

Arthritis, Art, and Motherhood: Hand in Hand

By Linda Del Fabro Smith, MSc, BSc(OT)

As an occupational therapist, I was curious to know the impact on motherhood activities was when arthritis was in the picture. As part of my MSc research and thesis requirements, I undertook a narrative study involving artwork, along with other data collection, from eight women with arthritis. Through interviews, observations, and looking at family photos I constructed narratives of each woman's experience using as much as their language and tone as possible. Each woman interviewed had a number of stories; these were compared and used to build a meta-story. Another methodology in this narrative study was to ask the study participants, none of whom have artistic training, to paint a simple picture in response to the question, "What are the most important things about being a mother?" Not surprisingly, the artwork supported the meta-story: **"Just because I can't do doesn't mean I'm not a mom"**. The paintings also echoed each woman's smaller narratives. I was surprised that firmly claiming "mother" as an identity enabled these women to remain not only strong and positive, despite chronic disability, but also provided a way for them to prosper in their daily lives during motherhood activities. The occupational identity, in some ways, rose above the effects of arthritis. Here are but a few of their paintings and the accompanying descriptions.



"Well, in the four corners there are four circles of color. The light pink represents B, my eight-month-old daughter; the light blue represents M, my ten-year-old daughter, the darker blue represents me, and the green represents my husband. So there is kind of a swirl that's meant to be my day: the beginning of my day starts with a long period of peace. There is a red piece—red represents pain and my color is mixed in with the red. There are some yellows, and it gets brighter as the day gets busier. And then the red represents pain again. It circles, though I don't know why I chose circles; I think maybe because we are a well rounded family, we kind of all meld in together."

All photos taken by Brooke McAllister, 2014.



"The painting is supposed to be about being a mother and so I thought I would draw a painting of the family. I am not good at faces. At first when [I painted this] the hands were not touching, but we always hold hands so I wanted to show that: us all holding hands, because one thing I enjoy every day about being a mom is being able to hold hands with my kids. We like hiking and walking so I thought I would make an outside scene. As far as how it reflects on my arthritis, I am really not too sure, except that my family and my husband have always been supportive of me and helpful. This sort of shows us all together and shows how my family has helped me with that."



“I guess the tree was a good image because I feel like I am the tree of the family—I support the family, and things just wouldn’t be the same without me. The leaves on the motherhood side are a little brighter and fresher, and the ones on the arthritis side are kind of tired and dormant, because they need to go to sleep down at the bottom. I put a silver lining on the clouds on the arthritis side, because there are positive things—it’s not all bad—I am at home with my kids, and that’s a definite plus. I am less stressed. In the picture, it shows the branches being sort of tired and broken, which is what my limbs feel like. The roots are a bit stronger on the motherhood side; on the arthritis side I do not feel as stable.”



“I put in the sunshine because I always feel so good when the sun is out. The rainbow kind of looks like a slide, and I guess that is to say that sometimes things are up and sometimes things are down. I like to think that I keep myself on the curve of the rainbow, so that I am not too—you know, feeling super good or super bad but try to keep myself in the middle, I guess. And the hand is for so many things. The hand is for being a mother—I know there are people that cannot use their hands and they are mothers, and I do not know how they do it. For me, the hand is so much a key part of me and being a mother; it gives everything: it gives discipline, it gives love, it gives encouragement but also, now, the hand symbolizes the arthritis too.”



Thanks to Dr. Catherine Backman, who gently and persistently encouraged me to publish the mother’s art from my thesis work, and to Dr. Diane Lacaille for remembering the beauty in these paintings.

“Well, it is just the hands of my three kids and myself, basically that we are all connected, all joined I guess, with me, the mom, being the focal point and the kids are all together. My hand fits on top as sort of the basis, the grounding, the keeping them together, the anchor. Because of the arthritis, it will not let my hand go flat anymore, and that would be it, a great big hole in the middle (laughing). It would have been nicer had it had gone flat; it would have shown more connection, more anchoring and drawing in.”

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Reference
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