

Without Love

A Photo-memory Box:

Closure of an Anticipated Death

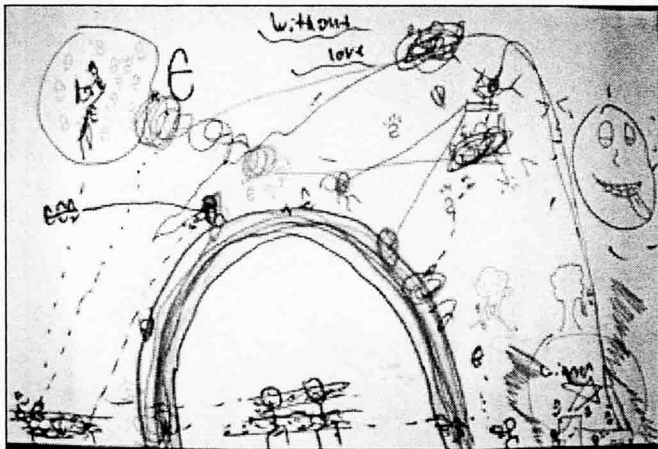
A year ago, I concluded a year of working with Geordie, a thirteen-year-old boy, anticipating the death of his mother. A school counsellor, concerned about his difficulties in school, referred Geordie to me for art therapy. Geordie was referred following increasingly rude, disruptive, and aggressive behaviour in school. The week we began working together, he was suspended for throwing rocks at other students. Geordie had some suicidal ideation shortly before his referral.

Geordie's mom was terminally ill for over two years, living in a small basement suite with him until a few weeks before her death. She died nine months after our first art therapy session. We continued working together for a further four months, until the end of the school year.

Geordie had experienced an earlier separation from his father and sister, as well as the death of the father in the family who was to adopt him following his mom's death. Geordie is now living with his mother's best friend. This arrangement began when Geordie's mother went into the hospital and it became apparent that she would not return home.

Geordie rarely spoke directly about her evitable death but worked through these thoughts and fears clearly in his process and in his work, for example by titling a picture "without love".

When he did begin to talk about Christmas and that she may not come out of the hospital again, I felt we had reached a turning point in therapy. Usually he would select a medium and work spontaneously, but now seemed to need more direction.



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In consultation with another therapist working with hospice clients, the idea of memory boxes was suggested. As his time with his mom was drawing to a close, I gave Geordie and his mom a disposable camera for Christmas - he took lots of pictures of their last Christmas together. She died at the end of January.

Geordie talked about taking lots of pictures, but about not having money to develop the film. Then he "lost" the film until "finding" it only a few weeks prior to the end of the school year. He entrusted me with the film, which I took for developing, then used the photos for our termination sessions. As a (now) fourteen year old, he kept a lot inside of himself, not really acknowledging feelings, but his art during the anticipatory grief year was powerful. Now, as he opened the envelope, I could hear him holding his breath. We looked at them together, and we talked about his mom.

I presented the idea of a box to him and he liked the idea, so for the next session I brought a selection of small boxes. Geordie took care over his small box, although to the observer the results were rough and looked like the work of a much younger child. Rather than simply place his picture inside, he chose to glue pictures onto the box as well as inside of the lid. I wrapped it in a cloth bag and he took it home to fill when he "finds the right things". I made one suggestion. He had told me that he had written something to say at her funeral, but "he couldn't say it because he would have cried". He still had the speech, so I thought that he could still send the message by putting his words into the box. Geordie was able to stay in school through this very tough year. He was becoming overwhelmed, but through the art therapy, his school counsellor stated that she believed our session were an opportunity for him to manage his emotions, as well as a way to safely work through them. My sense was that he had taken the time that he needed to complete our sessions. For a few weeks he was not able to face the pictures of his mom, but needed to do this with me, before the school year ended. It was quite a journey for both of us.

A few months later I spoke with him for a few minutes, at a new school. Geordie spoke about his mom with me, talked about adjusting to his new family and was looking forward to experiencing his next Christmas with them. I felt he had accepted the reality of his mother's death and that he is able to communicate his feelings more effectively and appropriately since his art therapy experience.

Liz McKnight M.Ed.DVATI