Can a Magical Photo Really Make Us Smile Again?

Custom Digital Photo Collages of Your Memories
by Nancy Gershman
Art for Your Sake

Editor's Note: *Several months ago, Nancy and I visited by phone and discussed her unique, digital photo collages called Healing Dreamscapes. As we talked, I was captivated by her talent to be able to take a photograph and design a work of art that not only captured the person's interests and personality, but also, helped those who mourn their death heal their grief.*

Some call Nancy Gershman a digital collage artist, a legacy portrait artist; one client calls Nancy "her private mythologist". But really, the best way to describe Nancy is that she is a healer who uses your photos, memories, stories, and insights from therapy or bereavement support groups to create a picture which speaks volumes about those we have loved and lost. Using photo manipulation software, Nancy can transform a sad photo into a new, entirely different picture that you can't take your eyes off of. Basically, sadness changes into reverence; hopelessness into something spiritual.

For example. You know those big sobbing jags you get when you bring out a loved one's photo? Well, Nancy's pictures make you stop feeling them. And you know how you prefer to be left alone instead of being with people who "just don't get it?" Suddenly, you feel almost extroverted. You become so proud of the human being who passed away that you can't wait to jump outside and share their portrait with everybody. Only this time, instead of that awkward feeling you get from people who really don't want to look at your sad photo one more time, it's Nancy's picture that gets people sharing uplifting stories about your child, your sibling, your parent, your friend.

In other words, those "healing dreamscapes" as Nancy calls them, give you the freedom to express your grief without suffering. They lift you up. Let Nancy explain how.

From a Print to a 3-D Photo Sculpture

My two main focuses as a mortician and death educator have been firefighters and bereaved parents. I've learned that unless you've lost a pre-term baby, a lot of people find photos of deceased babies, for lack of a better word, unpleasant. Yet, for the parents, that photo is all they have.

Well-intentioned friends and family will do anything to stop you from pulling out the photo of a dead or dying child. They make you feel guilty for even thinking that it's a normal thing to do. *You shouldn't put that out there!*They'll say. *It's going to scare people.*

So when I first saw the piece Nancy had done for Ruth, I thought she had commissioned a *Healing Dreamscape* shortly after her baby's death. In fact, Ruth had asked for a Dreamscape over a decade afterwards! She'd finally had enough. Nancy describes what happened.

"Ruth was ready to finally stand a picture of Kari-Ruth next to her other children. Her vision, actually, was to turn all her children's photos into photo sculptures. Before that could happen, I had to do some considerable work to turn the photo of little Kari-Ruth into a Dreamscape. It meant making the intubation tube invisible and selecting a landscape that made the ICU setting also become invisible. The first time I showed Ruth her Dreamscape, she said to me "... that the basket and the fact that [Kari-Ruth] was outdoors makes it kind of a fun picture. It makes it all look so natural."

"Can you imagine what that word 'fun' meant to me? I'm so unbelievably happy when I've transformed a deathbed photo into a work of art. For decades, Ruth desperately wanted people to ask: Who is this little girl? Now we had a Dreamscape that could teach etiquette to all the loving people who did not know why they should talk to a bereaved mother about her deceased child. Already the Dreamscape was producing questions: How many days did Kari-Ruth live? What did she die of? Tell us about the butterfly....

"The beauty of art is that it's interpretive; it begs questions of the viewer. When I make a Dreamscape, I'm thinking how will they place start a conversation around something that's not easy...? The fact that Ruth wanted her Dreamscape made into a 3-D photo cutout also had special significance to Ruth. She explained it this way: 'I loved that it would become a sculpture because it makes it a little bit more than a photo, with more substance and thicker, so you can hold it. I could hug it to my heart.'"

Read more about the Kari-Ruth Dreamscape: "When Your Newborn Dies, Hug Their Dreamscape"

Nancy's created a beautiful, healing memory for Ruth and her husband: a picture she is now proud to display alongside her other children. A picture that says: I had three sons but I also had a daughter and this is who she was ....

Other Healing Dreamscapes for bereaved parents – click on the images to read their story

I was in a similar place back in 1984. I had adopted two children from Korea as infants in the late 70s; had a biological daughter in 1981, and in 1984 had an ectopic pregnancy at Christmastime. A baby was born; I considered it born, and spent a day or two in the hospital. People continually told me: *You can't be sad. You have three other children and it's Christmas.* Even my husband, at the time, didn't acknowledge that we were pregnant or that we had a baby. My best friends would tell me to move on and don't think about it. Grief wasn't talked about then as it is now.

So, if I met a grieving mother today, I'd introduce Nancy as a woman who will make a beautiful gift for you; something you'll have for the rest of your life; a keepsake of your child in a photo. Imagine being able to look at this picture and instead of crying it brings you peace and healing. You're always going to grieve until the day you die. Yes, you will cry because you carried a living baby; because your baby was real (even though they are no longer here). But when you have a Dreamscape in your home for others to see, it overrides that sadness because it mesmerizes. It's art. Instead of censoring, there will be curiosity and lots of questions.

From a Print to a T-Shirt Campaign

Guilt is one of the strongest emotions we have, especially when it's our child who's dead. *It only I had done this or done that.* Or, *What did I do wrong?* If the baby is stillborn or dies at birth, a mother will be obsessing: *I ate right, I exercised, and then my baby died.* Worse, along with guilt comes anger. Still, I can't imagine—even if there are copious tears—that a parent would not be proud to hold and share a beautiful picture of their child if it brings that child alive again.

Nancy explains how finding the right form for a Dreamscape can be liberating for a bereaved parent. One father who was sick about losing his son and best friend knew only that he wanted to put his son's face on T-shirts:

"How do we approach the elephant in the room, when a young man – a flying instructor who loves flying – dies in a plane crash? It was Craig's aunt who first found me to create a Healing Dreamscape for her brother, Dale. He thought she would just pick a great photo of Craig and put it on a T-shirt. But when he saw what the Dreamscape was, that it addressed the flying in a fun way, the guilt and anger worked its way out of his system.

"Dale explains how the act of 'campaigning' with those Craig T-shirts helped him heal: 'Photos are what you're left with... The major thing for me was handing out Craig's T-shirt as a gift to his friends. I had 30 – 40 made. I try to always have some extra T-shirts in my trunk, and I'll say 'Hey, I've got something for you'. They'll say, 'Wow, that's Craig!' Or 'That's neat,' or 'I like it' and some will even put it on right then and there. The T-shirt keeps showing up in all different places. Craig's nephew wore it in May under his cap and gown. On Craig's death anniversary one of his friends wore one. Everybody seems to like it.

"And capturing the personality of my son in one portrait, so to speak, it's different. Like flying, which he loved to teach. Like the flip-flops he wore, made out of indoor-outdoor carpeting. I explain to people that the art was inspired by his favorite song by Ziggy Marley, 'Love is My Religion.' That the fruit is in the shape of country of Jamaica. It's a process of asking questions.

"I enjoy giving Craig's T-shirt out as a gift – it was good for me, too , that it was really more novel, more creative... like Craig. We had some framed and everybody has it displayed differently. I put mine in my beach house because Craig and I have a lot of memories there".

Read more about Craig's Dreamscape, "Campaigning for Craig: The Healing Power of a Legacy T-Shirt" (Hektoen International: Journal of Medical Humanities)

Nancy tells us what she needs to make a *Dreamscape* about your son or daughter

#1 A little conversation (by phone, Skype or face to face)

- "I'll ask: Tell me everything you know about your child, starting from the first time you felt those kicks in your belly. Tell me stories about how your child changed you or your family while he/she was alive.
- "Describe where your Dreamscape will sit (in your house? Your office?)
- "If you come from a particular ethnic or faith tradition, share that with me.
- "Did your child have a good sense of humor? Were they religious, or not at all?
- "Do you want to envision where your loved one is now? Tell me about their favorite places, songs, things to wear or eat."

#2 An iconic photo

- "I'll ask: Find me the most precious picture you have of your child; the picture you always have on you, or in your mind's eye. It can be a current photo or one taken years ago. The important part is that it really captures the essence of your child.
- "There is no set number of photos that go into a Dreamscape. Rather it's based on your budget and what we want the piece to accomplish. Sometimes, in fact, less is more."

#3: Check your email for the mock-up

- "I create a rough of the Dreamscape and email it to you. It will contain all the imagery we want to use but the cut out lines won't be neat, the colors won't be saturated and light and shadow won't be in yet. This is the time to tell me which elements are working for you and which are not."

Family Fundraisers: the way to raise $$ for a Healing Dreamscape

One hundred and twenty percent of bereaved parents are bursting to talk about the son or daughter they lost. There are exceptions – such as a child who's died by suicide or AIDS – when parents won't talk a lot about their child.

I do encourage my families to make a remembrance of their child or family member. Nancy's artwork is extremely reasonable (you pay by the photo and most Healing Dreamscapes are around $200-400). But if the cost is a little too much for you, start a family fundraiser: If you come from a really loving family, there will always be folks around who want to know what they can do to make you smile again.

So here's what you can do:

1. Send out an invite that says you're throwing a family fundraiser to raise money to commission a *Healing Dreamscape* by Nancy Gershman. The invite can say something like "For remembering Craig" or "A healing gift for So-and-So". Whoever it is for: you, a family member, a friend, or even the next generation, believe me when I say that it will be healing for everybody. So don't be embarrassed to ask those who love you to chip in a little something. They're likely to be relieved to have a port in helping someone heal.

2. Decorate a table with your child's favorite things. A creativity gene runs through every grieving family. I've seen funerals decorated with everything from artwork to fishing equipment. And who knows: you may even want to give away those special belongings to someone who really, really appreciates that they once belonged to your son and daughter.

3. In the middle of the table set up a pretty little glass jar. Everyone can come by and slip money into the jar. (White envelopes can be intimidating).

A little background about Nancy, by Nancy

"I come from an artistic family. My father's mother was Viennese and a trained painter who could make these hyper-realistic drops of water on a leaf. My dad was a weekend painter whose style was more expressionist. But he was also a management consultant who'd throw out challenging questions to his clients to keep them off their guard.

"I also worked two decades in advertising and market research, teasing "the truth" out of interview subjects as a copywriter. The only problem was that my solutions always came out as images first, headlines second. When the dotcom bust came, I made my exit to explore how suspending one's disbelief could promote healing. I taught myself Photoshop. For the first time, I saw myself as an artist who had a gift for fitting images together into a cohesive whole, but I also learned that I didn't fit the classic definition of Artist. I didn't have "that itch" to create art for art's sake. Rather, I prefer problem-solving through the act of being present, employing my quirky sense of humor, and of course, cutting and pasting.

"I grew up in New York City where everybody is in everybody else's business. I never felt lonely talking to strangers; on the contrary, I lived for it. But there were also mental health crises in my family that shaped my emphatic listening skills. I was raised by an Obsessive Compulsive mother. In addition to multiple deaths in the family, it also had to make sure a close family member got treatment for anorexia nervosa, or else – I was told – they would die happy.

"Today, I'm married to a scientist whose career has been making computers more intelligent. We have two sons – one of whom is getting his post-Doc in cognitive neuroscience and who has written some "collage novels" where the collage drives the story instead of the other way around. One day, I am positive that I will be quoting from one of his white papers on the revision of memory. The younger son is a musician working in film/video. One day, I am positive I will be watching or listening to something on TV that has his signature. Our legacy is our children, unless it can't be. In which case, I believe there is always a *Dreamscape* to make things right."

For more information about Nancy Gershman and her studio, Art For Your Sake. Email: nancy@artforyoursake.com. Skype:NancyGershman. Ph: 773-255-4677.

Backstory – With a wedding planned at the Planetarium, this save the date photo collage card design revolves around Mary's groom (a fireman) literally saving the bride! A meteor shower and astrological signs spice up the action on the invitation cards. As for Mary's comely figure and her fiancée's rescuing arms? In this Dreamscape, they were all hand crafted out of other people's body parts. View the transformation here.