Consider the following: our culture really does value words more than pictures. I think that’s actually true, but why would we value words so much and pictures so little? Well for a start, words are the tools of conversation and writing, and these left-brained sports earn us understanding, brownie points and, yes, even money. When did you last get paid for a picture that you drew?

Dreams, on the other hand, are rarely given to us in words. When we dream, we see images and feel feelings. Sigmund Freud said of his patients, "'I could draw it', a dreamer often says, 'but I don’t know how to say it' ". So, if dreams (which are just feelings breaking surface while our left brain finally takes a quiet time) come to us in non-verbal packages, why do we rely so heavily on words to express our feelings to others? Well, convenience and safety are two important reasons. In answer to your boss’s demand for an overdue report, it’s not too appropriate to get out your note pad and draw her an emotional stickman picture. And it’s much safer to explain in words, because, well, we are all so good at language. We learn to use language to greater and greater effect throughout our lives. The reverse is true of pictures. They are largely banished from our “vocabulary” as we enter teen years and move beyond.
That’s when we become more self-conscious and fearful of other people’s opinions and perhaps that’s why the picture-making well runs dry for most of us. Not so for young children. They usually revel in the chance to communicate visually. Ah, the magic of childhood!

We learn to use language to greater and greater effect throughout our lives. The reverse is true of pictures.

I’ve been a fertility clinician for about 25 years, but have known about the power and magic of pictures for much longer than that. Some kids love baseball, soccer, or even piano. I loved painting. Over the years, I’ve done my best to incorporate this love of visual art into our clinical practice, first at the McMaster Clinic and now at a beautiful, brand new clinic, called ONE Fertility, in Burlington, Ontario. At ONE Fertility, we work in a veritable art gallery, designed to soothe and please patients, staff and visitors as they struggle with the daily challenges of infertility. Over the last decade, I’ve also had the pleasure of working with two “art therapists”, Marianne Carmen and Alicia Mann-deSilva. These talented women are both artists who have also taken formal training as art therapists. They guide patients, maybe those with cancer or a history of abuse, in the use of pictures rather than words, to foster self-healing. Let me explain in more detail how we’ve

Fig. 1. Women were given a simple body outline and asked to name the most powerful emotions associated with their fertility problems and then place them with different-coloured markers, on their body map. Anger usually ended up in the throat – not on this occasion – and frustration in the hands. Often women surrounded themselves with hope.
Fig. 2. Hands are powerful. Women were asked to draw a simple hand outline on a small canvas 8”x6” and decorate it with acrylic paint and markers, showing their core-strengths. Several of the activities were used to identify strengths and supports that we sometimes forget or take for granted.

Fig. 3. This and Figure 4 are my two favourite depictions of what it means to feel and deal with infertility. I don’t need to add my own words.

Fig. 4. This lady had lost two pregnancies and was struggling to begin a third. She saw herself and her husband as distanced from each other, equally sad and carrying the same “hole in their hearts” as they battled on.
applied that approach to help women deal with the angst of infertility.

“Art therapy” is a somewhat scary name for: exploring and sharing feelings through visual rather than verbal communication. It combines “art activities with verbal exploration of the art product to facilitate understanding of the client’s issues and concerns” (Ontario Art Therapy Association O.A.T.A.). Put more simply, it uses stick people and simple diagrams that “come out” on paper in response to important questions like “what does infertility feel like to you?” Surprisingly, “words” can actually get in the way of these answers, but pictures can bring real and profound insight, when drawn or painted in a safe and supportive environment. Unlike conventional art, where the picture or sculpture is an end in itself (a fine painting, a beautiful carving), the “art” made in a therapy context is just a tool for communication with self and others. Yes, with self! Women’s eyes and hearts are often opened and great insight is gained when they are encouraged and allowed to let their right brain (the home of feelings, dreams and pictures) override their left brain (the throne of numbers, language and the insatiable and fearful ego).

The process of art therapy goes through two stages: making something concrete in response to an idea or question, and then considering what it means. The work that we’ve done along these lines at McMaster has always been led by an accredited art therapist. She keeps it all together. What she doesn’t do is try and interpret what women make – she just helps them see the answers for themselves, and supports other women in the group who are doing the same.

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Communicating and sharing with others through pictures does far more.

On pages 19 and 20, are some examples of the pictures women make in response to a number of ideas and questions.

We’ve run several eight-week-long group sessions, meeting for two hours a week, for three to six women at a time. The program we’ve developed has actually been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Those are things we can measure, but communicating and sharing with others through pictures does far more. Group interaction is incredibly powerful and supportive, while the pictures can surprise and enlighten those who produce them. The client does not need any artistic ability. None. The process is simple, sometimes heart-wrenching, but clear and true.

All our group members have given us feedback on the process. Here are some of the themes they’ve highlighted:

Women were not familiar with the concept of art therapy prior to enrollment – perhaps that’s why it was so hard to enroll women into groups! The main reason we haven’t yet tried to run a men’s group is that it’s been hard enough to get women to buy into this idea (women who are generally braver and more honest about their feelings than men – sorry, guys. “Couples” pose other challenges, so for now we’ve kept it simple and just worked with women). I think most who declined were scared away by the words “art” and “therapy”. Put together in the same phrase – not too appealing for most well-defended adults. Once in a group, however, women soon realized that they were safe and supported, and they shared many painful, sad and happy experiences with their fellow travelers.

Key issues raised by the sessions varied greatly from person to person – that makes sense. We feel differently so we draw different ideas. The cool thing is that in a group we can choose to see each other’s ideas in a passive rather than an active way. We don’t have to explain or defend our work and neither do they. It can “speak” for us. (I’m using the royal “we” here. I welcomed people to first sessions, but always got out of their way for the real work of safely sharing their feelings).

Results of art projects were sometimes unexpected and surprising – well, yes, perhaps
Making pictures can unlock some pain and bring us to tears, but that can be freeing.

that’s because we often keep difficult feelings and thoughts so well hidden that we aren’t even aware of them ourselves.

Making pictures allows them to surface.

There was difficulty and pain experienced in facing the reality and burden of infertility – yes again. We don’t like pain, and we steer clear of it when possible. Making pictures can unlock some pain and bring us to tears, but that can be freeing. That’s how we stave off depression and help ourselves to heal.

The act of painting and creating was intrinsically pleasurable – amen to that. Think about how you felt as a kid with bright poster paints lined up in front of you, kneeling in front of a low table (we have big tables now), hands all messy and a grand idea you couldn’t wait to portray. Throw in a few friends, working on the same project – bliss for some folks.

Comfort in seeing as well as hearing other women describing their experiences – groups that are safe and carefully led can be hugely therapeutic. Most of our women

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Fig. 5. This is me with Bob Daniels (he’s the older guy!) in front of one of my pictures at a gallery opening in 2009. Bob’s a long-time friend and the owner of Earle’s Court Gallery, Upper Ottawa Street, Hamilton. He’s well worth a visit if you’re in town.
stayed connected long after the sessions were completed. Incidentally, some continued to paint. And some began to paint with their children.

Ability to laugh with each other about the stresses faced – as above. A problem shared is a problem halved and much better understood. Also, the flip side of tears is laughter. One often follows the other. That’s healthy and good.

The course was too short – longer than eight weeks would have been appreciated.

Fig. 6. I love painting skies. This one is north of Sherbrooke, Quebec.
– well, that’s encouraging.

So I believe in pictures! They are magical, wonderful and healing in so many ways. These are some of my own. I hope you can see the joy, love and appreciation of the natural world, as well as some other feelings in them.

To think in greater depth about the crossover between conventional art like this, and healing art or “art therapy” (they do have a lot in common), please go online and check out the work of artists like Freda Kahlo, Georgia O’Keefe and Jackson Pollock. There are too many painters to mention, with stories of pain and healing, but Freda Kahlo’s is especially interesting. She was crippled by polio at the age of six, and then as a teenager, was hit by a tram while going to school! As a result, she suffered through many trials and pains, but went on to “paint her reality” and, to a large degree, healed herself through these pictures. O’Keefe and Pollock faced different challenges, but each in their own way healed or sustained themselves through painting. Maybe you’ll even find the energy and courage to go somewhere safe and quiet and start making some pictures for yourself? You may be surprised (in a good way) by what comes out.

**Fig. 7.** Winter scenes like this are another favourite. Snow isn’t white!

**Fig. 8.** Nancy and Quigley, Mill Lake, was made for my friend Tim, a carpenter who helped build my studio. Quigley’s now gone, but thankfully, Nancy is alive and kicking.

**About the author:**

My name is Ed Hughes and I’m a fertility specialist, painter and art believer at ONE Fertility Burlington and at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.