### Traces

By Sarah Tevyaw, MA, ATPQ

*“Art is important for it commemorates the seasons of the soul, or a special or tragic event in the soul’s journey. Art is not just for oneself, not just a marker of one’s own understanding. It is also a map for those who follow after us.”* [Clarissa Pinkola Estés](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=ntt_athr_dp_sr_1?ie=UTF8&field-author=Clarissa+Pinkola+Est%C3%A9s&search-alias=books&text=Clarissa+Pinkola+Est%C3%A9s&sort=relevancerank)

**S**ince I began working as an art therapist in palliative care, I have had the privilege of being present at the end of many individuals’ lives. My role as an art therapist encompasses that of witness, active listener, and provider of comfort, support, and a visual means of expression during these final days.

I have sat and listened while many of my patients contemplated deep personal thoughts. They shared stories, hopes, wishes, doubts and concerns, each one providing us with a moment of profound closeness. On many occasions I have heard the following words whispered; “*Is this what dying feels like?” “I’m scared to leave my loved ones behind.” “I wonder who will be waiting for me?” “I think this is the end.”*

I often wonder if these patients recognize the strong and significant impact they have on me as well as the entire world around them. Warm traces and reminders of them are left everywhere they walked, on everything they touched, and in the air around them as they took their final breaths.

Their traces however become most visible in the art that is created in these very last moments. It seems as though their mind, body, and spirit have been breathed into the artwork. Smears, tears, brushstrokes and finger prints act as proof that they have touched and have been touched by others.

Recently I had the opportunity to sit with a patient as she expressed thoughts surrounding her very existence and approaching death. Although she felt she was unable to depict this in an artwork she asked if I could work with her in co-creating her vision. She described how this vision came to her as she was *“face à la mort avant moi”.* During our second session together, she explained that the inspiration for this image came as she was lying in bed looking out the window in her room at the palliative care residence. The scene before her was very peaceful. Winter was upon us and the view was that of snowy birch trees and freshly fallen snow. She explained that one night as she looked into the trees, she imagined her ancestors. She wondered if there was a way to depict a process of life, death, and rebirth. She expressed that she felt that even though we die, we do not disappear, that we live on in the generations that follow us. She added that our spirit lives on like a shadow surrounding those still living. We worked together for many weeks. I began by drawing the view from her window as she lay in bed. At times, she would cry, and explain that although the intention for the image was joy, there was also sadness. I continued to listen to her vivid descriptions and would paint with her close guidance.

With the image complete, she suggested we write something small to accompany it, as a way of helping others understand the meaning of the work. She also asked that both the images and message get shared with others. We placed it in the palliative care nursing station, explained its purpose and invited the nursing staff to share their thoughts and responses to the work. The following is her message:

*“We will not disappear*

*We will live on through our children and our children’s children*

*We are part of a larger process*

*A process of rebirth*

*Children are dancing, people are smiling and waving*

*There will be a new future waiting for us*

*The spring brings new beginnings”*

The process of sharing this image and story was equally as important as the act of creating it. As Estes says *“Art is a map for those who follow after us.”* This artwork will live on in the palliative care residence and may help ease the way for those who too must make this final journey. The experience of co-creating the image with this patient touched me profoundly. We all strive to fulfill our potential right up until the moment we die. Art therapy provides a safe space for this to happen whether it is through drawing, painting, photography, hand casting or book making. Art therapy provides those in palliative care an opportunity to share, inspire, create and find meaning during one of life’s greatest transitions.