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Integrating Art into Life in Pursuit of Occupational Balance

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Abstract

Dr. Sharon Gutman, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, an occupational therapy professor and artist based in New York, provided the cover art for the Summer 2020 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Goldfish" is a 10" x 13" watercolor painting. Dr. Gutman has nearly 30 years of experience in clinical practice, higher education, research, and service to the profession. Dr. Gutman pursued a career in occupational therapy because it was a field where she could use her creativity. This decision led to an extraordinary career and a life of service to others. When the demands of a busy lifestyle put Dr. Gutman's well-being at risk, she integrated art into life in pursuit of occupational balance.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, occupational balance, art, painting

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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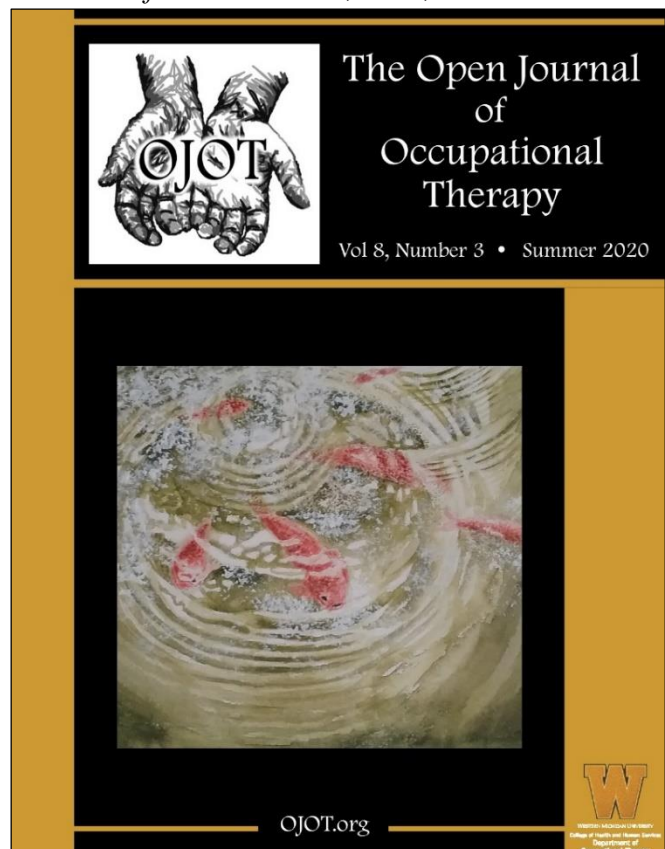
Humans are innately driven to engage in meaningful occupations. According to Wilcock (1993), one function of engagement in occupations is to exercise personal capacities that enable humans to be maintained and flourish. These capacities are rooted in human potential. We engage in meaningful occupations to develop our capacities. Maslow (1968) believed capacities are needs that demand to be used. When underused, these skills may atrophy and disappear. As occupational beings, we seek balance in the everyday occupations that take place across different aspects of life, such as work, play, rest, and sleep. Occupational balance is a central concept in occupational therapy practice. Wagman, Hakansson, and Bjorklund (2012) define occupational balance as a person's perception of the right amount and variation of occupations. How we prioritize the occupations we want, need, and have to do determines which capacities are maintained and whether a balanced lifestyle is achieved. When the demands of a busy career put Dr. Sharon Gutman's well-being at risk, she integrated art into her life in pursuit of occupational balance.

Dr. Gutman, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, an occupational therapy professor and artist based in New York, provided the cover art for the Summer 2020 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). "Goldfish" is a 10" x 13" watercolor painting. Dr. Gutman has nearly 30 years of experience in clinical practice, higher education, research, and service to the profession. Dr. Gutman pursued a career in occupational therapy because it was a field where she could use her creativity. This decision led to an extraordinary career and a life of service to others. When the demands of a busy lifestyle put Dr. Gutman's well-being at risk, she integrated art into life in pursuit of occupational balance.

Dr. Gutman grew up in a suburb outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a child, she was quiet and introverted. In her free time, Dr. Gutman enjoyed drawing pictures. "I have been interested in art as long as I can remember," she said. "When I was very young, I used to sit at a small table and draw for hours." During childhood, art provided Dr. Gutman with a creative outlet and means for self-expression. "There is nothing I do not love about art," she said. "It's a large part of the core of who I am." After high school, Dr. Gutman enrolled at Arcadia University to pursue a degree in psychology. She was introduced to the field of occupational therapy during an internship. "I thought what they were doing was very interesting," she said. In 1987, Dr. Gutman earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. With more free time to engage in art, Dr. Gutman completed a series of portraits from photographs. "Andy Warhol" (see Figure 2) is an 18" x 24" drawing made from oil pastels. Dr. Gutman decided to continue her education and pursue a career in occupational therapy. "I chose occupational therapy because it was a career where I could use my

Figure 1

Cover Art for OJOT Vol 8, No 3, Summer 2020



creativity,” she said. This decision would lead Dr. Gutman to an extraordinary career rooted in teaching, service, and scholarship.

Dr. Gutman continued to draw regularly until her busy schedule created challenges. In 1990, she enrolled at Thomas Jefferson University to complete the foundational courses necessary to enter an occupational therapy program. During this time, Dr. Gutman’s mentor, Dr. Ruth Schemm, EdD, OTR/L, FAOTA, encouraged her to explore a career in academia. “Dr. Schemm provided a different perspective and was a strong source of motivation,” she said. In 1992, Dr. Gutman earned a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Occupational Therapy. One year later, she began a teaching fellowship in the Department of Occupational Therapy at New York University (NYU). Dr. Gutman taught courses part-time while furthering her own education. In 1995, Dr. Gutman earned a Post-Professional Master’s Degree in Occupational Therapy from NYU. One year later, she returned to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Occupational Therapy. In 1997, Dr. Gutman

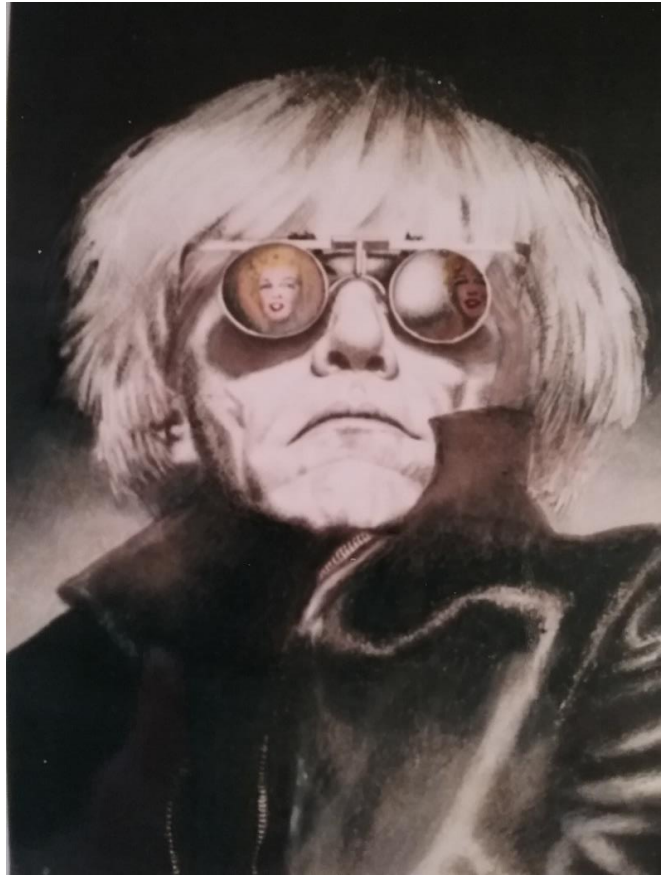
transitioned to academia full-time as an assistant professor in the Occupational Therapy Department at Thomas Jefferson University. In 1998, she completed her PhD under the mentorship of Dr. Jim Hinojosa, PhD, OT, FAOTA. In 2006, Dr. Gutman accepted a faculty position in the Occupational Therapy Program at Columbia University where she was later promoted to full professor.

Throughout the years, Dr. Gutman gained clinical experience in a variety of community-based settings. Her areas of expertise include promoting social skills in children with autism, supported education and employment for adults with cognitive impairment, and community reintegration for adults who are experiencing homelessness. Dr. Gutman believes her training as an occupational therapist provided a way of thinking that makes it possible to problem-solve almost anything. “If I cannot solve a problem, I know that I have the skills to find the resources to do so,” she said. Although a busy lifestyle prevented Dr. Gutman from engaging in art for several years, her creativity proved to be beneficial in clinical practice. “Occupational therapists see creative solutions that other people are unable to. This has always helped me to be a really good therapist.”

In 2019, Dr. Gutman became the program director for the online Post-Professional Clinical Doctoral Program in Occupational Therapy at Columbia University. She has enjoyed working with doctoral students in this capacity. “I have been fortunate to work with some incredible students who are just amazing,” she said. “Mentoring them, problem-solving together, that is what I find stimulating.” Dr. Gutman uses service learning opportunities to teach her students research methods for clinical practice. Over the last 8 years, Dr. Gutman has been working with individuals who are experiencing homelessness. “Many have mental illness and a history of substance abuse,” said Dr. Gutman. The focus

Figure 2

“Andy Warhol” (1987) by Dr. Sharon Gutman



of her research is helping this population obtain the skills they need to live independently or in supported housing. “Many became homeless at a very young age. Some experienced periods of homelessness, or grew up in the foster care system,” Dr. Gutman said. “The skills they should have learned to be functioning independent adults stopped developing due to mental illness or chronic homelessness. This combined with food insecurity and substance abuse degrades all types of functioning.”

Dr. Gutman believes people experiencing homelessness can benefit from skilled occupational therapy services. Over the last 5 years, she has supervised several Level II fieldwork students at a men’s shelter near Columbia University. Students in this setting gain experience working with the homeless population who often suffer from mental illness and substance abuse disorders. Dr. Gutman aims to develop interventions that are both creative and educational. She enjoys integrating sound, music, and color into one educational product. On one occasion, Dr. Gutman started a meditation group with participants at the shelter. After the group was up and running, occupational therapy students came in to take over. “It was a lot of fun and very interesting,” said Dr. Gutman. “Most of the participants were sweet, and hearing their life stories was heartbreaking.” During the session, she could see a peacefulness wash over them. Dr. Gutman believes occupational therapists have the perfect skill set to help this population. “There is a handful of dedicated occupational therapists who work with this population,” she said. “They need help with so many things. The opportunities are endless.”

In addition to teaching and service, Dr. Gutman has an impressive history of scholarly research and publication. She has authored numerous textbooks, book chapters, peer-reviewed scientific papers, and continuing education articles. On one occasion, Dr. Gutman used her creativity and artistic talent to write and illustrate a neuroscience textbook. Throughout her career, Dr. Gutman has participated in the dissemination of research to share her findings through scientific posters and presentations at regional, national, and international conferences. She has also served in many professional leadership roles at the local, state, and national levels. Between 2008 and 2014, Dr. Gutman served as the editor-in-chief for the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, the official publication of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). In this role, Dr. Gutman enjoyed working with talented authors, reading phenomenal manuscripts, mentoring junior scholars, and bringing awareness to the effectiveness of interventions.

Dr. Gutman’s contributions to the profession have been acknowledged with numerous honors and service awards. In 1997, NYU recognized Dr. Gutman as the outstanding instructor of the year. This award is given to emerging educators who demonstrate excellence in teaching. In 2004, the Division of Occupational Therapy at Long Island University awarded her the Outstanding Educator Award and the Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Occupational Therapy Program. In 2005, AOTA recognized Dr. Gutman’s scholarship with a Certificate of Appreciation. In 2009, Dr. Gutman joined the Roster of Fellows, AOTA’s highest honor. Each year, approximately 10 members of the profession are recognized for their leadership and outstanding contributions to the growth and development of the occupational therapy profession. In 2019, Dr. Gutman was awarded the Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship. Each year, AOTA bestows this award to one individual who has creatively contributed to the body of knowledge of the profession through research, education, and clinical practice. Unfortunately, the 2020 AOTA annual conference was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Gutman is looking forward to receiving the award and presenting the Slagle lecture at the 2021 AOTA conference.

In 2018, the demands of a busy career and life of service left Dr. Gutman feeling out of balance. “This was distressing because I am an occupational therapist and we are always talking about balance,” she said. “At the time, I did not really feel like I was doing anything that was making me truly happy.” Dr. Gutman was lacking a creative outlet. “I knew that I would get back to creating art when I retired, but I could not wait that long,” she said. “I needed to find a way to integrate art into my life, or I would die inside.” On January 1, 2019, Dr. Gutman made a New Year’s resolution to become a Sunday painter. Over the next 12 months, she carved out time to paint every Sunday. By the end of the year, Dr. Gutman finished a

series of five watercolor paintings. Each painting was a study of how light plays on the water. “Bermuda Swimming Pig” (see Figure 3) is a 10” x 13” watercolor painting.

Dr. Gutman pursued a career in occupational therapy because it was a field where she could use her creativity. Today, she has nearly 30 years of experience in clinical practice, higher education, research, and service to the profession. When the demands of a busy lifestyle put her well-being at risk, Dr. Gutman integrated art into life in pursuit of occupational balance. “Occupational therapists are such caregivers,” said Dr. Gutman “We also need to care for ourselves.” Recent events have inspired Dr. Gutman to begin painting again. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she enclosed her balcony to create an art studio. “Now I am motivated to use it,” she said. In addition, Dr. Gutman has been collecting photographs of trees she would like to paint. “I am fascinated with trees and feel an affinity with these giant living creatures,” she said. A New Year’s resolution to paint on a regular basis helped Dr. Gutman to appreciate the art process, not just the end product. “When I started painting again, just doing it was so much fun,” she said. “You lose all sense of time. It’s so wonderful.” Dr. Gutman admits her schedule is demanding and she has limited free time to paint. “I am going to take advantage of that,” she said. “It is a mindset. A glass half full thing.”

Figure 3

“Bermuda Swimming Pig” (2019) by Dr. Sharon Gutman



View more of Dr. Gutman’s art work in the OJOT Gallery

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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