

# An Interview with Lynn Underwood, MA:

## Art Therapy as a Healing Modality

© 2010 By Victoria Bowmann PhD, USA

**VB:** Thank you Lynn for taking your time to help educate others in Art Therapy (AT). Let's start with a definition:

**LU:** Art Therapy uses nonverbal language and various sense modalities for personal growth, transformation and insight. It connects our inner feelings with our outer realities. It has the potential to restore physical, spiritual and psychological well-being.

**VB:** I know that art is one of the most ancient forms of healing. Indigenous societies would gather to sing, dance, drum and make pictures on cave walls. What are the modalities most used in today's world?

**LU:** Art Therapy relies primarily on visual arts. Additionally, there is Drama Therapy; Dance Therapy; Music Therapy; Expressive Art Therapy; which uses all of the above. Even within each of these categories there are multiple off shoots. Art therapy taps into the imagination, where play meets possibility. It touches that place inside of us (subconscious, soul, heart).

**VB:** How does AT work?

**LU:** There seems to be certain magic about it, as the art seems to be in control instead of us. Often times one thinks we know what we are trying for but something else entirely happens ~ sort of an "ah ha" ~ How did that happen?

It taps into multiple senses and what transpires through the art becomes internalized, a sort of body memory. Based on the premise that thoughts create reality and the arts are the props to create these realizations.

**VB:** What is your background?

**LU:** I was a classroom teacher, originally on the Big Island of Hawaii where I continually integrated the arts, dance, and performance. I'm Certification as a Personal Trainer, Yoga Instructor, and Certified Heart Math facilitator. Heart Math uses resources of heart energy. My undergraduate degree is in Psychology and Masters degree in Expressive Arts Therapy.

As an expressive arts therapist, I use multiple arts forms including:

- visual art inclusive of clay, paint, etc.,
- theater arts to include improvisation, and role playing,
- music;
- poetry,
- movement,
- puppets,
- guided meditation,
- journaling,
- sometimes even a magic wand with children.

**VB:** Is this a typical approach most therapist employ?

**LU:** My current work in the arts seems to be a culmination of all that came before: education, art, psychology, movement, yoga, spiritual practice and alternative healing. I like the spiritual quality about it and how it works in a spontaneous manner. There is no prescribed formula with so many different possibilities and ways of working. It's fun, childlike, and taps into the imagination.

**VB:** As you began this work, did you have a situation which gave you a sense of knowing your were on your path and had something significant to offer?

**LU:** During my internship I had a project requiring that I choose a client to work with over time. This child probably had the worst reputation in the residential school setting for being the "bad guy". He would break windows and car windshields, as well as threaten staff and students. The staff therapists were always complaining especially if he was on their caseload.

I set up a medicine wheel type situation that consisted of a circle. He chose 4 animals, drew them and decided what each animal's message was for him and wrote each down. We placed the animals and corresponding written message around the circle and he would slowly walk around the circle, hold each animal to his heart, close his eyes and repeat the message from the animal.

We worked on this for several sessions and when we were complete he hung the animals and messages up over his bed. Soon after, I was in the therapists' offices and they were having a conversation to the affect: "I don't know why "he" can't be my client." This experience was an ah-ha for me!

**VB:** When you are working with a client, how do you proceed?

**LU:** This differs based on the client, the population, and whether it is an individual or a group. In general, the act of making art is calming, relaxing and puts one in the moment. It gives them the opportunity to take a step back from there typical day. I've had clients say, "I had a headache when we started and now it's gone."

With visualization and art making one imagines the tumor shrunk and a green healing light around it. This image is then drawn as healed. Sometimes by changing the image visually, the reality of it changes.

When using words one writes down their intention: what do you want to learn as a result of this art process? We then spend time in a short meditation, such as breathing for focus. During this process one creates a visual without trying to control it intellectually. Instead one just lets it come about organically, from within. Finally one can dialog with the image and/or journal.

In my work with substance abuse we generally start seated in a circle. Each client is asked to check in by responding to how they are feeling. They do this by choosing from a selection of percussion instruments that reflects their feeling at the moment. Each client then shares from their journal that was the homework assignment based on the project from the previous week. We then briefly touch on a topic that we will be focusing on; and then translate that to a visual art project. Each person is invited to share his or her art. They are then asked to check out with this question: how was this helpful? (This encourages them to make connections with the art just completed and how it is connected to their goals and intentions with regard to their life journey.”

**VB:** You’re an art therapist with Childhelp USA, aren’t you?

**LU:** Yes, I’m at the Village of Childhelp West in Beaumont, California as well as in private practice.

I previously worked with children inclusive of *challenged* kids and they were looking for a part time art therapist. AT is a huge help with these kids. It is calming, relaxing, and gives them a way to express themselves. When I work with children one on one, we often decide together what we will work on. Then they are given choices as to what art materials they would like to use in order to explore this goal. This helps establishing a trusting/working relationship.

I work with children during Art Studio; which is held weekly. They have the choice to come or not and to choose what they want to do. Sometimes the room is full and they are calmly and quietly working on whatever they have chosen.

I also offer a weekly group with teens using mostly theater arts. The role-playing and improvisations allow reflections on choices, anger, etc. There is a lot that can come through with the art. It’s like an open channel.

**VB:** In the book *Silence Broken* by the founders of Child Help USA Sara O’Meara and Yvonne Feddersen, they discussed the value of AT. “Many of the children who come to the art room are incredibly withdrawn and silent. They do not wish to discuss or open up about their lives before arriving at the Village It is too painful. For many, coming here is the first time there has been any relief from the abuse they have been experiencing. We (art therapists) are trained to study their history and then keep our awareness heightened . . . and the healing process can begin.” P 165.

It seems that using AT is a short cut towards healing in certain situations.

**LU:** I shared with another therapist the work I had just done with one of her clients in an hour and she was amazed. She said this was more than she had accomplished in 6 months. When I work one on one we generally “co-create” and results and realizations are usually spontaneous.

Sometimes I ask them, “What do you think we should work on?” “And what kind of art materials do you want to use to do that?” For once, these children have choices coupled with developing trust. It’s a win-win opportunity.

**VB:** Have you also worked with adults?

**LU:** Yes. I have worked with *normal* folks, those from domestic violence and others with substance abuse. Substance abuse individuals love it because it gives them hope, boosts their self-esteem and helps them move beyond the box. Recently a gal said she was avoiding looking at “goals” but what we did was fun, pain-free and helped to see some new possibilities.

AT as it relates to grief work (most cases dealt with death of a spouse) can offer a different kind of healing. By using a metaphor of *a garden* they found help, healing and hope.

**VB:** Without giving names, can you share some case histories with *Explore*?

**LU:** Certainly.

**Case History #1:** I’ve been working with a high functioning asperger child. He can get angry and fly into a rage and has therefore been removed from his home. We frequently work on calming tools usually using clay or drawing. By now, we have come up with several. Once he thought about and drew was a wishing well, when the water goes down into the well, he breaths and calms down. After he draws it, he closes his eyes and we do a type of visualization.

Another similar technique he came up with was a candle and he imagines the calmness of the candle flame. The success is: he’s getting ready to go home! When we last met, I asked him what would be the most helpful tool for him at home. His response: “His family”.

He drew all of his family members with bright colors and included different images. I asked him what each image had to tell him. Here are the individual responses he gave:

Family: We are here to help you.

Sun: I help you stay warm and calm. I will always come out.

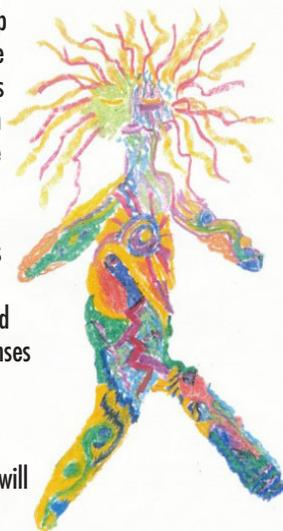
Clouds: When it rains, find something else to do.

Birds and sky: As long as you try, you will always get higher and higher, better and better.

**Case History #2:** I worked with another child who frequently hurt herself, inclusive of eating glass. During one of our sessions she was using clay and imagining herself to be working in a restaurant and preparing food. She had pieces of clay that represented food and put a pointed clay tool into each piece. She said she was injecting it with love and offered me one. Then she off-handedly said, “The boss is dead. She is the one who makes me eat glass.”

I suggested this might be a good thing and with the boss dead, maybe that means she no longer needs to eat glass. We decided to bury the boss and made the boss out of pipe cleaners and a coffin of cardboard. Then we took it outside and buried it in the ground. She solemnly stood there and started singing “Amazing Grace”. She has been transferred to another facility, so I can’t follow her progress any longer.

**Case History #3:** Another child has challenges with anger. Usually when I pick him up, he’s in the *doghouse*. We’ve been working on this and recently I picked him up and learned he had been doing well. He was in such high spirits as we walked to the studio and said he just felt good because he had been doing so well.





“When words just are not enough.” Representing the feelings and insight that is able to come through the art when one chooses to not verbally communicate or sometimes doesn’t have the words.

I had him line up some art materials (crayons, pastels) next to his paper and close his eyes. We do a type of guided meditation based on this positive feeling of doing so well and feeling pride in his progress. Then, with eyes still closed he translates this feeling onto paper. He’s very focused and manages to stay with this for about 10 minutes and is so pleased with the results when he opens his eyes. His behavior has improved and he asked to do it again next session.



**Lynn Underwood, M.A.** is an expressive arts therapist and coach, educator and consultant.

Utilizing the therapeutic tools of the expressive arts, she works with a variety of populations to include children and adolescents inclusive of abused, behaviorally and emotionally challenged, and autistic. She also works with domestic violence and substance abuse. Lynn works with schools facilitating

programs in social and emotional education. In her private practice she works with adults and children regarding life goals, realizing new possibilities, and creating positive change. She facilitates workshops on creativity, personal growth, spirituality, grief, healing, and team building.

Her work experiences include Child Help, Morning Sky Residential School, Oak Grove and San Diego County Probation Reflections Program as well as House of Hope (substance abuse) and Oceanside Women’s Resource Center (domestic violence).

She received the BA in Psychology and teaching credential from Sonoma State University, CA and her MA in Expressive Arts Therapy from European Graduate School, Switzerland.

Her website is: [www.artcreateschange.org](http://www.artcreateschange.org)

**Case History #4:** In working with domestic violence, we use visual journaling to represent their imagined future. One visualizes a pathway that represents their journey to include several goals. They include the surrounding environment that is visually appealing.

One can use collaged materials to make a house and show what goes on inside using symbols in the margins around it. There might be musical notes or stick figures dancing. These women are pretty broken and find empowerment as their journal grows out of their own creations.

**VB:** I love your following case history:

**LU:** Yes, it touched me as well.

**Case History #5:** After a mask workshop, a substance abuse client wrote the following:

#### Taking Off the Mask

After the turmoil of my chaotic years  
The uncontrollable flow of so many tears  
Resulting from anger, resentment and fear  
I’ve taken off the mask.

To let go of emotions so parasitic  
And tune out the voice of my inner critic  
Allowing myself to become optimistic  
While taking off the mask.

Astonished at what I found underneath  
Awareness of my quest for peace  
Gaining tranquility piece by piece  
By taking off the mask.

**VB:** Have you any closing words?

**LU:** I often turn to Rumi’s quote: Where there is ruin there is hope for treasure.

**VB:** Lynn, thank you and bless you as you continue this work. 🌸

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Victoria Bowmann, PhD** has been a health care professional since 1978, specializing in detoxification, cleansing and pain relief. She has developed various programs, published her first book: **You Gotta Have GUTS**, writes for *Explore!* and lectures internationally. She earned her PhD in Homeopathy and Natural Medicine from Westbrook University in 1999 and her doctorate in homeopathy from the British Institute of Homeopathy in 1995. Her private practice is in Phoenix AZ. Please visit her web site at [myrealhealth.com](http://myrealhealth.com).