

Using the Arts as a Method of Healing, Post-Conflict

By Yolanda F. Johnson



"Art is our one true global language. It knows no nation, it favors no race, and it acknowledges no class. It speaks to our need to reveal, heal, and transform. It transcends our ordinary lives and lets us imagine what is possible."

**--Richard Kamler
Artist, Educator and Curator**

As I look forward to the impending holiday season, with special attention to the art of thanksgiving and gratefulness, I cannot help but take stock in something very dear to me and which I find incredibly important in the realm of post-conflict development – the use of the arts as a method of healing. Three particular groups of people come to mind, and so I'll take this time to explore them: Veterans, Victims of the Rwandan Genocide, and Africans of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In a 2006 edition of *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, Collie, Backos, Malchiodi and Spiegel state that 30% of people who have been in war zones develop some form of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And that while PTSD was not recognized as a diagnosis until 1980, the use of art expression in trauma intervention appeared in the late 1970s.

Veterans

The celebration of the recent American Veteran's Day holiday first comes to mind, as when there is conflict, there are most often "soldiers" of some kind, who are left to deal with the aftermath of the conflict in which they were involved. The arts have been found to truly help veterans who are in distress. Most amazing to me, is that Collie et. al, also mention that art therapy was the only component, out of various options, including group therapy, drama therapy, community service, anger management, and journaling, that produced the greatest benefits for veterans with the most severe PTSD symptoms.

Rwanda Genocide

The second example I want to mention is one most likely etched in the minds of many – the 1994 Rwanda genocide, where nearly 1 million Rwandans perished, as the civil war between the Tutsis and Hutus escalated into a full-blown genocide, while the global community watched with gross inaction. The events have been depicted in various artistic

mediums – books, poetry, music and films, such as *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes in April*. One of the most impactful examples of using the arts to move forward and induce healing is the group, Ingoma Nshya, which means "new kingdom" or "new era" and the recent documentary, *Sweet Dreams*, which tells their story. According to established accounts, women had particularly heinous acts inflicted upon them during the Rwanda genocide, primarily of sexual nature. Also, the art of percussion and drumming was primarily a male-dominated area until Ingoma Nshya came along, and gave these women the freedom to not only express themselves through an artistic medium, but this medium helped them to collectively deal with post-conflict life together as Tutsis and Hutus.

Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which was the primary introduction of slaves from Western Africa to America. The most interesting example of the arts being used as an expressive healing method is through that of the Traditional Spiritual – music, heavily influenced by African rhythms brought with the slaves from their homelands. Not only did this music serve as a personal historic narrative, but it was used as a method of covert communication, noting escape routes, expressing their sorrows and articulating feelings about faith and resilience in their newfound Christian belief in God. Some of my favorite examples of this music are, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Keep Your Hand on the Plow," the latter, because it is the best example of historic narrative, in that it eventually became "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," one of the most profound anthems of the civil rights movement.

Indeed, the arts are essential to the human condition. Who doesn't have a special artistic outlet – be it a favorite film, song, book, that helps get one get through difficult times? I encourage us all to take a moment during this time of gratitude, thanks and celebration in many parts of the world, to be thankful for the gift of the arts to help us move forward as a collective human race.

Yolanda F. Johnson, UN Representative for the Foundation for Post Conflict Development, has found true joy in her career as a performing artist, music educator, and as a supporter and fundraiser for the arts, while also working to fulfill her goals of helping women and children both locally and internationally.