

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Shark!**

**Ulrike Holtermann**

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## **SHARK! – Ulrike Holtermann**

A story in pictures from art therapy in paediatric oncology

Pictures by Marco, words by Ulrike Holtermann

NOTE: the subject in this paper has provided full consent to share his work and name for the purposes of this paper.



Fig.1: Marco: "Hai!" (SHARK!), white paint pen on postcard, DIN A4

## **Preface**

The picture story of Marco, a 14-year-old boy with whom I worked as an art therapist in the paediatric oncology ward of a large university hospital in Germany, began with a postcard. Words were too much for Marco. He did not want to talk about his cancer. He therefore refused any psychosocial help offered. He seemed difficult to reach for many in the treatment team. However, he accepted my offer to visit him at his bedside as an art therapist during his several periods of hospitalization.

In our initial session, I brought a collection of postcards for Marco as inspiration, and he initially looked through them with some courtesy. In it he finally found one that interested him (Fig.1). It depicted a sea and a coastline and stirred his imagination: What would it be like, Marco wondered, to dive in a shark area? So he said, later adding a shark fin and the word 'HAI' (SHARK) with an exclamation mark in white paint pen. Marco commented: "With the disease it is like with the shark on the postcard. Somehow it's not real and yet the mood is so threatening..."

From this first sequence, Marco invented the character of a marine biologist diving in these dangerous waters, and I encouraged him to draw a first image for it. While Marco was drawing, I realized that Marco was already symbolically dealing with his illness in this first image. And since he had clearly shown me before that he did not want to make any words around himself and his situation, I told him that I was interested in the experiences of this marine biologist. While Marco was drawing and I was sitting at his bedside, I asked him if I could write a short text to accompany his drawings. Marco agreed. When he wanted to continue the story of the marine biologist in the next session, we kept these roles: he drew, I wrote something short to go with it and read it to him after he had completed sketching. My suggestion that he draw while I was responsible for the words seemed to increase his desire to draw as our work progressed. In this way, the following picture story about a marine biologist and his adventures was created during art therapy. It is the result of our joint artistic process at the bedside, which accompanied Marco's inpatient cancer therapy in the child hospital and in which Marco did not have to make the words that to him deemed so unnecessary.

1. The marine biologist in shark area



Fig. 2: Marco, "The marine biologist in shark territory", pencil on paper, DIN A4

The diver had always been fascinated by the depth and vastness of the great oceans. He had become a marine biologist and now worked in a shark area. Every day he went out on his boat to the dark glittering water. A fresh wind and the salty smell of the sea accompanied him.

Every dive was a new adventure... connected with uncertainty, but also with curiosity about what might await him in the depths of the blue....

2. Monster - a fish in the cave



Fig.3: Marco, "A fish in the cave", pencil on paper, DIN A4

Today the marine biologist ventured particularly deep. The sun's rays hardly found a way into these abysses and he felt an exciting uncertainty. What would await him down here today???

### 3. The marine biologist's hut on the beach



Fig.4: Marco, "The marine biologist's hut on the beach", pencil on paper, DIN A4

After the adventure in the deep sea and the encounter with the big unknown fish with the huge mouth, the marine biologist had earned a day's rest. A shady spot right on the beach had become his home. He lay in the hammock and looked down over the white sand to the sea. The rise and fall of the waves carried him away. His body became heavy and his thoughts dissolved into the eternally same sound ...

4. emptiness, a dream (session without picture)



Today the marine biologist felt a little dull. He just wanted to lie down. From his hammock he let his gaze wander over the sea. The gentle rocking and the sound of the waves drew his thoughts down; he dozed off. Weightless...deeper and deeper he glided through the water. Until he suddenly touched the bottom. He had never examined it more closely...

5. Turtle and marine biologist in the sunshine



Fig. 5: Marco, "Turtle and marine biologist in the sunshine", pencil on paper, DIN A4

The marine biologist had carefully felt the stones, the sand and the plants with his fingers. Rested, he now awoke from his dream. The morning sun shone in his face; he felt new energy. A wonderful day for a new dive.

Powerfully he pushed himself into the water and paddled nimbly into the depths as if he were a fish himself. Light and buoyant, he glided along when suddenly two eyes appeared before him...eye to eye...he knew that in the turtle he had met a being who would accompany him from now on....



## 6. The wreck

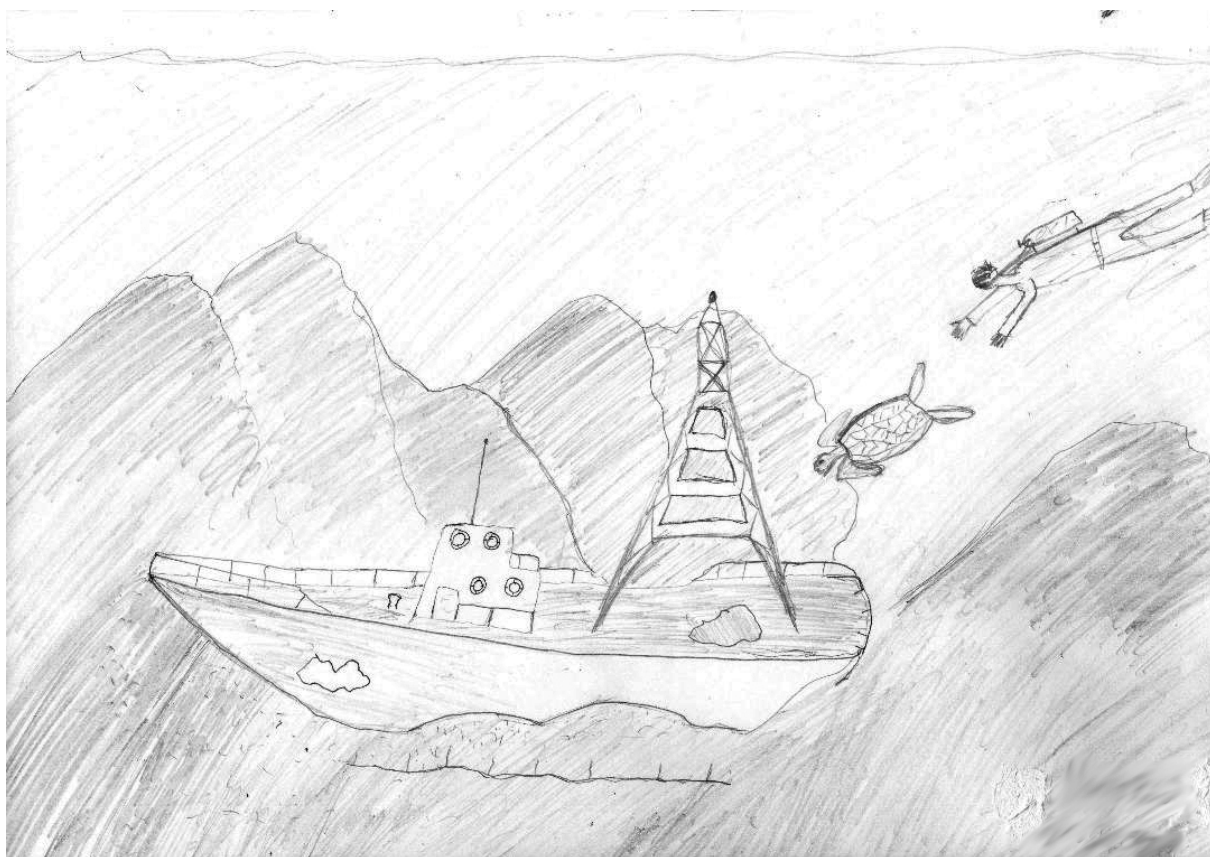


Fig. 6: Marco, "The wreck", pencil on paper, DIN A4

Happy about this intense encounter, the marine biologist swam through the sea with his new companion. He let her guide him and swam on and on. Never before had he ventured so far out. Now he felt safe and protected at her side and saw places he had never seen before. Foreign and enchanting at the same time.

Then a wreck appeared in front of them. The turtle nodded and seemed to be inviting him to swim into it....

## 7. Back in the dive shop (2 sessions)



Fig. 7: Marco, "Back in the Dive Shop", pencil on paper, DIN A4.

For weeks, the marine biologist had admired the world of the turtle and simply let himself drift. Now the oxygen tank was empty and he needed a new one before he could go on further discovery tours with his companion. A good opportunity to go to town again.

In the last few weeks he had almost forgotten the world around him (especially the one on land) and the nice woman in the dive shop. He gathered up his city clothes. How long had it been since he had used them...?

He had been in the water so much, had almost felt like an underwater being himself. Now he left the turtle behind for a while. It didn't like the heat and the dryness. He went ashore again...

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Honking cars - smiling people,  
stinking exhaust fumes - fragrant snack bars,  
strolling ladies - hurried businessmen,  
grey concrete - colourful hustle and bustle...

The life of the city absorbed him and he headed towards the dive shop. He saw the great white shark in the shop window. As he pushed down the handle, the bell above the door sounded softly. He entered and saw her standing behind the counter....

The End

## Postscript

After the picture story, at the end of his cancer therapy, Marco drew one last picture (Fig.8), to which he said: "With the right faith, the shark is also gone."

At the end of his art therapy, I gave Marco a copy of his story in a printed and bound edition, in addition to his originals in a folder.

I met him again many years later as a young man at an opening at the clinic. He told me that he had only ever drawn during the period of art therapy during his cancer treatment, and never again after that. It was nice to meet him again as a healthy young man.

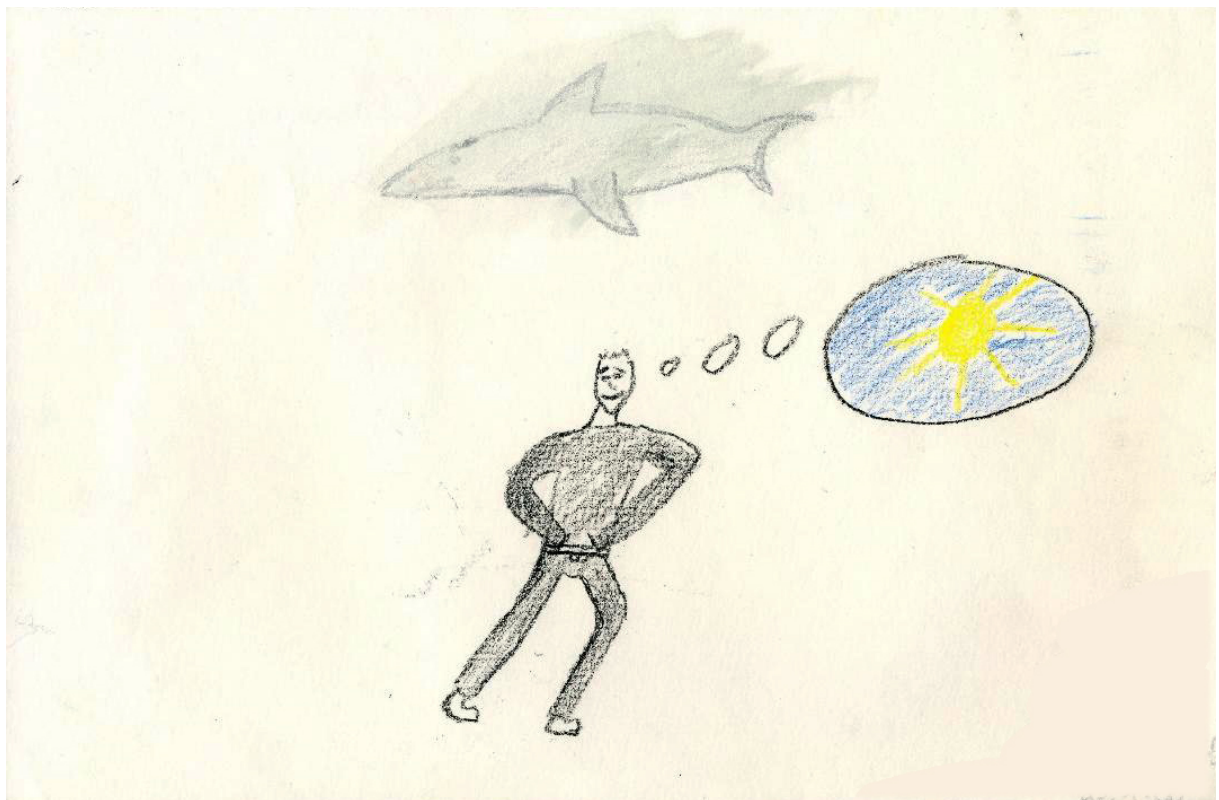


Fig. 8: Marco: The last picture, pencil on paper, DIN A4

### **About the Author**

**Ulrike Holtermann**, Dipl Soz.Päd, PG Dip AT, studied Social Pedagogy at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Hannover, Germany and Art Therapy at Art Therapy Berlin / Goldsmiths College, London University (PG Dip Art Psychotherapy). Ulrike completed further certified specialist training in art therapy and psychotraumatology. Since 2003 she has practiced in Germany as an art therapist in paediatric oncology, adult oncology and psychosomatic medicine. Since 2014 she has worked in an inpatient child and youth care facility and in her own practice. Since 2012, Ulrike has been a lecturer and supervisor on the master's programme in art therapy at the Weissensee Kunsthochschule Berlin.

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