



PRESCRIPTIVE PHOTOMONTAGE:

A process and product for meaning-seekers
with complicated grief

The current article introduces prescriptive photomontage, a playful method for meaning-making designed to give a renewed sense of hope and purpose to those with complicated grief. Made in consultation with a grieving client to augment traditional bereavement support, the process entails an interview and photo review, culminating in a brainstorming session where the Preferred Story (Freedman & Combs, 1996) is defined. The story either mythologizes the legacy of the deceased or envisions a future in which the client's continuing bond (Klass & Walter, 2001) with the deceased becomes a source of empowerment. The product is a fine art photomontage or "Healing Dreamscape" that envisions the Preferred Legacy or Future. The making of a Healing Dreamscape for Hope, a 62-year-old widow and bereaved mother with complicated grief, is described in our case example.

Grief is not only the loss of a beloved person. It also poses a fundamental challenge to the bereaved person's identity, goals, plans, and dreams (Neimeyer, 2000, 2010). Future plans whose fulfillment depended on a continuing relationship with a loved one are inconceivable in the wake of the loved one's death. Individuals experiencing complicated grief have particular difficulties reclaiming hope in this mental state. In recent decades, bereavement research has shifted away from the opinion that it is healthy to break bonds with a loved one (Freud, 1917) toward a view that healthy grief involves continuing bonds with deceased loved ones through conversation and memory (Klass & Walter, 2001). Grief counseling has historically involved a wrenching working-through of emotional pain. Now research emphasizes the social and emotional benefits of smiling and laughing during grief (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997) and of telling redemptive stories to one's consolers (Baddeley & Singer, 2008). A relatively new tradition of bereavement therapy adopts narrative methods to help the bereaved revise disempowering stories and find new empowering meanings, more satisfying identities, and more rewarding continuing bonds with the deceased (Neimeyer, 2000, 2010).

Most, but not all, bereaved people seek meaning in loss; most meaning-seekers find meaning with no therapeutic intervention. Griefers who have had traumatic losses that have violated their assumptions of a safe and predictable world may find themselves caught in a futile search to find meaning in their loss and regain purpose in lives disrupted by the loss. These individuals may be diagnosed with complicated grief (Neimeyer, 2006), and it is these individuals who typically seek and benefit from bereavement interventions such as therapy or support groups (Neimeyer, 2000).

The current article introduces a new method (prescriptive photomontage or the Healing Dreamscape method) for helping individuals with complicated grief to integrate their losses. This method capitalizes on advances in computer technology, namely digital photo manipulation. It has two aims: (1) to shift the griever's perspective of the deceased from absent supporter to supportive presence; and (2) to provide the griever with a tangible object (a Healing Dreamscape) that reinforces this shift. As a

first author N.G. learned that a client's shared dream with his deceased partner was to perform together at the Eisteddfod Music Festival. In the Preferred Future artist and client conceived together, the griever is in the choir at the festival, with the deceased directly behind him, in a gesture that works either as an imminent caress or conducting. In another example, N.G. places a new granddaughter in the arms of her [deceased] great-grandfather because the grieving daughter is struggling with how much her father "was always a part of this family." In this respect, the Dreamscape gently reminds the griever to do active work on the Preferred Legacy (e.g., presenting the deceased as an accessible role model) or Preferred Future (i.e., through consummation of a dream or goal).

For bereaved individuals who view life through a negative filter, it is difficult to conjure up a hope-filled future without guidance. Thus, the Healing Dreamscape process is artist-guided and the product



The Healing Dreamscape is a tangible visualization of how a griever might draw strength from a continuing bond with the deceased.



therapeutic process of creativity and play, the method is in line with play therapy (Wolfelt, 2006), except in this iteration, it is designed for adults. Likewise, its method of co-creating a more hopeful narrative with the griever draws upon narrative therapy (Freedman & Coombs, 1996).

What is a Healing Dreamscape? Visually speaking, a Healing Dreamscape is a hybrid object: a photomontage populated with people, scenery, and objects from the griever's personal life that hold positive connotations for them. It integrates disparate images into a whole, meshing fantasy, reality, past, present, and future. The selection of imagery for the Dreamscape is co-defined with the griever in a process that draws out details of what previously had defined the hoped-for future with their loved one. The net effect is a picture of a soothing, hope-filled future.

The Healing Dreamscape is a tangible visualization of how a griever might draw strength from a continuing bond with the deceased. For example, for one Dreamscape,

is artist-made. In this sense, the Healing Dreamscape process is a form of prescriptive art, a relatively new means of intervention in which expressive art is custom-made to provide relief for individuals in physical or psychological distress.

Prescriptive artists today include music thanatologists whose work has been shown to significantly decrease blood pressure and reduce the need for pain medication among patients with chronic pain and/or dementia (Foster, 2009). In the visual arts, documentary photographer Todd Hochberg photographs families bonding with a still-born or dying baby in the time they have to say goodbye (Brotman, 2010; Hochberg, 2003). Hochberg's album of fine art photography—a keepsake for the parents—sends a powerful message that a baby's life, however brief, is worthy of memory.

Artist and photographer Jennifer Karady works with veterans re-contextualizing (in a safe, peacetime setting) specific war zone memories which, in Karady's words, "have come home with them." Cast in elaborately



Fig. 1: 10 year old Ishmael

staged narrative tableaux with friends and family, veterans talk about how “something clicks” into place, reducing their feelings of alienation and anxiety as the picture “slows the whole scene down” for contemplation (McKinley, 2010).

The takeaway from these examples of prescriptive art is three-fold:

1. Prescriptive art is personalized, specific to the biography of the individual or family for whom it is made. It invites the client to reframe the meaning of traumatic events.
2. Fine art made by an artist elevates that client’s story, highlighting its universal themes and affirming the client’s self-worth.
3. Art that is life-affirming and multi-layered with meaning lends itself to sharing, providing opportunities for meaningful interactions and secondary healing.

What qualifies someone to be a prescriptive artist? To work with such a creative intervention tool, an individual must be an accomplished fine artist; a compassionate interviewer who develops rapport with a client to elicit positive themes and memory; and an artist-educator whose end product promotes healthy thought, feeling, and action on the part of the client.

In the following case example, the Healing Dreamscape process and product both play an ongoing, constructive role in transitioning a traumatized mother powerless to save her child to an empowered grandmother with a legacy to share. Following the case example, we discuss the method in more general terms.

A Case Example: Hope and the Death of her Son, Ishmael

When the prescriptive artist (first author, N.G.) first meets Hope, she has been attending a bereavement support group for 15 straight months without improvement. She enters the group as an outpatient with complicated grief and suicidal ideation after her youngest son, Ishmael, is murdered—the latest in a string of multiple serious losses. A divorce in 1977 from first husband Lonnie triggered Hope’s first major depressive episode. Her beloved Aunty’s death in 1987 triggered a second. Over the next 6 months, Hope advances from one anti-anxiety medication (Valium; 10 mg/2x daily) to another (Librium; 10 mg/3x daily). Ten years pass, and a happy 10-year marriage ends with the death of her second husband, Isaiah, leading to a prescription for Celexa (20 mg). On January 15, 2007, Ishmael is murdered, and Hope is committed for three days to Mercy Hospital’s psychiatric ward for suicidal ideation, hysteria, and severe insomnia. Her Celexa prescription is doubled.

Becky (not her real name), Hope’s assigned social work intern, finds Hope’s symptoms to be consistent with a diagnosis of complicated grief (Horowitz, Siegle, Holen, Bonanno, Milbrath, & Stinson, 2003). Hope has extreme difficulty accepting Ishmael’s death, longing for him nearly every day and worrying about “freaking out” at reminders of her son. She is prescribed Clozapine (200 mg) yet still has persistent anxiety. She sleeps fitfully and is markedly on the edge, feeling like “a bundle of nerves.” Concerned about Hope’s lack of progress in her support group, Becky talks to Hope about expressive arts therapy. Hope refuses.

“Actually I wanted to talk more about Ishmael. I wanted to give someone else all the details. But using brush and paint—I couldn’t deal with it. I was completely numb. I wanted to do nothin,’ know nothin’. Nothin’ to do with nothin.’”

Becky proposes the idea of an artist (N.G.) making her a remembrance portrait of Ishmael. When Hope understands that she will be guided through a process that will be playful, not painful, Hope agrees to meet N.G. The possibility of creating an uplifting memorial appeals to her. In Hope’s words: “I was just hurting and didn’t have the strength for art. I had no idea what to do. But this was exciting. I would have Ishmael with me in a dreamscape. I’d be able to picture him as he is now.”

Step 1: Intake Phase. N.G. makes a house

call to Hope. While pulling photos from a shoe box, Hope recounts Ishmael’s murder and its murky circumstances. Ishmael was found in the driver’s seat of a car, slumped over the steering wheel. His crack-addicted mother-in-law and another man (possibly her drug dealer) had fought in the back seat, at which time Ishmael was fatally shot. Hope blames Ishmael’s mother-in-law and is furious and disconsolate over the botched investigation—no DNA tests performed on the knife found at the scene; a gun never found; the murderer never identified. She feels spurned by the legal system and abandoned by members of her church, who neither sent sympathy cards nor called. Months later, Hope finds a letter from Ishmael to his wife, confessing to a fling with another woman and asking for forgiveness. This revelation is especially troubling, reopening old wounds as Hope tries to reconcile love and admiration for her “baby” with new information that casts him in a negative light. Hope’s reaction at the time is stark: “If you’re not in the light, then it’s wicked.”

With N.G.’s guidance, Hope begins to view the Dreamscape as a way to reclaim a positive legacy for Ishmael. She points out photos that capture his upbeat and loving nature. She talks about his exemplary work ethic and his pride at being involved in his children’s lives. Hope has two vivid memories that enthrall her: one of an adorable 2-year-old Ishmael sitting on her bed in footed pajamas; the other, a 34-year-old Ishmael grilling hot dogs in the snow, undaunted by the Chicago wind chill. Though the photo of baby Ishmael is damaged and no photo exists of Ishmael grilling in the snow, N.G. explains how through the digital photomontage process, these memories can be reconstituted in her Dreamscape. Throughout the interview, Hope expresses her faith and spirituality. She hopes that Ishmael is at peace in heaven, envisioning a safe place of fluffy clouds and brightness.

Step 2: Brainstorming Phase. Client and artist agree that a Preferred Legacy portrait is called for because Ishmael’s good reputation is at stake. The overarching question that informs the selection of images is: what photos best portray Ishmael as Hope wants him to be remembered? The Dreamscape must strike the right emotional tone, reminding Hope of Ishmael’s inherent sweetness, good humor, and high energy. N.G. guides Hope to a photo of herself after attending church service and

another of Ishmael. Both are wearing something brilliantly white, a fitting metaphor for Hope's central theme of "brightness." Initially Hope sees herself and Ishmael as the Dreamscape's only subjects. Yet she circles back twice, first to include her second husband, Isaiah, and then later, her first husband, Lonnie. The logic flow is this: Isaiah was the love of her life and Ishmael's true father figure, but Lonnie was his father. When N.G. checks in to ask, "Would you like the four of you in the Dreamscape?" Hope looks pleased but affirms that conceptually, the two periods should not overlap. In this regard, the Dreamscape will honor both the maternal and matrimonial relationships that defined Hope's life, paying special homage to Hope's continuing bond with her late husband.

The theme of peace is also important, as in, where does Ishmael rest in peace now? Therefore, before selecting imagery for the setting, N.G. asks Hope to name a special place she has been to that gave her a sense of peace and calm. Hope recalls a cruise she had taken and reveals she still has a photograph of her cabin. The photo features a porthole in the rear of the cabin that is reminiscent of a church's clerestory window, with light pouring through. The image conveys the sense of peace and heavenliness precious to Hope, so N.G. will include it in the Dreamscape.

Step 3: Photo search Phase. In Step 1, the Interview Phase, Hope and N.G. look through Hope's photos for inspiration and

to gain a shared vision of Hope's most meaningful memories of Ishmael. By contrast, the aim of the Photo Search Phase is to find additional images that will resolve some of the challenges identified in Step 2, the Brainstorming Phase. For example, including the photo of Hope and family from the Lonnie years means featuring a 10-year-old Ishmael. However, the image of Ishmael at 10 years old doesn't resonate as much with Hope as does his baby picture. N.G. offers to replace this older Ishmael (Figure 1) with baby Ishmael (Figure 2). However, the baby photo—particularly Ishmael's beloved "wild and nappy hair"—is badly bleached by age. N.G. suggests cloning an Afro for baby Ishmael from one of Ishmael's own children. Hope tracks down a photo of Ishmael's son Aquil in a bathtub with his siblings (Figure 3). The result delights Hope, feeling like a posthumous gift from father to son.

Back to the central photo of Ishmael in his bright white shirt. His body language expresses self-assurance, but the expression is mock-gangster, so N.G. encourages Hope to seek out another photo that expresses joy instead. Hope locates a photo where Ishmael beams as he snaps his own picture. Once N.G. identifies which additional images need to be tracked down from a source other than Hope, the Creation Phase begins.

Step 4: Creation Phase. N.G.'s task is now to produce a photomontage that reflects the positive themes that surfaced in Hope's interview. This means the image should, first of all, give the feeling of peace and bright-

ness; and, second, should portray Ishmael and Hope as envisioned in Hope's fondest memories—which happen to occur during two entirely different periods in time. To meet the first challenge, N.G. integrates three separate images from different sources to shape the Dreamscape's environment: the floor of snow (from another photographer's images) reflective of the grilling memory and reminiscent of Hope's classical idea of heaven; the backdrop, taken from an ethereal nighttime underwater shot of an illuminated pool; and the porthole from Hope's cabin, which becomes a heavenly portal inside the Dreamscape. Together, these images evoke Hope's spiritual theme of brightness and peace.

To meet the second challenge, N.G. needs to integrate Hope's two favorite memories of Ishmael—one of him as an adult and one of him as a child—into a cohesive whole. N.G. decides to juxtapose these two memories from different points in time by creating an inner scene within an outer scene.

In the outer scene we see the adult Ishmael, flanked on his left by a jubilant Hope in Sunday finery and on his right by his stepfather, Isaiah. To emphasize the adult Ishmael as happy, hardworking, and a good father to his children, N.G. uses the beaming face of Ishmael that Hope retrieved from her photo collection. N.G. also supplies the image of a child's tool belt, which the adult Ishmael in the Dreamscape wears to symbolize his work ethic and his bond with his children.

To create the inner scene, N.G. plac-

A RECOMMENDATION

for how clinicians might engage a prescriptive artist to work with their clients.

First, define the purpose of the prescriptive product. The selection of an appropriate prescriptive artist is dependent upon what the prescriptive art method needs to accomplish for the patient, not what medium is best (e.g. photomontage, photograph, etc.) Different prescriptive artists' work may have slightly different goals (e.g., to memorialize a relationship or a legacy, to spur conversation with loved ones, to restructure or recontextualize traumatic memories).

Second, select the appropriate prescriptive artist. The first author is in the process of compiling a list of established and emerging prescriptive artists along with the goals of their work and examples. In the interim, readers can contact the first author for a current listing. It is always best if the clinician has a firsthand opportunity to speak with the prescriptive artist and become familiar with the artist's body of work. Additionally, prescriptive artists on the whole tend to docu-

ment their process with a client, from the intake period forward, taping and transcribing conversations audio-visually or in transcripts. The clinician may request these tapes and transcripts, which should provide a good sense of the prescriptive artist's interpersonal sensitivity and interviewing skills.

Third, arrange a joint meeting between the clinician, the patient, and the prescriptive artist. Once the clinician has identified an appropriate prescriptive artist for the case in question, clinician and patient can meet with the artist in his or her studio or conduct a conference call with the artist from the clinician's office. If both clinician and patient are comfortable with the prescriptive artist's work and his or her interpersonal style, the prescriptive art process can proceed. The patient can then decide how closely he or she wants the clinician to follow the prescriptive art process with the artist.

es a TV set on the main stage (i.e., the snowy floor). Within the TV set, she places the Lonnie-Hope family grouping. N.G. swaps out the 10-year-old Ishmael sitting on Hope's lap for baby Ishmael, now cosmetically enhanced with Aquil's Afro. N.G. extends baby Ishmael's little footed feet out and beyond the TV set, to be warmed by the swirling heat rising from the grill (See Dreamscape, page 28). Throughout the process, N.G. e-mails drafts of the Dreamscape to Hope asking for feedback and suggestions. Now the Dreamscape is in its final iteration, ready to be printed and shared with others.

Step 5: Sharing Phase. After Hope is presented with a hard copy of the Dreamscape, she talks to N.G. about its meaning, and in doing so, makes some unexpected discoveries. Hope notices how her left arm—which wraps tightly around Ishmael—branches Escher-like from Ishmael's left arm. The seamlessness of the intertwining arms recalls Finkbeiner (1996) referring to a parent's reaction to their child's death as an "amputation effect," where "the lifeline that is cut is not only between the child and the parent but between the parent and the future." Here, Hope experiences her Dreamscape as a reversal of the amputation effect, melding Hope and son back together again and reaffirming their bond: "At first, I thought Ishmael's hand was missing. But after all, it is art so real, I told you, let's keep it the same. That's the connection. This photomontage will be the connection. I know that my baby love me."

Hope is delighted by the synthetic image of baby Ishmael warming his toes by the grill's fire. After she has taken the Dreamscape home, she reflects on how this hybrid memory mobilizes her creative reasoning, self-soothing abilities, and positive thinking: "When I used to close my eyes, I'd see my baby in his casket and that was just so hurting I couldn't take it. When this photomontage was made, now I see this little baby with the hot dogs, and it's like he's saying 'Goody, mommy! Hot dogs! Hot dogs!' I see him now, this little baby I was blessed with. This really brings me to just forget about a lot of wickedness and evil around me and what happened to my son, the way he was. Takes my mind off trying to take revenge and getting even, the hot dogs takes my mind off all that...Sometimes in the night I get up and go to the computer and put up the little baby part and hey, I

can go right to sleep."

Hope also uses the Dreamscape as a means to engage with others who loved Ishmael. Running into old acquaintances of her son or late husband, she shows them copies of the Dreamscape. This initiates a process of joint reminiscing as the Dreamscape reminds them of the deceased's best qualities and of good times spent together (Walter, 1996). When she can, Hope carries copies on her person, handing them out in her role as Ishmael's "memory-keeper." Recipients are grateful for being singled out for this gift, while Hope is rewarded with their positive feedback and thanks. Without fail, when told that this legacy portrait was made by an artist for Hope's recovery, recipients interpret this as a special honor.

Today, Hope's Dreamscape gives her the courage to reprocess, recover, and reclaim the shattered pieces of her life. The living Ishmael is gone, but for Hope, the Dreamscape embodies Ishmael's legacy and their continuing bond: "I can do that art therapy now ... but what we did then [with the Dreamscape], that just brought me out. When I saw what we made, I just got caught up in the moment...It seemed as if Ishmael was here, alive. Because it's physically here [as Hope's screen saver] where I see it every day...He's here and in my heart."

The Method of Prescriptive Photomontage

Below, we trace the steps of prescriptive photomontage, a recursive process, with movement back and forth between any two steps. Through these steps, the griever's increasing involvement in the creative process invests them in their own healing.

Step 1: Intake Phase. A major premise of prescriptive photomontage—drawn from narrative therapy (Payne, 2006)—is that the problem is not all there is. In Step 1, the client flips through personal photographs, introducing the loved one and the circumstances of the loss, while also describing current challenges and hopes for the future. Throughout, the prescriptive artist asks the client to elaborate on their sense-impressions, a process that provides rich visual detail. The leisurely pace of the photo

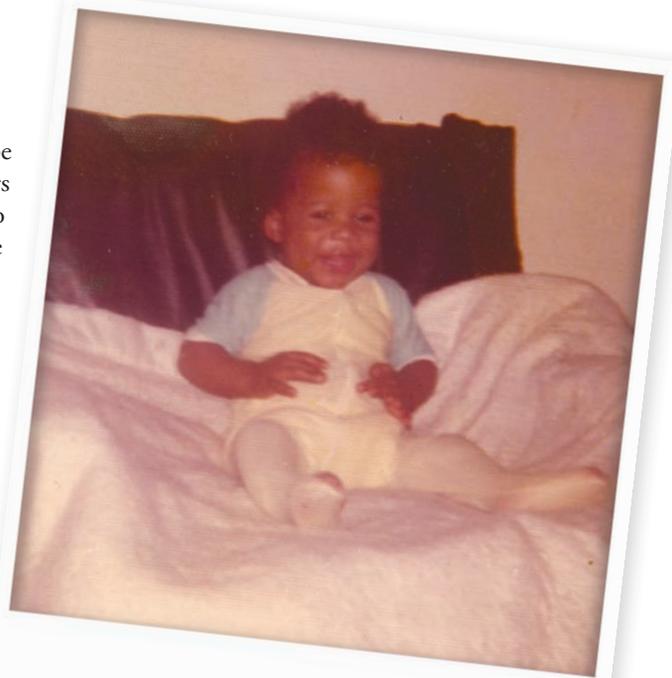


Fig. 2: 2 year old Ishmael

review allows for questions that probe nearly forgotten events once associated with great joy. Meanwhile, the artist identifies positive recurrent themes that translate well into visual terms. For example, in our case illustration, Hope tells stories that reflect the theme of good over evil, referring frequently to the term "brightness." Viewing these "bright" elements later in the Dreamscape, Hope is finally able to see herself as an epic character persevering against evil (White & Epston, 1990).

Secondly, prescriptive photomontage is based on the idea that continuing bonds with the deceased should be encouraged, not relinquished. Recent research suggests that it is normal for the bereaved to experience the deceased person as an ongoing presence in their psychological life (e.g., Klass & Walter, 2001). This is also in keeping with clinicians' suggestions that those working with the bereaved should encourage continuing bonds that empower the griever (e.g., Neimeyer, 2010). Next, as prescriptive artist and client define and shape the Preferred Story, the artist's questions change course to nurture an important shift in perspective: i.e., helping the griever view their loved one less as an absent supporter and more as a supportive presence.

Step 2: Brainstorming Phase. After hearing the client's story of loss, artist and client jointly determine whether the Dreamscape should represent a Preferred Future or

Preferred Legacy. Using directed questions, the artist probes for the Dreamscape's players, props and setting, and its intended audience. The artist's questions have a provocative quality that stretches the griever to think creatively about the loss and the continuing bond. Questions are not asked in any pre-selected order:

- "What would [the deceased] say about the current state of affairs (i.e., his or her death)?"
- "What do you think [the deceased] would want you to do now? What kinds of changes? What kinds of goals?"
- "Where do you think [the deceased] lives now? What do you think it looks like?"
- "Imagine a scene in which you and your loved one meet again. Where would it be? What would you carry with you?"
- "Other than you and [the deceased], who else should be in here?"
- "What will you be wearing?" "What will the others be wearing?"
- "Who gets to keep the Dreamscape?" "Where do you think it will be displayed?"

Together client and artist select the best photos, typically those based on positive attributes that surface during this extended interview. As they continue to brainstorm and dialogue, the client may have a change of heart and change of direction as they become aware of implied meanings in the Dreamscape's composition. Step 2 ends with a final selection of photos, an inventory of missing imagery, and the Preferred Story, defined.

Step 3: Photo Search Phase. The prescriptive artist assigns the client specific searches for missing elements. The hunt may be for preferred body parts, as heads and bodies can be swapped at any time. Or perhaps a face from a favorite photo may be badly deteriorated from handling or overexposure, calling for a facsimile. For the griever, locating a great fit among their own photo archives is often a reward in itself.

In such assignments, we can see parallels between the needs of grieving adults and grieving children. Wolfelt (2006) emphasizes "doing," and similarly, the goal-oriented activity here is the hunt for photos. It is not at all unusual to find a person with complicated grief—a human being otherwise limited in his or her social interactions—finding such activity not only intriguing but fun.

Step 4: Creation Phase. Back in the studio, the artist surveys the final photo selections and reviews the key memories for which there are no photographs. The final assemblage of the beta product is done by the artist, with input from the client collected after each mock-up of the Dreamscape is delivered (via e-mail, regular mail or in person).

By this point, the artist has a deep understanding of the griever's motivations and goals as well as the important themes in his or her life. Driven by the griever's history and the artist's own intuition and experimentation, the artist fleshes out the prescriptive plot of the Preferred Story. Because the goal is to stimulate the griever to engage in imaginative and interpretive processes of their own, the artist's mock-up will contain iconic images and symbols. The prescriptive artist will also embed the Dreamscape with "coincidences" as the artist keeps notes of information on the deceased known only to the griever. These "coincidences" greatly enrich the griever's experience of the finished product. Specific manipulations of imagery might include:

- Placing the players in a pose or activity that literally or metaphorically links them together
- Creating a safe place enhanced by favorite colors, objects, and locations
- Fusing together past, present, and future and multiple settings into a gestalt view

Step 5: Sharing Phase. The griever now has ownership of the completed Dreamscape as well as a transcript of all recorded conversations (made by the artist) taking place during the Healing Dreamscape process. Sharing is often bi-directional with the griever sharing thoughts with the prescriptive artist, followed by the artist volunteering his or her own interpretations or intentions. Back in the privacy of home or community, the griever shares the piece with loved ones, friends, acquaintances, or family members. Such sharing tends to open dialogue about the human being who was lost, rather than about the loss itself. It encourages others to ask the griever questions about the loved one and to share stories about the loved one's legacy, which can be a key part of the grieving process (Walter, 1996).

Discussion

The very essence of prescriptive photomontage is the possibility of redemption and hope. Hope's case example and others (Baker, 2009; Gershman, 2009, 2010) suggest that such processes help those with complicated grief make sense of their losses and embolden them to try out new ways of reintegrating themselves into their social worlds.

The Healing Dreamscape method elevates the griever's mood by evoking preferred memories of the deceased. The process affirms grievers' continuing bonds with the deceased and helps grievers define the deceased person's legacy as well as a healthy role for themselves. As a product, the Dreamscape can be interpreted each day from a different perspective. At point of need, it works as a self-soothing tool and the tangible embodiment of a dream or legacy. In Hope's case, process and product created a means for her to campaign for her son, now a worthy role model in her mind's eye, while affirming her own role as grandmother and storyteller.

Not unlike art therapy, "prescriptive art" matches an artist to a client, in this case an individual struggling with complicated grief. Where this technique is dramatically different from expressive art therapy is that the process is not about the expression of pain but rather about making higher level meaning out of loss. Additionally, the visualized Preferred Story or Preferred Future becomes a script of sorts which lays out—in visual terms—what the client's active work conceivably might look like.

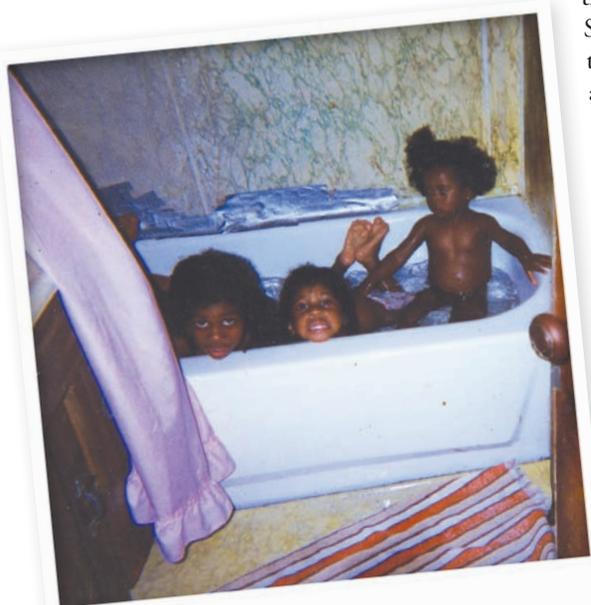


Fig. 3: Ishmael's son Aquil

A new technique, the Healing Dreamscape method has not yet been subjected to rigorous empirical study, so conclusions should be taken with appropriate caution. Like other grief interventions, it may work better for individuals who find that their grief does not alleviate on its own over time—individuals such as those with complicated grief. Although Hope's testimony suggests that the Dreamscape played a critical role in her healing, spending time with a compassionate listener may in and of itself be healing for a person experiencing complicated grief. To examine the extent to which the making and keeping of the Dreamscape itself contributes significantly to healing, future studies should compare the entire Dreamscape method to one that contains simply the interview and discussion of loss between client and prescriptive artist.

As an adjunct to therapy and as a post-therapy resource, the Healing Dreamscape method mines the dark patches of our history for positivity and joy. It can also be an homage to the hard therapeutic work done by the griever prior to the experience with the prescriptive artist. For Hope, the Dreamscape was a rewarding, poetic effort, a reminder to value the time we have while we are alive. Hope explains: "Brightness away from darkness. The Dreamscape reminds me of yin and yang. That's what we are, my family—that's what we are. My 10-year-old granddaughter asked me: 'Are you happy, grandma? I want you to be happy, grandma.' We really should not grieve ourself to death; our love ones will not like that. They are at peace and they want us to be happy with the time that we have here. God bless!"

Postscript

To date, there is no formal association of prescriptive artists, nor a formal discipline called Prescriptive Art. Until a formal discipline is established as it was for the field of art therapy, the mental health community will need to rely upon articles (such as this one), presentations, and panel discussions to recognize individuals who are prescriptive artists. The authors believe that as prescriptive art matures into a discipline, more individuals with artistic talent, experience, and/or interest in working within the mental health field will consider developing and emerging as prescriptive artists.

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