

Figure 4: *Tears Flowed Like a River*, by Phyllis Seelen

“Pain isn’t a bad thing. I learned that a long time ago from a hymn that goes like this: ‘Joy and pain come down entwined.’ When I did this drawing, I saw the womb form as a funnel through which my tears could flow like a river, because tears are a part of life. This drawing is a reminder to myself that life will always be entwined with pain—you can’t separate them.”

Why Talking about Our Pain Can Make Us Feel Worse

During the introductory meeting of my first Drawing from the Heart support group, one of our members, Phyllis Seelen, made a poignant comment that we all needed to hear as she spoke about her first drawing (fig. 4): “Life will always be entwined with pain—you can’t separate them.” Phyllis was right. Painful, life-changing experiences happen to us all sooner or later; we can’t avoid them. When they happen, most people do their best to deal with the pain by expressing it in the only way they know how—talking about it. But talking about pain often makes us feel even worse, because our words are frequently steeped in judgment, blame, and shame, which tend to ignite anger and rage or apathy and depression. Consequently, talking about emotional pain may accomplish only one thing: embedding the pain even deeper into our conscious awareness, making the healing process more difficult.

That doesn’t mean talking can’t help—it can, especially when it’s done under the supervision of a skilled therapist. Yet in spite of a therapist’s best efforts, our words often pull us deeper into an emotional funk, because few of us can edit out our judgmental words when we begin talking about a painful experience. Author James Pennebaker points out in his book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (Guilford Press,

1997), that people often stop talking about their feelings at precisely the time when they need it most—usually about three months after a painful experience has occurred—because it hurts too much to keep going over the same situation or issue. The backlash to this is that the people they have been talking to, like friends and family members, mistakenly think they are over it. But the fact is, they are not.

Without support and encouragement to keep talking about our feelings, most of us just push them down and bury them beneath layers of distracting daily events, hoping time will do its healing magic. Time doesn’t heal and healing isn’t magic. Left unattended, our buried wounds fester and grow until



Figure 5: *Powerlessness*, by a former client, shows how a simple drawing can express a complex emotional reaction.

another painful experience comes along, exposing all those unhealed wounds that time did not repair.

Expressive Art Is a Powerful Nonverbal Way to Express and Release Your Pain

Emotional pain and loss, if left unexpressed and unreleased, can unravel the fabric of our lives. What then are the alternatives if talking about our pain can make it hurt even more? Expressive art is now considered the most effective nonverbal way to express and release the feelings a painful emotion can produce. When we use art to express our pain, we are accessing that pain through the body-mind's inner language of imagery instead of using words.

Unlike words, our imagistic language is nonjudgmental. When a painful emotion is expressed as an image representing how our body reacts to that emotion, we avoid the negative interpretation our words often impose. A graphic image of an emotion allows us to see the colors and shapes that describe how that emotion feels inside our bodies. Expressing an emotion through color and form rather than words gives us insight into the nature of our feelings and their impact on our body, mind, and spirit. Seeing an image of what an emotion feels like brings us out of the darkness of judgment into the light of understanding where we can see the lessons our emotions can teach. These lessons can help us transform a painful emotional reaction into a positive life experience.

I decided to use drawing as the primary method of artistic expression for this book because drawing requires little in the way of materials—just chalk or oil pastels, colored markers or crayons, a sketch pad or a drawing journal, and you're ready to go. The



Figure 6: Drawing by former client expressing feelings of sadness over the death of a close friend.

space needed to do the work can be as simple as an easy chair or a porch swing. The skill involved in doing the drawing exercises presented in this book requires nothing more than the ability to hold a crayon or pastel in your hand and move it across the surface of the paper.

You Don't Have to Be an Artist

Anyone, even those without the slightest trace of artistic ability, can use this program to draw their pain. If you can make simple marks or shapes on paper that in some way represent what a painful emotion feels like, then you can use drawing to express and heal that pain.

A client I worked with several years ago was afraid, when she first came to see me, that her lack of drawing ability would prevent her from expressing her feelings about the death of a close friend. As soon as she began to draw (fig. 6), her fear disappeared. Just a few broad strokes and a small stick figure at the bottom was all she needed to fully express the feeling of sadness that had been pressing down on her for weeks like a heavy weight—a feeling she had been unable to describe in words.



Figure 7: Drawing by former client expressing the frustration she felt when dealing with her rebellious teenage daughter.

Drawing Releases Emotional Pain from the Body

Emotional pain causes physical pain, which acts as a signal to let us know when something is amiss. When we're in pain, it can be hard to pay attention to the source of that pain, especially when all we want to do is ignore it. Unlike talking, which can aggravate emotional pain, drawing that pain releases it from your body. However, releasing your pain does not solve or resolve the situation that provoked it; it simply enables you to feel physically more comfortable, so that you can concentrate on working and ultimately healing at a deep level.

Over the years, I've seen many clients learn to cope with situations that previously left them feeling

like helpless victims of their emotional reactions. One such client was at wits' end after struggling for nearly a year with almost daily verbal battles between herself and her rebellious teenage daughter. By the time she came to see me, she was ready to send her daughter to boarding school—a decision she knew she would later regret.

During our first session, I showed her how to use drawing to express her feelings (fig. 7) and transform her hasty emotional reactions into more positive and constructive responses. When I saw her a week later, she looked like a totally different person. The slump in her shoulders and the tightness in her face were gone. Elated, she told me that every time she had come to blows with her daughter during the past week, she had just grabbed her sketch pad and took a

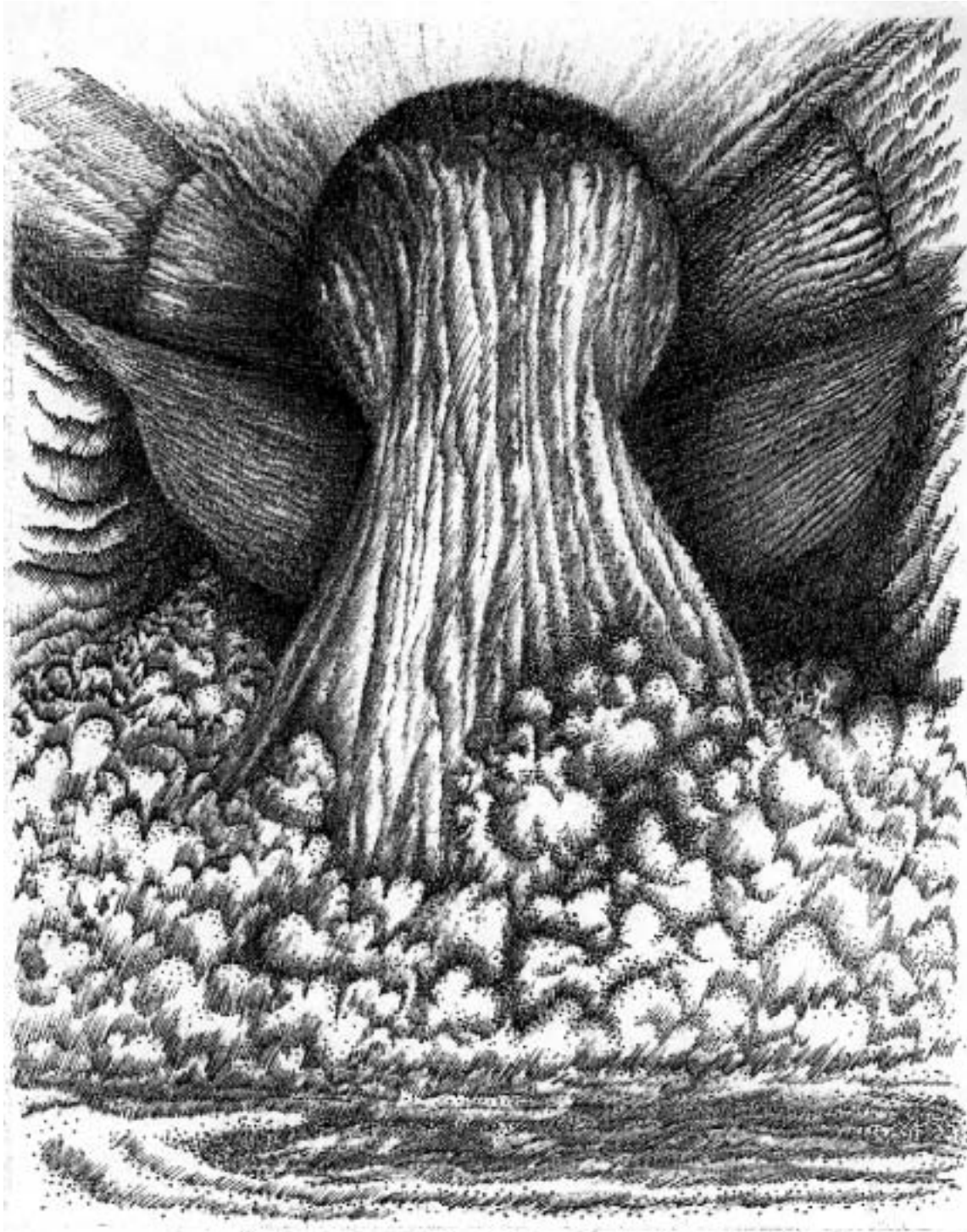


Figure 8: *A Flood of Tears*, by Barbara Ganim

“For nearly four years after my father’s death I was unable to grieve, because I was preoccupied with my mother’s Alzheimer’s disease. That pain finally came out in this drawing three years ago, and the relief I felt was liberating.”

few minutes alone to draw what she was feeling. “It made all the difference,” she said. “Instead of reacting rashly and emotionally, I was able to deal with the situation calmly and rationally. Now my daughter and I are actually talking instead of screaming at each other. I can’t believe the change in both of us.”

Whenever I begin writing a new book, I like to run workshops or support groups based on the concept of the book. These groups give me an opportunity to put my ideas into practice. While writing this book, I offered two seven-week Drawing from the Heart support groups based on seven healing steps. Each group met once a week for two hours. I guided them through drawing exercises that helped them work through every phase of the drawing-from-the-heart process. After completing the program, group members graciously allowed me to share their healing stories and the drawings they produced. These will not only help you see how others have used drawing to express and heal their pain, they will also serve as examples of how to do the exercises in this book.

In addition to drawings produced by group members, I have included some drawings and stories given to me by present and former graduate students

at Salve Regina University, where I teach expressive art. In some instances, to show specific examples, I use drawings by former clients and workshop participants. In each case, I have permission to use their artwork and experiences. However, a few of the artists prefer to remain anonymous. In those cases I use a pseudonym or refer to them as “former clients.”

As I began writing about emotional pain and the suffering it can bring, I realized that I was also ready to tackle my own emotional demons. Therefore, a few of my drawings are also included in this book.

This Book Is for Anyone Going through a Painful Experience

Whether you are struggling with the death of a loved one, job loss or looming retirement, aging parents, personal illness, or the painful twists and turns in relationships with friends or family, you know how sad and even devastating these experiences can be. While you may desperately want to ignore what’s happening in your life, unresolved emotional pain will express itself sooner or later through illness and disease, or it will reemerge during future life-altering events—magnified by months or years of neglect.