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## Self-expression to help heal the self

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Snow was falling one evening as Clara James walked home from the light rail train in Chicago. She heard a man behind her ask if he could carry the briefcase jammed with student papers she had to grade.

Seconds later the 22-year-old teacher was knocked down and pummeled in the face as she screamed for help. Another man's voice boomed out, "What's going on?" Her assailant ran off and she escaped with a broken nose.

Nine months later, she wasn't as fortunate. She was raped at gunpoint by two men who stole her car. "I was an emotional mess," said James, who soon moved back to Minnesota.

Now retired from 21 years as a Hennepin County social worker and family counselor, James, 64, said art therapy has been a crucial element in healing her self-doubt and traumatic memories from 40 years ago. She is one of 16 artists -- all crime victims at some time in their lives -- whose work goes on display today at the offices of the Minnesota State Arts Board in St. Paul.

"Artistic expression can help an individual try to make sense of the unimaginable, and help others understand what that person has experienced," said Sue Gens, interim executive director of the Art Board. It is co-sponsoring the exhibition of visual and literary art with the state Public Safety Department.

For James, "art helps you get in touch with your unconscious. You repressed a lot because it was too traumatic to face the pain, hurt and rage. You had nowhere to go with it. Art helps you express it and get it out." After her attack, a therapist had her do watercolor painting and sculpt clay to express those feelings. Recently she has found that nature photography has helped develop her spirituality.

She puts photos of bright red roses or hibiscus on "healing cards" she sends to friends

and relatives. "It's helped me forgive myself and others," she said. "I came to see the most important task in life is forgiveness and letting go. It helps me get to a place of peace and calmness."

For years she suffered depression and rejected God for what happened to her and for the abject poverty she saw afflicting people in Chicago slums, she said.

Joan Ungar, a licensed art therapist in Minneapolis, said she has been using art therapy since 1984 to help people understand what is happening in their subconscious. She said the creativity used in art, music, dance, poetry and other art forms taps the right-brain lobe, which governs emotion, and may release painful, repressed memories.

"I ask them to close their eyes and imagine where the fear, anxiety, terror and depression is in their body and what shape and color it is. Then I ask them to draw a gingerbread man and draw those colors and shapes on it. Often repressed memories will come out and be identified," she said. She asks them to talk and journal about their memories and feelings.

Mary Willette Hughes, of Waite Park, Minn., used poetry therapy to help heal from the betrayal of a religious leader who sexually abused her 6-year-old son decades ago. Now she leads poetry therapy sessions at a St. Cloud hospital.

"A poem tends to objectify experience, and gets it outside of themselves," said Hughes, 75. "They recognize their own experiences and can see them in a new light. Poems usually offer some insight that helps their recovery and growth."

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