

In Remembrance: September 11, 2001

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The Project: Martha P. Haeseler

On September 14, 2001, I spent the day listening to the radio while I grouted a mosaic countertop in my bathroom. As I listened with a broken heart to the music and memorial services for those who died on September 11, I was aware that it somehow felt good to be doing a demanding, repetitive, and tactile task for hours on end.

I had been empowered to make the mosaic in my house because the veterans with whom I work and I had made mosaic stepping-stones the previous spring from broken tiles we gathered from the dumpster behind the tile store. As I smoothed away the hardening grout from around the shards and stones, I was wondering if there were a way to help the veterans, and myself, through the upcoming days and weeks. The thought came unbidden that the veterans might wish to make a memorial art piece, and I felt relief and a new sense of purpose. On Monday I took a box of left-over blue and beige 4" x 4" tiles to the program where I work.

I work in a long-term outpatient program within a Veterans Administration (VA) Mental Hygiene Clinic. The veterans come in for two mornings or two afternoons a week, in four different sections. One section is just for art (and maintaining a garden), but all the sections have art therapy every week. The veterans were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the memorial project. We talked about it as a chance to remember and honor those who had died; it would be our flowers at the firehouse, express our feelings about the attack, and give something to the VA community.

We painted 64 individual tiles the first week and arranged them with mastic in a checkerboard pattern, leaving every other space open, on a 54" x 42" plywood base with a frame built by my husband. One veteran needed an additional four tiles, placed in a diamond, to complete his work; it was chosen to be in the center. Another veteran painted the title across three tiles, placed at the top. The second week, in the open spaces, we created mosaics from broken tile, stones, and shells and from found objects brought by the veterans including buttons, beads, coins, dried flowers, assorted hardware, several bells, and glass. Several staff members brought objects such as a nursing pin, an angel, and a button saved from the 60s reading "No peace without justice." We completed the piece by carefully grouting around the treasures. (Figure 1 shows the completed mosaic.)

I believe that violence and war have special meanings to veterans, many of whom have seen combat and experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and all of whom signed up to give their lives for their country. I was greatly moved by the individual painted tiles. The themes reflected in them include:

- Patriotism: many flags, stars, the Capitol, Statue of Liberty, patriotic statements
- Spirituality: prayers, light, a candle
- Beauty: many flowers, nature scenes, a bowl of fruit

- Sadness: a building cries as it is struck by an airplane, tears surround a firefighter, a leafless tree
- Harsh reality: buildings on fire, weapons, a guard to protect us, an angry red person standing akimbo, "arms for freedom"
- The word *peace* was painted many times, as were *hope, love, freedom, tolerance, honor, and duty*.

A favorite of mine shows an abstract head, in profile, filled with iridescent color. The artist said, "It is a person turning into a butterfly, like the people in the buildings." I felt privileged to be part of this communal work. As we put our pieces together, I felt that our individual feelings were given context and came together to create a whole. Also, the physical process of constructing something from nothing, and of bringing lost and broken pieces together in a work of art, felt like a powerful antidote to the powerlessness I experienced when witnessing the shattering of buildings and sorting through of broken pieces looking for human life. I felt as though together we were rebuilding and creating beauty from the rubble.

The memorial piece was well received by the VA. A prominent site where it would be seen by patients, visitors, and staff was selected. However, we were told that because people always like to touch public art, it must be covered with Lexan. It took 3 months for the Lexan to arrive and for the heavy piece to be hung. It appeared on the wall just before Christmas. Most veterans noticed it there immediately. I pass it on my way to and from work each day and have often noticed people standing before it, studying it. Sometimes they place their hands on the work, as if to gain solace through the touch. Almost everyone I know in Connecticut knows someone who died or had a narrow escape. A nurse with whom I used to work approached me to say, "It's perfect. It has everything in there."

Six months after the attack, on March 11, we held a public ceremony to dedicate the memorial mosaic and to remember



Figure 1

those who had died on 9/11/01. People from inside and outside of the VA came together to pray, sing, and reminisce. The ceremony was held in our program space where we were surrounded by artwork. Beautiful flowers were donated. I cooked for days, and we served fresh raspberries. The VA Director honored the veteran artists and received the work on behalf of the VA. He said that the mosaic and the ceremony were examples of the importance of community within the VA family. U.S. Representative Rosa De Lauro sent a letter of support, and the Psychiatry Service Chief spoke of the healing power of the arts.

Most importantly, the veteran artists conducted the ceremony. Their attendance was notable because these veterans usually avoid public places and large events, which tend to exacerbate symptoms. Some of them have trouble tolerating expression of intense emotion. They all came, and wearing yellow roses, they participated in the ceremony with grace. K. was mistress of ceremonies. H., who rarely speaks, offered to lead the "Lord's Prayer." B., who sometimes feels unworthy of prayer, chose and recited the following when we gathered in the corridor where the mosaic is mounted:

God of life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and wear us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening; when our lives have no music in them and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, we beseech you; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise. (St. Augustine in Mabey, 1999, p. 113)

The ceremony concluded with J. singing a cappella "You'll Never Walk Alone," which echoed in the open hospital corridor through the long silence as people stood, full of feeling, before moving on. A reporter lingered to talk with the veteran artists and later wrote a complimentary article in the local paper about them and their artwork.

Comments: Veterans of the Giant Steps Program

"My heart was overwhelmed. Making the memorial helped me get past that day. Each tile comes from the person's heart; there's a little bit of everybody in there, expressing themselves."

"I was glad to be able to donate my work. It made me feel good in my heart, knowing I participated in it."

"I didn't know how that could happen in this country. I felt good to do the art to remind people, so things like that won't happen again."

"I felt bad at first. It kind of helps me keep the people alive, although they perished. I'm glad it was done in the beginning, and not later when it's forgotten, although I'll never forget it."

"It's a legend for us to measure all future events in this category. I get used to looking at the artwork and identifying with parts of it, and if something bad happens, I think of the artwork and get it off my back."

"It expresses my condolences for those who died and my sympathy to their families. May God be with them."

"We put something down that will last a long time, for the next 50 years, and hope that this tragedy will not repeat itself. Just like Pearl Harbor, it's important that we do not forget so it won't happen again."

"It felt better to be doing something. It expressed my feelings about the loss and showed the spirit of freedom—we are free to make something like this memorial."

"Our piece expresses the unity of civilization, and honors the little people who came to the call and gave it their all. It shows what happens when people come together and help each other."

"Using my hands helped keep my mind off the pain. It looks like there is a lot of strength left in America; you can see it in the piece. I did a sun, a flag, and a star. They show we are still strong as a nation."

"It felt exceptionally good. It shows what we veterans can do and how we feel about the situation."

Conclusion: Martha P. Haeseler

Being part of the creation of the mosaic and of the memorial ceremony has strengthened for me the understanding that art and ritual lie close to the heartbeat of both the individual and the institution. I witnessed the importance of art and ceremony in helping me, the veterans, and our community attend to our emotional needs at a critical time. I witnessed the veterans transcend their fears and symptoms in order to help others. I feel lucky to have been able to do this essential work.

Reference

Mabey, J. (Ed.). (1999). *The Oneworld book of prayer*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld.