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## The Anatomy of Human Occupation

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## The Anatomy of Human Occupation

### Abstract

Dr. Emily Balog, PhD., OTR/L, ECHM, an occupational therapy professor and artist based in New Jersey, provided the cover art for the Summer 2022 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "The Knitting Brain" is an 11" x 15" painting made from watercolors. The inspiration for this painting came from years of experience working with individuals with head injury, stroke, and mental illness. The piece is from her *Anatomy of Human Occupation* series. This collection of paintings is a unique and authentic representation of Dr. Balog's love of the human body and the healing power of occupation. Dr. Balog is an occupational therapist with expertise in working with older adults in the community. She is also a highly decorated veteran who uses art to heal herself and other veterans from trauma experienced in service. For Dr. Balog, engaging in art is a powerful tool for recovery.

### Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, trauma, painting, Emily Balog

### Credentials Display

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The profession of occupational therapy was built on a pragmatic foundation where the concept of occupation (or, the act of doing) provides both an end and a means for promoting health and well-being. Occupational therapy shares a rich history with art and the rehabilitation of wounded soldiers. During World War I, wounded soldiers were transported to military hospitals for emergency treatment. Occupational therapy interventions often involved the therapeutic use of art and vocational training to regain function for employment. Arts and crafts were used to retrain, re-educate, and restore physical and mental health to re-enter the workforce. Occupational therapy remained an important part of rehabilitation and vocational training during World War II. It was common during this time to use arts and crafts as a therapeutic tool for promoting health and well-being. Humans are inherently driven to engage in the occupations we find meaningful. Art is a form of creative self-expression that holds meaning and purpose. For Dr. Emily Balog, engaging in a meaningful occupation, such as art, provides a means for healing and self-expression.

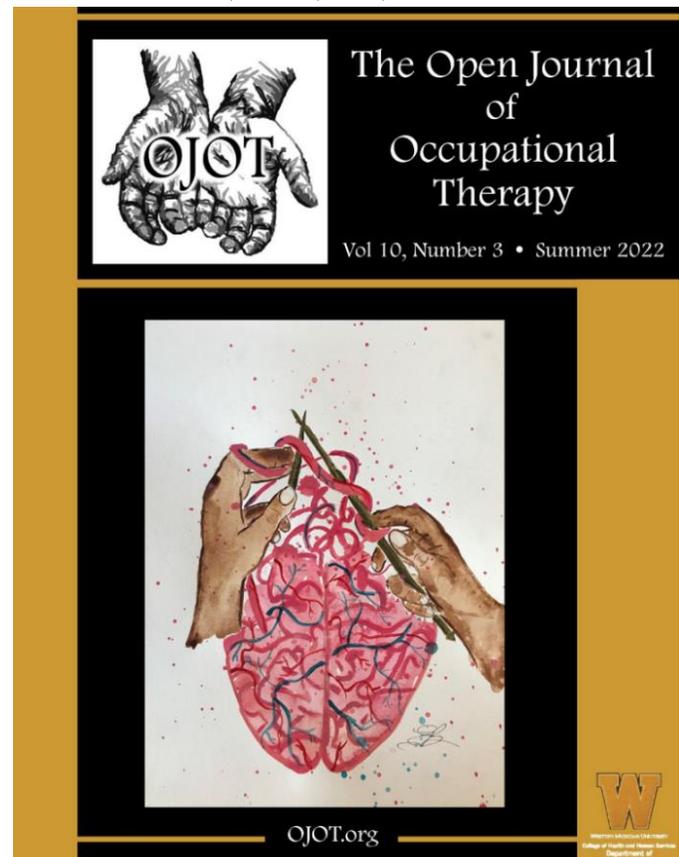
Dr. Emily Balog, PhD., OTR/L, ECHM, an occupational therapy professor and artist based in New Jersey, provided the cover art for the Summer 2022 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). “The Knitting Brain” is a 11” x 15” painting made from watercolors. The inspiration for this painting came from years of experience working with individuals with head injury, stroke, and mental illness. The piece is from her *Anatomy of Human Occupation* series. This collection of paintings is a unique and authentic representation of Dr. Balog’s love of the human body and the healing power of occupation. Dr. Balog is an occupational therapist with expertise in working with older adults in the community. She is also a highly decorated veteran who uses art to heal herself and other veterans from trauma experienced in service. For Dr. Balog, engaging in art is a powerful tool for recovery.

Dr. Emily Balog was born and raised in Laurel Springs, NJ, a small historic community near Philadelphia. Her childhood home was built in 1900. Dr. Balog is the youngest of four daughters. Their mother, Diana, was trained as a nurse. During World War II, Emily’s maternal grandfather was in the Army Air Corps. After he was discharged, the family settled in Ohio. Dr. Balog’s father, Joe, is a Vietnam veteran who was drafted at age 19. Upon leaving the service, Joe started a career with the United States Postal Service. As a child, Dr. Balog enjoyed looking through her father’s photos and trinkets from the war. “I have always loved history,” she said. Dr. Balog makes every effort to preserve the history of her current home, built in 1910. “My partner and I love to collect antiques and do restorations in our home,” she said. Dr. Balog has fond memories of antiques and studying family history with her mother.

During her childhood, Dr. Balog enjoyed engaging in arts and crafts. When she was young,

**Figure 1**

Cover Art for OJOT, Vol 10, No 3, Summer 2022



Diana taught her how to sketch. “Before my mom became a nurse, she was an art teacher for orphans in Ohio,” said Dr. Balog. “Mom was very talented, but we never saw any of her art because she threw it all away.” Diana became medically disabled from severe back problems resulting from her nursing career. During this time, she took an art class. “I confiscated the only drawing she did before she could throw it away,” said Dr. Balog. The drawing was a landscape of trees and a barn on a snowy hill. “The drawing reminds me of her home in Pennsylvania,” she said. Dr. Balog displays the drawing alongside treasured photos and family trees to honor her ancestors.

At the age of 12, Dr. Balog decided to pursue a career in occupational therapy. “I was fortunate to have a prominent figure in my life who was an occupational therapist,” she said. That figure was the mother of a childhood best friend. “In school, we had to write a paper about a career, and I chose occupational therapy because I loved the thought of helping people to live full, meaningful lives,” she said. “Over the years, I never wavered and did everything I could to learn about the profession.” Between the ages of 14 and 18, Dr. Balog worked at a local coffee shop frequented by many older adults from the community. “There was one older man in particular who I adored, Mayor Paul, as we all lovingly referred to him,” said Dr. Balog. Paul was a World War II veteran who was on dialysis. He had trouble getting in and out of the store and had dietary limitations on liquids. As Paul would pull up to the storefront, Dr. Balog would prepare his tea just how he liked it. “I used to hop over the counter to help him in and out of the shop,” she said. “We both got a real kick out of each other.” Dr. Balog’s assistance allowed Paul to participate as a member of the community. She never knew how much this meant to Paul’s family until his funeral. “This experience helped me realize working with older adults was my passion,” she said.

Advocacy is another passion for Dr. Balog. “I have advocated for LGBTQIA individuals for as far back as I can remember,” she said. Dr. Balog believes this is related to having several friends who identified as LGBTQIA throughout her life. Dr. Balog was commissioned by her local high school to paint a piece titled “Sterling Pride” (see online gallery) for the Gay-Straight Alliance club. In June, the painting will be on display for Pride Month. Figure 2 is a photo of Dr. Balog working on a painting titled “Beautiful Robbie.” This 18” x 24” painting is based on a photograph of a friend, Robbie, at Graffiti Pier in Philadelphia. Robbie identifies as non-binary and transgender.

During her senior year of high school, Dr. Balog was accepted into the Occupational Therapy Program at Thomas Jefferson University. “I was going to school and had no way to pay for it,” she said. Dr. Balog attended Camden Community College on a full scholarship. She soon realized the cost of higher education was not something with which her family could assist. While searching for funding opportunities, Dr. Balog discovered the United States Air Force Air National Guard could

**Figure 2**

*Photo of Dr. Balog’s Painting, “Beautiful Robbie” (2022)*



provide the financial assistance she needed. “I never thought I would join the military,” she said. “After September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, everyone was feeling patriotic and inspired.” At age 19, Dr. Balog enlisted in the Air National Guard.

Dr. Balog was assigned to the Civil Engineering Squadron. As an Emergency Management journeyman, her mission was to prepare and respond to threats resulting from natural disasters and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats. During Operation Enduring Freedom, Dr. Balog was deployed to Kuwait. Her mission was to develop plans and operations for the base in response to emergencies. One of Dr. Balog’s roles as a staff sergeant was to plot attacks on a map and send out reconnaissance to gather information. All military service members are issued a gas mask and personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect against nerve and biological agents. Dr. Balog was responsible for teaching the Wing how to don this highly specialized gear properly and respond in emergencies. “Recon” (see Figure 3) is an 11” x 15” painting made from watercolors. The title, short for reconnaissance, was part of Dr. Balog’s military role. “If there was an attack plotted on the map, which is typically what I would do, our recon team would go out to collect samples (i.e., biological agent) and report back to us,” she said. COVID-19 brought Dr. Balog back to this mindset. “I did a lot of reflection on my service during the pandemic,” she said.

Dr. Balog served in the military for 6 years. “I always thought I would stay and transition to the role of an occupational therapist,” she said. Several circumstances, including military trauma, led her to a different path. In 2008, Staff Sergeant Balog (SSGT E-5) completed her enlistment and was honorably discharged from service. Soon after she returned home, Dr. Balog was contacted by a Girl Scout leader seeking a female veteran to speak with the troop. When Dr. Balog arrived, the troop quickly surrounded her. “They wanted to talk to me and could not get close enough,” she said. “I brought my gas mask and the girls were fascinated by it.” This was one of Dr. Balog’s favorite volunteer experiences.

**Figure 3**  
“Recon” (2022) by Dr. Emily Balog



Dr. Balog earned several degrees while serving in the military. She graduated top of her class with an Associate of Science degree in Emergency Management from the Community College of the Air Force. She went on to earn both a Bachelor’s and Master’s of Science degree in Occupational Therapy from Thomas Jefferson University. Dr. Balog is considered a first-generation graduate because neither of her parents completed a bachelor’s degree in college. As an occupational therapist, Dr. Balog spent 15 years working with older adults. “My love and passion is aging in place,” she said.

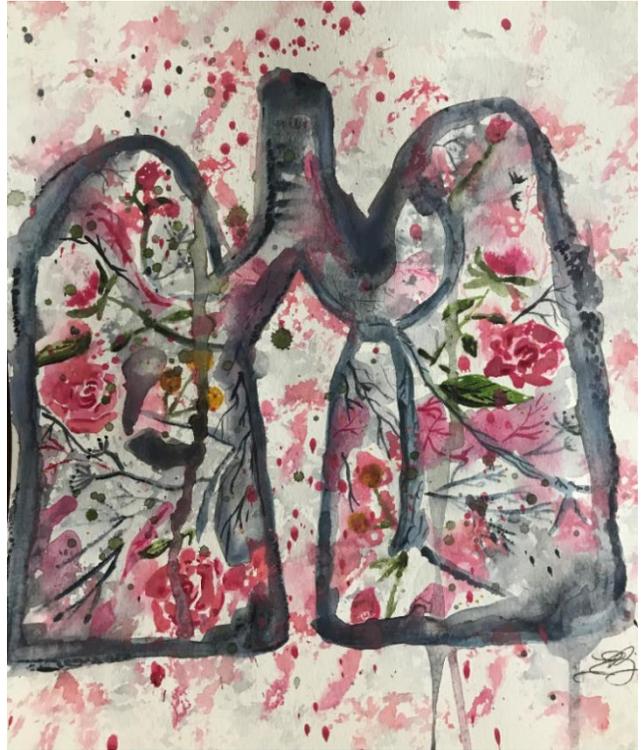
Dr. Balog did not fully identify as a veteran until her mother’s death in 2016. “Mom was always so proud of my service,” she said. When Dr. Balog began volunteering with veteran communities, the experiences triggered a flood of emotions. In 2020, she began searching for an outlet to grapple with the pandemic, continue to process her mother’s death, and, for the first time, address the trauma she

experienced in the military. At the same time, Dr. Balog was remote schooling her two young children; maintaining a career as an occupational therapist, researcher, and college instructor; and pursuing a Ph.D. “To say I was burnt out would be an understatement,” she said. “I was juggling so many roles, and like nearly every parent, there was no support because we had to isolate.” Dr. Balog needed an outlet she could do at home that was just for her. One afternoon, she pulled out her kids’ art supplies and started painting. “I started to think about how people heal from engaging in meaningful occupation,” she said. “The positive reaction I got was surprising.” Dr. Balog’s family was very complimentary of her paintings. She decided to post a few pieces on social media and was blown away by the delight and support of her followers. This was motivating. “Not only did I gain healing and strength through the creation of art, but also from the validation of others,” she said.

Dr. Balog’s art is often focused on human anatomy. The *Anatomy of Human Occupation* series is a unique and authentic representation of her love of the human body and the healing power of occupation. “It was this work that spoke to so many other people on social media,” she said. “This is a great example of the healing power of occupation.” One piece from the series, “Flora-Pleura” (see Figure 4), is an 8” x 10” painting made from watercolors. The piece was inspired by Diana, who had lung cancer, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Balog added flowers inside the lungs because they are healing. Dr. Balog finds it therapeutic to think of other people and what might be healing for them.

Dr. Balog dedicates her weekends to family and painting. Her husband, Matt, is an Army veteran who served as a Blackhawk Crew Chief in South Korea and Bosnia. Matt is currently employed as a nurse. The couple has two children, 8 and 9 years of age. “Fruit of Heartfelt Labor” (see Figure 5) is an 11” x 15” painting made from watercolors. The piece was a Valentine’s Day gift for Matt. “He is an

**Figure 4**  
“Flora-Pleura” (2021) by Dr. Emily Balog



**Figure 5**  
“Fruit of Heartfelt Labor” (2021) by Dr. Emily Balog



amazing gardener and the love of my life,” said Dr. Balog.

During the pandemic, Matt worked as a frontline COVID nurse. “Weight of the World” (see Figure 6) is an 11” x 15” painting made from watercolors. Dr. Balog was inspired to create this painting after watching health care providers work during the pandemic. “They are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),” said Dr. Balog. “I wanted to show what health care providers on the frontline are going through.” The painting was purchased by a fellow Tillman Scholar, a hospitalist who wanted to make prints and distribute them during nurse appreciation week. This surprised Dr. Balog. “I am goal oriented and this was not part of my plan,” she said. “It is humbling that people like my art and want to buy it.”

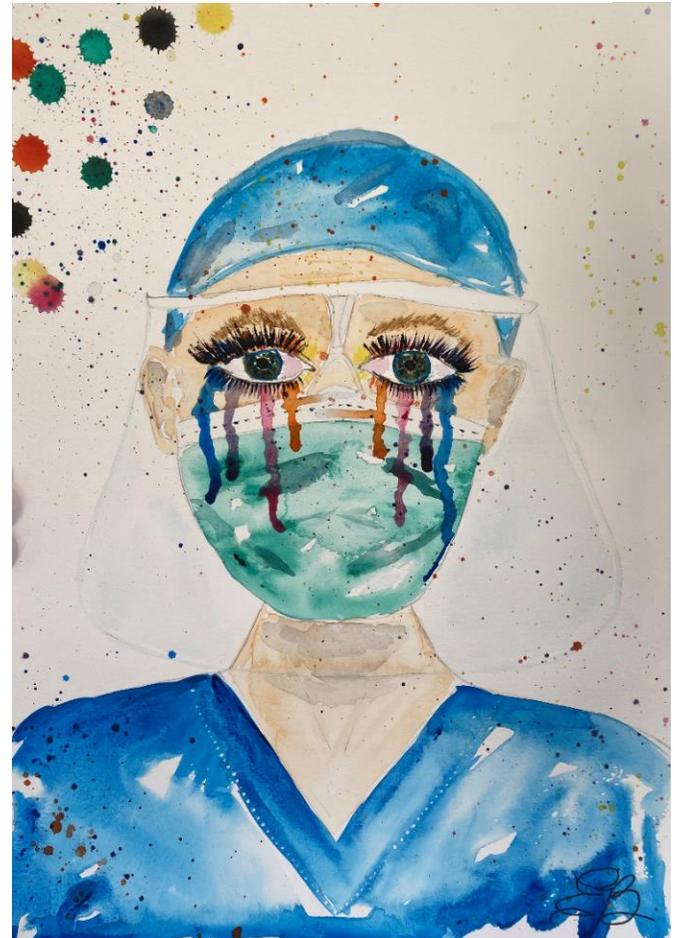
After her mother passed away, Dr. Balog felt lost. “I wanted to leave a bigger impact and legacy in the world,” she said. “While my work with older adults was meaningful, I felt the need to do something more.” In 2016, the Department of Occupational Therapy at Thomas Jefferson University offered Dr. Balog a position as a lab instructor. This was the opportunity she needed. “The moment I stepped foot back in the classroom of my alma mater, I knew that academia was an opportunity to leverage students as force multipliers for branching the profession back into our community roots,” she said. After reaching out to her mentor, Dr. Mary Corcoran, for guidance, Dr. Balog enrolled in the Translational Health Science Ph.D. program at George Washington University. Her dissertation was focused on developing a theory of change with older adults. Dr. Balog described her research:

Older adults who are middle income are at risk of institutionalization because they don’t qualify for social safety nets and their assets are often within the home they dwell. Middle income older adults often need to liquidate their assets to gain access to support. Empirically demonstrating the ways that occupational therapists collaborate and provide services for areas such as instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), support, and social participation has the potential to generate funding to communities for aging in place services.

Dr. Balog’s research aims to improve access to innovative programs and services for the older adult population. In 2018, Dr. Balog was selected as a Tillman Scholar. The recipients of this award are chosen for their academic and leadership potential (Pat Tillman Foundation, 2022). In addition, Dr. Balog received a scholarship to assist with the expenses related to her doctoral degree.

Dr. Balog served as an adjunct professor at Thomas Jefferson University for 5 years. After completing her Ph.D. in 2021, she accepted a full-time position as an assistant professor in

**Figure 6**  
“Weight of the World” (2021) by Dr. Emily Balog



the Occupational Therapy Doctorate Program at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She is designing innovative programming in theory, health policy, community-based practice, and a course specifically geared toward the occupational therapy process with older adults. One component of the program involves sending fieldwork students to senior centers to address common needs, such as social isolation and fall prevention. The culminating project for the older adult course, transected with the fieldwork experience, involves an in-service based on the senior center's interests and needs. "This program is one way to push out beyond the rehabilitation aspects and show what occupational therapists do in the community," said Dr. Balog. "We want these senior centers to see they need to hire an occupational therapist to work there."

Engaging in art has promoted healing in ways Dr. Balog never imagined. First, art has helped Dr. Balog focus on her own needs. This is something that is often difficult for parents, caregivers, and anyone who has experienced trauma to accomplish. Painting also helps Dr. Balog feel close to her mother. "I paint a lot of wild birds," she said. "My mother loved birds. I feel connected to her anytime I paint, but especially when I paint birds." In addition, art brings peace in the form of self-expression that improves Dr. Balog's life flow. "I am using the power of occupation to heal myself," she said. "I would like to think my openness about my own healing helps others too." Finally, art has brought healing through commissioned pieces. Dr. Balog has had people with fertility issues, medical professionals suffering through the pandemic, LGBTQIA support groups, and many others reach out to commission work that is meaningful to them. "It is a great honor to be asked to create something for these individuals," she said. Dr. Balog has donated her art to raise money for veteran organizations, including Team Foster, a group that provides service dogs at no cost to veterans with traumatic brain injury or PTSD. Dr. Balog has been working on a children's book with a fellow Tillman Scholar that is geared toward social-emotional support for children whose parents or caregivers serve on active duty in the military.

For Dr. Emily Balog, art is a therapeutic tool that promotes healing from the trauma she experienced in service. Art remains a meaningful occupation, as well as a means for healing and self-expression. Dr. Balog's art represents the healing power of occupation. Her paintings embody the connection between anatomy and human occupation. Dr. Balog plans to continue creating art that intersects with components of her personal experiences as a veteran, her profession, and her desires toward promoting occupational justice. She is continually inspired by others, which simultaneously informs her art.

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**View more of Dr. Balog's art work in the OJOT gallery:**

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/39/](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/39/)

**Follow Dr. Balog on Instagram:**

[https://www.instagram.com/ems\\_fineart/](https://www.instagram.com/ems_fineart/)

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