

## Personal Reflections

### My Brain Changed: Healing PTSD through Creativity

Denise Sims

*GAINS honors all the internal and external means of supporting neuroplasticity, recognizing that unique individuals may find diverse pathways to foster their brains' intrinsic movement toward greater complexity. This is a story of tenacity in the face of neural obstacles – and of triumph.*

#### Two Prefaces

Mark E. Sherman, LCSW

*Mark Sherman is currently a contractor for the US Army in Germany, working to heal returning soldiers and their families.*

My dear colleague, What you will read below is not about negligence. Many of us witness and experience complacency and disillusionment in the midst of what we have come to accept as “standard practice.” Indeed, the pressures for maintaining stability and symptom management have increased, accompanied by the threat of harrowing legal consequences, supported by institutionalized policies that are considered to be evidence-based and cost cutting. As Ms. Sims shares her story, she is challenging you to keep an open mind to the many avenues of healing. Dr. Karl Menninger told me in a personal conversation about the primacy of hope. I invite you to find hope that will stimulate *your* creativity in finding new avenues of healing.

John F. Hiatt, MD

*John Hiatt is a psychiatrist and clinical professor at the University of California, San Francisco, and Founder of Transpersonal Center.*

The article that follows is very thought-provoking. It reminds us that what we do has critical consequences for our patients/clients, and that what we do not know far outweighs what we do know. There are many paths leading to any particular mental disorder. It follows that there are many paths leading out of it. Our standard ways of treating mental problems are based on statistics, but the person we are treating is an individual. A close relationship with an adequate number of frequent contacts and listening to the patient/client are essential. The financial pressures of our health care system often discourage this. They also lead to a goal of management rather than true healing. It is important that we remain humble and open as we attempt to help people. One can only be glad that Ms. Sims stumbled upon a path that no professional would have recommended, but did lead to her healing.



All of my adult life, I had been outgoing, high functioning, and successful both personally and professionally. I had a happy and deeply satisfying marriage and family life that included owning my

own business, Image Consulting Services. I was respected in my field and did speaking, teaching, and consulting to over ten thousand people spanning twenty-five years.

When I was 40, my father died very suddenly due to (mistakenly) being prescribed the wrong medication for nine months. He was 60 years old, vibrant and energetic. He dropped dead while whistling around the kitchen cooking breakfast. It was very traumatic, and I became depressed for the first time in my life. Anti-depressants were recommended. Against my better judgment and holistic approach to health, I reluctantly agreed to take them temporarily. This was the beginning of the end for me.

I got worse and worse with each one I tried. I felt as if I were a guinea pig, spiraling downward for two years. I finally took one that seemed to work over a period of 4 months. The doctor said he thought I was stabilized and should taper off. After tapering off, I felt like my old self for about six months. Then suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, I had an extreme manic episode. I was blind-sided. It happened in the blink of an eye and continued for twelve weeks. It was “beyond the beyond” and then went beyond that. I had no idea what was happening to me!

As a result of my breakdown, my husband of 16 years abandoned me, taking our 2 children and home with him. To complicate matters, my office and art studio were in our home. He was convinced I had gone mad, never to return to sanity again. This was precisely when I needed help most. In a matter of fifteen minutes, I was left homeless for two weeks. My husband disallowed access to any of my belongings, which included all of my work, office, and art supplies, or joint funds for over a year. Virtually every single aspect of my previous life became unavailable to me in fifteen minutes. So many traumatic events happening in such short time and with such great magnitude compounded the original traumas. For the following four months, I was suicidal. I could barely speak from trauma and shock.

I was eventually hospitalized. During this time, a doctor mentioned that a study had just been released with findings about the medication that I had stopped taking five months prior. The study said that this medication “may cause manic episodes or suicide in 36% to 42% of the people

who have used it within the following year after they stop taking it, even if they have never had a manic episode or been suicidal before.” Subsequently, several doctors have deduced that the manic episode was triggered by the anti-depressant medications I had taken. Unfortunately, it was too late. My happy life of 20 years had already been obliterated.

Over the next four years, I saw my doctor and counselor regularly. Slowly I got better, but never exceeded more than 65% of my previous functioning level. I continued to suffer debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but didn’t have a name for what was wrong with me. Because I had never experienced mental difficulties before, I assumed that my symptoms were the residue of reduced brain function from the severity of the drug-induced manic episode. Now I recognize that the multiple traumas I had sustained were more at the root. In addition to depression, I suffered from the intrusion of repetitive nightmares, with my own screams waking me four to six times a night. My short-term memory, focus, and concentration were greatly diminished to the point that I couldn’t continue my career in public speaking. Even when the depression abated, I experienced unrelenting waves of hurt, pain, anger, and regret. Nonetheless, I was determined to heal, to fully recover, not just manage my health.

In my quest for healing, I remembered that for 20 years, three friends had encouraged me to take a painting class with a woman in our community who was not an art therapist, but was very skilled at providing an emotional space for people to access their inner world through painting. Some people have been painting with her for 14 years, as a “practice,” much like a “meditation practice.” So after three years of feeling like my healing had reached a plateau, I made my way to the Center for Creative Exploration, CCE Painting Studio in San Francisco. While I have been an artist for 25 years and have done some work with art therapy, this class was radically different from any work I had done before. It was not about technique. It was not about “my pretty picture.” It was not about the result, but the process. For five weeks I painted

and painted in a medium I don't particularly like - tempura and paper. Then suddenly, in the sixth week, the trauma emotions came up in a bundle in an instant. I felt like I was going to throw up and pass out. I got dizzy and my body got hot. When I told her I felt like vomiting, my teacher said, "I think you should paint that." I strongly resisted, insisting I would actually vomit or pass out if I did so. As I continued to object to "painting that," she encouraged me and then said, "OK. You can either take it with you or leave it on the paper." So I painted the picture you see on this page - and that is the painting experience that began a dramatic shift in my brain.

I took the eight-week class two times consecutively, and completed a seven-day painting intensive. During these classes, something remarkable began to happen. As I continued to paint even when, seemingly out of nowhere, highly charged emotions were coming up, I experienced a distinct and visceral sensation of release. A specific area in my head got hot and tingly off and on for five weeks. The foggy veil that resided between me and my "trauma frozen" emotions was lifting. The parts of myself I could only remember but not access began to feel alive and well.

The hot sensation in my head occurred about midway in the process of painting the terrifying picture and continued off and on for weeks. I noticed my ability to access previous emotions and cognitive skills the very next day after the tingly hot sensation first occurred. They improved and got stronger and stronger, expanding to more cognitive functioning over the course of eight

weeks.

I knew the heat sensation was significant and something had happened in my brain directly related to cognitive changes. I had the opportunity

to describe these sensations to two health professionals, and they indicated that it was specifically in the area of my brain related to visual and emotional recall. They told me the hot tingly sensation indicated heavy blood flow to that area of my brain.

I then began to notice that a whole group of experiences began to be available, including a broader range of emotions, which had been arrested for five years. I could focus. My concentration improved. My memory improved, and cognitive skills I hadn't been able to utilize for five years were suddenly back and getting stronger every day. The following month, I was able to return to public speaking and teaching with greater skill than before my trauma. I could have a real laugh! It was amazing. It distinctly felt as if the neurons, dendrites, and axons in my brain had been in a "glacial deep freeze" for five years, and the glaciers were melting, allowing the neurons and axons to fire freely, while the dendrites grew more dense, so that information and energy were flowing without being arrested or distorted.



CCE Class "Barf" Painting

Beyond this, I also experienced releasing a great deal of pain, hurt, blame, and angry feelings that plagued me after my father's death, divorce from the love of my life, and the loss of my family and long time happy home. These emotions seemed lodged, frozen, and stuck in my body for five years. Once I became aware of this, I continued to pay close attention. All my life, I have had an ability to track sensations in my body, so I had

been acutely aware of how the flow of sensations and energy had changed during my illness, robbing me of so many of my former capacities. Now I was able to assist my own healing by focusing on the changes in energy flow that were happening rapidly each day. The effects of this change became stronger over time rather than being temporary. I continued to feel more and more like my former self, until the layers of the foggy veil were gone.

About a year after the painting experience, I noticed that as my capacities were returning, I had the sense that they were more expanded, and then that the new developments were integrating with the old. I have since talked with Bonnie Badenoch who says that once the neural circuits begin to integrate, they develop a momentum of their own, allowing new

pathways to continue to emerge. As a result, I am convinced that people can heal beyond management or recovery. People can truly heal.

I have heard others describe the effects of EMDR, and think my painting experience created a similar release from trauma, only more so. However, although EMDR has been effective for many people, it had not worked for me. As I painted, strong emotions came up and as I continued to remain engaged with the painting through the emotions, they would dissipate, with the feeling that they left my body energetically, leaving them

on the paper. The reduction in my traumatic emotions significantly changed my daily life. This is an account of my own personal experience, and I cannot make any official claims that this work produces these results. For me, the results far exceeded anything I tried over a five-year period. Even after five years of regular counseling, talk therapy couldn't even touch the results that

occurred for me during eighteen weeks in the painting class.

During my search for healing, I spoke with numerous doctors and health care professionals who seemed resigned to "management" as being the best I could hope for. When I told each and every one that I was committed to healing beyond "management," they said "Good luck with that," as if they didn't see that it was possible or realistic. I

asked countless professionals if they could refer me to anyone who had successfully recovered. I desperately

needed hope and role models of success. No one knew of any, or if they did know of one, the person was unwilling to speak about it. I am sharing this experience in the hope that all who have been traumatized will find the hope and strength to continue to look for the fullness of healing, with confidence that our brain's capacity for changing its wiring and strong push for better functioning means that there are many creative paths toward healing.



Denise's Professional Work  
"Buddha's Eye"

**Denise Sims** has provided Image Consulting Services specializing in color, bone structure, body type, and personal style for thirty years. She is now also creating the "Healing through Creativity Project," an exploration of creativity and improved brain function. Denise created all of the art in this piece. She has sold her work commercially for twenty-five years, and is a single mom with "two great kids." Denise says, "After five long years of challenge and struggle, I have regained my high functioning self and quality of life." Denise especially wants to acknowledge Barbara (her CCEFSF teacher), Gary, her mom, and two very close and committed friends who went the distance with her. "I feel I owe you all my life, and I realize how critical close, committed family and friends are in the process of recovery and healing."