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The Reciprocal Relationship Between Art and Occupational Therapy Practice

Abstract

Susan Burwash, Ph.D., OTR/L, an occupational therapy professor and artist based in Washington State, provided the cover art for the Winter 2017 issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The featured piece contains Professor Burwash's signature *fauxpals*, lampwork glass beads made from molten glass and pure silver foil. Art creates balance between traditional medicine and personal medicine, those meaningful activities that give life purpose. Professor Burwash's personal medicine is making beautiful things that can be given away.

Keywords

Occupational Therapy, Art, Lampwork Glass Beads, Personal Medicine, Mental Health, Technology, OT4OT

“There is something incredibly mesmerizing about working with molten glass,” said Susan Burwash, Ph.D., OTR/L, Chair and Associate Professor at Eastern Washington University. Professor Burwash provided the cover art for the Winter 2017 issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (Figure 1). The featured piece contains her signature *fauxpals*, lampwork glass beads made from molten glass and pure silver foil.

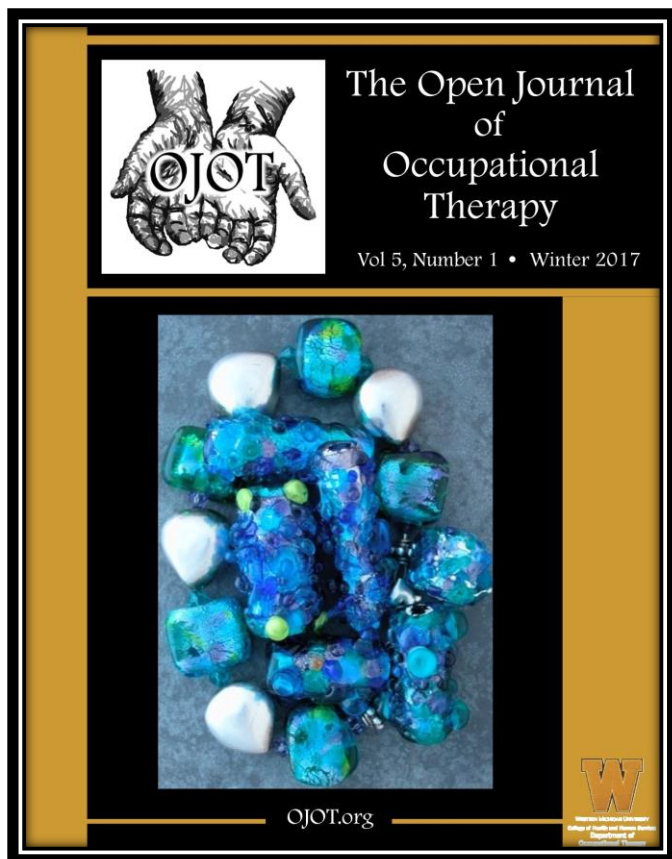


Figure 1. Cover art for OJOT Vol 5, No 1, Winter 2017

In a recent interview, Professor Burwash shared insight into her motivation for bead making. “Bead making is the perfect blend of art and science, spiritual and practical, and that’s why I love it so much,” she said. Creativity is important to produce beads that are aesthetically pleasing. Technical knowledge is required for the safe

handling of tools and materials. The bead making process begins by gradually exposing a thin rod of glass to an open flame. To avoid thermal shock, the glass must remain in constant rotation. The rod begins to melt into a gather. Molten glass is spun around a slow turning stainless steel mandrel. An organic base bead is formed. After shaping the bead, it is adorned with crushed glass, enamel, wire, or metallic foil. Surface decorations may be left in place or melted flush with the surface of the bead. To minimize stress, the bead must cool slowly in a kiln with temperatures set just below melting point. Working with molten glass is compelling, yet calming; a repeating pattern of focus and release. There is no room for anything else; it is the perfect molten meditation.

Professor Burwash completed a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy and Doctor of Philosophy in Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Her formal training was founded on the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy, 1997), with the human spirit at its core. “I have always loved the Canadian Model for its spiritual component,” she said. Professor Burwash’s trademark swathe of purple hair is symbolic of her interest in art and creativity. “Purple is a very spiritual color,” she said. Professor Burwash is constantly looking for balance between pragmatics and spirituality. “In the end, I always lean towards spirituality,” she said. Professor Burwash feels occupational therapy and art are two threads of her life that have become better integrated in recent years. Using all of her

skills and talents every day excites her. “It’s a great place to be,” she said.

In her early clinical practice, Professor Burwash provided occupational therapy services in hospital, outpatient psychiatry, and industrial rehabilitation settings. She transitioned into higher education in 1994 and has remained there ever since. Professor Burwash serves as Chair and Associate Professor for the Occupational Therapy Program at Eastern Washington University. She currently teaches courses on mental health, theory, group dynamics, and research. Professor Burwash believes that “teaching is an art and a science, and is never mastered but an ongoing journey of discovery.” She considers a single teaching approach insufficient for students to develop clinical knowledge and reasoning. To better prepare her students for clinical practice, she created new learning experiences through community partnerships.

Professor Burwash has organized several stigma reduction initiatives to influence her students’ attitudes toward individuals with mental health concerns. She has also supervised students offering a variety of art-based groups in community agencies. Recently, a group of her occupational therapy students developed a creative writing project at VetsGarage, a maker’s space providing technical training and resources for veterans in Washington State. The class also involved song writing. “Music is a powerful intervention. It allows us to explore our thoughts and feelings in ways that words alone will not,” Professor Burwash said. Her students have also lead jewelry making workshops at The Women’s Hearth, a drop-in

shelter for women who are experiencing homelessness. Professor Burwash emphasized that “making something with your hands in a community of women is very powerful.” A narrative inquiry by Burwash, Brawley, Jucker, Lambert, and Lauritzen (2014) described how participation in the workshop has changed the lives of women from the Hearth community. In one account, a participant shared how living in more than 60 different foster homes made her feel like state trash. Participating in the jewelry workshops made her feel like a pieced together person again. Burwash noted that “experiences like these demonstrate how art heals in ways very little else does.”

Art creates balance between traditional medicine and personal medicine, those meaningful activities that give life purpose. Deegan (2005) described personal medicine as self-initiated, non-pharmaceutical activities that improve one’s overall sense of well-being. Professor Burwash’s personal medicine is making beautiful things that can be given away. Creative occupations, such as jewelry making, can help people transform their identities. Professor Burwash believes the relationship between art and occupational therapy practice is reciprocal, noting that “as clinicians, we have a whole array of creative occupations to choose from.” She added, “we can support our clients in returning to a previous interest, or in trying something new.” According to Christiansen (1999) “occupations are more than movements strung together, more than simply doing something. They are opportunities to express the self, to create an identity” (p. 552).

When Burwash is not crafting beautiful jewelry, she enjoys creating online spaces for promoting the profession of occupational therapy. In 2010, Burwash and five other occupational therapy educators from around the world founded a virtual group called Online Technology for Occupational Therapists (OT4OT) (<http://ot4ot.weebly.com/index.html>). Their objective was to establish an online platform for global collaboration. They realized this goal during their first OT 24-Hour Virtual Exchange (OT24Vx) conference. In 2014, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) recognized OT4OT as an International Advisory Group for Social Media. Burwash and her colleagues gave a presentation on OT4OT at the 16th International Congress of the WFOT in Yokohama, Japan. Thousands of occupational therapists have joined OT4OT's online forum. Over 60 related subgroups with the suffix "4OT" have been created since the group's founding. "My involvement in OT4OT has been one of the highlights of my career," said Burwash.

For Professor Burwash, lampwork glass bead making provides a perfect balance between art and science, traditional medicine and personal medicine. Engagement in meaningful

occupations, such as jewelry making, empowers individuals with mental health needs to explore their interests, improve social skills, and build relationships. Art has been used in occupational therapy practice since the profession was founded one century ago. If Burwash could travel back in time to meet the founders of the profession, her topic of conversation would be art as a healing force. "We have so much more evidence today to support the use of art in occupational therapy practice. It's nice to have an experiential base, and now to be able to point at the research and say, see, I told you all along."

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Additional Information

Visit the Occupation and the Artist Gallery to see more of Susan Burwash's work:

http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/cview2.cgi//ojot_occupationandartist

View Susan Burwash's Digital Dossier: <https://sburwash.wordpress.com/>

Learn more about VetsGarage: <http://vetsgarage.org/>

Support Women's Hearth: <http://www.help4women.org/programs/the-womens-hearth>

Learn how OT4OT is facilitating global collaboration: <http://ot4ot.com/>