



The Transformative Art of Healing Dolls

A Guided Process Making Art Dolls for Self Awareness, Discovery and Healing

Barb Kobe

ONLINE COURSE
April 1, 2016—March 31, 2017

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PLEASE NOTE

The Transformative Art of Healing Dolls contains an intentional, creative, and expressive arts process of making three dimensional figures that are called healing dolls. The making of these healing dolls may assist you in the healing of a physical ailment or disease, expressing and releasing uncomfortable feelings, finding balance and becoming more self-aware. When you use art making to heal yourself it can help you to release the negative thoughts and fears that can block your body's ability to heal physically, emotionally and spiritually. It can also help you maximize your body-mind's ability to work harmoniously and in concert with any form of prescribed treatment.

Please keep in mind that this process is in no way meant to be a substitute for conventional medical or emotional treatment. If you are working with a medical professional please let them know that you are participating in this process.

The creative activities involve using artistic materials and approaches. The dolls you create are not intended to be about the quality of the art—please do not judge your dolls based on their artistic qualities. The dolls are about your individual expression; how the creative energy moves through you.

Introduction

An art doll is a personalized, original work of art that a doll maker uses for self expression, to mark an experience, to release or contain emotion, for play, power or performance. Each doll becomes a tangible reminder of what the doll maker learned and felt while making the doll. The doll and the doll making can be a community-building experience, and a reminder of her or his own self-worth, humanness, and connection to life.

My book and this online course is based on an artmaking process I created in 1999 using art dolls for healing and transformation. I designed this process while researching and writing a final paper for my last college class at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota. I titled it *Medicine Dolls: How to Make Healing Dolls for Yourself—An Exploration into the Healing Power of Dollmaking*. My teacher returned my paper unmarked and said, “I think this is brilliant and you should publish it.”

I took his suggestion to heart, and two years later, I offered the class at a retreat setting in Jordan, Minnesota. I was amazed at the dolls the participants made, and I was encouraged to continue exploring what happens when women make healing and transformative art through dollmaking. I taught this kind of dollmaking at Edina Art Center in Edina, Minnesota, for many years.

I also offered an online learning experience called the Healing Doll Project (later called Medicine dolls), an opportunity to learn about healing dolls and how to make them. I invited several friends and anyone else who might be interested to participate. Since 2004, I have offered seven more online classes and collected photos and stories from over one hundred participants.

This online course shares my dollmaking process and includes pictures and stories of my healing dolls, as well as those of the participants from the retreats and the online project. It is a guided process that I first used with women in a Medicine Doll retreat and later within the online classes.



Demeter
Holding Compassion for Herself
Barb Kobe



Creativity Shaman
Barb Kobe

DISCOVERY 1

How I Became a Healing Artist

“What matters most is experiencing your feelings and gaining insights.”
Lucia Capachionne



With my wild woman puppet, Ruby Roho and other dolls



Endangered Feelings Animals
with The Fulls (first design)

How I Became a Healing Artist

Dolls have always been a part of my life. Each Christmas I would receive a doll as a gift from my parents along with handmade doll clothes from my grandmother. I played with my collection of dolls, dressing and redressing and then putting them on display in my room. I had baby dolls that drank water and wet their diapers, bride dolls, fashion dolls, and one of the first Barbie dolls.

I grew up in a creative family: my grandmother was a seamstress, my mother did needle arts, and my father built things out of wood. I loved the visual arts. I painted murals for school plays, musical productions, and dances. After one year in college focusing on art, I entered the work world and spent over twenty years in the fields of engineering drafting, graphic arts, advertising, and print and multi-media production. During this time, I taught myself to sew and made my own clothes.

My career as a professional graphic artist changed with the birth of my children in the early 1980s. I spent my time creating art with my son and daughter, encouraging them to express themselves. But at the same time, I would say, "I'm not an artist," and I never owned my own creative life.

My journey of embracing my creative life began with encouragement from people who saw my creative potential and encouraged me to take risks. This involved taking small creative steps, then being gently mentored and nudged to take more. Each creative step sparked my curiosity and led me to want to know about creativity and myself. I noticed that when I did art with my children, I gave them permission to be creative, to take risks (color outside of the lines, use unusual color combinations, or add three more things to a drawing), and find out "what happens if?". I was beginning to give myself the same permissions.

In 1989 I created a set of characters to teach my children about emotional communication. They were called The Endangered Feelings Animals©: Angerilla, Crynoceros, Trifearatops and Happy-potomus. Later the designs took the form of puppets. I also created other little, soft sculpture dolls called Numbfull and the Fulls©: Tearfull, Fearfull, Ragefull, Joyfull, Stressfull, Powerfull, Shamefull, and Peacefull.



My Mom's first and only childhood doll



Mom made this Betsy McCall Doll for me from pattern



One of my baby dolls had a knob on top of its head that I could use to change her feeling face. Who knew that this would be a foreshadowing of my personal work as an adult?



Numbfull and The Fulls

Tearfull, Shamefull, Numbfull, Stressfull, Powerfull, Joyfull, Ragefull, Fearfull, Peacefull

I used my puppets to talk to my children about their feelings. I noticed a doll or puppet was a useful, non-threatening tool to teach about feelings and emotional communication, to transform beliefs, and to affirm feeling expression. I showed the puppets to a group of art therapists and social worker friends. Their enthusiasm for the characters and for my message was encouraging. One of the social workers who worked in Minneapolis elementary schools created contacts for me to share the puppets with groups of school children in their classrooms. I had never done anything like that before and took on the invitation as a creative risk to see what would happen. The children loved the characters and shared feeling stories from their own lives. I remember one third-grade girl standing up in the middle of the presentation and saying, “You mean we’re supposed to have feelings.”

**I realized making art changed
my emotional state...
and if it worked for me,
it might create the same response in others.**

A year after their conception, I started getting requests from teachers, social workers, and therapists who were interested in purchasing sets of the puppets. I had the original patterns for the prototypes, so I began taking orders, sewing sets, and selling them. As I was sewing each of these soft sculptures, I noticed I would work through my feelings—anger issues when making Angerilla, grief and sadness with Crynoceros, fear with Trifearatops, and joy and happiness with Happypotomus. As I created these feeling faces, my face and body muscles shifted into the same expressions.



I was invited to show the feeling puppets at a meeting of the Minnesota Art Therapy Association. After my presentation, the characters and I were welcomed into the small community of art therapists. I began to attend meetings and volunteered to use my graphic arts skills to produce their newsletter.

I also attended a Healing Your Inner Child workshop by art therapist Lucia Capacchione. She introduced a creative process called “writing with your other hand.” I loved the process of asking questions with my dominant hand and getting answers from an inner part of myself by writing or drawing with my non dominant hand. I began to use this dialog technique with my feeling characters, journaling in their “voices” using my non dominant hand. I felt I belonged to this community of art therapists, and I started to read books about art therapy and how to use art strategies with myself.

As I used Angerilla, Crynoceros, Trifearatops, and Happypotomus with groups of children in schools, I noticed a similarity between having a conversation with myself using my nondominant hand-writing and using puppets as spokespersons for my feelings. I would speak as a puppet, giving the feeling a voice, and the children would have a conversation with the puppet. I was surprised and delighted by the stories the children told, and I was amazed by the number of children—and adults—who seemed to have never talked about their feelings.

I used Numbfull and the Fulls to talk about stuffing feelings. I would walk into a classroom with the little Fulls stuffed underneath my shirt. As I pulled each one out, I would talk about that specific feeling and what it looked like, sounded like, even what it smelled liked. I would then ask what would happen if someone tried to stuff the feeling away. I felt as if I were in some sort of emotional learning laboratory; each visit to a classroom added more to my feeling database.

I was beginning to see evidence that using art, in the form of non-threatening, three-dimensional objects, such as puppets, could be used as instruments for learning, transformation, change, and growth. I believe these characters were my first healing dolls.

Along this journey, I had a variety of other experiences that convinced me of the healing power of visual metaphor. I learned about metaphors in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and hypnosis training. I taught classes at professional seminars, workshops, elementary schools, and community centers. The subjects included parenting, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and creativity using art and visual metaphor. I continued my study of psychology and art therapy, which uses the visual language of art to communicate a person’s stories and beliefs through an art medium in order to transform and heal.



Drawing made with my non dominant hand

Every person who comes and goes makes his or her unique contribution. When therapists joined the process, they invested it with their own psychology. Jungians made it Jungian; Buddhists made it Buddhist; artists, poets, ritualists, and storytellers have all offered their gifts.

Cassandra Light



Shaman Dancer
Barb Kobe

My focus on dollmaking began with the discovery of the book *Mother Plays With Dolls* by Elinor Peace Bailey. Elinor's book, which I read in one evening, filled a creative void brought about by mass-producing set after set of feeling characters. I knew my creations were making a difference in children's lives but, at the same time, producing them was draining me of vital energy.

Elinor's discussion of a psychology theory called transactional analysis was familiar to me. I had studied it, taught it in parenting classes, and used what I learned with myself and my family. She wrote:

I have used the doll as a tool to free my personality. Dolls have enormous potential for amusing their makers and, in the process, for offering insight. Something so benign can take the danger out of imagining. Playing with dolls is a safe way to explore change and make discoveries; and play, after all, is the very center of the creative act.

I wrote a letter to Elinor expressing my gratitude for her book and her inspiration. She called me. When I asked her what I should do about my exhaustion with making the puppets she said, "If you're tired of doing them, stop. Something else will open up."

Nature had a big influence on my dollmaking...

Each fall, I would harvest different kinds of roots, wash them, and hang them up to dry on the clothesline.

I incorporated these roots as body parts, many times with the roots coming out of the head.

Not long after this, I visited a gallery showing of dolls by Brenna Busse of Minneapolis. On the wall next to each was a story of the doll's meaning. Brenna's dolls and their images and stories spoke to me. I felt as if I were back in my childhood Catholic Church, visiting the Stations of the Cross. My heart opened up, and the stories woke up a lost creative part of me. I walked away from the gallery saying, "I could make these kinds of dolls. I could do this. No—I can do this!" I began by imitating Brenna's style using clay faces, wrapping the body with fabric, and embellishing it with beads, sticks, seed pods, shells, feathers, and stones. Later I would stray from Brenna's style and start developing my own.



Connecting to Spirit
Made from an Elinor Peace Bailey pattern



Earth Elemental root doll



Brenna Busse doll

Wisdom of the Grandmothers was my first big doll. I used my interest in Native American culture for inspiration. She had a simple cloth body form. Her face was made from polymer clay, and her body was wrapped in torn fabrics. I loved the process of making her—making the face, tearing the fabric, putting colors together, and embellishing her with symbols. I was connecting with my creative self, and I wanted to create more.

Six months after my conversation with Elinor, I received two invitations. The first was from Maureen Carlson, a recognized expert in polymer clay and dollmaking who lives in the Twin Cities area. She invited me to be part of a new doll group she was starting, which later became known as Stonesoup Dollmakers. Second, the Urban Dollmakers in Minneapolis–St. Paul invited me to submit slides for a doll show they were putting together. I joined the doll group, and they accepted my dolls into the show. I started to feel confident about my work and was developing my own style.

Nature had a big influence on my dollmaking. While walking through my backyard garden, I came across a strawberry root. I gently pulled it from the earth and washed it off. I put a small polymer clay face on it, wrapped it in a variety of colorful fibers, used some lamb’s wool for hair, and attached a bell. She was complete. The root theme was my inspiration for the next three years. Each fall, I would harvest different kinds of roots, wash them, and hang them up to dry on the clothesline. I incorporated these roots as body parts, many times with the roots coming out of the head.

Around the same time of my “awakening,” Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s *Women Who Run With the Wolves* was published. I loved reading the stories and her Jungian analysis of them. I was delighted when I read,

Dolls are one of the symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature. For centuries humans have felt that dolls emanate both a holiness and mana—an awesome and compelling presence which acts upon persons, changing them spiritually. Dolls are believed to be infused with life by their makers. They are used as markers of authority and talismans to remind one of one’s own power.

I read the Vasalisa story. It is about the relationship between a young girl named Vasalisa and a small doll she receives at her mother’s deathbed. She keeps the doll in her pocket, and the doll’s voice guides and helps her as she encounters challenging adventures in her world. The doll is a symbol of protective love from her mother and becomes the voice of Vasalisa’s intuition. The story grew more and more meaningful as I came to believe that my art, my dollmaking, would help me connect to my intuition, my power, my wisdom, and myself.



Wisdom of the Grandmothers
Barb Kobe

Basically dolls are complex fetishes. The maker is intentionalizing spirit and meaning into the doll.

Cassandra Light
Way of the Doll



Strawberry Root Doll
Barb Kobe

Estés says the Vasalisa story represents a woman letting go of “the good little girl” and the discovery of a woman’s wild side or authentic self. I was particularly fascinated by a character in the story called Baba Yaga. She was mean and nasty and invited me to explore those parts of myself stuffed away in a dark corner of my mind and imagination. Baba Yaga has her roots in the stories and culture of the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe. The word “baba“ is a form of “grandmother” in Russian and is a term of respect for elder women in general. Baba Yaga can be a good symbol to study when experiencing darkness, depression, or spiritual emptiness. My fascination with her was an invitation to look into the dark mirror of my soul and seek an understanding of the energies coming through me as I created my dolls.

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My dollmaking helped me work through emotional issues of pain, loss, shame, and grief, and at the same time I was learning about women’s developmental stages. There was an awakening happening within me. I was becoming conscious of the disempowering messages in which education, family, culture, and the media define what it means to be a woman. I was forty-eight years old, my daughter was an adolescent, and it seemed both of us were struggling with the same power issues and questions: Who am I now? How do I separate being the mother/daughter and being myself? How do I separate from my mother/daughter and still be loved? How can I stand in my own creative power?

While reawakening lost parts of myself through my dolls, I came across a number of authors, art therapists, and other influential people whose writings supported what I was beginning to believe about my work: Julia Cameron’s *Artist’s Way*, Pat Allen’s *Art as a Way of Knowing*, Barbara Ganim’s *Art and Healing*, Dawna Markova’s *No Enemies Within*, and Sandra G. Shuman’s *Source Imagery*.

Each doll I created expanded my emotional literacy and communication skills with myself and others. I was getting comfortable talking about feelings and making dolls that expressed my emotions—except anger and fear. If I made a doll face that showed these feelings, I would destroy it, only to have it appear again in another attempt. I wondered what was going on with me. To tell the truth, I wondered what was *wrong* with me.



Baba Yaga Barb Kobe



Spider Woman Barb Kobe

I first bumped into the concept of “shadow” in a psychology class in college. Psychologist Carl Jung said our shadow is the person we would rather not be. I wanted to know more. I learned from Debbie Ford’s book *The Dark Side of the Light Chasers*:

Our shadow, formed long ago, contains all the parts of ourselves that we have tried to hide or deny, the parts we believe are not acceptable to our family, friends, and most importantly, ourselves. It is made up of everything that annoys, horrifies or disgusts us about other people or about ourselves. It holds all that we try to hide from those we love and all that we don’t want other people to think about us or find out about us.

I wondered if this was what was showing up in the faces I created. I attended a workshop presented by William Miller, author of *Your Golden Shadow*. He talked about the shadow as the part of ourselves associated with all that is negative in us and that we try to avoid. He pointed out that a shadow aspect may also contain positive parts of ourselves he calls “gold.” He said, “We are powerless to deal with it (the shadow) until we make it conscious.” He continued, “Our task is to reconcile the opposites that we discover—to somehow bring the persona trait and it’s opposite shadow trait together into a new entity.” This was what my dollmaking was doing for me. My creative work was changing my self-perception and helping me deal with conflicts and problems in new ways. Each new doll opened me up to new possibilities, helped me to become whole, and helped me find greater fulfillment in my life—even the scary and angry dolls.

One of my all-time favorite books is *No Enemies Within* by Dawna Markova. It is about turning shadow aspects into allies. She says:

Each of us is the ultimate healer of her condition and that we can use creative tools to uncover the map to our paths. Every soul is born with something to give, something to experience and something to learn. There is a creative force at the very center of each of our beings—a flow of energy, pushing, stretching, and demanding to be transformed into the world. No matter what challenge we face, be it of body, heart, or soul, the first stage of healing is withdrawal into ourselves.

We have to learn to switch our allegiance, from being loyal to outside people, situations and toxic substances, to becoming loyally committed to finding the things that nurture the sacredness in us, silencing the tired, old voices in our heads that moan about how selfish and inappropriate we are being. The truth needs to be given voice and image and movement.



Shame on Me Barb Kobe

The dolls you create begin to express your authentic self, full of creativity, enthusiasm and vitality. Through the creative work you become a whole person with a range and depth of feelings. You come to trust your intuition and cultivate an inner life shaped by awareness.

Unknown



Golden Shadow Barb Kobe

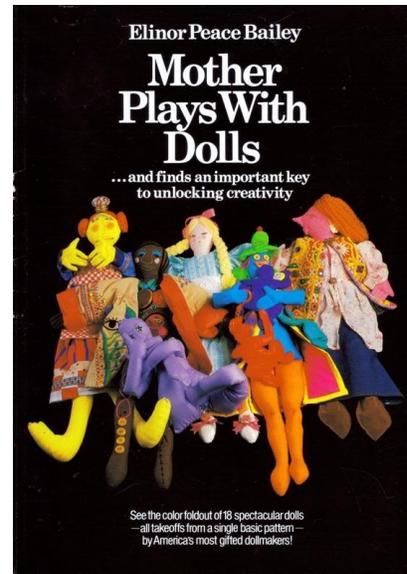
I had set a goal of finishing my bachelor of arts degree at age fifty. I had two classes remaining, and I decided to take a writing class. The assignment was to choose a subject I was interested in, research it, and write an academic paper. I chose the topic of dollmaking from a perspective of personal growth and healing. My thesis was “the act of making a doll can take the dollmaker through a process of creative imagination, healing, and growth.”

I began the research for the paper by searching for artists and women who were using dollmaking for healing and transformation. I had read Elinor Peace Bailey’s book, *Mother Plays With Dolls*, met her through a couple of workshops put on by the Stonesoup Dollmakers Club and felt inspired by her encouragement to move forward with my dream. I found articles written about her in magazines like *Contemporary Doll Magazine*, *Soft Toys and Animals*, and *Doll Life* and she had a newsletter for her national cloth doll organization, The Association of People Who Play with Dolls. I was encouraged reading about Elinor in the February 1993 issue of *Doll Life*.

The importance of the doll is the process of making the doll. They are useless when finished. Because they have no special use, their makers can be totally free in a creative sense, experimenting with fabric, technique, line, form, color, and expressing their ideas in a tangible form. Some of the ideas are emotions that the maker is trying to work through. Sometimes it’s a death or illness or larger concepts of God and universe. People have used dolls for these purposes. It’s their very inconsequential nature that makes them consequential. Dolls have allowed people to take an uncontainable idea or an idea that stretches beyond their ability to hold it and put it into something diminutive that they can cope with.

With Elinor leading the way and serving as one of my mentors I started to seek out those dollmakers who she “played with” and follow the creative breadcrumbs to each dollmaker that I found in her newsletter, doll magazines, books and professional journals.

Susanna Oroyan also came to a Stonesoup Dollmakers workshop and introduced her book *Anatomy of a Doll*. Susanna was an inspiration to meet and she too encouraged me to follow my heart. Her book showed many ways to make an original, one-of-a-kind – called OOAK – doll. Although I did not see images of my dolls within her books, I saw almost every way there is to design and make original dolls, along with many how-to-make them illustrations and photographs of hers and other dollmaker’s dolls. I found other dollmakers and felt as if I belonged to this tribe of creative women. I was learning the tools to use to teach other women.



So the doll, that errant bit of childhood whimsy, the ultimate sandbox, can be the symbol, the place to return to. Gathered in her little-girl dreams a woman can find the strength to imagine.

elinor peace bailey



Doll I made from one of Susanna Oroyan’s patterns

I learned about Cassandra Lights's dolls and book *Way of the Doll: The Art and Craft of Personal Transformation* in the November/ December 1989 issue of Yoga Journal.

Cassandra is an artist and art therapist with work in masks and performance art and is the founder of The Way of the Doll School in California. She “addresses the incorporation of sacred healing into the dollmaking process”.

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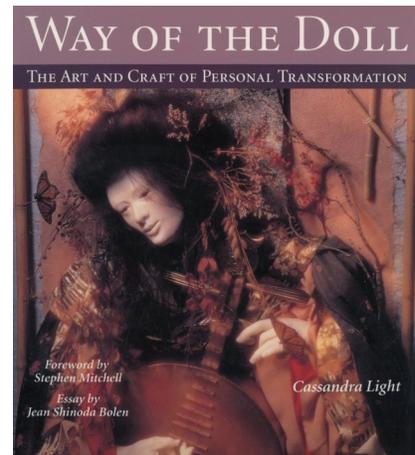
I inhaled every word she wrote about dollmaking and transformation and studied her process of inviting participants to engage in a yearlong creative circle as they made a doll. I was gathering the threads of my theory that dollmaking can be transformative and healing. I read,

The Way of the Doll is the ultimate guide for self discovery and evaluation. In its purest artistic form it is an avenue to reveal your most hidden talents and ultimate joys. There is sorrow and growth in the course that seems to last a lifetime, but only interjects at points of pure light in the soul. It is a lifetime of revelation molded in mixed media and color,...it will never allow you to fall back, but to bless yourself a thousand times and move onward into the next phase of growth.

These dolls are like seeds in that they contain all the processes—rational, imaginative, conscious and unconscious—that later evolve into separate parts: art, science, pragmatism, and spirituality, but are in the beginning united in what, for children, is the basic experience of play.

I resonated with these words. I had had so many of the emotions and experiences that Light talked about. I could relate to the archetypes her students were creating. Even though I never met Cassandra Light in person I felt her work informing mine and mentoring me forward.

While looking at the pictures of dolls in Susanna Oroyan's books I would stop at one dollmaker's dolls more than others....Pamela Hastings. Her dolls were more abstract than most I was seeing, more outwardly emotional and courageous. I felt as if she had her finger on the pulse of healing and dollmaking, and she was in the process of writing a book on the subject, and was looking for stories and pictures. I contacted her.



Our dolls are shaped by the verbal “clay” of these primal tellings and retelings...every doll is a symbolic poem of the soul.
Cassandra Light



Pamela Hastings



The Queen of May and Her Familiar
Pamela Hastings

This journey inward, called the spirit or soul and the deep mind, is healing. Healing comes to us from within, our own healing resources are freed to allow our immune system to operate optimally and that is always how we heal”

Barbara Ganim
Art & Healing

We had a great conversation about dollmaking, transformation and healing, and I found out we and our dolls had a lot in common. She lived on the East Coast of the United States and said she was planning a visit to her mother in Waterloo, Iowa. I was planning on visiting my mother in Davenport, Iowa, at same time. We arranged to meet in person in Waterloo, Iowa. We have been friends since then and I had another mentor and cheerleader.

Pamela sees her art and dollmaking as part of a journey of self discovery. She believes that when people makes dolls they make an image that represents their own interpretation of reality.

When this is made visible through a doll, we can then choose whether or not this doll represents the particular reality we want to support with our lives and energy. The doll becomes a functional tool, to help us see our own lives and goals more clearly. The doll that you make is not you. It is a vehicle for making the invisible visible, and therefore easier to change, especially within a safe dollmaking environment.

I had created the Endangered Feelings Puppets and Numbfull and the Fulls. I knew that creating three dimensional puppets/dolls could help me and others befriend feelings. In Pamela's book *Dollmaking as a Transformative Process* she mirrored back my knowing of the subject of dollmaking and befriend feelings.

We can take "dolls out to play, and then we have the power to accept and acknowledge them, and go on with our lives in greater freedom." She suggested that we could haul around our feelings like baggage ,or salute them for the service they have performed, or transform their energy into change, possibility, transformation, growth and healing.

We can haul around our feelings like baggage or salute them for the service they have performed, or transform their energy into change, possibility, transformation, growth and healing.

I felt heard, witnessed, simply from reading about Pamela's experience with her dollmaking. With Pamela as another mentor who supported and encouraged me to develop my concept and continue to do the work I was almost ready to write my paper.



Pamela Hastings doll

When we create our experience of reality in a concrete form, through a doll or other symbolic work the finished product is not necessarily a work of art, but a functional tool to help us see our own lives and goals more clearly. The doll you create is NOT YOU. It is a vehicle for making the invisible visible and therefore easier to change. At times scary, ugly, or unpleasant images and words may come pouring from your hands. This is a Good Thing, and not a sign that you should be immediately institutionalized. We all contain a whole Pandora's Box of Gremlins, but in the safe environment of doll making we can take the little suckers out to play.

Pamela Hastings
Dollmaking as a Transformative Process



Turtle Barb Kobe

As I was gathering information for my research paper, I remembered that I had read Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run with Wolves*. Each story, along with her analysis, fed my creative spirit and inspired more of my dollmaking. The story, *The Doll in Her Pocket: Vasalisa the Wise*, deepened my work and my relationship with myself. It is the story about infusing women with the Wild Woman's primary instinctual power – intuition.

Estes says,

Dolls are one of the symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature. For centuries humans have felt that the doll emanated both a holiness and mana—an awesome and compelling presence which acts upon persons, changing them spiritually. Dolls are believed to be infused with life by their makers. They are used as markers of authority and talismans to remind one of one's own power.

Dollmaking was becoming a healing medicine for my body, mind and soul. The thought of taking it out of my life was inconceivable. Making dolls gave me a home, a path and a purpose. I knew that as I created my dolls, I was healing.

I titled my paper “The Dollmaking Circle: A Process of Personal Growth and Healing.” In my research, I looked for a model of an unending circular process as a design for a circular dollmaking process. I found the Native American medicine wheel to be the closest to what I was searching for. I liked that it used symbols from nature and that there were four distinct directions, or focal points. I believed this process invited and encouraged dollmakers to explore their range of perception through the dolls they made, and in doing so, they would reach a deeper level of understanding of themselves.

During a Friday night Stonesoup Dollmakers' meeting, I shared my paper with Maureen. She liked it. She invited me to teach the doll-making circle process at her new creativity center in Jordan, Minnesota. Within a month, I offered a class at Maureen's center and was surprised that it filled. I began teaching what I believed was possible: making a doll could create change and growth in the dollmaker.

I designed a curriculum and then used it to teach and facilitate the students in the class at Maureen's center. As I taught and facilitated the curriculum, I watched my students make their dolls. I did not give them patterns; they created dolls totally from their imaginations and from using a variety of art materials I provided. I noticed they were getting in touch with healing issues such as grief, loneliness, anger, and fear during the creative process. I started wondering about the connection between psychology, neurology, and immunology, which is a combined area of study called psychoneuroimmunology—a subject I had studied in college. This branch of science is the study of mind-body healing using imagery..



Finding Her Inner Shrine

Barb Kobe



Healing the Earth Barb Kobe

In my research, I learned that doll-type figures were used throughout history in healing rituals. Medicine men and woman created doll figures of human and animal forms because they believed these figures held symbolic meaning and influence with the great mysteries of life. These dolls were fetishes and totems that served important purposes in ritual and play. They became contact points to the inner person and the unknown. These first dollmakers believed their lifelike creations represented a connection to having and controlling life force. I theorized that maybe the dolls I was creating were similar to these early healing dolls, in that making doll figures gave me a conscious and/or subconscious connection to healing energies.

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With this in mind, I decided to explore this possibility of connecting to my healing energies. I started making a doll focusing on healing an imbalance in my digestive tract. I cut some branches from a curly willow and positioned them into an interesting body shape. I wrapped the shape with batting to create bulk and then wrapped the body with purple fabric. I looked at the organs of the digestive system in an anatomy book. I made organ shapes out of solid-colored fabric and appliquéd them to the proper positions on the doll's body. I then sewed orange beads following the lines of the meridians—the body's energy pathways. On the back of the body, I put a symbol for the spine, knowing all nerves in the body connect there. I made the doll's face out of Crayola Model Magic and placed a veil over it, symbolizing "going within." I added multicolored hair representing a connection with the mind.

I held her at arm's length, looked at her, and asked, "Are you done?" I heard an immediate answer from a voice I had never really paid attention to before: "No, she's not. You have to wrap a yellow snake around her." I thought this was odd, but I followed the directive. I formed a yellow snake by wrapping clothesline with yellow fabric and using beads for the tail and head.



**The Saint
Bringing Back Parts of Herself
Barb Kobe**



**Chakra Healing Doll
Barb Kobe**



Digesting My Life
Barb Kobe

Again, I thought it was odd that I was led to put this yellow snake on this doll. I dug out my copy of Jeanne Achterberg's *Imagery in Healing* in my personal library. I intuitively turned to the page that said, "a yellow snake represents women's healing power." As far as I was concerned, this supported my theory: when we are ill with a physical or mental problem, or when we need to grow, we can start to heal ourselves with art—by opening up to our inner voices of challenge and change and letting their messages emerge.

The yellow snake was my message: trust your body to guide you. The doll stood as a reminder to take care of my body and choose healthy and nourishing food. I have kept this doll. She hangs on my wall as a metaphor of how I digest life and how my intuition is a powerful guide in my creative process.

It didn't take too long for the house to fill up with dolls. My husband felt as if he were being watched. He suggested moving some of the "girls" out by having a show. I organized a show at a local art gallery and invited a friend to show her art quilts with my dolls. Some of the people who attended the opening talked to me about the meaning the dolls held for them. I knew the dolls meant something to me, but the possibility of them appealing to others surprised me. I sold all but a few of the dolls and was soon getting commissions for new dolls. Other people wanted to know how to make the dolls and if I were offering any classes.



Art Therapist's Shaman
Barb Kobe

At first I was excited by the response to my work, but then I got scared. I contacted Elinor Peace Bailey again. This time I asked if she had any thoughts about how I might handle this unexpected attention. She said:

I hear your hunger to push your ideas and find limits. That is the stream from which you will find spiritual nourishment, never cease to do that. Do not let your present success own you and keep you where you are. Get a real job before you do that. Second, if you teach, teach with everything you have, and hold back nothing, or do not teach at all. If you are continually in search for new and fresh ideas, there is nothing to fear in the classroom. Your students can imitate your style but they cannot be you. That is your job, and it is dynamic, not static. As for marketing your work, make sure that you know all any rep might know about HOW and TO WHOM and HOW MUCH. That way you need never be dependent on someone else to do what you will always do best and with the greatest passion.

My inner work of healing, which came through my dollmaking, became my outer work of teaching dollmaking and creating commissioned dolls. Each person I taught and each doll I created led me to learn more about myself. My healing path had taken me out of the safety of my studio and into the unknown of the community.

A woman contacted me to make a doll for her niece who was graduating from high school. She was part of a large family of multi-generational women who got together at a family cabin to celebrate their teen members transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. They created a ritual that included special food, candles, and a circle where they said well wishes and prayers for the girl moving on. She wanted a doll to be part of the ritual. I had studied women's development in college and knew the value of ritual in women's lives. In some small way, I felt honored to be asked to participate in this giving ceremony. For several years, I was asked to make such a doll for the next daughter, niece, or granddaughter.

Creating commissioned dolls was a new experience. As a child growing up, I was repeatedly told I was overly sensitive. I remember getting my feelings hurt easily and wanting to hide away in the safety of my room, which was full of dolls, crayons, and coloring books. My dollmaking had helped me get in touch with this early sensitivity, and I was becoming more sensitive and intuitive with each doll I created. This was especially so when making a healing doll for someone.



**Garden Icon
Barb Kobe**



**Letting Go
cloth doll Barb Kobe**

As I first made commissioned dolls, I asked for minimal information from each person, such as who the doll was for and what it would symbolize. But as I made each doll, I would intuit so much of the person's story, I would get overwhelmed. I had to find a way to focus on the core issue of what the doll represented. I became aware that my way of understanding another's issue was to try to feel what the other person was feeling and through that feeling create a visual metaphor. The people ordering the dolls were surprised when I unconsciously used symbols that connected with some aspect of their lives: ruby slippers on a doll for a woman who collected them or a mirror for someone reflecting on a deep aspect of herself.

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I began to feel stressed from making dolls for others. It was as though I were being unconsciously empathetic to the point of self-destruction. I needed to set limits and boundaries for myself. I developed a list of ten questions to create a structure for the design process as well as a boundary to protect myself from being overly empathetic. (These questions can be found in the appendix.) With feedback from the questions, I could use my creative energies more efficiently and refine my focus.

I believed that when I created a healing doll, I entered into a collaborative agreement between the person wanting healing and myself as a healing artist. When I made contact with the person the doll was for—whether in person, by telephone, in writing, or psychically—I received intuitive inspiration, and I became part of a supportive group focusing on that individual's healing process.

While making healing dolls for others, I realized that I was becoming more aware of my own physical and emotional healing issues. I decided that if I were to continue doing this type of work, it would be important to take good care of my body, mind, and spirit. I started getting regular bodywork, I worked through some old issues with a family therapist, and I made my own healing dolls. As with all healing work, one thing led to another. My art was leading me to a personal healing issue that would challenge what I believed about my work.



**Celebrating Her Growth
Barb Kobe**

One has the options of regarding images as infectious and diseased, or living ensouled entities worthy of tender care and respect.

Bruce Moon Art and Soul

In 1999, shortly after receiving my BA in psychology, I began to experience pain in my left hip. At first, the pain was sporadic enough to ignore. But over a year's time, it gradually worsened. I reluctantly went to see an orthopedist. The diagnosis was early arthritis and a hip joint abnormality. Total left hip replacement was recommended. Without surgery, I could look forward to multiple daily medications and a cane.

My first response was one of denial. I did not want to think this was possible. In my denial, I refused the surgery, thinking I could control the problem using alternative therapies. My husband was a chiropractor at the time, and I had a strong belief in the chiropractic approach of stimulating the body's self-healing abilities. I started to get chiropractic adjustments and added acupuncture, massage therapy, and of course my art for relief. My dollmaking was my sanity. It took my focus away from the pain and put it on my dolls. In fact, when I was making dolls, I did not experience pain.

My pain persisted whenever I moved. When my leg began to give out in late September, I consulted a hip specialist in Minneapolis. He concurred with the original diagnosis and recommended hip replacement surgery. I had tried my alternative approaches for a year, but the pain was affecting my quality of life, so I reluctantly scheduled the operation for December 2000.

A few days after scheduling my surgery, and still apprehensive about it, I attended a Halloween dollmaking party.

I fashioned a twenty-inch-long figure out of sticks and painted them green. I wrapped her in crimson fabric, stitched copper beads onto the fabric, topped the head with a halo of dill weed, and added a crown of deep-red raffia hair. Then I fastened a small bunch of lavender, which some consider a healing herb, over the doll's heart.

When the figure was complete, I held it up and noticed its left hip jutted out. Almost immediately, I felt relief flood over me, and the anguish over my own hip faded away. The doll was "talking" to me through her body. It was like a wake-up call, a sign from my intuition—and my hip—that I needed to make a decision so I could get my life back and move on. It was as if my hip were saying to me, you have a choice; now is the time to choose.

The physical pain was still there, but by the time I came home from the party, I was feeling relieved and confident about the decision to have the surgery; so much so, that I moved the surgery up a month.



Hip Healing Doll
Barb Kobe

My surgery was very successful, and six weeks of rehabilitation followed. During my recovery, I made twenty small valentine dolls that helped me focus on healing and moving forward with my life. I believe my healing process from the hip pain began the day I made the red-haired doll with the protruding hip, and making the twenty little dolls during my recovery helped speed my healing process along.

In July 2002, the story of my healing process was published in a *Natural Health* magazine article called "Create a Healthy You." Art therapist Shaun McNiff was asked to give his opinion on my story. He said, "That doll making helped her deal with her physical pain is not as far-fetched as it sounds. The relationship between art and healing has been around forever."

Leaders in the art and healing field were quoted in the article, saying that making dolls could be healing for a variety of reasons. The mere act of doing a creative project brings about healing. Others said creativity improves health by providing spiritual comfort and relieving stress. Most creativity experts agree that using the arts to express oneself releases emotions that aid physical healing. In the *Natural Health* article, McNiff said, "Creativity does something that words can't do, and people report that it's powerful."



The act of making a doll can take you through
a process of imagination, healing, and growth.

You do not need to be an expert at
dollmaking, or artmaking for that matter,
to encounter the power of this kind of healing work.

I believe the dollmaking process
invites and encourages the doll creator
to explore a range of perceptions and emotions, and in doing so,
to reach a deeper level of self-understanding.



I am an artist who makes one-of-a-kind art dolls and healing dolls. My creative process in dollmaking has helped me to develop confidence in myself and in my art. I have used my dollmaking to nurture my creative self and work through issues from the past and into the present. I have released stuffed and numb feelings and used my dolls to create containers that allowed me to hold them, express them and make them my friends. The dolls I've created serve as symbols for my life lessons and they have impacted and inspired those who have viewed them. This art, along with those who have mentored me along the way, has changed my life and put me on a path of creative personal growth and empowerment.

Holding Her Medicine Shield of Power
Barb Kobe