

The Narrative of Self through Art: Frida Kahlo between pain and resilience

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RIASSUNTO: L'arte ha il potere di entrare in connessione con il mondo interiore e quello circostante ed è quello che ci mostra una delle pittrici più note al mondo Frida Kahlo. La biografia dell'artista tocca le corde più intime dell'animo umano ed è tanto ricca da generare ancora oggi a distanza di anni continue riscritture e reinterpretazioni. I soggetti dei suoi dipinti, spesso autoritratti, si intrecciano alla vita personale, alle vicende d'amore, alle condizioni di salute precarie e soprattutto al suo paese di origine, il Messico. Il presente contributo si propone di osservare alcune tra le opere più significative di Frida Kahlo per evidenziare la scelta di coltivare il senso dell'intimità nel narrare la sua vita usando diverse tecniche espressive. Il prediligere l'autoritratto, rappresenta una forma molto personale di espressione, infatti, di 143 tele di Frida, 55 sono autoritratti e sono inclusi tra i più popolari e migliori della sua produzione. Il più grande soggetto di Frida è sé stessa. I suoi autoritratti infondo, si possono considerare come una sorta di autobiografia poiché rappresentano un intreccio di diverse emozioni che vanno dal dolore all'amore alla forza di vivere che rimandano ad un'immagine di donna coraggiosa e resiliente ancora oggi molto attuale.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: narrazione, autobiografia, emozioni, arte, resilienza.

ABSTRACT: Art has the power to connect with the inner world and the world around us, and this is what one of the world's best-known painters, Frida Kahlo, shows us. The artist's biography touches the innermost chords of the human soul and is so rich that even today, years later, it still

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generates continuous rewriting and reinterpretation. The subjects of his paintings, often self-portraits, are interwoven with his personal life, love affairs, precarious health conditions and above all his country of origin, Mexico. This contribution aims to look at some of Frida Kahlo's most significant works to highlight her choice to cultivate a sense of intimacy when narrating her life using different expressive techniques. The preference for the self-portrait represents a very personal form of expression, in fact, of Frida's 143 canvases, 55 are self-portraits and are included among the most popular and best of her production. Frida's greatest subject is herself. Her self-portraits, after all, can be seen as a kind of autobiography as they represent an interweaving of different emotions ranging from grief to love to the strength to live that re-member an image of a courageous and resilient woman that is still very relevant today.

KEY-WORDS: storytelling, autobiography, emotions, art, resilience.

1. Introduction

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón, aka Frida Kahlo, was a Latin American painter and internationally renowned artist.

A woman with a very strong personality, independent, passionate, opposed to all social conventions, with a special artistic talent and personal charm. She was born in Coyoacán, of a German-Jewish father and a Mexican mother, in 1907 (although she prefers to say she was born in 1910 as she considers herself a child of the Mexican revolution). From birth she suffered from spina bifida, which led to her having a deformed foot and right leg. The real event that disrupts her life, at the age of 18, is a bus accident in which she is crushed against a wall. Frida suffers several spinal fractures and her left hip is pierced by the bus handrail. She underwent 32 surgical operations and, once discharged from hospital, was forced to rest in bed with a plaster cast. Finally, after nine months, her cast was removed and she was able to walk again despite the pain that would accompany her for the rest of her life. She took advantage of her long convalescence to read books on the communist movement and to paint; hence her parents decided to give her a four-poster bed with a mirror on the ceiling, so that she could see her reflection, and some paints. She thus began to paint a

series of self-portraits, as it was herself she saw most during the day, but above all with these representations she broke the taboos of those times on the female body and sexuality. From this negative experience, however, she draws a life lesson: making art is her *raison d'être*, both to help her family financially and to contribute to the communist struggle. Once she had recovered, she submitted her paintings to Diego Rivera, the most famous muralist in Mexico, who was so impressed by Frida's modern style that he took her under his wing and introduced her to the Mexican political and cultural scene. Thanks to this acquaintance, Frida became an activist in the Mexican Communist Party in 1928 and joined a group of artists and intellectuals with whom she shared ideals: to create an independent Mexican art linked to popular expression.

In 1929 Frida and Diego got married. A marriage full of betrayals, initially on his part, but later on hers. The two divorce ten years later because of Rivera's betrayal with Frida's sister. After a year, Diego returns to Frida, demanding her in marriage, she accepts. The relationship with Rivera is fundamental in Frida's life, both sentimentally and emotionally and artistically and professionally. Frida's works often depict the dramatic aspects of her life, such as the accident and abortions that lead her to have an obsessive relationship with her body, so much so that she makes it the focus of her works. She then goes on to describe her inner state and her way of perceiving her relationship with the planet, emphasising pain and repressed eroticism, which she tries to represent through symbolism. Furthermore, she always tries to defend and represent her people in her works.

Frida became an internationally renowned artist in the 1940s when an exhibition was dedicated to her in New York and Paris and her works were requested in almost every group exhibition held in Mexico. In 1943, she was called to teach with other artists at the new art school of the popular and liberal pedagogy: the Esmeralda. Frida chooses not to teach inside the classrooms but outside on the streets where people live, where life is, where one feels free to express oneself. In the years that followed, her health became increasingly worse until 1954 when she fell ill with poliomyelitis and died of a pulmonary embolism on the night of 13 July. After her death and in more recent times, culture has come to appraise her works, her qualities, her creative work and her ability to capture attention through the story of her life told through her canvases. Why is Frida Kahlo

still alive with her works, what aspects of her work attract the attention of artists but also of people who feel close to her story? It is the intimacy of her works, the way she communicates her physical vulnerability and emotional pain, but also her defiance, self-confidence and pride in her culture that so clearly translates into her when we look at her works. Frida looks at us through the canvas, self-portraits like selfies refer us to works that cultivate a sense of intimacy and expression of a very complex emotional world that at the same time invites us to overcome fears through acts of courage that invite us to find beauty in life. Frida's last words: 'Viva la vida' still resonate today as a fight for life!

2. The mirror of ourselves: storytelling through art

Storytelling through art gives the possibility to communicate with a multiplicity of languages such as figures, images of desire, memory, past, present and future. The painter Frida Kahlo drew on her personal experiences, her numerous operations, her emotional life, the different emotions that coloured her existence, and in her works, which were often portrayed as self-portraits, she described her inner suffering, both physical and emotional. Her art was revolutionary because she dared to express her emotions, her ideology and the events of her life explicitly and publicly. Frida, in painting her self-portraits, was always driven by the need to resist a pain, to circumvent a suffering, to not allow evil to get the upper hand.

For her, painting represented her cathartic means of liberation from pain and negative emotions in order to defy death and begin to live again. Her encounter with painting was accidental and began at the age of seventeen, when after undergoing surgery, she was forced to be immobile for a long period and during that stay, her mother had a large mirror installed under the canopy of her bed.

The mirror! Executioner of my days, of my nights. Image as traumatising as my own traumas. Constantly that impression of being finger-marked. "Frida, look at yourself.

Frida, I mean, look at yourself. No more shadow to hide in, no refuge to retreat to, at the mercy of suffering, to cry silently without a trace on my skin. I realised

that every tear carves a furrow in the face, albeit young and smooth. Each tear is a fragmentation of life. I scrutinised my face, my every gesture, the folds of the sheet, its relief, the perspectives of the objects around me. For hours, I felt myself observed. I saw myself. Frida inside, Frida outside, Frida everywhere, Frida endlessly. It hadn't been a bad joke by my mother. Quite the contrary: according to her, it was an ingenious, useful idea. I didn't have the courage to reproach her for it. I had to live with it, swallowing my saliva sideways to suffocate my violent pain [...]. But suddenly, there, under that opaque mirror, the desire to draw became imperious. I had time, no longer just to draw lines, but to give them meaning, content. To understand something through them, to conceive them, to forge them, to twist them, to untie them, to reattach them, to fill them. Classically, to learn, I used a model: me. It was not easy: as much as we may be our most obvious subject, we are also our most difficult. We think we know every part of our face, every feature, every expression: well, everything is eluded, continually. We are ourselves and another, we think we know ourselves down to our fingertips, and suddenly we feel that our envelope eludes us, becomes completely foreign to what fills the inside.

The moment we can no longer see ourselves, we realise that the image in front of us is our own.

I have been asked many times why I have this fixation on self-portraiture. First of all, I had no choice, and I believe this is the essential reason for this continuity of the I-subject in my work. Try to put yourself in my place. Above you, your image, and more precisely your face. Since the body is usually tucked under the sheets. Your face, then. Obsessive exhausting almost. The obsession devours you, or you face it head-on. You have to be stronger than it, not let it swallow you up. Have strength. Skill.

In the most academic way possible, I made myself my model, my study subject. I committed myself (Jamis, 2003, p. 93).¹

In her self-portraits, she often portrays herself with her head erect in an almost haughty posture, often in a half-length pose and with a particular attention to colour and detail. In this painting (fig. 1), she expresses her obsession with Diego Rivera and the fact that she cannot stop thinking about him. In the second self-portrait (fig. 2), she wears the traditional Mexican costume of Tehuana, on her head she wears leaves and the root

1. Traduzione a cura dell'Autrice.

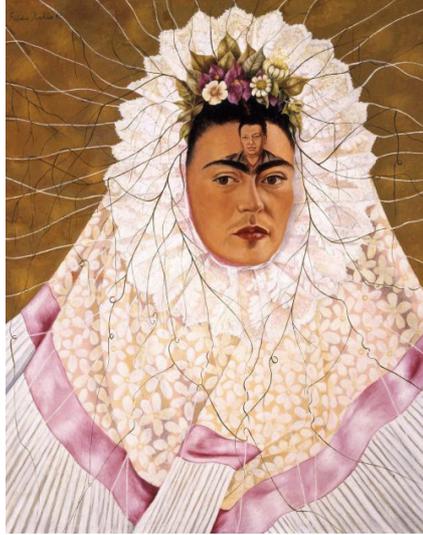


Figure 1. Self-portrait 'Diego in my thoughts' (1943).

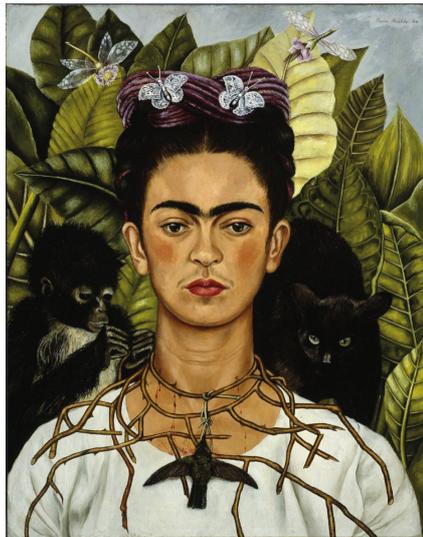


Figure 2. Self-portrait with necklace of thorns and hummingbirds (1940).

resembles the design of a spider's web. These could be her thoughts in which she trapped Diego. In a writing she made public the meaning she attributed to the different colours: although she recalled the traditional tones of Mexican art, she gave each colour a psycho-gical value, from olive green to brown, yellow, blue and magenta. For example, olive green was often associated with the feeling of op-pression, the colour of scor-

ched earth expressed despair, yellow madness and fear, and red and pink blood and death. Backgrounds with creepers and rich tropical vegetation are often depicted in her works, as can be seen in the self-portrait with necklace of thorns and hummingbirds. She is often accompanied by monkeys that embrace her and become more frequent after her divorce with Rivera, starting in 1940: it seems that the presence of the monkeys fills the void left by her husband, emphasising her sense of loneliness. In the Self-portrait the necklace of thorns and hummingbirds, a black cat is also present in a threatening pose, while a dead hummingbird hangs from the necklace of thorns: the latter can cause her further injuries and the hummingbird (which in Mexico is used as a good luck charm in love) seems to refer to herself, as she feels like that bird. After she has ended her love affair, she portrays herself dressed as a man, with short hair and scissors in her hand in 'Portrait with cut hair' (Fig.3).



Figure 3. Self-portrait with cut hair (1940).

Here too, the artist uses painting to express her deepest and most intimate pain, portraying herself stripped of all passion, all seduction and femininity, as if these had gone with the separation. In this self-portrait Frida also examines the social model of womanhood, not so much a reflection on her identity as an analysis of womanhood in its deepest characteristics, eliminating from her own image the signs codified by society to indicate femininity: long hair, dresses and feminine attitudes. In this painting, Frida, who is wearing a generously sized man's suit, holds a pair of scissors instead of a fan and looks directly at the viewer, thus challenging him to look at her as a woman. Art, therefore, as an expressive form of the human soul can help build new cultural imagery. Frida, in fact, through her art managed to give strength and voice to her own identity, overcoming prejudices (Marone, 2017). Each of her works refers us to a symbolic concept that can have different meanings and directly shakes our conscience. Frida's gaze teaches us, once again, that art can help us find a new, non-conformist vision, develop mental aptitudes and lateral thinking, help us see beyond stereotypes, help us grasp the relationships between the inner world and reality, overcome fears, reflect on the complexity of relationships, on the need to represent and represent ourselves by touching the chords of the unspeakable.

3. The expression of pain through art: a pedagogical perspective of resilience education

In the identity and biographical reconstruction of the Mexican artist, narratives and paintings emerge about her body put to the test by illness, while at the same time interpreting the ability to withstand life's traumas with courage and resilience. The transformation of trauma into something else is certainly a theme that fascinates the viewer: life does not break down in the face of pain, but rather the beauty and vivid colours of clothes and settings prevail in her works. Frida redefines her experience by providing the reader with a narrative that is consistent with her life story, starting precisely with her childhood; she is the first to contribute to the birth of her revolutionary icon, fragile and resilient, hovering between two antithetical forces, for her entire life in limbo, shifting the boundaries of health and illness, love for Diego, political passion and introspective closure, of disguises in men's clothes and traditional

sumptuous and feminine costumes. The transition from one era to the next is for Frida a continuous movement, an interweaving of narrative and identity plots (Demetrio, 1996), in search of the integration of the self. In this regard, Covato writes: 'it is a matter of weaving an identity that can be told first of all to oneself in the course of that complex and in many ways mysterious passage from childhood to adulthood, which can be defined as the passage from biological to symbolic birth' (Covato, 2006, p. 2). In the artist's life story, there are two events in particular that mark turning points and maturation: his terrible accident and his meeting with Diego. In her short life, she underwent numerous surgeries and, each time, in order to overcome her convalescence and recover her vital energy, she clung on to painting (Lowe, 2014).

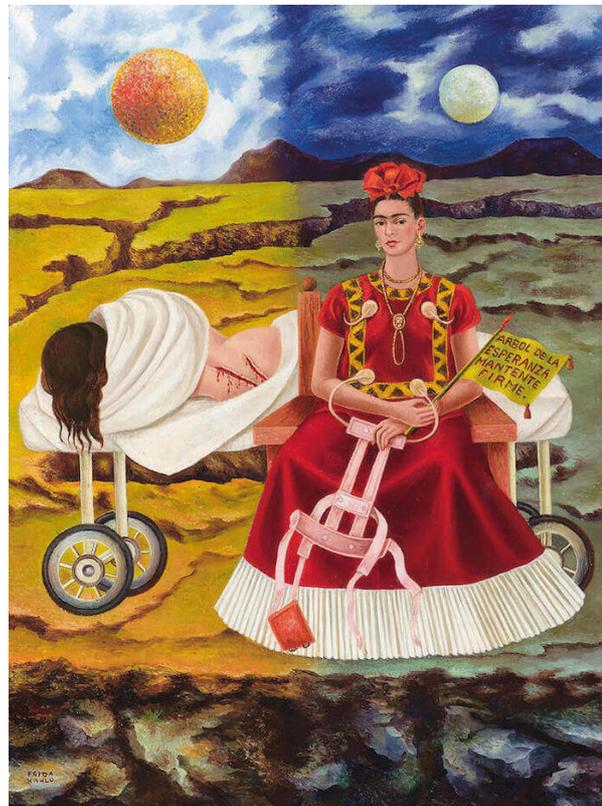


Figure 4. 'The tree of hope remains solid' (1946).

The painting 'The Tree of Hope Remains Solid' (Fig. 4) depicts the image of two Fridas, one lying supine on a stretcher wrapped in a sheet that leaves her bleeding scar uncovered, the other is seated on a bench opposite,

dressed as a *tehuana*, an orthopaedic corset hangs from her intertwined hands on her lap, another supports her back. That armour allows her to stand as her own guardian. Over her who struggles between life and death, the sensual Frida watches over, instilling courage and holding high a flag on which these words fly: 'Tree of hope, stand firm'. Both bed and bench rest, however, on the edge of a ruin, all around the barren, desolate earth opens up into crevasses: on the sick one a bloodthirsty reddish orb glows, on the other a benevolent, regenerative moon shines. The battle Frida is fighting is part of the alternation of light and darkness that rules the world. Frida's painful story of grief continues and is represented by several marriages. Frida wanted that child, at all costs, even against Diego's wishes. In March 1932 Frida became pregnant again, but on 4 July 1932 the child was no more. An abortion had taken him away from her in the night. Frida suffered greatly, then asked to be left with the foetus to see it, touch it, draw it (Jamis, 2005).



Figure 5. 'Henry Ford Hospital (the flying bed)' (1932).

In the painting 'Henry Ford Hospital' (Fig. 5) Frida is portrayed lying on her bed in an empty space with no depth, stretched out then sitting in the middle of nowhere, against the backdrop of an unknown city: alone.

The leaden court of clouds aggravates the desolation accentuated by the overhead shot, which crushes her body. In Detroit, Frida feels estranged and in response evokes nature and machine, sky and earth, around her bed. Against her belly she drapes six red ribbons at the ends of which float: an orthopaedic bust, a foetus, a piece of her pelvis, a motor, a bruised orchid and a snail, symbolising the regenerative power of art. Using the broken pieces of her life, she portrays herself in the act of a spinner who, by weaving a new cloth, puts herself back into the world. Painting is her friend and accomplice and through her works Frida finds the courage to move forward. Frida was also the first artist to accurately portray reproductive images. Her works include depictions of fertilisation, pregnancy, childbirth and reflect her life experiences. The marks are surprisingly accurate and incredibly detailed, considering that these images were painted in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, given the social norms of the time, medical manuals were not accessible to the public and childbirth was a private event attended only by medical personnel. This makes the artist's knowledge and insights even more innovative for the time and interesting to study even today in the medical field and beyond.

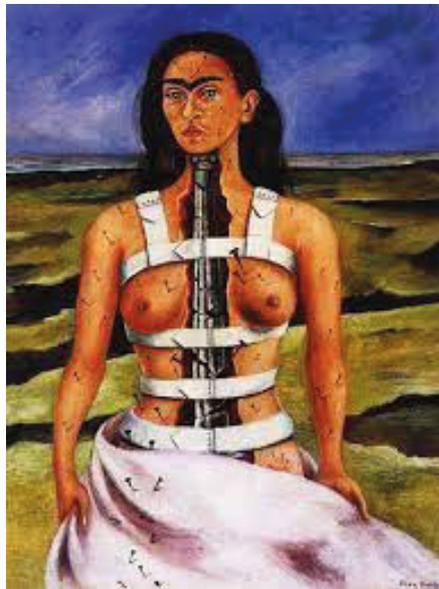


Figure 6. 'The Broken Column' (1944).

The broken column (Fig. 6) is a work that Frida created shortly after undergoing surgery on her spine. This was just one of many medical

procedures she underwent throughout her life to correct the problems that were the result of her pre-accident. In the painting *Frida* is faced with a desolate, fractured landscape that seems to have suffered as much upheaval and trauma as the artist. She has a deep, jagged cleft along the length of her nearly naked torso that allows the viewer to see her spine shown as a cracked and broken column of ionic stone.

The spine appears close to collapse, especially at the base. Nails of various sizes pierce her entire body and face, increasing her suffering.

Tears flow freely down her cheeks. Her breasts are exposed and, although her body is mutilated, her sensuality is still evident. There are also strong echoes of iconic Christian martyrdom in the depiction of nails and sheets. Despite the agony she suffered, a look of strength and defiance can be seen on Frida's face. Although her body is wounded and tortured, it is evident that her spirit is still intact. The symbolic elements of this painting attempt to represent the artist completely alone, accompanied only by the pain and torment of her wounds. Frida's relationship with her disability is well represented in this work, which conveys an unbearable image of pain, immobility, disability and violation of the body. The spinal column is replaced by an ionic column that, while representing one of the immovable icons of power and stability, is cracked and damaged. Although torn at the centre, his body is erect, held together by a surgical brace. There is an immediate and apparent tension between strength and vulnerability.

Frida maintains direct eye contact with the viewer, a conscious choice, placing herself in the position of an active subject, rather than a passive object to be 'looked at'. The artist maintains a position of power here, using her body and her gaze to prevent the portrait from entering the realm of pity. The tears she sheds demonstrate the effects of physical pain, but Frida's paintings have the unique ability to project her strength rather than emphasise weakness. The *Broken Column* is considered by many to be Frida Kahlo's most important painting. It is difficult to imagine a scene that better captures her inner and outer turmoil while also providing an explanation. In turn, this painting has become one of the most researched and analysed works of art of her career and remains one of the highlights of the impressive collection of the Dolores Olmedo Patino Museum in Mexico City.



Figura 7. 'Self-portrait with the portrait of Dr Farill (1951).

Dr Farill, the protagonist of the composition together with Frida Kahlo, was the surgeon who operated on the artist's spine after the shocking accident. In the long series of works created by Frida during her hospital stay, this self-portrait with the doctor was the first to be completed. Frida painted this *la-vage* to thank Dr Farill for saving her life. As stated in this letter: 'Dr Farill, thank you for saving me, you have given me back the joy of living. I am still sitting in a wheelchair and don't know if I will be able to walk again soon. I have to wear a plaster brace, which is a terrible pain, but it helps me hold my spine better. I have no pain, but I am always very tired [...] and, but this is natural, I am often desperate, in an indescribable way. And yet I still want to live. I have already begun to paint, with all my affection, the small picture I want to give to Dr Farill' (Kettenmann, 1994).

After repeated operations, Frida found it difficult to walk, she often moved around in a wheelchair and spent a lot of time indoors. She painted in bed and, when she could, in the studio or in the garden. In her later years, she painted mainly still lifes. From 1951, due to severe pain, he resorted to the use of painkillers, which made his works less precise and accurate at a time when he felt a stronger desire to also express his politi-

cal ideology in his paintings. In the spring of 1953, her first solo exhibition was held in Mexico and was a huge success. On the evening of the opening, Frida was very ill, but she did not want to miss the vernissage. She had herself transported in an ambulance and carried to the gallery, and attended the party drinking and singing along with the public. Before he died in 1954, his physical condition worsened. She suffered a great deal, in 1953 her leg was amputated due to gangrene, she was distraught about all the difficulties she had to go through in her life, such as not being able to have children because of her health condition, exhausted and consciously left the testimony that she did not want to come back to life.

Religion says precisely that after death the soul rises, but despite her strong faith there too Frida rebelled, writing the opposite of her beliefs. She had lived to the full and for the Mexican artist her life had to end there, she wished never to return to the world. Not an easy choice to make when she realised she was leaving for good. "I au-gue that the exit is cheerful and I hope I never return".



Figura 8. 'Viva la vida' (1954).

Before she died, Frida also painted one last painting, one of the few to be signed and dated. Watermelons, some cut in half with the words 'viva la vida', a message to people: enjoy life. A counter-representation of the

living nature, in bright, vivid colours, with red blending with the green and blue of the sky. Symbolic interpretations are varied, but Frida was very devoted to her Mexican culture and the watermelons are symbols of the traditional Mexican Day of the Dead.

On this day, people celebrate the dead by celebrating them and imagining them eating their favourite foods and watermelons. By adding “viva la vida” on a slice of watermelon, the artist is simply wishing eternity to the soul. A testimony to the beauty of life in spite of difficulties, a testimony that Frida leaves not surprisingly a few days before her death, with the symbolism linking her to the festive death with the joyous banquet.

4. Conclusions

Frida Kahlo’s life shows us how suffering, both physical and emotional, can be transformed into vital energy. It teaches us, above all, how the courage to face what makes us suffer can give us new possibilities, never imagined before. For Frida, painting was the preferred language for expressing emotions and freeing herself from pain. This possibility to communicate represents an achievement and a rebirth at the same time. The story of Frida Kahlo’s life is studded with episodes of suffering, but it is above all the story of a person capable of transforming pain into art, difficulties into *joie de vivre*. Art, for Frida, seems to be synonymous with self-care, self-help, the search for that unity that traumatic events put in serious danger. The more we learn about her story through her paintings and writings, the more the question arises: how did Frida Kahlo continue to love, to create, to paint a world full of colour? Her secret lies in having been able to cultivate within herself the seed of resilience, the ability not only to resist difficulties, but also to transform and adapt to changes, however extreme and dramatic, positively reorganising one’s life (Vaccarelli, 2016) without alienating one’s identity. What better example of resilience?

Frida used self-narration (in the classical form of writing and through the use of a complex expressive language such as painting), a tool that has a fundamental function in the therapeutic sphere, because the person who tells herself reinforces her internal world, puts her experiences in order and secures a sense of cohesion and a greater understanding of what is happening to her (Zannini, 2015).

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