

Transforming Your Self-Image Through Body Art

Lenore Balliro

Imagine you lived in a place where you got to use your whole body as a kind of blank canvas every day. Imagine you had the freedom to dress by expressing yourself through elements from nature, yards of fabric, face paint – whatever appealed to you. No one would make fun of you in this place based on what you wore, what you put on your face, what you wove into your hair. Imagine there were no Gap stores, no Aeropostal, no Victoria's Secret, and no magazines sending you messages about how you **SHOULD** look if you want to be hip, cool, up-to-date, professional, studious, or sexy. Would you feel liberated by your choices or

burdened by them?

Each person—child and adult—displays artistic confidence and the grace of feeling comfortable in one's body. No tight jeans to dig into the waist. No pinching pointy shoes. No Spanx or push-up bras.

photos of Hans Silvester at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGLR8wEvRfQ> you'll see what I mean.

We were inspired by the Omo portraits in a class I took at Lesley University last fall called "Drawing from Within." We followed the model of the Omo people and used our bodies as canvases. We adorned one another and our selves

The people of the Omo River valley in Ethiopia use everyday items from nature to adorn themselves. Each person—child and adult—displays artistic confidence and the grace of feeling comfortable in one's body. No tight jeans to dig into the waist. No pinching pointy shoes. No Spanx or push-up bras. If you check out the



Photos by Hans Silvester of people in the Omo River Valley in Ethiopia.

with face paint, branches, flowers, drapes of fabric, berries. The teacher took photos. After a week, she came in with a slide show. We saw each other emerge on the screen, transformed by our costuming. I was surprised to see myself: bittersweet branches in my hair, white shoulders, painted face, softly draping vintage fabric reclaimed from old crimson drapes (see photo on next page). Others chose to adorn just their hands, arms, or ankles, and these portraits also appeared in the

slide show. It felt as if we were being introduced to another of our selves, one set free for the day. I looked at myself on the screen and thought—I'd like to meet her.

Perhaps it's a bit too risky in our culture to step outside everyday and go to work, school, church, or shopping with painted faces and branches in our hair. We might get fired. We might get shunned. And what would they say at the PTO meeting? But the classroom is a place of freedom, experiment, and safety. We could play around in the classroom and experiment with the power of transformation once we are freed from the ordinary. In this case, the ordinary is what we wear everyday, how we present ourselves to the world. Why not try adopting a totally unfamiliar "look" and see how that makes you feel about yourself and others?

You'd need very little. Some water based face paints (Caran d'Ache works really well). Some

brushes of different widths, some new sponges, cut up. A box of fabric pieces of different textures. Items from nature: leaves, branches, twigs, acorns, flowers, bones.

The idea is to just jump in and see what emerges, not to plan ahead of time about who you want to "be." The idea is to play, play until you meet a different one of your selves that might emerge before your eyes. If you are uncomfortable about face painting, try your wrist, or palm, or the back of your hand. Or your foot. One part of the body can stand in for your whole self. You can adorn yourself or have someone else do it for you, or combine the two. With permission, you could photograph each other for a slide show in a later class.

After you are done, you could write about your experience. Did you want to resist the whole idea as childish? Did you welcome the sense of play and experiment? What did it feel like to have such freedom? How did it feel to "meet" your



Holi, the Hindu festival of colors, is a chance to celebrate spring. Participants playfully cover themselves in colored powders and paints and spray each other with colored water. Photo from <www.boston.com>.

adorned self in a slide?

These impressions could be turned into the images for group or individual poems as well.

Many cultures hold celebrations or rituals where people transform themselves through costume, paint, and masks. They step out of their everyday selves to become someone else — or maybe to embrace some inner self they usually hide. Halloween and Carnivale come to mind. Hindu people in India celebrate Holi — the festival of colors, where the new year is welcomed in people run around splashing each other with color. (Check out these beautiful photos, sure to make you smile: <www.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/03/holi_2010.html>.) In Mexico, people dress up as skeletons to honor their ancestors that have passed. (See: <www.azfoto.com/tucson-day-of-the-dead.html>.) Rituals and celebrations like these can take us out of our ordinary days and our ordinary sense of self. Participating in these events can make life seem unfamiliar, where odd wonderful things are possible because we don't have to conform to certain codes of conduct.

I decided to ride the subway home from my Lesley class in my painted face and strange twig-woven hair. I acted as I always do: worked on the *Globe* crossword puzzle, then read a novel. Many riders glanced sideways at me; a few whispered to



Photo of the author by Denise Malis, Lesley University.

each other; a few even smiled right at me. And I was happy to smile back.



Photo by Dominic Arizona Bonucelli of people celebrating Day of the Dead.

Lenore Balliro (photo above) has worked with adult literacy and ESOL programs for over 25 years. This fall she is directing a new project called "Managing Stress to Improve Learning," where teachers and students will engage in expressive arts projects to promote well-being, build community, and support creativity as part of the learning process. She can be reached at lballiro@worlded.org.