

# Healing Through Creativity

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## Visual Arts Educators' Guide



**Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards**

Alliance for  
Young Artists  
& Writers



NEW YORK LIFE  
FOUNDATION



NATIONAL  
ART EDUCATION  
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NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

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# Introduction

The following art lessons were designed by Donalyn Heise and Adrienne Hunter to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all learners; to foster resilience in those who have experienced trauma and those who may experience trauma in their futures. While specifically designed for learners who have experienced trauma through grief and loss, these lessons also address artistic, academic, social, and emotional learning for those exposed to other forms of trauma, such as trauma from natural disasters, political upheaval, extreme poverty, violence, neglect, abuse, or homelessness. Grief and loss can occur from the death of a loved one, displacement due to economic issues, natural disasters, or major changes in one's life. Each lesson incorporates award-winning writing and/or art from the 2019 Alliance for Young Artists & Writers' *Healing Through Creativity* publication.

Art and creativity can provide a safe place to express feelings and emotions. Creative practices can also foster resilience and empower individuals to be a change agent in their lives by visually articulating individual strengths and assets.

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back, to successfully adapt, to cope, to develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to the stress that is inherent in today's world.

Resilience Theory is the belief in the ability of every person to overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in that person's life. As educators, we are not always in a position to eliminate risks, but we can teach using a resilience framework to increase protective factors that foster resilience. Protective Factors that the arts provide include personal accomplishment, resourcefulness, creativity, persistence, metacognition, vision for the future, a sense of purpose, a sense of humor, and optimism (Heise, 2014, 2013; Heise & MacGillivray, 2013, 2011).

Art teachers can strengthen protective factors that foster resilience by implementing innovative curriculum and utilizing nurturing pedagogy. We can empower students by giving them choices, engaging them in authentic learning experiences and collaborative community art-based initiatives that celebrate individual and collective strengths. By understanding the characteristics of resiliency, teachers who are advocates for learners who have experienced trauma can help students avoid the cycle of failure and low expectations that can lead to adverse outcomes.

Professional Development—Art educators are strongly encouraged to continue professional development to sharpen art skills, and to learn more about trauma, resiliency, and other factors that impact education. Professional organizations, such as the National Art Education Association (NAEA), provide relevant professional development at the local, state, and national level, offering conventions, publications, webinars, webcasts, and online courses. Partnerships with museums, universities, libraries, and community organizations also provide valuable resources.

# Selected Readings

Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (2019). *Healing Through Creativity*. Retrieved on July 5, 2020 from: [artandwriting.org/healing](http://artandwriting.org/healing)

Gerber, B.L. & Guay, D.M. (2014). *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs Through Art*. Alexandria, VA: NAEA.

Heise, D. (2014). Steeling and resilience. *NAEA Art Education*, May, 26-31.

Heise, D. (2013). *Fostering resiliency through the arts*. In Tavin, K. & Morris, C.B (Eds.), *Stand(ing) up for a Change, Voices of Arts Educators*, 112-120.

Heise, D., & MacGillivray, L. (2013). *Fostering resilience in an intergenerational art and literacy program for homeless families: An analysis of curriculum*. 2013 VSA Intersections: Arts and Special Education. NAEA, 103-126.

Heise, D., & MacGillivray, L. (2011). Implementing an art program for children in a homeless shelter. *NAEA Studies in Art Education*, 52(4), 323-336.

Hunter, A., Heise, D., & Johns, B. (Eds.) (2018). *Art for Children Experiencing Psychological Trauma: A Guide for Art Educators and School-Based Professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Johns, B., Heise, D., & Hunter, A. (2020). *Students Experiencing Anxiety: Creative Connections and Practical Strategies for School-Based Professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

# Shields: Protection and Power Through Art

## BEFORE YOU START: GOALS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*There's a bright side somewhere. Don't you rest until you find it.*—African American Spiritual

This art lesson was designed to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all learners, to foster resilience in those who have experienced trauma, and in those who may experience trauma in their future. We recommend that art teachers refer to the Educators' Guide Introduction for information on resilience- and trauma-informed education.

**Theme / Big Idea:** Protection and Power Through Art

**Guiding Question:** How can art protect us in times of pain and grief?

### Brief Description of the Lesson

Shields have been used in many cultures for protection or as symbols of power. This creative art activity utilizes colored pencils and paper to create a symbolic paper shield with a decorative motif around the border, incorporating the importance of repetition and continuity. When experiencing trauma, the brain and body may get stuck in survival mode, focusing on fear, pain, and dangers while signaling survival strategies of fight, flight, or freeze. The creative process can change our perspective to see the gifts within tragedy, such as our ability to cope, our strength in surviving hard times, and our ability to recognize and embrace joy. In times of sorrow and grief, it is important to remember our sources of strength and coping strategies. In this lesson we will look at creative art and writing, noting common themes of protection. Then we will brainstorm and share positive ways to cope, sources of strength and joy, and the power of creative art to communicate and make connections to past, present, and future.

**Protective Factors** that the arts provide include personal accomplishment, resourcefulness, creativity, persistence, metacognition, vision for the future, a sense of purpose, a sense of humor, and optimism.

**Timeframe:** Five 45-minute classes (one week).

**Materials:** colored pencils, 12- x 18-inch construction paper, and scissors. Optional: Digital images and glue sticks can be added if students choose to add digital images to their shields.

**Accessibility Note:** This lesson is appropriate for teaching and learning at a distance and encourages students to be creative with materials available at home. New media technologies can be utilized to photograph, share, and discuss student works. This lesson is geared for middle and high school students but can be adapted for younger children. This lesson can also be enhanced by using alternative art media, such as paint, oil pastels, watercolor pencils, student-chosen media, or allowing them to create a multimedia shield.

## Learning Outcomes

- Identify themes of grief and resilience in creative works of art and writing.
- Create a work of art that visually communicates strength and joy.
- Write an artist statement.
- Make connections between art and life.
- Evaluate and present work.

## Learning Path

Engage in content, look closely at visual art and creative writing, using inquiry prompts to stimulate discussion and reflection.

**Read and Reflect** on “Peace Is Only Real in a Photograph,” a poem by Phoebe DeAngelo. One of the ways the author dealt with grief was to place her uncle’s photograph on the wall between pictures of her closest friends and others who made a difference in her life. She writes, “I see his smile first, but then his eyes. I see joy, love, compassion.” Remembering the joy can help us cope with grief and pain. Creative arts can provide a safe space to express emotions and can also strengthen resilience.

**Looking at Art and Researching:** View works of art depicting shields in a variety of social, cultural, and historical settings. Note the functions/purposes of shields for protection and power. How can we protect ourselves in times of pain and sorrow? Suggested resources examining other cultures that have used shield designs for protection and power are listed below.

## Discussion and Reflection Prompts

- What is a shield? (define in your own words, then look up in dictionary)
- What ways are shields used in history and culture?
- In what ways do we shield ourselves from pain of grief?
- How can we visually articulate strengths and joy that shield us from pain?
- What role does repetition play in healing? What’s worth repeating?
- In what ways can creativity foster resilience?
- How can you use your shield as a source of protection and power?

### History Note: Context on Native American Shields

Native Americans of the Great Plains, (Blackfoot, Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapaho) lived in a time and place when survival depended on physical skill, hunting, and warfare. Warriors sought images of power and strength through periods of solitude. In our lives, there are challenging times when we seek power, strength, and protection.

As shields were considered sacred objects and were believed to bring good luck, they were preserved by tribes, even after the use of firearms became common. These shields were hung on poles to the East of a warrior's lodge, as a charm to ward off danger. When a warrior died, his shield was buried with him, for it would be needed in the afterlife. The only exceptions were shields that were given to young braves while the original owner was still alive ([bit.ly/35sdQEJ](http://bit.ly/35sdQEJ)).

**Resources:** Assign one of the following to individuals or small groups of students.

After researching, ask them to compare and discuss what they have learned with the rest of the class.

- Protection, Power and Display: Shields of Island Southeast Asia and Melanesia: [bit.ly/3md2tXm](http://bit.ly/3md2tXm)
- Shields in the collections of the Smithsonian: [s.si.edu/3isjcDO](http://s.si.edu/3isjcDO)
- Dance shield: [s.si.edu/33iGK7I](http://s.si.edu/33iGK7I)
- Leather shield made by Spanish soldiers: [s.si.edu/2DQbuUK](http://s.si.edu/2DQbuUK)
- Rites built around a door-shield (keibi), part of the lutumbo lwa kindi initiations, Kabila Village, Congo (Democratic Republic), National Museum of African Art: [s.si.edu/2DUxUnY](http://s.si.edu/2DUxUnY)
- Battle shields and war bonnets: [bit.ly/3ilIdjR](http://bit.ly/3ilIdjR)
- Shields in contemporary art: Artist Judy Shintani creates shields from nature: [bit.ly/3k8hHe7](http://bit.ly/3k8hHe7)

### Vocabulary: "Shield"

(n) a person or thing providing protection.

(v) to protect (someone or something) from a danger, risk, or unpleasant experience; to prevent from being seen; enclose or screen (a piece of machinery) to protect the user.

**Respond / Perceive / Analyze and Apply:** Analyze, interpret, and compare art (literary and visual art) to determine common themes and summarize. What have you learned about shields, symbols, and coping with adversity to create a shield with symbols that communicate your sources of strength and joy?

# Shields

## CREATE THE WORK: STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

### Art-Making Instructions

1. How do we shield ourselves from pain? After exploring the theme of protection in reading and looking closely at shields in a variety of cultural and historical contexts, create your personal shield that can serve as a symbol of protection for you in difficult times. Brainstorm and share: What do you do to help you cope? What brings you joy in times of challenge? Music? Pets? Talking to friends? Baking cookies? Which of your own cultural practices help you cope? Create a list of ALL the things that make you strong, including things that bring you joy. Create a personal symbol for each source of strength and joy. (For inspiration, see symbols handout ([bit.ly/2DRNEId](https://bit.ly/2DRNEId))). Share your list with your peers. Revise your list and add new ideas as necessary.
2. Cut out a large geometric shape to create a shield. What shape will your shield be (circle, rectangle, diamond, or freeform)?
3. Choose two or three symbols of strength and create a repetitive pattern using colored pencils around the edges of your shield. What colors will you use and why? What symbols of strength and joy will you use in your border motif? (Some students may choose to create a template for each symbol to trace.)
4. Design the center of your shield by adding images of animals, people, places, things, and events that bring you strength and joy. What principles and elements of design will you focus on to help you communicate effectively and create an interesting composition?
5. Share, explain, and discuss in-progress work. Critique and use feedback to make revisions.
6. Write an artist statement that describes the choices you made in the design, what your symbols represent, and what inspired and motivated you. Reflect on what you do to cope in times of crisis.



# Shields

## REFLECT AND SHARE: DISCUSSING WORK AND GIVING FEEDBACK

### Reflect and Connect

- How do life experiences influence the way we relate to art? How does learning about art impact how we perceive our world? In what ways can looking at art, talking about art, and creating art enrich our lives and help us become resilient?
- Reflect on how art can help us express difficult emotions.

### Present: Exhibit / Share Your Shields with Others

- Present your shield to the class and share your sources of joy and strength. What colors did you use for the border and why? Discuss the symbolism of borders, how repetition can help us feel comfortable after trauma. Some things are better repeated, other actions not. For example, kind words and compassionate actions are worth repeating. Negative self-talk is better if not repeated.
- Invite other students to comment or ask questions about the work of art using correct art terminology. Saying “I like it” and nothing further is not acceptable; they must provide a rationale for what they thought, what was successful, and why.
- After presenting the art to peers, ask the class, where will you display it? How could seeing it regularly help foster your own resilience? Where could it be displayed to help others?
- Evaluate what you learned from the process of creating and presenting.

### Conclusion

We explored shields that are used for protection in multiple cultures and contexts. Then we listed our sources of strength and joy. After designing symbols representing those things in our lives that bring us strength and joy, we created a personal shield using colored pencils that symbolically protect us by reminding us of our individual and collective strength. We also created an artist statement to accompany the artwork. Display this shield somewhere where you will see it regularly and be reminded of your own resilience and ability to survive challenging times.

# Shields

## NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

### Create

**VA:Cr2.3:** Select, organize, and design images and words to make visually clear and compelling presentations.

**VA:Cr2:** Identify, describe, and visually document places and/or objects of personal significance.

**VA:Cr3.1:** Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

### Present

**VA.Pr.6:** Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic works.

**VA.Pr.6:** Identify where art can be displayed both inside and outside of school.

### Connect

**VA:Cn11:** Identify how art is used to inform or change beliefs, values, or behaviors of an individual or society.

### Respond

**VA:Re.7.2:** Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.

### Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies

**Self-Awareness:** Ability to identify emotions and recognize strengths with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism and growth mindset.

**Social Awareness:** Perspective. Empathy. Respect for others.

**Relationship Skills:** Ability to communicate clearly, listen, cooperate and engage with others.

### English Language Arts (ELA) Standards

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.4:** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3:** Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

## SAMPLE RUBRIC #1

Possible Points	Student Self-Assessment	Teacher Assessment	Description
15			<b>Create:</b> Compose the visual design (used principles and elements of art to create a good design)
10			<b>Create:</b> Art craftsmanship represents quality work and effort.
35			<b>Connect:</b> Did the art meet the established criteria: Created personal symbols representing joy and strength to symbolically shield and protect from life's challenges with repetition in border? The art successfully conveys intended message.
20			<b>Present:</b> Presented shield and participated in peer discussion and reflection using art terminology.
20			<b>Present:</b> Written Artist Statement that effectively communicates the total experience of making the art, your inspiration and intended meaning.
100			<b>Total Points:</b>  <b>Comments:</b>

## SAMPLE RUBRIC #2

Performance	Exceeds expectations	Expectations met	Needs work	Comments
<p><b>Perceive / Analyze:</b> Students will observe and respond to selected creative writing and visual art that expresses emotions of grief and loss. Students will discuss in terms of content, style, and techniques.</p> <p><b>Interpret:</b> Students will discuss the moods and feelings presented in the creative works. Students will share their interpretations with the group.</p>				
<p>Students create an artwork that communicates things that make them strong in times of adversity, things that are significant for them, and is inspired by the content, style or technique of artworks observed and analyzed, while demonstrating quality craftsmanship through appropriate use of materials, tools, and equipment.</p> <p><b>Experiment / Imagine / Identify:</b> Students will list, discuss, and reflect upon various things that bring them joy and strength. Students draw inspiration from their list of things that bring them strength and joy to create their own art that visually communicates their intended meaning.</p> <p><b>Investigate/Plan /Make:</b> Students gain inspiration from content, styles, and techniques viewed as they plan and execute their own artwork about strength and joy.</p> <p><b>Reflect/Refine/Continue:</b> Students create their own artwork about things that bring them joy in times of crisis using a variety of teacher provided materials.</p>				
<p>Students write an artist statement to be displayed with their completed artwork.</p> <p><b>Relate /Synthesize:</b> Students reflect upon the use of visual art vocabulary to write about their choices in terms of sources of strength, the materials, techniques, and stylistic characteristics used in creating their artworks and how their choices were inspired by the artworks and writings considered prior to beginning their own work. Students present their artworks and artist statements for a group discussion about an appropriate location for physically or digitally displaying the finished work and how a display communicates information and ideas to the viewer.</p>				

# Peace Is Only Real in a Photograph

POETRY

**Phoebe DeAngelo**, Grade 10, Waring School, Beverly, MA.  
Gold Key, 2017.

The ocean behind me seems at peace.  
It sits still, no waves in sight.  
As if all the bad in the world was paused  
For just one moment.  
On the horizon, a rock wall separates  
Sea from clear skies.  
A few boats float in the distance  
But they're blurry and they lack importance.  
Sand ascends from the water,  
Creating a hill of craters in the foreground.

My uncle's name is John,  
But we call him Johnny.  
It just always seemed to fit him. He  
is the center of the photograph.  
His right knee is propped up,  
Providing a seat for my sister, Cecily.  
I am plopped on his broad shoulders.  
His hand grasps my ankle for support.  
John and Cecily look forward,  
I stayed focused on the hairs of his head.

Uncle Johnny kept us laughing.  
Burning mixtapes for my sister and me,  
Labeling it "Girls rule, boys drool."  
I still have it.  
It's too scratched to play  
With a big stripe of red nail polish.  
"Follow Me" by Uncle Kracker  
Stays in my favorites on iTunes.

I can hear his laugh echo in my head  
Thinking about all the times he got on all fours,  
To act as a pony since I always said I wanted one.  
The laugh that's contagious.  
That hurts your sides.  
That makes your eyes well up. My  
aunt was always mad at first.  
Muttering something about how he's going to hurt his knees.  
He never cared.  
Never stopped.

His smile always bigger  
Than anyone I had ever seen.  
It pauses time,  
Makes everyone forget.  
It forces everyone to think about  
Only important things.  
Happiness, Laughter, Positivity.  
He lightens up a room in a way I  
always wished I could have.

He fell in love with my aunt Kim at UMass.  
A beautiful blonde undergrad student.  
She can recall the moment she first saw him. "It  
felt like I had known him my whole life." They  
quickly thought about their lives together. A  
home,  
Children,  
A family.

This photo was taken on July 10, 2003.  
I was two-and-a-half.  
Five hundred and fifty-two days later,  
We lost him.

My uncle's name was Major John Ruocco.  
When he was a junior in high school,  
He was in a head-on car crash.

The driver was killed.  
He decided he wanted to go into the Marines.  
To make up for his best friend's life somehow.  
He graduated college wanting to be in the Infantry.  
Scoring so high on an entrance exam,  
He was convinced to be a pilot instead.  
He completed 75 missions in Iraq.  
Leaving his two young boys  
And beautiful wife  
At home.

He came home different,  
Changed, unrecognizable.  
Awoken with nightmares,  
He struggled  
To connect with Kim and the boys.  
The problem became obvious  
When he told his 10-year-old  
He forgot to watch the Super Bowl.  
Joey handed the phone to Kim  
"Something's wrong with Daddy."

She flew across the country to California.  
John had two days before he was deployed.  
She went to the base first.  
“I don’t know what to tell ya,  
He didn’t show up this morning.”  
In panic she went to his hotel.  
She sprinted through the hallway on every floor.  
Hysterically calling his name.  
There was a large man kneeling  
Head to toe in camouflage.  
It wasn’t John.  
This man stood next to an open door.  
Without saying a word  
Kim walked in.

He had taken his own life.  
He couldn’t handle it.  
He gave up.

The photograph is loosely taped to my wall,  
Squashed between pictures of my closest friends.  
Everyone who made a difference is up there.  
It blends in with the ones around it  
Yet it’s always the first one I see.  
It’s my favorite one of us.  
Not because it’s the best picture.  
But because it’s the last.

I see his smile first,  
But then his eyes.  
I see joy, love, compassion.  
Five hundred and fifty-two days.  
Only five hundred and fifty-two days.  
I settle back into the ocean,  
It just looks dark. ■

# Masks: Celebrating and Honoring Loved Ones Through Clay

## BEFORE YOU START: GOALS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.*

—Albert Camus

This art lesson was designed to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all learners, to foster resilience in those who have experienced trauma, and in those who may experience trauma in their future. We recommend that art teachers refer to the Educators' Guide Introduction for information on resilience- and trauma-informed education.

**Theme / Big Idea:** Through the Visual Arts We Celebrate and Honor Our Loved Ones

**Guiding Question:** How can art celebrate and honor our deceased loved ones?

### Brief Description of the Lesson

The properties of clay can be healing. Clay can be shaped and reshaped, encouraging freedom to take risks. The process of working with clay can be very therapeutic. First you wedge the clay, pounding it to release all the air bubbles and making it pliable. Wedging and kneading are appropriate outlets to release anger, tension, and frustration, providing opportunities to release stress in the body from trauma and loss. The action of smoothing the clay, molding it, manipulating it, building with it, shaping it, taking away from it, and reworking it makes clay a very soothing and forgiving medium with which to work. This process of working with clay re-establishes a sense of order to art, if not the rest of one's universe.

This lesson will provide the students with an opportunity to honor a loved one who has passed away by using clay to make a mask that symbolically represents their loved one, creating a ceremony to celebrate the life and memories they hold dear, and to present the mask and ceremony through a written assignment and/or physical presentation.

**Protective Factors** that the arts provide include personal accomplishment, resourcefulness, creativity, persistence, metacognition, vision for the future, a sense of purpose, a sense of humor, and optimism.

**Timeframe:** Based on a 45-minute class

Day 1: After a 15-minute discussion and teacher demonstration of building an armature (or mold), safe use of tools, and clay working techniques, the students will make their armature then begin to wedge their clay.

Day 2: Students will begin making their clay masks.

Day 3: Students will continue working on masks.

Day 4: Students will remove their masks from armature, trim, smooth, sand, make holes as needed, and allow the masks to dry. Students' names should be gently etched inside the mask at this time.

Days 5 and 6: Drying / Firing Days—Any downtime should be used to begin planning and drafting the ceremony.



Day 7: Apply glazes or paint with acrylics.

Day 8: Re-fire glazed masks; embellish painted masks.

Day 9: Embellish glazed masks; continue to work on ceremony; student self-assessment.

Days 10 and 11: Presentation Day / student self-assessments.

### **Art Media: Clay**

**Materials:** Low-fire clay and kiln (consider partnering with another school or community program to have your clay pieces fired if you don't have a kiln). Air-dry clay can be used if no kiln is available. A variety of clay tools, including rolling pins or thick cut dowel rods, 1/2-inch wooden slats to use as guides when rolling clay for even thickness, found objects for texture, plasticware as tools, emery boards for sanding, canvas or burlap sheets on which to roll clay, glazes, underglazes, or ceramic paints (acrylic paints can also be used), paint brushes, sponges, newspaper, masking tape, markers, soap, water, vinegar to make slip,\* paper towels, dry cleaning plastic or plastic bags, and cloth-covered boards for wedging clay. Very important: Aprons should be used by all and disposable gloves should be used those who are tactile- or clay-sensitive.

**\*Potter's tip:** Slip is clay thinned by water with a tiny splash of white vinegar, and is used to attach added-on pieces such as noses or ears. The vinegar makes the clay stickier, which makes a big difference in adhering added clay. Any vinegar will work.

**Accessibility Notes:** This lesson can be adapted for distance learners. Through the use of technology and social media, the student can communicate with and receive feedback from their teacher and peers. The mask making process and the ceremonial presentation can be documented through photos and videos. Recipes for air-dry or oven-baked clay can easily be made at home using ingredients commonly found in home pantries.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- Identify themes of grief and the resilience provided by traditions, symbols, and ceremonies.
- Create a clay mask utilizing symbols to honor a loved one who has passed.
- Develop a new tradition or ceremony using the mask (worn or displayed) to celebrate the life of a loved one.
- Make connections between art and life by presenting your mask and ceremony, explaining the symbols used, and how one can draw strength and joy from the process of creating.
- Exhibit your mask as part of a display to advocate for the importance of art in school.

## Learning Path Read and Reflect

1. Engage in content by reading the essay “Seasons” by William Schenck.

“To everything there is a season” reminds us that all emotions, both positive and negative, are important and are experienced all throughout life. We have traditions that we experience, consciously or unconsciously, to mark events in our lives. This young writer enjoyed fishing and appreciating the beauty of nature around him with his father. When his father passed away, he drew strength and solace from his memories and the beauty of nature that remained and that reminded him of his father. The author states, “The wind blows, not cold, not light, but strong. It is strong with your spirit, strong with the man who gave me my life. You are not a ghost. You will never be a ghost. For a ghost is a spirit without love, and the wind speaks to me. Your spirit is love itself.” (*Healing Through Creativity*, p. 14.)

2. Read the poem “To the Dead Bird in the Target Parking Lot” by Amanda Chen. The author states “I want to remember” (p. 43). How can we honor and preserve our memories?
3. Sometimes we create a new ceremony to honor and celebrate a loved one. Read “My Elephant and Me” by Alexa Russell. “Oh, Lanikai, ‘beautiful ocean,’ the shore where my heart now rests. The waves crashing on the beach. Perfect weather. A light breeze. June 24 my family walked along a white sand beach, all of us together, his ashes in tow. The sun hadn’t risen. We were all alone. We walked until we came to a cove, a single tree jutting out into the water. I had already shed many tears as we watched the sun creep from under the sea. I drew my brother’s name in the sand as the others scattered flowers all around. My dad drew a heart and placed what remained of ours inside. We sat together holding hands, an elephant watching right beside us. Then, the wave came and swept my brother away. ‘The wind and the waves still know his name . . .’ (p. 6).
4. Discuss the following quotes:
  - a. Albert Camus: “In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”
  - b. Maya Angelou: “God puts rainbows in the clouds so that each of us—in the dreariest and most dreaded moments—can see a possibility of hope.” (Maya Angelou is given credit for this quote after hearing a song, *Rainbow in the Sky*—notably recorded by Mahalia Jackson; however, authorship is attributed to a legally blind European-American from Georgia named Andrew Jenkins.)
  - c. Song lyrics by Pete Seeger, inspired by Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8,  
“Turn, Turn, Turn:  
To everything (turn turn turn)  
There is a season (turn turn turn)  
And a time to every purpose,  
Under heaven  
A time to be born and a time to die”

**History Note: Explore the History of Masks**

The earliest masks date back to around 7000 BC and were usually used in rituals and ceremonies. It is very possible that masks may have been made earlier but have disintegrated due to the materials that would have been used to make the masks, such as leather and wood. Examples of masks have been used all around the world.

**Resources**

- The Functions and Forms of Masks: [britannica.com](http://britannica.com)
- The History of Masks. The Masked Man-Sapiens: [sapiens.org](http://sapiens.org)
- Masks Through History—Evolution and Carnival Heritage: [carnivaland.net](http://carnivaland.net)
- Masks in History / Second Face. The Museum of Cultural Masks: [maskmuseum.org](http://maskmuseum.org)

**Some Interesting Facts about Masks**

- Ancient Greeks used masks in theater that had brass megaphones in the mouth to amplify their voices.
- In New Guinea, masks were used to intimidate tribal members and enforce social codes.
- Indonesian masks could only be worn by their owner. It was believed that the spirits who lived in the masks would be offended if anyone else wore the mask.
- Death masks were made in Ancient Egypt so that the soul could recognize its body and to help the deceased be accepted in the afterlife.
- Chinese masks were color coded. The colors depict personality traits of the character represented.
- Mask wearing in Africa was usually reserved for men, even if the mask represented female beauty.
- We see masks in medical settings to guard against germs. With the COVID-19 global pandemic, the CDC recommended the use of masks to help protect against the virus. While some people chose to wear plain, surgical-style masks, many chose very creative masks.

**Discuss Traditions, Symbolism, and Ceremonies****Inquiry Prompts**

- Think of a time in your life when you have worn a mask. What was the occasion? What did the mask look like? Did it mean anything special to you?
- When you were wearing your mask, how did it make you feel? Did it change the way you spoke? Did it change the way you moved?
- When you had your mask on, did you act like a different character? Did wearing the mask make you feel like you could do something that you couldn't usually do?
- Think about traditions that you have experienced. Were any of them celebrations? What symbols might represent these traditions and celebrations?
- What new traditions can you start today to honor a loved one who has died (either people or pets)? Does the ceremony need to be repeated? If so, physically? Or can a ceremony happen only once? Can it live in our hearts forever?
- What objects will help keep the good memories alive forever? (Mask? Photographs of the ceremony?)

# Masks

## CREATE THE WORK: STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

Create a clay mask utilizing symbols to honor a loved one who has passed away.

### **Low-Fire Clay: Detailed Instructions for Mask Making**

1. The students will make sketches of the mask they plan to build with clay. Consideration should be given to any embellishments that they may wish to add once the mask has been fired, such as feathers, beads, and raffia. Holes for attachment should be made in the clay before it is fired.
2. The students will use newspaper and masking tape to build an armature (or mold) to drape their clay over to form their mask shape. The form should be strong enough to hold the mask, but not so strong that it won't give a little when the clay shrinks as it dries. (Don't use a ton of tape to make it solid.) Extra newspaper and tape can be used to form cheeks, chins, or other raised areas. Note: Noses work better as add-ons rather than under the draped clay.
3. The teacher will demonstrate the process of wedging, kneading, and rolling out clay.
4. Placing the clay on a piece of canvas or burlap, the students will use the rolling pin or dowel rod to roll the clay into a slab about 1/2 inch thick. Using wooden slats as guides is recommended to achieve a slab that is an even thickness.
5. The students will carefully drape the clay over the armature, gently forming it into the desired shape, trimming off excess clay. Damp paper towels can be placed on the clay to prevent drying out.
6. The teacher will give a demonstration on clay building techniques, including proper use of clay tools, scoring the clay, excising the clay, and making and using slip to attach add-on clay pieces; a variety of ways to create texture and depth; and planning holes for hanging and embellishment after the mask is fired. Venting and hollowing out really thick parts will help prevent the piece from exploding due to air pockets. The students will wedge and knead their clay on a cloth covered board to remove all air bubbles and make the clay pliable. Air bubbles trapped in the clay will cause the mask to explode when fired.
7. The students will create their masks using the desired clay building techniques, making sure that their name is on the back of the armature. Masks should be covered with a damp paper towel and stored in plastic bags to remain workable until the next class session. Once the mask is completely formed, allow the mask to dry slowly and thoroughly. Once the clay is dried and removed from the form, the name can be inscribed inside the mask.
8. When the clay is leather-hard, it should be removed from the armature and cleaned up using tools and a damp clay sponge.
9. Once the clay is completely dry, the clay should be fired.
10. When the clay has been fired, the students can now decorate their masks. If they are using glazes and underglazes, the clay will need to be re-fired after the glaze has been applied. If the students are painting their masks, ceramic paint or acrylic craft paint should be used. An acrylic gloss sealant can be applied for shine.
11. Once the clay mask has been glaze fired, or painted and dried, embellishments and hanging materials can be applied.

### **Air-Dry Clay: Detailed Instructions for Mask Making (See recipes below.)**

1. The students will make sketches of the mask they plan to build with air-dry clay. Consideration should be given to any embellishments that they may wish to add once the mask has dried, such as feathers, beads, raffia. Holes for attachment should be made in the clay before it dries.
2. The students will use newspaper and masking tape to build an armature (or mold) to drape their clay over to form their mask shape. The form should be strong enough to hold the mask, but not so strong that it won't give a little when the air-dry clay shrinks as it dries. (Don't use a ton of tape to make it solid.) Extra newspaper and tape can be used to form cheeks, chins, or other raised areas.
3. The teacher will give a demonstration on building techniques, including proper use of clay tools, a variety of ways to create texture and depth, and planning holes for hanging and embellishment after the mask is dried.
4. The teacher will demonstrate the process of kneading and rolling out clay.
5. The students will knead their air-dry clay to make it pliable.
6. Placing the air-dry clay on a piece of canvas or burlap, the students will use the rolling pin or dowel rod to roll the air-dry clay into a slab about 1/2-inch thick. Using wooden slats as guides will help with achieving uniform thickness of the slab.
7. The students will carefully drape the clay over the armature, gently forming it into the desired shape, trimming off any excess.
8. The students will create their masks using the desired clay building techniques, making sure that their name is on the back of the armature. Once the air-dry clay is dried and removed from the form, the name can be written inside the mask. Masks should be stored in plastic bags to remain workable until the next class session.
9. When the clay is leather-hard, the students should remove their masks from the armatures and trim them up and make any final adjustments to the design before allowing them to dry completely. The name should be put on the inside of the mask.
10. The students will then paint the mask using ceramic paints or acrylic craft paints. Once the paint is completely dry, an acrylic gloss sealant can be applied for shine.
11. Embellishments and hanging methods can now be applied.

### **Homemade Clay Recipes**

Here are two recipes, however other recipes can be found on the internet and through YouTube videos. The same basic procedures of working with purchased air-dry clay can be used with the homemade dough clay, although to avoid cracking, you may need to roll your dough clay out to 1/4" instead of 1/2".

#### **Baker's Clay:**

4 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup salt

1 1/2 cups water

**Directions:** Mix the flour, salt, and water together. Knead dough until smooth. Roll out dough and shape as desired. Add any additional clay pieces using a slip made from clay thinned with water and a very tiny drop of vinegar and make necessary holes prior to drying as mentioned in

the directions above. You will need to let the mask dry enough to remove the armature or paper form prior to baking (so you don't start a fire!). Bake in a pre-heated oven at 350 degrees F (175 degrees C) for one hour. Check it periodically to be sure it doesn't burn. Cool thoroughly. Paint with acrylic paints.

**Air-Dry Dough Clay:**

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup salt

2 Tablespoons vegetable oil

$\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 cup water

**Directions:** Mix flour and salt in a large bowl. Add the oil, and then slowly add the water and stir until you get a nice clay consistency. You may not need a whole cup of water. Once it is mixed and kneaded, roll out the dough and shape as desired. Add-on pieces and holes should be in place prior to drying. Air dry for 48-72 hours. This dough can also be baked in a 250 degrees F oven for about an hour. Remove the armature and paper first! Check it periodically to be sure it doesn't burn. Masks should be thoroughly dry and cooled prior to painting with acrylic paints.

# Masks

## REFLECT AND SHARE: DISCUSSING WORK AND GIVING FEEDBACK

### Self-Assessment

**Discuss responses to the following prompts.**

1. Working with clay is a very tactile experience. How did it make you feel to wedge the clay?
2. Clay allows you to work and rework, to create smooth edges or textures, to make changes. Talk about the process of manipulating the clay. How is this a metaphor for life?
3. What changes, if any, did you make to your original design as you were making your mask? Why did you make those changes? Did the alterations change any of the symbolism you originally planned to use?
4. In making your mask, what did you learn about yourself and others?

### Plan Your Ceremony

**Draft a new tradition or ceremony that utilizes the mask (worn or displayed) to celebrate the life of a loved one.**

1. What role will your mask play in the ceremony: Will it be worn by you or someone else? How will it be displayed? What actions or activities will you include? Will there be speaking parts? Who will be included? In what ways will you honor and celebrate your loved one? How will you speak nonverbally about the celebration of life, joy, and strength (singing, dancing, music, games, poetry)? What will you say about the person who inspired you to make this mask and ceremony?
2. Write an outline of your plan for the ceremony.
3. (Optional) Write about your mask and ceremony in English class. See Presentation Options below.

**Present your mask and ceremony, explaining the symbols used and how one can draw strength and joy from the process of creating.**

**Select one of the following presentation options:**

- Imagine yourself as an anthropologist who has found your mask and evidence of a ceremony related to the mask and is writing a study/report on it. Include descriptions of the symbols, what the symbols might represent, and what the ceremony might celebrate in the report. Sketches and/or photographs may be included.
- You are a journalist for a major newspaper or magazine. Your assignment is to write an article about your mask and ceremony. Include information such as: who inspired your mask, what symbolism you used, what the symbolism means, what the ceremony celebrates, and other information that might be interesting to your reader. Black-and-white or color photographs are appropriate.

- A major TV station is interviewing you about your mask and ceremony. They have asked you to bring your mask along and to demonstrate your celebratory ceremony. It's a good idea to think about some questions you may be asked ahead of time. Write out potential questions and answers so that you aren't taken by surprise. What questions do you think they may not ask you that you would want them to know? (Plan how you will insert that information into the interview.) What question do you definitely NOT want them to ask, and how will you tactfully avoid answering this personal question?
- You have an opportunity to create a YouTube video of your mask and celebration ceremony. Write the script for the segment specifying all you will say. Talk about the process of making the mask, and include your inspiration for making the mask. Include information about the symbolism you used in designing your mask and ceremony. Enacting your ceremony, how will you speak nonverbally about the celebration of life, joy, and strength? What will you say about the person who inspired you to make this mask and ceremony?
- Write a poem, rap, or song about the person who inspired you to make the mask. Include in the writing information about the person (place or thing) you are honoring, such as why they are so special to you, their personal characteristics, and other attributes; symbolism you used and what these symbols represent; information about your ceremony and how the mask and poem, rap, or song will feature in the ceremony; who will be in the ceremony; who will be a witness to your ceremony; and if your ceremony will be videotaped or photographed.

*Exhibit your mask as part of a display to advocate for the importance of art in schools.*



# Masks

## NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

### Create

**VA:Cr1.1.Ia:** Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

**VA:Cr2.3.IIIa:** Demonstrate in works of art or design how visual and material culture defines, shapes, enhances, inhibits, and/or empowers people's lives.

**Present:** Evaluate the efficacy of the plan, venue, and/or location for displaying their works of art.

**VA:Pr5.1.Ia:** Analyze and evaluate the reasons and ways an exhibition was presented.

**Connect:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

**VA:Cn10.1.Ia:** Document the process of developing ideas from early stages to fully elaborated ideas.

**Respond:** Compare, analyze, interpret, and evaluate interpretations of contemporary art works with supporting evidence that explores social, cultural or political themes in contemporary life.

**VA:Re8.1.Ia:** Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant and sufficient evidence found in the work and its various contexts.

### Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies

**Self-Awareness:** Self-perception, self-confidence, self-efficacy, the ability to identify emotions, and recognize strengths. Self-efficacy is the belief in your ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplishment of a task.

**Responsible Decision Making:** The ability to make positive choices and take responsibility for positive and negative outcomes. Skills include: identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, and reflection.

### English Language Arts (ELA) Standards

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3:** Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6:** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7:** Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

## ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

	Observed	Not Observed	Comments
<b>Create:</b> Demonstrated quality artwork that visually communicated meaning. Demonstrated in created work of art and design of ceremony how visual and material culture defines, shapes, enhances, inhibits, and/or empowers people's lives.			
<b>Present:</b> Provided rationale for how, where, and why the work will be presented.			
<b>Connect:</b> Revealed understanding of connections between art and life. Synthesized knowledge of themes in creative writing and works of art, and related to their own personal experiences to make art.			
<b>Respond:</b> Shared verbal responses that demonstrated analysis and interpretation of contemporary artworks and creative writing with supporting evidence of social and cultural themes in life.			

# Seasons

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**William Schenck**, Grade 9, Greenwich Country Day School, Greenwich, CT.  
Gold Medal, 2018.

It is summer now. The river is running bright, and the sun is warm and sweet on the sagebrush. All around us is life; the kingfisher is rattling like a gunwale, the hummingbird buzzes and tumbles like a garnet tossed carelessly overhead. Somewhere far downstream, a grosbeak spins its messy warble. No, the trout are yet to bite and the lines yet to tighten, but the hard and bitter and perfect scent of the mountains is pouring over the valley and the sky is ever blue. My legs wobble in the water as I feel the current pulsing against my thighs, but it does not scare me; it fills me with life. I am standing next to you, and I am safe and smiling. All is well; we are together. This is happiness, I think. This is everything beautiful. This is life.

It is autumn now. The breeze is strong and cool, and it casts the leaves through the sky till they festoon the city with a million shades of yellow spark and orange flame and tender scarlet coal. The park's paths are covered with them too, with people, with dogs, and the oaks are equally heavy with acorns and flight-feisty birds. "Nothing like a Sunday morning in the city," you say, and I agree. Because you are right. You smile, and suddenly this October morning in the park is a play, a wonder, and all the people are adventurers and all the dogs storytellers and the oaks are mountains and the birds golden treasures spilling from caves like shattered glass. I call out the names of birds: warbling vireo! ruby-crowned kinglet! blue-winged warbler! I ask which one is your favorite, but you have none. It is all life; it is all beautiful and sacred. God is a warbler, I tell myself as we listen to the wind on a high wooden bench. God is the morning in Central Park.

It is winter now; well, not quite. There are no leaves on the trees, no warblers or vireos flighty in the oaks, and the breeze is not cool but bitter. But how can it be winter when you are beside me, when the sun is shining, when the wonders of life are spread before us to seek, to love, to pray? No, winter is the season of death, and you are more living than I could ever imagine. "Where are we going?" you ask, and I call out names as we drive rapid-fire across bridges that stretch across the endless yellow marsh. There is so much, too much; shorebird roosts and marsh hawks on high and rare auburn ducks that hide on high school ponds. I want them all. You are with me, and everything there is beautiful.

But now it is winter really, and cold snows blow. And when I seek hardy black sea ducks and little spotted owls and weave through tangles of holly to see everything that is beautiful, I seek them alone. Sick is the word everyone keeps saying. He is sick in his prostate, sick in his body. I keep words of my own. Your mind is not, I think. I fight through the freezing wind and the shivering rain, and the owls and the sea ducks and the cranberry flocks of finches turn a blind eye. The beauty of everything is lost to me. And it is still winter, and I am back at the river-where-it-was-summer. The river is ice and the sun is weak and waxy-white, but the sky still keeps its blue. And though the kingfisher has fled and the hummingbird flown and the grosbeak gone far away, new life is here. The places where the river is still water are covered with mallards and wigeons and golden eye ducks, the snowy hillsides teem with creeping gray partridge and chipping goldfinches, and where ice keeps its iron grip is the gathering place for swans, big as lions and twice as beautiful. They are like white spirits, great ghosts of frost. Ghosts. This is all that is beautiful, but all I have of you is a distant ghost. Still ill, still fighting. Still sick and far away.

But it is spring now, and with the green of the earth comes every wonder nature has to give. It is beautiful, so perfectly, indescribably, everything beautiful; warblers bubble and twirl with songs that break through the canopy of locust and golden-green larch, and snow geese come at dawn to the marshes we once hopped through, carefree. I am everywhere, to see all that is beautiful, to love the love of the world you gave me. And it is warm and life is all around me, and how can I be sad? I can see the happiness in your eyes when I speak to you, for the wonder is yours as well. You are not a ghost, never; you are here. And though I watch you be weak and sick as I have ever seen, the joy does not leave. It will never leave.

It is still spring when I am pulled from school early in the morning, when I am told that I am to return home, for my mother wishes to see me. I know. For the sake of my family, I keep my face passive, but I had always known. And as we drive slowly back home, not saying a word, about to face whatever is waiting in that house ready or not, I look and listen. I see the blur of green as we drive down the streets, the leaves on the trees stretching out to greet the morning sun, and the red-bud blossoms still hanging on, to the last petal. I see the sun glistening on the harbor water where

I row and the seabirds my coach chides me for stealing glances at. And song; I hear it everywhere. Robins and song sparrows serenade me from every corner, and as I step through the threshold, heart pounding, I can make out the faint warble of a mockingbird. I make a note of its final melody as the door slams behind me.

And then it is time to hear the news, time to cry, to hold each other tightly. I watch the mockingbirds, flashing white and grey outside the window, through every moment. I had lost the father who stood strong, who showed me nature and God and everything beautiful there is to be seen a long time ago, I think. You only left me birds.

I cry hardest when they take away your body, for I will miss your smile as I name each song in turn and your steely eyes as we speed to catch a rarity. You taught me, taught me well, and you watched me learn from nothing to twice as much as yourself. But you will not be there to greet me again. I kiss your forehead once and weep once again.

But despite my sadness, it is still spring, and if through all my father's teachings I had learned one thing, it is that to waste beauty and action and love is the greatest waste of all. So it is the evening of the next day, and my father's body is still yet to be ash, when I swing on my binoculars and head out the door. My friend meets me on a grassy island, and we speak as we walk. For hours we speak, of where we will go and what we will see for years to come. I tell him of your death, and he is stunned. I tell him the truth. "I have no regrets. He was a great father and a great man. He would not want me to sit and cry in my room. We were happiest out here, together. This is where I heal."

It takes time, but I heal.

And it is summer now, summer again. The sea is swaying gentle and blue and the maple quivers shy and green. The song sparrows sing from beach roses and the mockingbirds fight on the lawn like scattered newspapers wheeling in the wind. I can hear the terns calling from on high, making their nests in the little rocks at high tide. The sand is in my toes. I see the house you taught me in, the house you loved me in, the house you lived and died in. The wind blows, not cold, not light, but strong. It is strong with your spirit, strong with the man who gave me my life. You are not a ghost. You will never be a ghost. For a ghost is a spirit without love, and the wind speaks to me. Your spirit is love itself. ■

# To the Dead Bird in the Target Parking Lot

FLASH FICTION

**Amanda Chen**, Grade 12, Westlake High School, Austin, TX.  
Gold Key, 2019.

Dead Bird in the Target parking lot,

Hi. I'm not too sure how to start this . . . it's three in the morning, and I have no idea what to say to you. I'm sorry?

I can't stop thinking about how you died. A car came by; there were birds in its path. In moments like that, I always wonder if the birds are going to get away, and they always do. But you didn't.

You tried to get away, but you hit the car's bumper on your way up. I remember praying that you'd get up or army crawl out of the way or something. But you just laid there. And then the car ran over you, and you died. You didn't even twitch. It all happened in probably half a second.

You were there, and then you weren't. And then I started crying.

Don't take it personally, but looking back, I don't think I was crying just for you. The truth is you died in the same way that my six-month-old brother died: suddenly. I cried for you just as I cried for him. I cried because it wasn't fair. I cried because I hated how one moment you could be in a dirty parking lot or in an antiseptic hospital, but gone in the next. I cried because I missed him.

He was twelve years younger than me, and I loved him—still do. I took him out on walks in his blue stroller, warmed up formula, burped and bathed him, sang to him under my breath, and dressed him in outfits that matched mine. I pushed his cradle up to the piano and played Mozart's Sonata in D Major, smiling at his giggly accompaniment. And when he was hospitalized because of bird flu, I held on to his tiny hand and a desperate hope for forty-five days, humming Mozart between broken sobs. I prayed for the first time in my life. It felt like I sat there under that stupid painting of a cartoon giraffe for years just staring at him, willing him to get better. But he didn't.

I often wonder about the impact your death had on your family. Are they pacing their nest or birdhouse waiting for you to return? Do they refuse to talk to your siblings about it because it's easier to forget? Does your dad work overtime just to deal with the pain? Does your mom whisper in her sleep that she doesn't want to live anymore, knowing that her other children are only a room away and the walls are paper thin?

I want to thank you for making me cry. I know that's weird, but I've never really been able to acknowledge the pain. It's easier to fake a smile and pretend that everything's fine even when my chest aches with grief and a million unspoken words. It's easier to talk about a hard calculus test at the dinner table than about the night I spent crying into my brother's old blanket. It's easier to try to forget.

Except, somehow, the easier hurts a whole lot more, and forgetting doesn't fix anything.

I don't want to forget anymore. I don't want to hide my brother's picture in a government textbook where I know my parents won't see it. I don't want to flinch at the sight of a random six-year-old boy, the age my brother would be now if he were still alive. I don't want to cry when playing Mozart because it's so empty with the ghost of his laughter. I want to remember: you, him, the pain, all of it.

I promise. ■

# My Elephant and Me

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Alexa Russell**, Grade 10, Pryor High School, Pryor, OK.  
Gold Medal, New York Life Award, 2017.

I am haunted by an elephant. He hovers over my shoulder wherever I go. He follows me in the school hallways, sneaking along without anyone batting an eye. How can one hide a two-ton animal in plain sight? You simply can't. The effects of such a presence leak into every aspect of your life. Even invisible ghosts have visible consequences.

It was the middle of June, and we were gathered together in the ultrasound room. After everything that had happened the previous winter, we needed some good news. Miscarriage has a way of breaking even the strongest heart, but this moment would be our redemption. The nurse jiggled my mother's stomach, trying to get a better view. We had told her how much we wanted a boy, and she was anxious to find out if she would get to make our dreams a reality. We laughed to release the tension in the room, held each other's hands in anticipation.

"Well, Momma, it looks like your wish came true!"

Our joy filled the sterile room, rang loud down the hall and settled around us. My sisters giggled and jumped. My dad shed a few tears. I was there behind the camera, grinning from ear to ear. Everything God had told me that night the first baby passed away was finally happening. He had promised me this brother, and he was following through.

The nurse brought out a basket filled to the brim with stuffed animals. One would have the honor of holding my brother's heartbeat in its chest.

"We'll let Dad decide since it's a boy!"

"I think we should get the elephant because they both have a trunk."

That's the conversation that changed my life. A single, slightly euphemistic statement that brought my phantom elephant to life. I didn't know it at the time, but soon every time I saw one of those massive creatures, my heart would swell with love and grief.

July came with more doctor visits, just-in-case checkups and ultrasounds. When we went as a family, my sisters and I laughed in the back of the room, guessing at what formless blob on the screen was our brother-to-be. We joked about how the baby sat cross-legged like a true Indian, and how his little hands covered his face. We left that day blissfully unaware of the error in my brother's DNA, completely ignorant to the malformation in his organs.

It wasn't until a couple of days later that the doctor called my mom to tell her about trisomy 13 and the chances of her son's survival. The practically impossible had happened to him. His thirteenth chromosome had been repeated by some mistake in his DNA replication. He was growing and growing with the wrong instructions from his cells. The wrong pattern was being used, creating a body that wasn't meant to live.

"You'd be lucky to have a couple of minutes with him."

My parents brought us into the living room one day soon after that. They told us to sit on the couch. They needed to talk to us about the baby. We sat down in a row, wondering what was going on.

"The doctor said that he isn't expected to live."

Then it was our turn to hear about trisomy 13. We cried together as a family, something that became a regular activity in the coming months. I was broken and lost. How could this be the plan God had for us?

School started that August, life's lame attempt at normalcy. It was my ninth-grade year, the last year of junior high in my town. I was supposed to be on top of the world. Of course, I wasn't. I was too afraid to tell my friends I had a dying brother at home. So I lived my freshman year alone. I went through the motions of school and came home to despair. Some days my mom would be so down that none of the normal motherly chores would be done. She'd just be sitting around the house crying, almost always crying. She had begun grieving her baby the moment the diagnosis reached her ears. The rest of us seemed so far behind in the process.

My mother wasn't like me. Her friends knew what she was going through. Soon, people sent elephants of their own. My elephant wasn't the only one in the room anymore. Compassion drove our friends to great lengths to support us. They sent us gifts from across the country, found trinkets to show their love. Their elephants brought mine some company, but it still wasn't like having support of my own. They knew my mom, not me. If only I had been a little braver, then maybe we wouldn't have been as lonely, my elephant and me.

Months passed, and my loneliness consumed me. I cried silently most mornings, trying not to draw attention to my grief while desperately wishing for someone to notice. I walked to class with my elephant in tow, two tons of hurt weighing down on my soul. I wore elephant bracelets on my wrist as a physical acknowledgment of my sorrow. One day, out of nowhere, a friend asked what they were for. I smiled, so grateful for that tiny spark of hope.

"They're for my brother. He has trisomy 13, and they don't think he'll live."

"Oh, I think I'll get one too."

One simple sentence, and suddenly a pet elephant didn't seem like such a difficult thing to have. December was fast approaching, bringing my brother's due date with it. But it was only November, and I told myself I still had time with him. My elephant was getting antsy; breaking down became more common. It was the 10th when my dad picked me up from school. I got in the car and instantly felt the thick gloom in the air. He turned to me with fear and sadness in his eyes.

"It's time."

We got home and told my sisters that Mom was being induced. We'd get to meet our brother in the morning. They must have forgotten about the doctor's words because they jumped and hollered without a care in the world. I stared at my mother's face, her uncertainty as clear as day.

"Please, no. Not yet."

I prayed. We were supposed to have a little while longer.

That evening I rode to the hospital with my parents as the family elephant dutifully followed the car. My sisters had stayed behind with our grandparents, who would bring them in the morning, when the doctors were supposed to begin inducing. We waited in our room as nurses busied themselves around us. As the sun set, we laid down and slept on the rigid hospital couch. My elephant curled up in the corner. We would need our strength for the next day.

I was the last of the three of us to wake up that morning of November 11. I was about to get in the shower when my mom yelled for my dad.

"Get the nurse! Something just fell out!"

They ushered me out of the room and told me to wait with my aunt, who had just arrived. I left in my pajamas with greasy, unwashed hair and sat in a standard hospital chair. We waited until the nurse came and took me back to the room.

"They sent me to get her."

I walked in, more nervous than I had ever been in front of any other boy. That is until I saw his face. My parents had told us he wouldn't look the same as everybody else. My father handed me my brother, and I fell in love. It didn't matter that he had a cleft lip, that some things were a little different, because he was perfect, from his head to his eleven toes. As tears ran down my cheek, I stared, drinking in all I could of this precious baby in my arms.

"It's going to be OK."

My dad wrapped me in his arms as I handed my brother back to my mom. I continued to cry as I hugged my father. I had been so worried about that moment, and there I was. I felt truly alive with my love for my brother. Tears just kept coming.

Despite how I appeared, I was finally at peace. All those months I had lived in fear, anxiously waiting for God to do something, and there my miracle was. In my arms, I held the beautiful baby brother God had promised.

It had been 9:03 a.m. when my brother literally fell into the world. We loved him every moment he was here. We took a million pictures to capture it all. We were so overwhelmingly at peace and filled with so much joy. It was practically a zoo, with all the elephants in the room. On the bed, on our laps,

and in our hands, elephants anywhere an elephant could stand. It couldn't have been a more wonderful day. My sisters and I read books to our little brother. My mom changed his diaper. My dad prayed over his son.

Even as we laughed, our time with him was ticking away. His heart couldn't beat fast enough to keep pace with our excitement. His brain couldn't quite fathom our love. His lungs couldn't breathe in enough of this life. At 5:08 p.m., I watched as my brother took his last breath. I watched his skin lose the colors of life. I saw the blood rush to his head as he struggled to stay a bit longer. Four point seven ounces of perfection was ripped away from us far too soon.

That evening I left with my sisters and my grandparents. We went to my house, and I fell asleep in tears. The greatest day of my life had passed, leaving me with nothing but an elephant.

My now constant companion sat at the foot of the bed that night, watched over me and cried with me. He'd claimed me as his that day, and now he would never leave. He patted me with his trunk, laid himself down, and drifted off to sleep.

I remember the haziness of the next few weeks. We sat at home as people brought us food. Life wasn't as vivid as the day my brother was born. I floated in and out of reality, escaping the feeling of time. Our emotions were so raw, seeping onto our faces with every little change. One moment tears would flow abundantly, only to be stifled by the laughter in the next. Joy was so seldom that each little joke was savored for minutes on end. I remember my dad's face as such happiness crept over him. The pain so clear, yet the need to smile overcame it. His demeanor would change as he threw back his shoulders and tears welled up in his eyes, the purest kind of joy blooming amidst our sorrow.

My sisters returned to school rather quickly, but I stayed behind. Their classmates sent us cards and knew what was happening. On the other hand, I knew all that I would receive was blank stares and hard questions about my two-ton friend. My elephant wasn't ready for such rejection and disregard. No way could I expose him when we both had healing scars.

For the next couple of weeks, I avoided school in favor of my elephant. He had taken it upon himself to never leave my side. Sometimes, he stretched himself across my chest, crushing my heart without any warning. I don't think he meant me any harm; he seemed oblivious to his own size. Thanksgiving came and went without a brother for me to thank. My family and I clung to each other in the small confines of our living room. Eating and sleeping became our only reasons to move.

I finally returned to school after Thanksgiving had passed. I made myself invisible, avoiding the obvious questions of my whereabouts. I tried to keep my composure, shushed my elephant when he trumpeted in the halls. I walked into the art room and made my way around the class to the shelf with our projects on it. As my teacher handed me my sculpture, she asked the question I'd been bracing for.

"Is he still with us?"

I sucked in a breath, unable to form many words. I shook my head no.

"He was here for eight hours and five minutes."

I could feel her compassion as tears formed in her eyes and she wrapped me up in a hug. There's no doubt that she was thinking of her son to come. My elephant watched as the scene played out, savoring the attention. I sat back down with a little bit of hope in my soul. It's amazing how much a single person caring lightens the load.

I went about my day, ignoring the trumpet calls of my invisible friend. I walked into the math classroom, and there my best friend stood, the only other one who knew what animal followed me around. She opened her arms when she saw me.

"Come here."

That's all she said. She didn't ask any questions. She was simply there with love in her arms. My second spark of hope that day. My elephant was practically bouncing off the walls with all the thoughts coming his way. I can guarantee you've never seen anything quite like that, the most massive creature jumping around. It only lasted a little while, then he settled down. He sat next to my desk the rest of the day, begging for attention that I didn't have to spare.

School went on like that, a circus of hide-and-seek with an elephant. He tried making scenes in the middle of class, but his two-ton temper tantrums went unnoticed by my peers. He'd sulk in



my lap, not leaving room for much else. My life was consumed by an elephant, and I wasn't given any choice in the matter. Grief had interrupted my plans and wreaked havoc on my emotions. My brother was dead, and no one knew he had even lived.

Finally, ninth grade came to an end. I left the halls of the junior high along with the isolation that inhabited my days there. I thought the worst of it was over, but summer brought new challenges with it. My family flew across the globe to the beautiful little island of Oahu. There we explored new landscapes and terrains, but no matter where we went, a certain elephant couldn't be shaken. Grief still hung in the air. We were there for a reason, and the day was fast approaching.

"Did you know his name means 'ocean' in Hawaiian?"

Oh, Lanikai, 'beautiful ocean,' the shore where my heart now rests. The waves crashing on the beach. Perfect weather. A light breeze. June 24 my family walked along a white sand beach, all of us together, his ashes in tow. The sun hadn't risen. We were all alone. We walked until we came to a cove, a single tree jutting out into the water. I had already shed many tears as we watched the sun creep from under the sea. I drew my brother's name in the sand as the others scattered flowers all around. My dad drew a heart and placed what remained of ours inside. We sat together holding hands, an elephant watching right beside us. Then, the wave came and swept my brother away.

"The wind and the waves still know his name . . ."

That song played in the background as my heart continued to break. I thought the worst of the pain had come at 5:08 p.m. on November 11, 2015, but I was wrong. The pain came in knowing it'd be a lifetime before I saw my brother's face again. For now, I'd have to live for what he left behind, a family, a legacy of love.

I started high school in the fall. This time, I was determined to be on top of the world. I walked proudly in the front doors with an elephant that I wasn't ashamed to know. I told my friends soon after, and suddenly my elephant was easier to see. He wasn't as transparent, and soon, people started to move out of his way.

The funny thing is that the year before, I believed I was alone in my storm. But this year, I was voted homecoming attendant of the sophomore class. I found a dress and rode in a car with a stuffed elephant at my side. I waved to the crowd, to all my friends in the stands, and smiled. I was happy, and definitely not alone.

"OMG! She has an elephant with her!"

The girly squeal brought such joy to my heart where loneliness used to reside. How my tiny spark of hope had grown in only a year! I would never be the same, but I could learn to be OK. It's amazing how a little love can put a skip in the step of a two-ton animal. I'd be walking to class, and he'd hop all around as my friends patted him on the head. They'd smile and wave, give him gifts on his birthday. It didn't take much to contain him. Just enough courage to proclaim he existed.

"Who knew eight hours and five minutes would equate to a lifetime of change?"

I am haunted by an elephant. He hovers over my shoulder wherever I go. I've tamed him, he isn't in control. I let him hang around in my memories and remind me that life is good. Despite all I've been through, I choose to believe him. Life is genuinely good. Bad things happen, but life isn't the sum of every horrible circumstance. It's much, much more. Life is experiencing the moments in which we are truly loved, no matter how fleeting. And I count myself and my brother among the lucky few who can honestly say:

"I have lived." ■

# The Red Thread Multimedia Fiber Art Project

## BEFORE YOU START: GOALS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but will never break.—Chinese Proverb*

This art lesson was designed to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all learners, to foster resilience in those who have experienced trauma, and in those who may experience trauma in their future. We recommend that art teachers refer to the Educators' Guide Introduction for information on resilience- and trauma-informed education.

**Theme / Big Idea:** Creating an Unbreakable Bond.

**Guiding Question:** When something bad happens in life, how can one pick up the pieces or start over?

### **Brief Description of the Lesson**

When something bad happens in life, how does one pick up the pieces (or start over) and move forward? How can art help us express our feelings and emotions when we don't have the words to share? How do we stay strong for the people we love? In what ways can we express ourselves as an individual, but yet be part of a group that makes up a whole? How can we contribute to our community? Navigating difficult times is often an individual process. Being part of a group can promote healing.

Through the exploration of a variety of art media and processes, students will experience trauma-sensitive art studio practices by nonverbally expressing feelings and emotions in a safe space. Students will create one individual fiber art block to keep and will contribute one to a group product that will be publicly displayed. One constant in each student's work is a Red Thread that connects us all. Students will have opportunities to critically reflect on ways creative art can foster resilience. This collaboration can be adapted to an integrated, multicultural, multigenerational, and/or community project.

**Protective Factors** that the arts provide include personal accomplishment, resourcefulness, creativity, persistence, metacognition, vision for the future, a sense of purpose, a sense of humor, and optimism.

**Approximate Timeline:** Based on a 45-minute class

Day 1: Discussion and demonstration of materials and tools available; begin prep work for blocks.

Day 2: Finish prep-work; begin making blocks.

Day 3: Continue work on blocks.

Day 4: Continue work on blocks; have one completed that will be donated to the class project.

Day 5: Lay out blocks and collaborate on placement; mark blocks; begin sewing if time allows.

Day 6: Students sew blocks into strips. Those not sewing should be working on their 2nd or 3rd blocks (which they will keep for themselves).

Day 7: Continue sewing; finish up blocks to be kept. Work on Student self-assessments.

Day 8: Display completed Fiber Arts Quilt. Reflections.

**Materials:** 9 x12-inch Smart-Fab\* fabric scraps, yarn, felt. Red sewing thread, decorative Red Thread which can be thick, thin, lumpy or smooth and satiny, and additional threads of assorted colors and weights. Scissors (righty and lefty, straight and decorative paper shapers); sewing needles; straight pins; masking tape; Aleene's Tacky Glue; fabric paint/ acrylic paint; fabric markers/sharpie markers; Popsicle craft sticks; Sponge brushes and paint brushes in assorted sizes; paper plates for palettes; stampers in assorted shapes and stamp pads (NOT stickers or stick-ons); scrapers, foam rollers, and paint tray; assorted stencils, beads, sequins, buttons, and other embellishments; pencils and paper (for sketching and designing); and several rolls of wax paper. Important: Disposable plastic aprons, and plastic gloves for tactile-sensitive students.

Materials for clean up: Soap, water, paper towels, buckets for water, sponges, and newspapers or plastic tablecloths to protect work space.

\*Smart-Fab is a lightweight, easy to cut inexpensive trademarked material that can hold wet media without running. However, other materials such as muslin, old sheets, or burlap can also be used.

**Accessibility Notes:** Teachers can assemble "kits" for the students, including the Smart- Fab (or other fabric) and the Red Thread. Students should be encouraged to use any medium they may have at their disposal: paints, markers, stamps and stamp pads, and any embellishments, and experiment with different techniques. Completed blocks could be returned to the school. Or students can submit a digital image of their handmade fiber block. Using Zoom or other social media, the teacher and students can work together "virtually" to collaborate on the placement of their blocks and discuss their art-making efforts. The digitally submitted fiber art images can be assembled to create a digital quilt. Options for assembling the actual handmade fiber blocks into a Multimedia Fiber Art Quilt include: sending marked blocks back to students to be sewn, teacher sewing them, or volunteers/ local quilt groups assembling the fiber art quilt. Possible places for the quilt to be displayed: school, local community center, churches, local hospitals. The quilt can also be raffled to raise money for a charity determined by mutual consent of the students.

## Learning Outcomes

- Identify common themes in creative works of literary and visual art, and reflect on ways art can foster resilience and promote healing.
- Distinguish ways visual art and literary arts are used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect individual and group identities.
- Learn nonverbal expressions of emotions through art and in a safe space.
- Create fiber art by choosing from varied media and collaboratively planning, assembling, and executing (sewing). Recognize how being a part of a group can create a sense of belonging.
- Present finished quilt.
- Identify resilience factors including a sense of belonging and having at least one person who cares.
- Connect art to life and establish vision for future.

## Learning Path Read and Reflect

1. “It Is What It Is” is a short story by Makayla Wach. The author states, “[I] couldn’t . . . stand the sight of something so broken” (p. 45), but at the end she says, “we stood in silence for a while longer, watching the unraveled world slowly begin to knit itself together” (p. 48).
2. Read the definition of Kintsugi: Kintsugi is a Japanese art form in which breaks and repairs are treated as part of the object’s history. Broken ceramics are carefully mended by artisans with a lacquer resin mixed with powdered Kintsugi gold, silver, or platinum. The repairs are visible—yet somehow beautiful.  
  
Sometimes in the process of repairing things that have been broken, we can create something that is more beautiful and resilient. In the Japanese art of Kintsugi, breaks and repairs in pottery are treated as part of the object’s history.
3. View *Pulling Tight*, an artwork by Zoe Chen. List adjectives that describe this painting. What adjectives describe you at this moment in your life? What did the artist do to visually communicate feelings and emotions?

**Identify** common themes in the written texts and visual art and perceive and analyze the authors’ and artist’s intended meanings.

**Create** two fiber art blocks using a variety of methods and techniques.

The following art lesson utilizes the Red Thread as an important visual element representing the strengths of individuals who have experienced grief and loss, as well as the collective strengths that come from being part of a community.

### **History Notes: Resources to Extend Learning about Fiber Arts**

- Fiber artists: Nick Cave, Sheila Hicks, Faith Ringgold, Rodrigo Franzao, Ian Berry, El Anatsui.
- Sheila Hicks: [sheilahicks.com](http://sheilahicks.com)
- Ian Berry—Art in Denim: [ianberry.org](http://ianberry.org)
- Faith Ringgold: [faithringgold.com](http://faithringgold.com)
- 10 Inspiring Fiber Artists you should know: [theartofeducation.edu](http://theartofeducation.edu)
- The Textile Museum—George Washington University Museum: [museum.gwu.edu](http://museum.gwu.edu)
- International Quilt Museum: [internationalquiltmuseum.org](http://internationalquiltmuseum.org)
- Gees Bend Quilters: [soulsgrowdeep.org](http://soulsgrowdeep.org)
- Smithsonian Institute Images of Fiber Art (2,400 images in the collection): [si.edu](http://si.edu)
- On the Cutting Edge: A History of Textile Art: [thurmanovich.com](http://thurmanovich.com)
- Historic Textile and Costume Collections: [cehs.unl.edu](http://cehs.unl.edu)

### **Vocabulary**

**Quilt:** This project is not technically a quilt, as by definition a quilt has two layers with batting sandwiched inside, and stitching through all three layers. However, the term “quilt” also refers to something that resembles a quilt. This collaborative fiber art project is not a mural, as it is not painted or affixed directly to a wall or ceiling. Therefore, in this lesson we will refer to both the individual fiber blocks and the assembled, sewn, and displayed blocks as fiber art quilts.

Fiber art refers to a fine art whose material consists of natural or synthetic fiber and other components, such as fabric, yarn, ribbon, wire, and paper, and prioritizes aesthetic value over utility. It is often created collectively and focuses on the manual labor of the artist(s) as part of the work’s significance.

# Multimedia Fiber Art

## CREATE THE WORK: STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

### Preparation

1. Choose two pieces of Smart-Fab 9 x 12-inches, one for the front and another for the back as one sheet of Smart-Fab is too thin. However, if you are using heavier fabric, skip steps 5–7.
2. Create a border on the “back”: Using a popsicle stick, lay the stick along the edge of one sheet of Smart-Fab and draw a line the width of the stick, sliding the stick as you go around the entire perimeter of the block, creating a border without having to measure. This will be your stitching line later, but will also remind you to end your design inside the border. The Popsicle stick is approximately 3/8” wide and eliminates measuring.
3. Using the second sheet of Smart-Fab to create the “front”, draw the same borders. Then holding it vertically, write your name in the top left corner above the border line. This will help with design orientation later on.
4. Place your “back” Smart-Fab (the one without the name) on a sheet of wax paper face down so the border does not show. This is your workspace and will help keep your work area clean and make moving your piece easier for drying.

### Glue Front and Back Together for Stability

1. With the “back” side facing down, make an X with a line of glue diagonally from corner to corner, staying about 1/4” from the corners. Not having glue in the corners of borders will make sewing easier later, but it is not necessary to measure exactly.
2. Place the “front” (with your name and border on it facing up) on top of the X glue on the “back” sheet, matching all edges. Flatten to adhere the sheets.
3. Repeat all steps for your collaborative block. You will make one block for the collaboration and one or two to keep for yourself.

### You are now ready to create your fiber art blocks!

- Take risks in this safe environment and try new materials and new techniques: stamp, write, paint, and use your creativity to plan or go rogue for an interesting composition.
- Remember to incorporate the decorative Red Thread somewhere in your design and to stay inside your borders. This decorative Red Thread should touch two of the four borders. Use a vertical (portrait) orientation if orientation is important for your design as the group quilt will be laid out with the blocks vertically.

### Collaboration and Layout

Once everyone has completed their individual blocks, determine how many total art blocks you have for the collaborative art quilt. Lay out the blocks vertically in columns of blocks across. For example, if you have a total of 70 blocks, you might arrange 10 blocks across and 7 blocks down.

1. Working as a group and starting with the top of the first column, arrange the blocks in an aesthetically pleasing design.
2. For a more interesting design, use blank half-blocks measuring 9 x 6- inches if you are using a 9 x 12-inch blocks of fabric. By using these blanks to form a staggered brick-like design, you eliminate the problem of having to match seams and all seams will be less bulky.
3. Messages may be added to the blank half-blocks (such as participants' names, date, location, occasion).
4. Arrange the first column of decorated blocks with a blank half-square block placed on the bottom of the column.
5. The second column then starts with a blank half-square block and ends with a full art block. Arrange the blocks in the same way, alternating the blank half-blocks on the top and bottom of the columns. This completes the staggered brick-like effect. The size of the finished project will be determined by how many blocks you have. Extra blocks may be added, if necessary, to be able to use everyone's art blocks.
6. When the blocks are in their final layout, work together using masking tape and pencil (or marker) to label the blocks in the top- left corner beside the name starting with column 1A, 1B, 1C. The next column will be 2A, 2B, 2C. Each column will correspond to a number and each row will correspond to a letter. (The masking tape will be removed after sewing.)
7. Break into teams by column, depending upon the column in which your art block appears. Keeping the blocks in order, each team collects the blocks in their column, then moves to the sewing station.

### **Sewing**

1. Using red sewing thread, each team member will hand- or machine-sew his or her block to the next block. Sew the bottom of A to the top of B, bottom of B to the top of C, and so on. The blocks will be sewn with the front (art) sides facing each other so the seam will be on the back, undecorated side. You will be sewing on the border lines that were drawn earlier. The last person will sew on the extra half-blocks on the odd columns to the bottom of the column, and the first person will sew on the extra half-blocks on the even columns to the Top of the even column. The red sewing thread is the invisible bond that connects all individuals.
2. The columns/strips of connected blocks will then be sewn together, in order, by hand or on a sewing machine. You can take turns using the machines or designate a volunteer to sew the strips together. If no sewing machine is available, the strips can be sewn together by hand, or a school volunteer or local quilting group may be able to assist with the sewing.

# Multimedia Fiber Art

## REFLECT AND SHARE: DISCUSSING WORK AND GIVING FEEDBACK

### Present

- Display the quilt in the school or community!
- Take pictures to document the project.
- Hold a celebration, virtually or in-person, to share the work with your community.
- Raffle the Multimedia Fiber Art Quilt to raise funds for a community project.

### Discussion and Reflection Prompts for the Students

- Reflect on the use of the Red Thread as a visual element in each individual art block, as well as a way to connect pieces to a unified whole.
- How did you feel about giving away one of your quilt squares to donate to the collaborative quilt? How did this process reflect an individual's role in society and how an individual is supported by a community?
- How did you feel about having to stay within the "borders" you drew as the first step in creating your art block?
- Was it difficult for you to choose the materials you used when you had so many choices? How does this relate to life—are you more comfortable when you have more choices or limited choices?
- Reflect on how it felt when you experimented with new materials and art techniques. Did you take artistic risks in this process?
- What symbolism do you see in the collaborative quilt that may communicate strengths?
- How did it feel to see your work publicly displayed?
- How do you think others will react when they see the collaborative artwork displayed publicly?
- What did you like best about this project?
- What do you think you might have done differently on your individual piece, or on the collaborative work?

### Discussion and Reflection Prompts for the Teacher

- In what ways did this art activity help those students who have experienced loss express themselves in a safe manner?
- How does this activity foster resilience in students?
- When doing a similar fiber arts project in your art class, how can you ensure success for your students? What modifications or adaptations would you make?

**Informal Assessment:** The teacher will demonstrate appropriate uses of materials and processes prior to allowing students to begin. The teacher will check for understanding and answer clarifying questions as needed. Teacher will monitor and conference with individual students to discuss in-progress artwork.



# Multimedia Fiber Art

## NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

### Create

**VA.CR.2:** Experiment, plan, and make multiple works of art and design that explore personally meaningful theme, idea, or concept.

### Collaborate

**VA.CR.1.2:** Apply knowledge of available resources, tools, and technologies to investigate personal ideas through the art-making process. Learners collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose.

### Reflect and Connect

**VA.CN.10:** Make art collaboratively to reflect on and reinforce positive aspects of group identity.

**VA.CN.11:** Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

### Present

**VA.PR.5:** Individually and collaboratively, develop a visual plan for displaying works of art, analyzing exhibit space, the needs of the viewer, and the layout of the exhibit.

**VA.PR.6:** Identify where art can be displayed both inside and outside of school.

**VA.Pr6.1.Ia:** Analyze and describe the impact that an exhibition or collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings.

### Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies

**Self-Awareness:** Identifying Emotions, Self-Efficacy

**Social Awareness:** Perspective Taking, Empathy

**Relationship Skills:** Communication, Social Engagement, Relationship Building

### English Language Arts (ELA) Standards

#### Comprehension and Collaboration

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

## ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

	Observed	Not Observed	Comments
<b>Create:</b> Developed a work of art, inspired by verbal and visual texts, that is visually effective in communicating the intended meaning of an unbreakable bond.			
<b>Respond / Reflect:</b> Verbal reflections demonstrate impact of art process and product in connecting art to life. Student comments revealed art's ability to promote healing or foster resilience.			
<b>Connect / Synthesize / Relate:</b> Demonstrates understanding of how people contribute to awareness and understanding of their lives and the lives of their communities through artmaking.			
<b>Present:</b> Analyzes and evaluates impact of presenting artwork. Provides rationale and effectiveness of the chosen plan and venue for displaying works of art.			

# It Is What It Is

## SHORT STORY

**Makayla Wach**, Grade 10, North Allegheny Intermediate School, Pittsburgh, PA.  
Gold Medal, New York Life Award, 2019.

*In memory of Aidan*

I checked my watch, snapping it closed with a loud CRACK and a sigh. These things can't be rushed, of course, a fact that fails to make my job any less tedious. It is what it is.

Knowing I'd be here a while, I decided to take a seat in one of the pews, careful not to crease my suit doing so. I looked around the chapel, at the hushed crowds huddled together in small groups like roosting crows. I overheard my name more than once; mentions of how they knew me, stories of their friends that I've met with before. I usually ignore this idle gossip. I've become accustomed to their hate and fear. It is what it is.

The mother caught my eye, sitting alone on a bench. She sat in rigid silence, a stark contrast to the woman I'd visited only a few days prior. Then, there were tears and shaking fists. Then, she'd been screaming and wailing and clawing at my face, trying her hardest to chase me away. Of course, I didn't go away. I never do.

Now, she simply sat. Staring unseeing into space through dull, rusted eyes. It's sad, in a way, to see this switch flipped. To watch as an intricate tapestry is torn and frayed and bleached, to watch a bright and lively woman wilt into despondent weed. One would think that after all I've seen, I'd get used to it. I never do.

Perhaps it's an ache of guilt, buried deep within my bones. Perhaps it's simply a reminder, a sign of purpose and existence disguised in this terrible pattern. Whatever the case, it pangs whatever heart I have left each and every time. It is what it is.

And perhaps that's why, on this particular afternoon, I stood and, hesitantly, approached her. I said nothing—just sat by her side. I braced myself for her to lash out, to attack me again, but she didn't even look up. Just stared at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. In a way, it would have been more reassuring if she'd at least reacted, whether it be in anger or otherwise.

But she didn't.

Finally, a hoarse whisper etched a crack in the silence.

"Why?"

I didn't respond. Usually, any comment on my part stimulates bargaining, which I really can't afford to do. Not anymore.

She buried her head in her hands. "It's my fault. I should have known. I'm his mother. If I'd noticed something was wrong, then maybe . . ."

I wanted to tell her that nothing had been wrong. That she wasn't to blame. That it was just the way of the world. It is what it is.

But I didn't.

The father came and sat beside her, wrapping his arms around his wife. He looked tired—so very, very tired. The last few days had aged him, though not beyond the point of my recognition. I nodded to him, noting how he wearily nodded back. So, he did remember me. Of course, he did. He'd seen me more often than most. First his mother, then his father, then his sister, and now . . . well, it is what it is.

I cleared my throat and stood, brushing off my suit. For some reason, I couldn't stand to be in the presence of the parents any longer. Couldn't stand the sight of something so broken. Not that I hadn't seen it before . . . but that afternoon, something was different. Wrong.

I decided then that I'd leave, get some fresh air. There isn't much where I live, and I take it when I can. By then I'd be feeling like myself, and then I could finish my job. It's just a job, that's all it is, it's nothing personal. It is what it is, I thought, and in retrospect, I believe I was attempting to convince myself more than anything.

But as I turned to go, a young girl approached me, tears streaming down her face. Without warning, she forcefully kicked my leg, causing me to wince. Ah, yes. The sister.

“How could you?!” she screamed, swinging her fists. I stepped backwards nervously. It seemed I had had the opposite effect on her as I did the mother. I distinctly remembered this girl denying my existence just a few days ago, muttering about nightmares and needing to wake up.

Now, she’d woken up.

“You took him!” She was still yelling, still crying, still trying in vain to pummel me with her delicate hands, hands much too small for such a feat. “You took him! You took him, and you’re gonna bring him back!”

I just sighed and strode away, leaving her to her wailing and stomping and the forced, premature growth that shouldn’t have come for many more years. However much it pains me to see children shrouded in black, they just never understand. Would I bring them back? Would I, if I could? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But either way, I can’t—a fact they never seem able to process in their innocent minds. I can’t, so no matter how much they plead, I won’t. It is what it is.

Another girl stood by the door, looking down at her handheld screen and chewing gum. She wasn’t dressed like the rest of the people in attendance, wasn’t wearing ink and shadow. But she was carrying a weight, I could tell. As I approached, she popped her gum, made a rather rude hand gesture, and stormed out.

I stared after her, confused, and a voice behind me said, “Sorry about that.”

I turned and saw the brother. He was staring at the floor, hands in his pockets.

“She doesn’t mean any disrespect,” he said quietly, still not meeting my gaze. “She just doesn’t know how to help me, that’s all. She doesn’t know what to say.”

I said nothing, and he laughed weakly, running a hand through his hair. “I guess I don’t, either. Or, what I should’ve said, anyway. I didn’t mean to snap at him . . . but it was late, and I had a lot of homework . . .”

I wanted to tell him that it wasn’t his fault. That he had no need to carry this burden, not all on his own, in any case. That he was allowed to cry, allowed to mourn. That he and his father didn’t have to be the strong ones, and that there’s no shame in leaning on others for support. It is what it is.

But I didn’t.

I stood frozen at the door as he shuffled back into the chapel, where his family was waiting. And there I stood for a long while, not knowing what to do. A breath of air was no longer as enticing as it had been before. And besides, it must have been almost over by now. I’d met with the mother, the father, the sister, the brother, even the brother’s girlfriend . . . who else would my work have affected?

My silent query was answered as I looked around, eyes lingering on everyone present. Coaches and teachers, wondering if they’d been too harsh or pushed too hard. Teary-eyed girls, heads swimming with the unsaid declarations of love that they’d been too shy to confess. But one particular boy caught my attention, hunched in the corner. Almost without thinking, I approached him.

He looked up as I neared his secluded spot, and a flash of fear crossed his features as I realized he’d been trying to avoid me. His eyes were rimmed red, and he wiped his nose on his sleeve before speaking.

“Why?”

The friend’s hoarse, whispered word echoed with a different sort of pain than the mother’s. Perhaps that’s because he wasn’t really asking me—not really. He was wondering why he’d been left behind, left alone on this miserable rock between birth and death. A common, slightly aggravating reaction. Why do they always assume I know all the answers? Why do they think that just because I’m here, I can see into the mind and heart and pain of everyone I take? I’m not here to ask questions, and I’m certainly not qualified to answer them. I’m here to do my job. It is what it is.

The friend wiped his eyes and took a photo from his pocket, creased from the constant folding and unfolding it had been subject to these last few days. I’ve often wondered why people keep these pictures, looking at them again and again when they never truly replicate the spark of a real smile. When the memory they treasure so much and carry in their pocket only serves to remind them of what they’ve lost. But they can’t let go, not of old photographs or sweatshirts or blankets. It is what it is.

I turned back to the chapel doors, knowing it was nearly time. I'd given them all long enough. But before I could take another step, a girl appeared in front of me, face red and eyes fixed on her shoes. "Um . . . I'm so sorry to bother you, but . . . here," she murmured. "I-I was wondering . . . could you please deliver this? If not, that's fine . . ." She held an envelope in her shaking, outstretched hand. I was surprised by the gesture, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't slightly irked as well. I am not a mailman, I am not a servant, and I am certainly not a friend. But, unsure of what else to do, I took it. With a sigh of relief, the girl darted off, disappearing into the crowd.

I stared after her a long while before opening the letter. All it said was this: I'm sorry I didn't get to know you, and I'm sorry I didn't say this before, but thank you for helping my brother.

I frowned and craned my head to see where she'd gone, catching a glimpse of her at the side of a young boy . . . a boy in a wheelchair. I cursed the pang in my chest, cursed the melting hunk of ice that was supposed to be my heart, and turned away. It's only when it's too late that they remember these things, or care enough to bring them up. They think that maybe, just maybe, the words they'd left unspoken could have changed what happened. That's absurd, of course. Nothing can prevent me from my purpose, whether I like it or not. And, as I'm beginning to discover, it's not an enjoyable position to fill. It is what it is.

And so I went to the long, wooden box, polished surface gleaming in the dim light of the chapel. I went to the box and found the one I'd come for sitting atop, legs swinging and eyes wide as he looked out across the crowds of people gathered for him. I beckoned for him to follow. He hopped down and reached for my hand, then hesitated.

"I . . . I didn't mean for any of this," he said quietly. "This wasn't supposed to happen. If I'd known . . ."

"Known what?" I said, caught somewhat off guard by my own gravelly, seldom-used voice. "Known the sorrow of a mother? The pain of a father? The bitterness of a sister, or the guilt of a brother?" The boy was silent, but I was not.

"You, all of you, never understand. This doesn't end with family and friends. I've seen it, time and time again. I've watched strangers weep and wail and harbor responsibility over someone they never really knew. I've watched lives crumble, and since the beginning of time, I've said nothing. Because . . ."

Here I took a deep breath.

"I could say it is what it is. But that doesn't mean it should be."

He nodded and looked away, blinking back tears. We stood in silence for a while longer, watching the unraveled world slowly begin to knit itself together. Then, with one last glance over my shoulder, I took his hand in mine.

And I led him home. ■

# Pulling Tight

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