

Artful Anger

BY J. NATHAN CORBITT

Serving their communities as artists, ministers, social workers, educators, and therapists, these three creative people open a window to the reality of our world. They call all of us to action, even as they use therapeutic art-making to heal survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking.

It lay on my shoulder heavy. I turned my head and momentarily froze as I saw the muzzle of an automatic rifle pointed directly at my neck. I grabbed the pot of fear boiling up from my gut. I decided it would be in my self-survival interest to hold that pot of fear and not spill my emotions in the direction of a voice that was now becoming stronger.

"Sir, Sir, SIR! Where are you going?"

I want to go home. That was my first thought, like a small child running to his mother. But I could neither fly home nor fight the situation. The fear was now turning to anger. The boiling pot was beginning to burn as my physical space was threatened. I was at a border crossing in a war zone where tensions were high and violence hovered waiting to swoop down with falcon speed. I would not be prey; I bolstered myself and held on.

I looked at the border officer with all the respect I could muster and became very confused. Here was a woman holding a weapon of death—and carrying new life. She was pregnant, her belly pushing the uniform beyond its limits.

"SIR! Where are you going?" She repeated sharply.

My mind was sorting for a response, one that might appeal to her nurturing side and encourage her to pull the gun from my shoulder. My mother's voice was now in my head, "Nathan, a soft answer turneth away wrath."

"I'm going to the capital to judge a youth choir festival." I managed a smile as I responded.

"Hmph." She grunted with unconcern and pulled the gun to her side as she waved me on.

I did judge the choir festival. In the middle of devastating poverty and what I now know as the trauma of war, I watched children and youth dance and sing with cathartic vigor that released their fear and anger and helped to bind their scattered emotions within a safe space.

That was nearly thirty-five years ago. Then, the destination and purpose seemed so insignificant. What reasonable good could a musician, or any artist, do in a place filled with so much hatred and violence?

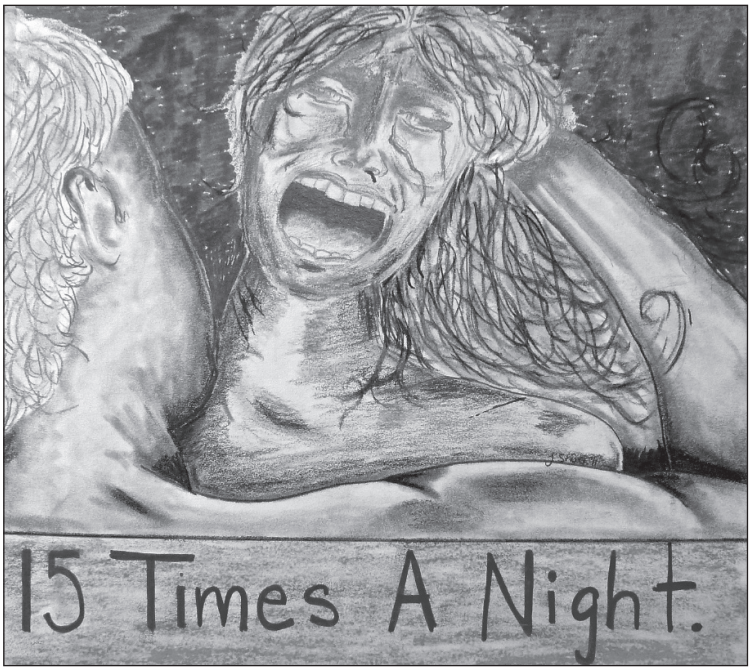
Since that time, I have witnessed firsthand the injustices of war—death, human trafficking, and forced human migration, among a long list of rights withheld and needs denied by aggression at the point of a gun, or spear, or fist. My anger was sparked by that single incident and has been continually ignited by similar ones. My hope, encouraged by the play of those children, led me to encourage and engage creative people in responding to injustice with love, compassion, and the healing power of art-making wherever they find themselves.

Over the course of nearly twenty years through my teaching and non-profit work, I have met some remarkable creative artists who understand the therapeutic nature of art-making. They serve their communities as artists, ministers, social workers, educators, and therapists. At times these creative people are prophets who stand on the edge of society providing a window to the reality of our world. Their art serves as a mirror where we are forced to see ourselves at our best, and our worst. They bring a critical awareness to a world many of us do not know exists, even in our own neighborhoods, and they call us to action.[1] At other times these creative people are healers, highly trained creative art therapists who painstakingly work with survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking.

Three of these artists are Jamaine Smith, Hannah Poon, and Natalie Hoffman. Each of them has personal experiences to share that give voice to injustices they have witnessed. Their art is sometimes disturbing to see. Yet, each one calls for action.[2]

The artist, Jamaine Smith, comes from a social work background and currently serves as the Director of Community Programs at BuildaBridge International in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He has an M.A. in Urban Studies with a concentration in Community Arts from Eastern University.

One morning Jamaine was shocked to read a news article about a sex-trafficking ring in Brooklyn, New York. It was discovered very near where he was living with his family, in a peaceful and caring community. Neither he nor his neighbors were aware that the crimes they knew happened in other parts of the world were occurring just blocks away from their homes. He desired to change that. *15 Times a Night* was a piece created to bring critical awareness to the prostitution and sex-trafficking of adolescent girls.



Jamaine Smith, 15 Times a Night (2011). *Pencil, charcoal, and colored pencil on paper. 10.5 x 9.5". Used by permission of the artist.*

He says that as he created the piece, "it was non-verbal lamentation and intercession all in one. There were emotions swirling within my chest that I could not put into words." The angst, sadness, anger, and determination for change are represented in every hard stroke of pencil, charcoal, and colored pencil.

15 times a Night is a prayer. Unable to adequately understand the complexity of the issue, Smith says:

> I must enter into a space of prayer in order to process and release the feelings, the images, the unction only God can understand. This state of prayer is complex and can result in a visual representation of both lamentation and intercession like *15 Times a Night*. I believe God does hear, acknowledge, understand, and consider every voice. He validates the voiceless. God has the power to do what we cannot. This is a hope we can hold onto in a world where it appears justice is seldom served.

The artist, Hannah Poon, currently works as a social worker at a shelter for homeless families in Calgary, Alberta, where she facilitates art classes and recreational opportunities for children and youth as a means to build resiliency and skills. Like Jamaine Smith, she is a graduate of the M.A. in Urban Studies with a concentration in Community Arts from Eastern University.

In *Objecrated*, Hannah drew on a memorable experience for a piece that would be part of a campaign against sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. The event was sponsored by an arts and justice group in Calgary called Dikaios, from the Greek word that is translated "justice" or "righteousness." She explains:

> I once met a woman who was a street worker. She was not much older than me. I remember the evening she came into our outreach van for a sandwich and hot chocolate. The skin on her face was weathered and leathery. Her hands were shaky, swollen, and rough. Looking closely at her, I could see that she was once really beautiful. A petite native woman with coffee-colored skin and gentle features that were almost all hidden by years of street life and prostitution, she now looked like a cartoon that you see on posters at Halloween. She smelt of rotting flesh. When she left, one of my co-workers asked if I had met her yet. When I said no, my co-worker proceeded to fill me in that this woman was well known on the $5 stroll. She was a crack addict (and had picked away at her leg until it was rotting) and at that time the smallest rock of crack cost $5. If the saying "the eyes are the window to one's soul" is true, then that night when I saw her eyes and took a moment to look into them, all I saw was darkness and brokenness.
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> The piece *Objecrated* is a message of the brokenness of one's body and soul shipped and taken for someone else's pleasure. The pain of rejection and of betrayal at any level is immobilizing and deflating. It can take a lot to heal from that. To imagine that someone has been stripped of their dignity and is constantly placed in a situation where they are rejected and betrayed until they are senseless raises in me a sense of deep anger for their situation and compassion for everyone involved. The piece expresses my disgust towards the dismal treatment of another human being.
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> Those who work in justice fields, particularly social work, know that there is never an easy solution. Issues like sexual exploitation and sex trafficking are complex, grey, and seemingly unsolvable.

Hannah Poon, Objecrated (2012). *Mixed Media Sculpture: Maple wood, Plywood, plaster bandages, hemp string, and cotton/polyester fabric. 30 x 16 x 16". Used by permission of the artist.*

When faced with injustices such as these, you can feel helpless, particularly when you have worked with people who have been exploited who either choose to go back into their situation or are killed for their attempts to leave. This piece is a prayer of anger towards this injustice. It is a cry of frustration towards the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of finding solutions. It is a lament for God to hear and intercede with a miracle. It is an intercession for

those experiencing this injustice to find true restorative freedom. There is a calling towards reconciliation, restoration, and justice that propels us to find solutions, to act for change, and to stand for a greater good.

The artist, Natalie Hoffman, is a Certified Art Therapist trained at the Art Therapy and Counseling Program at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As an art therapist with BuildaBridge International, she works with adults who are living with acute mental illness, substance abuse, or both. She also works with children living in transitional housing, and children who have come to this country as refugees.

The common thread that unites all of these artists' works is trauma. Hoffman says of this piece:

> Hopelessness can be contagious. To me, hope does not exist because the world is a beautiful place. Hope exists because the world can be an extremely challenging place, which gives us the opportunity to see and feel the possibility of happiness in the future, when we look with not just our eyes. I wanted the viewer to look someone in the eyes who may be at that moment without hope, but instead of joining them in that hopeless place, to be able to see the humanity in the person, and to become a vessel that allows for hope to grow.
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> Throughout my career I have learned to empathize less with my patients, in order to better treat them. Allow me to explain: a therapist will often come across a person at the bottom of a hole. In order to help that person, they may crawl down the hole as well. The person may feel better understood, but now both therapist and the person are stuck at the bottom of this hole. I view my job as being able to reach down, or travel down the hole only momentarily, and then to switch the focus to working together to climb back out of the hole.
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> I know how quickly a person's life can change, how quickly a person can fall down a 'hole,' and I am learning how to help others out of those holes without joining them at the bottom.
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> I have seen some traumatized individuals possess what could be considered a righteous anger over the hand they have been dealt in life. From a clinical perspective, this anger, although it may be justified, can isolate a person and increase their symptoms.
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> Perhaps it is for this reason that I rarely find myself getting angry over some of the traumas I have seen others experience in my line of work. My job is to create a safe space where my patients can, through

Natalie Hoffman, HOPE IN THE EYES OF THE HOPELESS (2013). *Acrylic paint on canvas, magazine collage. 18 x 18". Used by permission of the artist.*

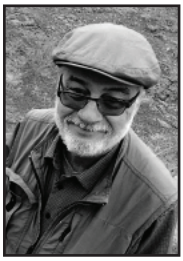
the act of art-making, express feelings of righteous anger, or to lament over some of the losses they may have had in life. I am fortunate that through working with traumatized individuals, as well as by creating and displaying my own artwork inspired by them, I have become more connected to the needs in the world around me.

I believe that God acts through us, through our actions and our relationships to one another. When I think about justice, I can only see it occurring when we choose to let love guide our actions. Many of the individuals I work with have suffered injustices. When I think about my response, and God's response to this injustice, it boils down to being able to love that person, in that moment, even if loving them does not seem easy.

NOTES

1 See J. Nathan Corbitt, "Prophet Muse," *Singing Our Lives*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 18 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006), 28-35.

2 For further reading on the scientific dimensions of anger, see the *International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes,* edited by Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (New York: Springer, 2010). Regarding variations in anger among children within and between cultures, see Deborah C. Stearns, "Anger and Aggression," *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, *www.faqs.org/childhood/A-Ar/Anger-and-Aggression.html* (accessed July 6, 2014). On art therapy for anger, see the articles in Frances F. Kaplan, ed., *Art Therapy and Social Action: Treating the World's Wounds* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), and Marian Liebmann, ed., *Art Therapy and Anger* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008). Artist Rose Deniz explores anger as a motivation for artwork in "Do Angry Artists Make Better Work?" *www.rosedeniz.com/2011/01/21/do-angry-artists-make-better-work/* (accessed June 23, 2014).



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