

# The Art of Happiness: Reflections on the Power of Creative Projects

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**Abstract:** This reflection piece is intended to share an experience of a professor and a student as they journey through a semester long assignment entitled the Art of Happiness Project. The student's difficulties with the assignment create opportunity for imagination and creativity to take hold. The professor provides the platform for the student to overcome fears and present special works of art to a large class as well as prepare for a submission to a community art show. Both experience a reciprocal process of growth and definitions of happiness.

**Keywords:** creativity, happiness, family violence, healing, art therapy, teaching.

One project that I have enjoyed working through for several years has been one I call the Art of Happiness Project. This title was not stolen from the famous book that came out at the exact same time I created this semester long project, I promise. Prior to the project, I spent a lot of time thinking about what I really wanted these students to get from my class. What I wanted them to experience so they would always remember it and what skills I wanted them to gain to take with them in their bag of social work tools.

Remembering back to my social work practice days in mental health, when you ask most people what they want out of life they will tell you they just want to be happy. This seems so simple, yet so undefined, yet so individual, yet we all seem to think we know what at least a part of happiness looks like. What we know mostly, is how we would individually define our own happiness.

Happiness, for me, meant being in a supportive and safe, loving relationship with someone who never went away even if I tried to push them. It meant having three children like I always dreamed. It meant becoming a doctor. It meant giving my life to a profession that I loved and it loved me back just enough that I didn't want to run away from it. It meant having a great part of my life being spent with people who make me laugh, who love me back, who let me cry if I want to, and who accepted me...and maybe a big house someday with a pool. I've given this a lot of thought but I also know my happiness has changed as I have.

So my plan was to create an assignment for students in the BSW program to share what their

happiness looks like. The parameters of the assignment were pretty loose but students were given an outline that stated they were to create an individual presentation using creativity to represent what "happiness" means to them. In class we discussed that art is something that stimulates an individual's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, or ideas through the senses. It is also an expression of an idea and it can take many different forms and serve many different purposes. There are no concrete examples given because I want the students to develop their own ideas rather than model after others.

The syllabus contained this statement as well: The Art of Happiness has many components. It begins with developing an understanding of what are the truest sources of happiness and setting your priorities in life based on the cultivation of those sources. "It involves an inner discipline, a gradual process of rooting out destructive mental states and replacing them with positive, constructive states of mind, such as kindness, tolerance, and forgiveness." Balance is a key element of a happy life. - Dalai Lama

I was away at a conference when I received an email from a student named Caroline. The student wrote: "I am having a hard time coming up with my Art of Happiness project. Every time I sit down to work on it, the same thing comes to mind. What I do have I know I could never share in class. I'm not sure what to do... I wrote out a paper of what keeps coming to mind to say and I have attached it here. I know you have no obligation to read it or anything but I was wondering if you could give me some advice. Thank you for your time."

I responded “Oh my gosh, that is BEAUTIFUL. Why don’t you read this out loud? Even if you cry...even if we cry...this is a beautiful window into reality past and present and really represents your being here in social work for a reason. This is a wonderful project write up. Do you think you could just read it?”

Caroline said “I don’t know if I could...I am not generally a sharer but your classes are inspiring me in ways I didn’t think could be possible. I have changed so much in such a short time.”

We went on to discuss that the piece could be read as poetry and creative writing. Leaving much up to the imagination of the audience can be very powerful. As a professor, I did not want Caroline to feel pressured or used and I struggled with having this conversation with her at all. I spoke with the chair of my department to ensure I was not exploiting our student but rather being supportive of her. We discussed that she would not have submitted the piece without any intent and to really follow Caroline’s lead on the process.

### The Reading

Caroline decided to read the piece as if it was written about someone else and also shared that she would be bringing a small painting/abstract picture to accompany her when she read the piece in class. Caroline stood in front of a class of fifty students. She propped her art piece up and began reading in her soft articulate voice.

*Happiness is not something I think I can talk about, but rather the absence of it. If I try to talk about happiness I always stop and my mind goes to one thing, what happiness would have looked like. Happiness to me would have been wearing clean clothes. Or, to wear ones that didn’t have holes. Happiness to me would have been my Dad coming to one, just one, of my sports games. Or, to come to my graduation. Or to not hear him say, “Maybe next time kid.”*

*Happiness would have been eating three meals a day, or knowing what it was like to feel so full you couldn’t eat anymore. Happiness would have been eating more than plain boxed rice*

*because it was free from the church down the street. Happiness would have been waking up and not having to shake the roaches off of my blanket every morning, or to see my breath because there was no heat in the house. Happiness would have been feeling excited rather than scared to stay home when we had a snow day. To not feel afraid when I saw my own house.*

*Happiness would have been making a friend. Or staying in one place for more than six months at a time. Happiness would have been not having to hide the bruises. Not having to lie and make up excuses. Or try to explain why I couldn’t change in the regular locker room with the other girls to hide the purple whip marks. Happiness would have been not to watch my sister get punched in the face and not being able to stop it. To not have my first memories be violent or bloody. Happiness would have been to say ‘no’ to my father that first time and having him listen. Or to be backed up by my mom who wouldn’t force me to do what my father said “for her.”*

*Happiness to me would have been never knowing what it was like to wake up after being choked out. Or, to wake up from a knock-out punch, or the taste of my own blood from loosened teeth. Or, being thrown down a flight of stairs, or my head held under water. Happiness would have been not having lost a day here or a day there that were just too hard or too sad to remember.*

*Happiness to me would have been not sneaking bottles of my father’s scripts and taking them all at once hoping I wouldn’t wake up. Or to not look in the mirror at myself hearing my father tell me I was too fat, too ugly. Happiness to me would have been not being born...*

*Happiness for me would be to hear “I’m sorry”. To hear I’m sorry from my father for all the things he did. An “I’m sorry” from my mom for covering it up, for forcing me to do them. An apology from every adult in my life, every parent, every teacher, every church member, every social worker, every police officer, every stranger that looked at me but never saw ‘me’. Who saw the bruises, who suspected something, who saw the signs, who never did anything. An “I’m sorry” from them for hearing the ‘I’m fine’ and for never taking a*

*second look. An "I'm sorry" from all of them who never cared. I want to hear an "I'm sorry" from God for making me.*

*I don't know what happiness would look like for me or what happiness is. I don't know if I would recognize happiness if I saw it.*

*But, I hope happiness for me today is to be a social worker. To be able to be the one that cares. To be the one that doesn't look away, who doesn't pretend like you are fine when you say you are. To hear another's pain and know exactly how that feels. To be the one to tell a child that needs to hear it, "I'm sorry for all of those that never were." To strip away all of the secrets. To intervene when no one else does. Happiness for me today is helping those that need it and to tell them that I am glad that they are alive even though they aren't.*

The class was frozen. It was easy to see that the students were wondering if the story was about Caroline. Some sat with tears welling in their eyes looking as if they had just been through something powerful. But no one could deny the fact that this reading was amazing. Caroline was the last student to present that day. So the quiet group of fifty just faded out into the halls and onto their next class.

I had to cry, when the students had gone, for many reasons. Mostly because I was grateful to see one of our students reach inside and use her experiences in a creative way that helped to inspire and empower others. I was also worried. Worried that maybe she is not ready to pursue this field and help others when her pain seemed so raw...worried that maybe the act of reading this work out loud to a large group would make Caroline want to run away. But not so, Caroline was fine, she was actually energized and happy and came by my office to process a bit.

The next class day Caroline was not there. We discussed the presentations that had taken place over the last two weeks and the class talked about presentations that moved them. They agreed that many presentations were powerful but that Caroline's was the most memorable. They were impressed of her courage to communicate

something so emotional and were intrigued by the way it was written in third person, they wondered if it was about her but that was not confirmed. This was one of those teaching moments that cannot be written in a lesson plan. Although it was a million dollar classroom moment, it was not all of my making. I provided the platform but the students took the experience into their own hands. Being a social work class, the processing of experiences and providing feedback is an important skill to gain. This powerful presentation offered an opportunity for the class to discuss emotionally charging topics and well as how they personally react to the pain or experience of others.

### **The Art Show**

In our community, we have monthly art events that are called Final Fridays. Essentially, an art crawl is planned each month across the midtown points of the city. People can hop on a trolley, eat snacks, look at art in many different locations, and really make a night of it.

I had recently received an email from one of our community partners that an art show was planned a few weeks away that illuminated the issues of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, recovery and healing. Not only had Caroline written an excellent creative piece but she also submitted a mixed methods piece of art. When she completed her class presentation, she gave me her art piece. I told her I would hang it up in the social work hallway with her permission. But after I was reminded of the art show on the topic she had presented, I wondered if she would be interested in submitting her piece for the community art show. She was interested. Not to speak her writing, but only submit her artwork. It was accepted by the community agency and she wrote her first artist statement to include with the piece. It read: *the goal of the piece was to portray an absence of true happiness, but reaching out to find healing through the pain.* Simply stated and powerful.

As we prepared for the art show, I made sure that she would come see her art piece even though she was unsure of how to locate the show downtown. It was somewhat like an adventure. I took my children to the flower shop to pick her out some flowers that could help signify that this was a big

deal and she deserved to feel proud of this beautiful and impactful work. I wanted to maintain my boundaries with my student, but I really felt like I wanted to give her something to show my appreciation for her bravery.

The art show was in a thrift shop. There were multiple pieces hanging on the walls and a few displays set up with installations. The overarching theme was family violence, sexual assault, pain and recovery. Caroline brought her cousin to the show. Caroline is shy, she is very careful when she speaks, this can easily be misinterpreted but I figure she associates with people who have outgoing personalities so she can let them break the ice for her. Caroline's piece hung right in the center of all of them. We did not know it would have such a prominent place in the set up.

I welcomed her, introduced her to my family, gave her the flowers, and stood with her for a moment as she stared at her work. Then I backed away so she and her cousin could have their own experience of it. I did not really know what to say. I had never been through anything like this with a student. I knew that it felt right to communicate to her that I saw her and that I was interested in her learning and her own development as a student and a social worker. This can sometimes be difficult to communicate in words.

There were also guitar players and poets at this art show so that gave us something to focus our attention on and not have to keep making discussion over what was more an experience than something to be discussed. I looked at her in her tweed coat talking to her cousin and it was really more emotional than I had prepared for. I did not want to place any of my emotions on Caroline because I wanted her to experience this art show and the display of her heartfelt work for what it was for her, not for me.

That night, she said she hoped someone would be inspired by her. She said she wanted to do this because if there was anyone out there who read her work or saw her art, that they would know that she was willing to listen. That she understood what real pain felt like and that the

reason she wanted to be a social worker was so that she could be something different than what she had.

When I got ready to leave, I said good bye and shared that I was really proud of her. I thanked her for being willing to do all of this. I got about a quarter of the way out the door when her cousin stopped me. She looked me straight in the eye and said "you may not know what you have done for my cousin, but you have changed her. From your class she comes home and talks about everything. She didn't used to do that. This project brought something out in her that has given her more confidence. She is learning to speak louder and share herself again. I don't know how I would ever say thank you for that, but thank you." As if this experience itself was not enough, her cousin's words shot through my heart.

As an educator, I want to make a difference. I want students to hear us and know that we really want them to succeed. Social work is a very special discipline. We do teach skills, values, and frameworks. We also empower students to heal themselves and others. I have this constant saying: "would I want them as my social worker if I ever needed them?" and this reminds me that our students come in at all different levels of development and process and it is the educator's job to help them become the social worker that can work with anyone in any setting. The professor has a very special place of privilege when it comes to the learning and development of students. I honor this space and tread carefully.

Caroline taught me a lot that semester. This class was the first time I met Caroline. I have often encountered exceptional students who usually know well of their exceptionalities. I am not convinced that she could even see what she had done with this work. I am not sure that she understood what type of impact she could make by sharing these words, these experiences, and this piece of art.

This essay serves as another opportunity for Caroline to share her story and also is an opportunity to share the impact she has made from many perspectives. Everyone is creative. Sometimes it takes a little more work to bring it out

but creativity is an outlet and an opportunity. When I developed the art of happiness project, I could have never foreseen this experience coming from it. We share this reflection for the powerful story it is and hope that others will feel inspired to use more creativity in their work and

daily lives.

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