

Peeking inside a conversation between two art therapists talking about clinical work in end-of-life care on a wintry afternoon

Jody Thomson and Judy King

Introduction

Jody Thomson facilitates group art therapy with adult cancer outpatients at a large metropolitan Sydney hospital, and runs a weekly community art-based cancer support group in Western Sydney. Judy King is the art therapist at a children's hospice in Sydney, looking after children with life-limiting illnesses for respite, and end-of-life admissions. This paper begins in the middle of their conversation, as they talk about Judy's hospice work and look at some of the response images she makes in her journal on the ferry ride home from work.¹

Judy King: ...that was about a little boy who died a few hours after he was born at the local hospital. His mum and his young brother Tom wanted to spend more time with this little boy, this little 31-week-old. We worked together, Tom holding his little dead brother in his arms... I sat with the family for around two hours, memory-making.

It started in the tea room as I dunked my tea bag at the sink, standing next to the grandmother. She just wanted to talk... and talk she did, about various family dynamics amongst her children. Finally, we both walked back to the room with our mugs of tea and I tentatively suggested perhaps doing some handprints for memory-making.

I gathered together all my materials and went into the chilled room... it's kept cold for the little one in the cot... and I remember walking in to see him... it was just myself at first, which was good. I think I just wanted a moment with him by myself... and he's got a little bonnet and he's all wrapped and looks cosy... I think I touched his cheek and then picked him up... it was the first time I'd picked up a dead 31-week-old baby. As a nurse, I've looked after plenty of adults who've died in intensive care, but not children.

Tom wanted to hold his little brother. We spent quite some time choosing and making colours. Tom was very particular – he didn't want red, but maroon for his hand, and together we mixed the colour, with him directing how much more blue to add to the red. Mum chose purple, and Tom chose green for his little brother Ben.

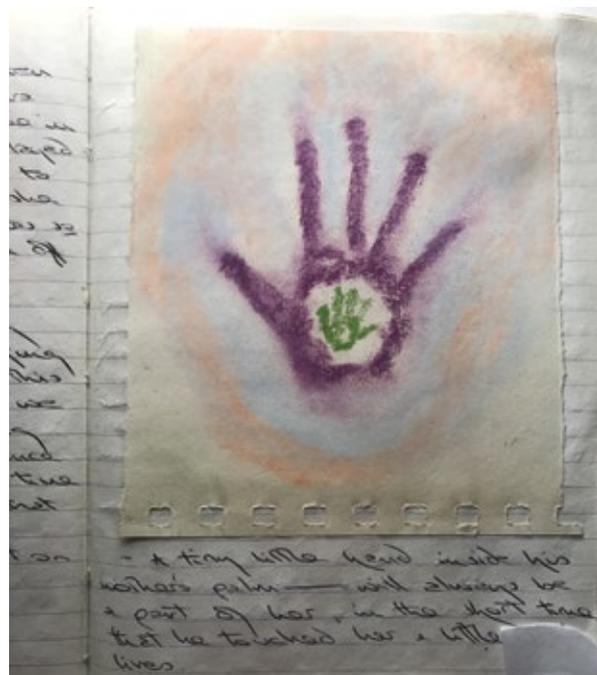


Figure 1. Judy King, *Art response to Ben's family*, pastel on paper, 310 × 200mm.

The text on this page reads: "Mum's sister came and wanted to hold little Ben, so I stayed with her while Mum and grandmother went to get some lunch. After a little while she got quite distressed as he was SO cold. I gently took him from her, placed him back in the cot and followed her into the corridor to check in. She leaned into my shoulder as she cried saying 'I don't know how you do this work'. I replied that we were glad that we are able to make a small difference to families at such a sad time – I really meant that."

Written under the image is: "A tiny little hand inside his mother's palm... will always be a part of her, in the short time that he touched her and little Tom's lives".

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