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COLORS OF DISASTER: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE "BLACK SUN"†

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In a variety of studies (Fleshman & Fryrear 1979; Kramer, 1977; Landgarten, 1981; McNiff, 1991; Moore, 1981; Rubin, 1984) art has been shown to be useful in treating childhood victims of trauma. Most of these have focused on child abuse (Cohen & Phelps, 1985; DeMaria, 1991; Kelley, 1984; Lyons, 1992; Malchiodi, 1985; Sikelianos, 1986; Spelz, 1990; Wohl & Kaufman, 1985). However, there is very little literature on the healing effects of art therapy with victims of natural disaster (Appleton, 1990; Hoffman & Rogers, 1991; Klingman, Koenigsfeld & Markman, 1987; McIntyre, 1990; Newman, 1976; Shilo-Cohen, 1993). This remains a serious problem considering the lasting effects experienced by children who go through earthquakes, hurricanes, plane crashes and other disasters. In this paper we attempt to explore this issue in depth with focus on color choice and, in particular, the phenomenon of the black sun in these children's drawings.

In the last few years, earthquakes have continued to devastate small and large towns alike. From Los Angeles, California to Kobe, Japan we usually hear about the horror in death tolls. Unfortunately, that is just the beginning of the trauma for the survivors. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is the effect on the psyche of the children who go through these disasters. These children are our future. If they are not treated for the traumatic wounds they suffer as the result of witnessing overwhelming death and destruction, they will never be whole, fully-functioning adults. As a result, what was learned in Armenia has great worth today.

On December 7, 1988, at 11:41 a.m., a devastating earthquake, measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale, suddenly struck over 40% of Armenian territory. Within 41 seconds it killed over 25,000 people (with unofficial reports as high as 55,000), injured another 78,000 and left over 2,000 amputees. More than 40,000 people were rescued from under the ruins and at least 53,000 families were left homeless. It was an incredible, almost instantaneous, collapse of life and property.

The children, who seemed to suffer more than the adults, were in school at the time of the quake. These buildings were inadequately designed and constructed and were not built to withstand such devastating force. In all, 83 schools and 90 kindergartens were destroyed. In the area of Leninakan, of the 18,000 reported deaths, 10,000 were children and adolescents. Over 3,900 children lost one of their parents and 520 became orphans. After the quake, 32,000 children were evacuated into different parts of the

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Soviet Union for between 2 to 6 months. In fact, somewhere near 6,000 children were lost in the post-disaster chaos but, fortunately, were later found and restored to their families.

Against tremendous odds, Anait Azarian and Vitali Skriptchenko Gregorian (two of the authors) founded the Children's Psychotherapy Center in the Spring of 1989 in the town of Kirovakan, which was located approximately 12 miles away from the epicenter of the quake. The Center was named "ARALEZ," after the half-human, half-canine creature of Armenian mythology that heals fallen heroes by licking their wounds. The ARALEZ Center, originally set up in two tents, was greeted with enormous skepticism by town authorities as well as by bureaucrats in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Regardless, the Center, staffed with hardworking, committed volunteers, was quickly flooded with young victims seeking help. The necessary equipment was provided by "SOS Armenie," a Swiss relief organization, and many licensed psychotherapists, clinical psychologists and social workers came from France, England, Canada and the USA to help the Center's staff. The Soviet authorities, who initially viewed the Center's effort with considerable criticism, eventually acknowledged its positive influence and afforded it the opportunity to occupy a seven-room house in downtown Kirovakan. Likewise, the Parliament of the Armenian Republic eventually confirmed the status, aims and structure of the Center, thereby permitting them to work under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In three years (1989–1991) the Center treated more than 2,500 victims of the earthquake. At its peak the Center had a staff of 32 volunteers; among them were 2 psychologists, 10 psychotherapists, 3 social workers and one psychiatrist.

Color Choice and the Symbolism of the Black Sun

The drawings of the majority of the child survivors who were traumatized by the events they witnessed are very restrained in their color choices. We realized this phenomenon from the very beginning of the Center's activity. One wall in the biggest room was decorated by the previous owners with several children's beautiful pictures made before the disaster (Figure 1). Of course, we kept these pictures in their place. But nobody knows why our children, and then the therapists, too, began to collect new drawings on the next wall (Figure 2). We think it was an unconscious will-

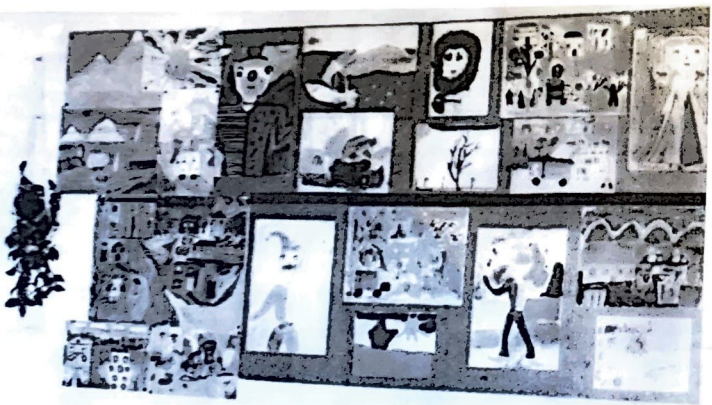

Figure 1. The Armenian children's artwork made before the disaster.

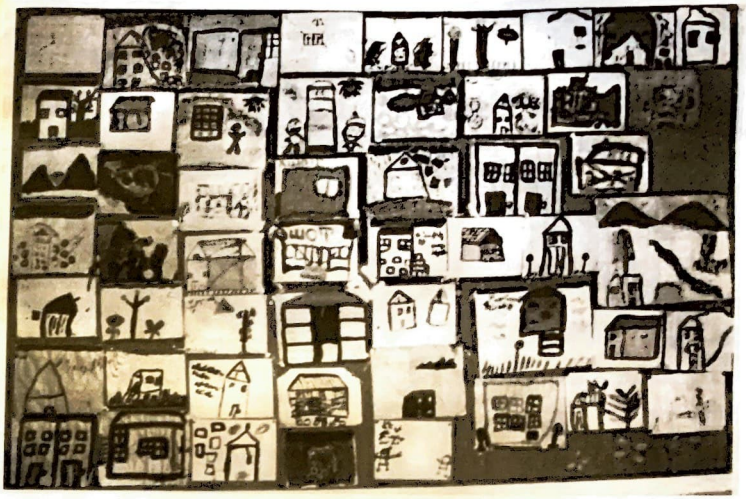

Figure 2. The Armenian children's artwork made after the disaster in the Center.

ingness to draw attention to these unusual messages.

It became more and more obvious that the disaster victims' drawings were extremely unusual because of their restrained color choice. In many of them we did not observe half-tones, and in most of them the children used only two or three colors (primarily black on white and sometimes red). The children never used any colored background or colored paper for their drawings. In fact, they preferred only white paper. This is very unusual for children and especially for Armenian children. It is interesting to note that the well-known Armenian writer Nelly Saakian, after studying and analyzing the ancient Armenian art of Khatchkars (cross-stones) and carpets, came to the following conclusion:

> From earliest times Armenians have used few but always intense colors—not red but purple and crimson, the color of the ripe pomegranate skin and blood. The order of colors most frequently used in Armenian carpets is purple, brown, yellow, blue, green (seldom used), and the rarest—black and white. These colors repeat the actual color range of the Armenian highlands. (1991)

Comparing the drawings on the two walls in the Center, we distinctly understood the significant difference between them. The young victims of the quake refused to draw and apply steady color clichés. It was obvious that their color choices were not the result of chance.

One day Anait (one of the founders of the Center and the staff psychologist) conducted a simple experiment in the art therapy room. She preliminarily took away the black crayons, black watercolors and black markers and pencils from the table for the drawing. When a group of 10 young children (6 to 8 years old) came to this table for their art lesson, Anait became the eyewitness of their incredible behavior. Sitting at the table, the children were given complete freedom to draw anything they wanted. However, they refused

to draw, even though they had all the paints, crayons, markers and pencils they could have wanted in every color except black. They would not draw until a boy was sent to retrieve the black colors from Anait's desk. Once again, we were convinced that the traumatized children, in overwhelming majority, preferred the colors noted above and persistently chose them for special reasons.

Gregg M. Furth, an investigator of children's drawings, has given the following common interpretations of the colors:

> Black may indicate or symbolize the unknown; if used for shading, it is generally seen as negative, projecting "dark" thoughts, a threat, or fear. White, as the absence of color, may indicate repressed feelings; it may also, after all colors used, signal life's completion. Psychologically, red may signal an issue of vital significance, a burning problem, surging emotions or danger; physically it may reflect an acute illness—for example, infection or fever. (1988)

Similarly, the Russian painter Vassily Kandinsky, ancestor of Abstractionism, considered the color white to be the hidden probability of any color birth, and the black one the death of any other color (Baraev, 1991). In short, the symbols of birth and death. Another work, "Black Square (on a White Background)," by the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, was deciphered by critics as a symbol of destruction and desolation (Kelley, 1990). By choosing these colors, the traumatized children are able to express their psychological pain to the world: anxiety, helplessness, loneliness, sadness, feeling threatened, vulnerable, fearfulness, even terror and despair.

In addition to the startling presence of restrained color choice, there is another astonishing phenomenon we discovered in the traumatized children's artwork and that was the prevalence of a "black sun." Although this symbol seems somewhat unusual at first, references to it can be found in many different genres. For instance, there are various kinds of black suns used with different meanings in the mythological traditions and metaphors of poetry around the world. First of all, the black sun has been referred to as an apocalyptic image, indicating darkness and gloom, fear and terror, death and non-being, retribution and oblivion. For example, many passages in the Bible reflect this symbolism: "The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble; the sun and the moon shall be dark . . ." (Joel 2:10) or ". . . there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair . . ." (Revelation 6:12) (New American Standard Version).

Similarly, the black sun is also the image of total melancholy, desperation and depression. Gerard de Nerval's (1986) chimerical expression ". . . my constellated lute bears the Black Sun of melancholia" has the same somber sense that is derived from the famous Durer engraving, "Melancholy," where a huge black sun in the background hangs over the figure of a dismal woman. When the sun is combined with blackness it signifies that life is ebbing or nearing its end. Finally, another black sun is that of guilt and doom. It is the image from Racine's play and Euripides' tragedy—a vision of the hapless Phaedra. This black sun is related to sin, crime and punishment.

Not one of these meanings was reported by the children who drew the black sun in their pictures, but all of them had good reasons to use this image. This connection becomes apparent when we realize that the trauma they suffered was so deep that they developed chronic depression, numerous fears and phobias, unwanted thoughts of death and other Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms all associated with the black sun.

Clinically, there are few better ways of illustrating these findings than through the use of case vignettes, which have been shown to help reveal the phenomenological terrain of experience in a vivid and meaningful way (DeMaria, 1992a). As a result, the following cases highlight the therapeutic role art played in the healing processes experienced by the child survivors of the 1988 Armenian earthquake.

Cases

Hasmig

Nine years old when she first came to the Center, Hasmig was experiencing very severe post-traumatic stress. Her initial drawings represented only one subject: a black building with two black spots on both sides and red spots inside (Figure 3). She persistently drew similar buildings during each art therapy session, even though there were many different topics from which to choose (i.e., "Earthquakes," "Free topic," "My home," "Our town," etc.). The draw-

Figure 3. Hasmig's "Wheat Elevator in Flames."

ings became animated when Hasmig began to tell about the torturing images that still haunted her:

> The plaster and stones of our classroom started to move and all of us ran outside. Then my mother came and we went to Yerevan by car. My mother would not let me look out of the window but I managed to see the wheat elevator of Spitak in flames from both sides. I also saw a man being carried away. He had only socks on. In another place I saw a man whose hands and head were in blood.

Spitak was the town nearest the epicenter of the earthquake and thus was one of the worst areas due to the complete destruction of all buildings and the massive number of human losses. Through her drawings, Hasmig communicates to all of us the tragic experience that traumatized her in Spitak. The colors in her drawings give a vivid picture of the meaning of the restrained color choice of black and red. She went on:

> I can not forget our trip through Spitak and the burning elevator, too . . . I think that all things in this town were fearful and black . . . even the sky was black. I am doing them (things in the drawings) in black because all people must know how it was bad . . . red color because there were many people dead under the ruins . . .

For approximately one year after the traumatic disaster, Hasmig was afraid of new earthquakes, buildings, vibrations, noises and fires. She was suffering from a clear case of PTSD as evidenced in her hyper-

Figure 4. Taron's "Truck with Bloody Body."

vigilance and reminiscent responses. Throughout this period of time, the burning elevator was effervescent in her drawings.

Garen

Garen was a 5-year-old boy seriously shocked by the earthquake in his kindergarten. When asked about his drawing he responded, "This is the floor of our kindergarten. See how it's shaking. It's the earthquake!" When asked about his use of the color black he again made reference to the shaking of the floor. However, when asked if the floor of his kindergarten had a carpet on it made out of black and blue colors he said he could not remember.

At the time we knew that there was not a carpet with black and blue patterns or black and blue colors on the usual wooden floor of Garen's kindergarten. But Garen drew the kindergarten with a shaking floor again and again. Every time he did so, he used fast, spasmodic brush strokes as if he were trying to imitate the convulsive shaking of the floor during the earthquake. He was horrified. He continually saw the shaking floor in re-enactment nightmares that are common in children suffering from PTSD. Garen was lying on the normally stable and solid surface of the floor, playing with the toys when the quake struck. He felt the full violent force of the vibration through his whole body. There is no doubt that this complete sensing of the earth giving way beneath him was incredibly traumatizing to him. In his repetitive drawing-scribbles he was telling us what scared him so deeply.

Taron

An 8-year-old boy, Taron experienced the disaster in a comparatively safe place. His two-story home was located in the region not hit by the earthquake as strongly and destructively as the town of Kirovakan. Unlike his schoolmates, he was not afraid of vibrations, noise or new earthquakes because he did not feel them at the moment of the initial quake impact. However, he had different troubles. After the disaster he began to suffer from repetitious thoughts of his and his relatives' deaths and terrorizing nightmares of

Figure 5. Varduhy's black house.

bloody corpses. Taron's mother had noticed a disturbance in her son's behavior (i.e., regression, irritability and aggressiveness), which increased during the 6 months following the disaster. She then brought him to the Center.

When Taron portrayed his quake experience through art therapy, the source of his symptoms became clear. It was the first of Taron's drawings in the art therapy room, and the only drawing with a very brief explanation, told through clenched teeth, which began to shed light on his behavior (Figure 4). Taron's home was located on the street over which there was a road on which trucks carried the wounded and dead. No one in his house realized that he had been watching these trucks from the balcony. His first drawing vividly illustrated such a truck (pictured entirely black) with a bloody body (the red spot inside the truck) on its platform. It was as if a window were opened into Taron's world. From her son's black-white-red message, Taron's mother had an immediate understanding of the particular and very specific trauma from which he was suffering.

Souren

We were very struck by the visual message of the next boy, Souren. Also 8 years old, Souren was trapped under the ruins of his house for about 5 hours. Although in severe pain, the result of a stone falling on his hand, Souren's father tried to keep talking to his son as they lay in the ruins. Fortunately, they survived, although his father's hand had to be amputated. However, Souren's grandmother and a family friend, who at the time of the earthquake were sitting around the same table, died. A long time after the tragedy, Souren persisted in the initial denial of the trauma. He buried the memories of disaster so deeply that he forgot all of them except some physical or

Figure 6. Varduhy's black sun.

sensory stimuli. He produced 10 strikingly similar pictures that contained big, shapeless, dark spots drawn on white paper with stripes of black, deep blue and a little red. He said:

> In my pictures there are the colors of our wallpaper. During the earthquake they all were torn. When the guitar broke with a loud noise I was on the balcony and everything went black. I slept. When I woke up I spoke with my father. Then all went black again, and I slept once more. Then they took me somewhere.

Souren did not remember what they talked about, who saved them or whom he saw above. David R. Johnson, an expert in this field, has written about this state of survivors:

> The attempt to preserve a sense of the good self, characterized by safety, control, and gratification, leads to an encapsulation and elimination of all aspects of the traumatic situation from consciousness. Whereas most of the time in the post-traumatic period the person is unaware of the trauma and often has amnesia for the events . . . (1987)

In Souren's case, we can see that in his first attempt to remember something about the tragic event and to break through his protective capsule, he informed us about the colors of his destroyed wallpaper. What is so interesting about this initial revelation is the fact that there was no such dark and gloomy wallpaper in their home. Souren's mother reported their wallpaper to be composed of beautiful pink, lemon and violet colors, not the black, white, red and blue ones represented on her son's drawings. Even in his initial attempt to reconnect with the trauma he experienced, Souren had unconsciously changed the colors of his wallpaper to reflect his traumatic experience.

Figure 7. Arman's earthquake-torn Spitak.

He persistently used black, white, red and blue colors for representation of the torn wallpaper on many similar drawings during the initial post-disaster period.

Varduhy

It was extremely difficult to communicate with one particular 7-year-old girl. Her name was Varduhy. She was very thin and reserved. She looked at the world with her big, frightened eyes trying to keep silent. We discovered that when the quake struck, Varduhy was in her parents' apartment, located on the ninth floor of one of the highest buildings in Kirovakan. It was reported that the whole building had swung back and forth during the earthquake, making it practically impossible for the girl's family to escape. Varduhy was hurled in different directions, after which she heard a terrible rumbling noise coming from underground and the loud cracking of the building walls. After this trauma, she began to fear everything in her world: sun, rain, lightning, hail, animals, buildings and so on. These emotional disorders were complicated by psychosomatic enuresis. However, once she was at the Center she began to express her trauma in her pictures, where again we see the overwhelming presence of black, white and red. On the first drawing (Figure 5) she drew her black house with a black cloud of smoke, a tree with a black/red top, and above she drew a quite stereotypical yellow sun with red and yellow sunbeams. The black sun was shown on her second drawing (Figure 6) in which there are again black destroyed buildings with red clouds of smoke nearby. Varduhy tried to show an ambulance in the tent similar to what she saw in the post-disaster period, and a gloomy sun above these subjects of her fear.

Arman

Ten years old, Arman ran out of the school, which was trembling and shuddering, to look for his mother.

Figure 8. Arman's black sun nightmare scene.

He found her sobbing. She had learned of the terrifying events in Spitak, where most of their relatives lived. A passerby, seeing their distress, gave them a lift to Spitak. The things Arman had seen there are drawn in his first darkened picture (Figure 7). On the right part of the picture, near the ambulance, is a body in a casket. On the left, two people carrying a body on a stretcher are making their way through destroyed houses. In the second drawing (Figure 8), Arman drew a scene from nightmares that had been tormenting him after seeing Spitak. The same corpses and caskets are on the street, only now there is a black sun above the apocalyptic picture of a collapsed town.

Arthur

"I hate this place; I hate this town!," cried Arthur, an 11-year-old boy. He was afraid of it. His father and brother, along with about 20 of his relatives, were crushed to death in the ruins of the town. The boy had expressed the whole terror of the tragedy, the whole depth of his psychological trauma in the same symbolic way as did the other young disaster victims. He drew the black sun above the place where he had experienced the trauma (Figure 9). He placed it above destroyed black buildings with yellow windows (electrical light). A green mountain is behind the town.

Summary

The children's drawings reveal the repetitive compulsion often seen in play therapy with children who have been traumatized (DeMaria & Cowden, 1992b). In an effort to gain symbolic and emotional power over the event, it is repeated over and over, much like scar tissue in the healing of a physical wound. The body, in an effort to heal itself, builds up an excess of healing tissue to protect the fragile injury. Here the

Figure 9. Arthur's black sun.

creative process, through drawing allowed the children to process through and slowly expel the toxic experience. The act of creation itself here proves to be inherently healing. This was evidenced as slowly, but surely, other subjects and themes began to appear in Hasmig's drawings during her recovery. In another of Hasmig's drawings, made one year after comprehensive psychological treatment in the Center, we find blue skies, green trees, green grass and many-colored houses and trucks. In this drawing (Figure 10) we find more day to day scenes (i.e., construction of new houses) and she begins to draw more grounded imagery (steady color stereotypes), such as, "blue sky," "green trees and grass" and "red fires." Thus, Hasmig's drawing after a year of treatment reveals a great deal of healing. She is able to let the bright colors of her day-to-day world break through and replace the grim and traumatic images of black, red and white. She moved through her traumatic experience by, as she said in her own words, trying to express the tragic experiences that the disaster brought. Far from repressing these experiences, the art therapy allowed her to acknowledge, communicate, express and eventually abreact these toxic emotions. In so doing, we witness, through her drawings, the incredible journey from despair to hope.

Not all children, however, can verbally confirm this expression. Some of them simply can not verbalize their unconscious actions, whereas others just refuse to tell about it. Instead, they communicate meaning through the color changes in their artwork. This was evidenced by the sharply changing colors of the familiar wallpaper in Souren's drawings. Unconsciously, Souren was crying out to be heard, and we and his parents needed to listen with our eyes. His parents were key in that they knew the real colors of

Figure 10. Hasmig's drawing after psychotherapy—"Construction of New Houses."

the wallpaper. During his initial denial (amnesiac) period Souren could not use other conscious methods to communicate with the environment. This amnesiac period is referred to in the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder literature as the "numbing response" when the individual basically runs on "automatic pilot." In this state there is little access to normal modes of communicating, therefore art serves as a powerful vehicle to circumvent the difficulty of verbally communicating the depths of emotional trauma.

The findings of our work strongly suggest that traumatized children begin the healing process by signaling arising psychological turmoil and stress through powerful color changes in their artwork (the overwhelming use of black, red and white). This appears to be going on at an unconscious level due to the fact that none of them could clearly explain, verbally, why they did it.

Why, then, do traumatized children use the black-white-red color range? It is a question to muse upon. Is there a universal language of symbols in their minds and drawings only consciously unknown to them? Arthur and Arman at first drew the stereotypical yellow sun with yellow sunbeams, but then, seemingly obeying that same unknown inner urge, they changed the sun color. Both of them diligently painted over the sun and sunbeams with black. In seeking to understand this powerful behavior we must assume that there is an inborn symbolic language of the children that was activated during the post-traumatic period in order to make effective contact with their environment.

Discussion

The vivid use of the color black by children in therapy is related to its use in our culture and the collective meanings it has for children not only in

Armenia but around the world. The drawings of the black sun by the Armenian children who survived massive devastation has vivid meaning for all of us. The sun itself has always been synonymous with light, understanding, the rational, the logical, life-giving. However, for these children the sun is painted black. The life-giver has turned dark. The rational has turned irrational; the clear lucidity of the sun has been eclipsed by the darkness and night of disaster and trauma. When earthquakes and other natural disasters claim whole towns, one's core sense of belonging and security is challenged and thrown into question. It is a vivid form of what Laing (1979) termed "ontological insecurity." One's whole sense of being is turned upside down, inside out and rendered ambiguous.

We can only imagine the fear and terror that threatened to darken the innocent bright eyes of childhood. In 41 seconds, the earthquake struck and destroyed two of children's most solid beliefs: (a) that their parents are always brave and strong and (b) that the earth is always steady and trustworthy. It was Charles Darwin who said:

> A bad earthquake at once destroys our oldest associations; the earth, the very emblem of solidity, has moved beneath our feet like a thin crust over fluid—one second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity which hours of reflection could not have produced.

The children's ground was literally shaken. All those things that they had counted on and took for granted were literally shaken up, injured and, for some, tragically destroyed. They witnessed the engulfment of houses, lost friends and family and, yet, they survived. In these children's portraits of the black sun the ontological nature of their shock and trauma is vividly revealed.

Art, as a powerful medium of expression and healing, allowed these children to travel through the dark night of the soul and begin to rebuild themselves and their worlds. The overwhelming evidence of these findings gives further validation of the inherently healing power of creativity. In addition, we have gleaned valuable new information about how art therapy may be related to color therapy. Pictures truly are worth a thousand words and, as has been shown through this study, art therapy can give us valuable clues as to the trauma that children are not able to verbalize. Finally, the art served as a tracking tool that allowed us to concretely watch the healing process that unfolded before our eyes. As the colors moved from the obsessive use of black, white and red to a blossoming of full spectrum color we saw the children slowly regain hope, dignity and a sense of self. Therefore, it became apparent that, in the face of such darkness, the use of art therapy enabled the children to rebuild their world from the inside out and feel the ground beneath them become firm once again.

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