frustration of too little funding and too quickly approaching deadlines, we stop and remind each other that we are so fortunate to be able to do this. Being in the very presence of great art and great artists there is an aura of the sacred - the sacredness of our human love of life. Together we reach out. Together we heal.

"Remembrance: A Tribute", an exhibit of artwork celebrating our triumphs and our freedom, opens at the North Shore Arts Association on August 25th. It is free and open to the public. Tickets for the September 8th performance are available at the NSAA now. Please join with us in this time of remembrance - of our losses and of our many blessings.

Kathleen Valentine is a graphic artist and writer who lives in Gloucester and is very happy about that.

My View



Kathleen Valentine