



Remembering: “Petals of Hope”

Artistic responses to the Omagh Bomb

Conversations with Carole Kane and Malachi O’Doherty

When the petals fell
She gathered them, child's play
And wove the path home

John Paul Lederach



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Contents

Introduction	5
Boris Pinto	7
Cat Wilkinson	9
Eilish McAuley	11
Evelyn Johns	12
Frank Sweeney	13
Elaine Gallagher	14
Gabrielle McAleer	16
Irene Lowry	17
Frank Sweeney	18
Jean Brennan	19
Julie Gibson	20
Michael and Patsy Gallagher	22
Molly Montague	23
Molly Montague and Bridie Breen	24
Nicole Watt	25
Olga Bradshaw	27
Lorna Martin	29
Patsy Gallagher	30
Trudy Sharkey	31
Elaine Gallagher	33
Cathy O'Donnell	34
Malachi O'Doherty	35

Carole Kane

Introduction

I have explained my involvement in the *Petals of Hope* project to many people over the past fifteen years. I would tell them how we gathered up all the flowers that were laid on the streets of the town to honour the grief caused by the bomb on August 15, 1998. I would explain how these were dried and made into paper and fashioned by school children into art works.

As I would start to talk, the usual reaction, especially of those who live in Northern Ireland, would be to interrupt me, to tell me where they were that day, when they heard about the bomb.

Some have even recalled the finer details, the clothes they were wearing or who they were with.

“When I heard about the bomb, I was in the caravan...” “When I heard about the bomb, I was in the garage...” “When I heard about the bomb, I was going to my sister’s...” “I was driving when I heard about the bomb...”

I have heard this so frequently, that I almost anticipate this reaction, allow them the chance to tell me, for it shows their connection with the disaster and how much of a shock it was for them.

Over this past eight months or so, when we have been back in Omagh working on the most recent phase of the experience, I’ve been conscious of a change in the response. I was quite taken aback the first few times I heard it.

“When I *felt* the bomb, I was in my friend’s house...” “When I *felt* the bomb, I was in the office...” “When I *felt* the bomb...”

This change from “hearing about the bomb” to “feeling the bomb” is significant because it indicates how widely the impact had extended. The vibration of the destruction resounded far beyond the devastatingly physical impact on the immediate, out to the listener or the stranger who lived miles away. The immeasurable shock and pain stretched beyond this land. Their echo returned to Omagh in heartfelt sympathy and love, demonstrated in the sending of flowers, gentle words, prayers spoken. Without these, the *Petals of Hope*, *Rays of Light* project could not have happened.

Malachi O’Doherty and I have been in Omagh, having conversations with people who were involved in one aspect or another of the original project who responded to a public invitation to meet. As you will hear when you listen to their stories, some had left flowers, or had cleared them away as part of their council job, some took part in the workshops of the arts project through their school or as a member of the Carrickmore sewing group. Others in bereaved families received pictures. We acknowledge that many, for their own reasons, have decided that their involvement now stays within those early days of 1998-99. We

respect their silence but all are invited to listen to these conversations or read the collection of experiences.

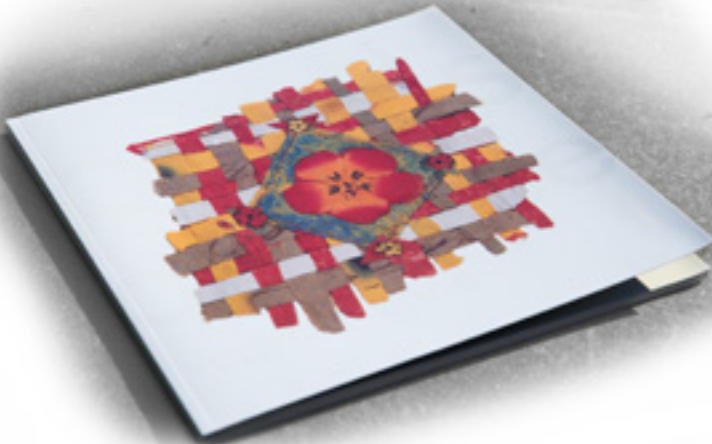
One fundamental theme shines through both phases of this creative endeavour and may explain why this tactile process has worked, if it has. In a simple play technique, we mixed mulch and pulp with delicate flowers, into basins of water, piece by piece, practising the ritual of rhythmic movement. This allowed us to find feeling in our hands and our hearts, as our heads tried, or maybe stopped trying, to make sense for a while.

By working alone or in small groups, in silence and humility, without questions, hope started to appear and like “a sea-change”, we were changed. The result has given a different sense of worth in this memorial.

One of the contributors describes Omagh as a “running sore” and there are those who still grieve and know great loss. Yet there has been much said about how the people of Omagh rallied together, supported and cared for each other, being gentle when that was needed and this capacity is still within their community.

I originally trained as weaver and naturally look for patterns in shapes and colours. There are many shapes and colours in these stories. Collectively, they display an array of sometimes darker shades, touching on extreme pain while others are more tactile, showing depth of dignity and humanity. Beauty is evident in all, including the most painful, and it wasn't our place to exclude them for this reason; it is more important to share them.

It continues to be an amazing privilege to be present alongside some of those who were affected by such an atrocity. Their strength inspires me and has taught me more than I can express.



These and more audio-digital stories can be found at www.omaghpets.blogspot.co.uk

Malachi O'Doherty

I didn't know about *Petals of Hope*. That simple fact shocks me, now that I am familiar with it. At the time of the Omagh bomb I was thinking like a journalist about the horrific details and the political implications. Mostly, I was stunned. We had lived with the lazy and unfounded understanding that a bomb in the street will rarely kill more than a couple of people, will often kill nobody.

Omagh seemed to tell us that, for all our decades of experience, we really didn't know bombs at all.

There had been other projects for peace making and healing, some of them a bit twee or self important, some of them secret, involving contacts and intermediaries, relying on the goodwill of people who had often exercised bad will.

What was special about *Petals of Hope* was that it did not come out of an organisation or community group, a think tank or a committee; no long period of devising and fund raising had preceded it.

It arose from a simple question, heard on the radio. What are they going to do with all those flowers?

Carole Kane had an idea and she called the Omagh District Council Arts and Culture Officer, Frank Sweeney and told him she could make some of the flowers into paper and make a nice art work, a tribute to the grief of the town.

Sweeney responded with a bigger idea still; turn all of them into paper, make lots of pictures, we'll give you everything you need; we'll get children out of school to help you.

And, as Boris Pinto says, sometimes just doing something is better than trying to say anything, because words are not adequate. Boris was one of the children who helped. He is now a forensic psychiatrist.

Elaine Gallagher, who also helped, has since worked in art therapy.

Both were prompted towards their vocation by the experience of *Petals of Hope*, a project that said nothing, when nothing could be said.

For the past few months I have been going to Omagh with Carole and meeting people who were involved in *Petals of Hope*, remembering the project and the parts they played, reflecting on what it meant to them.

What it means to me is a reminder that sometimes we miss a big story in the margins of a bigger one. *Petals of Hope*, in a region in which many have laboured and paid out to develop peace making and reconciliation, is a reminder that sometimes it just happens, because someone has a good idea and gets on with it.

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The photographs featuring the workshops and paper-making process have been taken by Carole Kane. All audio recordings and the other photographic images in this book and the digital stories, have been recorded and captured by Malachi O'Doherty. I'd like to thank Malachi for his technical expertise, insights and commitment which have extended far beyond the original plans for this phase of the project.

Both phases of this creative process have been steered through a spirit of presence, gentleness, listening and healing. We would like to thank all who have shared their thoughts, experiences and reflections of the *Petals of Hope* project and Omagh Bomb of 1998. Your conversations have made this encounter unique and possible. We are grateful for your contributions.

Special thanks is given to Professor John Paul Lederach, David Bolton and others, whose conversations and timely words have directly encouraged us to proceed with and supported us during the few months of this project.

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Carole Kane



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