



**Living Art of Montana Workshop Reflections
Brain Injury Association of Montana Conference
September 16, 2005 ~ Helena, Montana**

The Brain Injury Association of Montana brought Living Art of Montana facilitators to their 2005 annual conference with the help of a Montana Arts Council's Artists in Schools/Communities grant. Living Art is a Missoula-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to use the arts and nature to support healing.

Living Art artists and volunteers facilitated an all-day workshop using mask-making and poetry as self-exploration for people with brain injuries and people who support them. Facilitators included: Living Art director and drama therapist, Youpa Stein; writer and cancer survivor, Pamela Kierulff; recent nursing school graduate and dancer, Lori Mitchell; AmeriCorps* VISTA volunteer, Lisa Weinreich; theater artist and registered nurse, Pam Dale; traumatic brain injury survivor and registered nurse Ann Uffulussy; and medical doctor and writer, Beth Ammons. Over thirty people participated and a few more people chose to participate by hanging out and observing the activity.

Stephen Nachmanovitch writes in his book *Free Play* that, "We have a right to create, a right to self-realization and fulfillment." In line with these thoughts, Living Art believes that the expression of the truth of our experience through the arts can be a celebration of our unique selves and originality. The arts give us tools to weave our life with meaning.

Living Art was honored to work with the participants in the workshop. We are grateful to the artists for their willingness to share their creations. Their work sheds light on how creative expression can inspire us toward our potential and who we are meant to be. A few examples of the poems and masks people created are shared on the following pages.



Creative expression can open new doors of perception

Workshop participant John Raskovick expresses how the gift of poetry can help us hold seeming opposites and take us to a place of new understanding.

*“Self knowledge ~ I’m confused
Listen to the ocean roar ~ It’s fluent...”*

Excerpt from poem by John Raskovick



These lines can help us remember that in an ocean of confusion it is possible to find smoothness and flow. It is possible to find something coherent in the roar.

Creative expression can be a way to help us navigate changes

Workshop participant, Kim Mace, expressed her experience of her brain injury in her mask and poetry using the metaphor of changing seasons.



*“Love yourself freely and purely
With each breath that you take
And know that you’re worthy
Your life is what you make*

*Like each new day and the
Seasons through time,
Go through your life embracing
The seasons of your mind.”*

Excerpt from poem by Kim Mace

Creative expression can help us remember what we love and what gives us joy

*I don’t know the answer
But life doesn’t get much better
than eating mangoes in the ocean.*

Excerpt from poem by Cynthia Heidt



Creative expression can help us shine a light on our connections and relationships

Calvin Burch likes to connect. His poem reflects his gregarious nature.

*Huffy – the best bike there is
“Steel Blue”, but really kind of green.
I ride all around town because I’m too lazy
And walking takes too long.*

*Everything I do has a purpose.
I talk with anybody and everybody.
I stop and BS with them all.
People from out of town ask me for
directions
And I think I can tell them the best places to
go.*

*I like to think halfway in my own mind
and halfway in the other person’s mind~
to see things in the other person’s way.
I don’t think everyone needs to see things
in my terms.
I don’t want to be led.
I don’t want to lead.
I want to walk beside you.*

Excerpt from a poem by Calvin Burch

Creative expression can help us transform the old into something new

Workshop participant Mitzi Stonehocker made two masks. One represented her old life of fear stemming from when she was abducted and received a brain injury. The other mask represented a new beginning reflecting not wanting to hide anymore, her desire to live her life, be herself, be happy, find peace of mind and to help others. Mitzi had wanted to create a mask at the conference last year but a family emergency prevented her from attending. She had been thinking for a whole year about how she wanted to physically represent her readiness to move into a new phase of her life. When she took off the plaster cast of her face representing her “old life mask” she had surprise and wonder in her voice. She went up to her room and washed off the lingering bits of plaster before coming back down to do her new mask. Her poem reflects the shift she felt. Through her art work Mitzi marks her intention and her choice to transform her experience.

*Darkness of night my friend
looking out
no one can see through the glass
so alone*

*I am different but I’m not dead
I don’t want to hide anymore
When I take off the old maybe I can come out*

*Take off the old, the mask of fear,
I don’t sing
then I found myself singing in the shower*

*washed off the old
with water
dried to a softer newer me
lighter step...”*



Excerpt from a poem by Marilyn Mitzi Stonehocker

Creative expression can reflect the deep spirit of a human life



Photograph of Living Art workshop participant Lisa T. Hathaway

Lisa's smiling unfinished mask reflects her irrepressible spirit. Talking about relearning to talk and walk again after her brain injury, she said,

"I use to fall down when I was learning to walk again. When I fell down I would say, Yeeee~ ha!"



LIVING ART *of Montana*

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