

THE HEALING *Power of Art*

Paper, paint, canvas, and a clothesline—how a creative process helped one surviving spouse move forward after her husband’s death.

By Tasha Sprovtsoff | Surviving Spouse of Staff Sgt. Nicholas Sprovtsoff, U.S. Marine Corps

I’ve wanted to be an artist since I was my kids’ age. I loved drawing and was often praised for it: “You’re such a good artist.” I heard it all the time.

I used to build houses with Legos and draw the structures on paper, so I thought I might become an architect. I also traced body shapes out of my mom’s catalogs and used the form to draw clothes, so fashion designer was another possibility. I wound up attending an art school and getting my degree in graphic design because I thought it would offer me the broadest spectrum

of possibilities. After college I worked for a publishing company designing ads.

And then I met Nick, a sergeant in the Marine Corps. We got married, I got pregnant and had a little girl, and my mom life and military life took over. I could feel it in my

body that I needed to be more creative, but there was no time.

When our daughter was 14 months old and I was pregnant with our son, Nick was killed in action. Creating art was the last thing on my mind. After a while, I would get out my sketchbook at night when the kids were in bed, but I didn’t remember how to do it. I didn’t know what to draw. I would sit there staring at it, almost like I didn’t deserve to do it because I hadn’t been practicing.

Eventually the kids started Montessori school two days a week. I searched for local art classes—at the local craft store or anything I could find. I started practicing again.

I asked myself,
“What do you want to do?”
And I answered, “I want to be doing art.”







Previous pages: In step one of her creative process (left), Tasha spreads paint across a Gelli plate. One of her finished pieces (right), titled “The Lake,” was inspired by her family’s cabin in Canada—a place of happy memories. Above: “Flower Field”—with blue sky above, green grass and flowers below—was one of the first pieces Tasha created with torn paper.

Once they were both in school five days a week, I asked myself, “What do you want to do?” And I answered, “I want to be doing art.” I found a studio space for rent, and I was shaking while driving over to check it out. I thought, “This is finally it!”

I rented the space and started focusing on my art. At first I felt I didn’t know what I was doing. But little by little, I discovered a process I love.

To start, I spread acrylic paint onto a Gelli plate, which is a flat surface that looks and feels like gelatin. Then I press whatever mark-

making objects I choose into the paint to create patterns. I’ve used the bottom of water bottles, bath loofahs, trivets, yarn, a potato masher, cheesecloth, and a plastic bag. Each makes a different pattern in the paint. I then place white paper on top of the plate so the paint transfers to the paper. I lift up the paper to see if I like the pattern. If I don’t like it yet, I keep adding layers of paint, letting each layer dry on a clothesline I hung on the back wall of my studio before adding more paint. I repeat the process with more and more pieces of paper and hang them all to dry.

Once the sheets of paper are dry, I tear them up. To me, this represents my life—and the lives of many widowed people. The printed papers are built layer by layer, just like our lives starting at birth. We add a layer when we graduate from high school, start a career, go on a big trip, fall in love, have children. All these were layers of my life, and my husband was the person I was building them with. The moment he died is represented by ripping the paper to shreds, which is how my life felt. As I’m ripping the

ALL ARTWORK: TASHA SPROVITSOFF

paper, I'm telling my story. I do battle some anger about Nick's death, and some days tearing paper isn't even enough—I wish I were breaking dishes.

But then I take the ripped paper and create a new work of art. With Mod Podge glue, I attach the pieces of paper to a wrapped canvas to make a collage. This represents the fact that with time, something new develops. Parts of what existed before are recognizable, but you no longer have exactly what you had. The only choice is to take what you can and build something new.

I host a support group twice a month to share this process with local widowed people, and they say they feel uplifted and energized by being together, sharing about their person, and creating something new that doesn't require thinking too much or making new decisions.

This is what my art represents: the life that can never be the same but is once again beautiful. ★

Tasha Sprovtsoff, an artist and yoga teacher, lives in Colorado Springs, CO, with her 7-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son and shares her work, art-class schedule, and support-group schedule at happyfishartstudio.com.



How Art Helps Us Heal

By Karen Anderson

Creating often comes from the gut. It begins in a place where words don't exist. It is a place deep down inside you of raw feelings and emotions that are often inexpressible and intangible. When you surrender to these feelings and emotions by letting them surface, you can begin to attach images, color, and form to them in an intuitive way, making them more concrete to work with.

Whether you create with paint, markers, pencils, or simply a glue stick and scissors as you cut out images and paste them on paper to form a collage, here are four ways making art contributes to the healing process:

- *It allows you to express yourself without words.* It gives your experience a voice in the sense that you can attach words to your creation as it becomes clearer and more workable.

- *It is nonjudgmental.* It exists because it is what you are feeling at that moment. It can be a gentler way to start the healing process.

- *It provides a container to hold your emotions.* This space also provides a silent witness that validates your feelings as real.

- *It helps physiologically.* The process of creating reduces stress, anxiety, and depression by lowering your heart rate, slowing down your breathing, and helping you break the cycle of ruminating negative thoughts.

Anyone can be creative and receive the healing benefits of art making. Say to yourself, "I am not setting out to make a Picasso but to acknowledge my feelings through imagery." The healing process is about trusting yourself and being honest. Simply begin and see what turns up.

Karen Anderson is a board-certified art therapist and grief counselor who offers workshops using art and meditation for healing life's transitions and losses from her studio, Healing Thru Art, in Woodbury, CT.



Above, left to right: A water bottle is one of Tasha's favorite objects to press into paint because she loves the flower shape it makes. To create "The Butterfly," she used pieces of torn paper cut into very specific shapes. In "Aspen Grove," the red and yellow strips of paper represent aspen trees, which grow in abundance near Tasha's home in Colorado.