



## ART THERAPY: A SPECTRUM OF PARTNERSHIPS

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### Creative Synergy

One of the most useful ideas in art therapy literature was presented by Helen Landgarten and Darcy Lubbers (1991). They challenged readers to find "creative ways" to incorporate art into their particular ways of practicing psychotherapy as art therapy "is synergistic with practically any goal or approach." This wide spectrum of synergies is the key to the current success of art therapy practice and it is critically important to future growth and creative vitality.

A synergy is more than a one plus one combination. It multiplies as a result of interactions between synergistic pairs. In keeping with the primary tenet of Gestalt Psychology, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. When art therapy works collaboratively with another discipline, there are going to be effects that cannot be planned in advance. This type of relationship is the basis of the creative process.

In my experience with art therapy there has been an ongoing tension between those who favor expansionist visions of what the work can be and those committed to a more closely regulated profession. The former view tends to emphasize how art therapy can be adapted to any situation where art is used with people whereas the latter focuses more on exclusively clinical practice. Conflict of this nature is inevitable in every profession. Rather than allow the strife to evolve into hardened opposition, I prefer to look at polarization as a necessary psychological condition. When we approach opposition from the perspective of creative tension, we see different positions as express-

ing the fullness of a situation. The perspectives need one another to exist and when viewed as sources of creative agitation, they form a synergistic pair.

It is the pragmatic and very concrete process of connecting that lies at the base of the appeal and creative vitality of art therapy. The term "art therapy" is itself a joining of interests and disciplines. Once we accept that the process of mixing is at the basis of the professional enterprise, we will, hopefully, become less apt to crystallize the field into a single entity. Rather than striving to eliminate contrary perspectives, we might consider a more creative management of the interplay. The different positions energize and shape one another.

Healing is a process that transforms conflicting forces into a new and more productive relationship. Art does the same thing. It may be useful to apply the healing function of the creative process to a redefinition of art therapy. This re-visioning will, hopefully, enable the profession to make use of all of its resources and conflicts. If we act in a way that corresponds to the creative process, we will stay open and continuously introduce new combinations of art and therapy.

### The Basis of Art

In order for art therapy to sustain its synergistic potential, there must be a vital source from which new connections emerge. Every way of practicing art therapy will benefit if there is strong art basis at the core of the profession's identity. Goals, applications,

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theories and styles of practice are endless and they flow from a mainstream of creation that can never be solidified into an *idée fixe*. When we focus too much on one particular way of being in partnership, we lose the basis for future synergies. Highly specialized practices do not offer a fertile and expansive basis for future creativity. As Edith Cobb wrote, "Overspecialization, which creates rigidity of response, is a formidable threat to any species, occasionally resulting in extinction through sheer inability to change and adapt" (1993, p. 110).

The source of art therapy's influence and attraction to other disciplines is the making of art and the presence of images. If we move too far afield of committed and knowledgeable practice in the studio, we lose the primary process of creation. All the ways of practicing art therapy flow from the studio and return for renewal.

Over the last three decades I have watched thousands of people exploring art therapy as a career path. There is a consistent sense of exploration and new opportunities that form the basis of the attraction. Virtually every person I see approaching art therapy has an interest "in art and something else"—art and psychology, art and social service, art and special education, art and religion, art and children, art and aging, art and community, and so forth. People drawn to art therapy are not satisfied with the exclusively commercial approach to art that permeates much of the society nor do they relish the idea of working in isolation. They choose art therapy over art education because they desire involvement in the depths of the individual psyche—those of the patient and themselves. I have never made these separations between art therapy and art education, but they nonetheless characterize public attitudes.

Art therapy is an extension of an international search for a more meaningful relationship between the maker of art and the images produced. It is also an expression of a yearning for creative community. Art therapy embodies the notion of people working in an in-depth psychological way with the artistic process, images and one another.

Even today after three decades of existence as a professional field, art therapy is constantly being "discovered" first-hand by people through their personal experience and yearnings. Throughout the world people involved in both therapy and creative expression discern art's healing power. As they begin to research this phenomenon, they discover the field of art therapy.

I have a tendency to view art therapy as an eternal function of art with all of our contemporary practices emanating from this continuity. The therapeutic use of art has no single point of origin. It has existed in every section of the world with a diversity that corresponds to the varieties of artistic experience. This indigenous presence is the most important indicator of art therapy's potential. If it has persisted through time as a way of remedying the ills of the human spirit, then it is likely to continue into the future as a vital therapeutic process.

I have always found it useful to view the history of art therapy from two different yet complementary vantage points. The more commonly accepted of the two is the history of twentieth century clinical practice, and the other is the archetypal study of art's therapeutic process. The former perspective is an institutional history of specific professional actions during the modern era whereas the latter focuses on the healing aspects of the artistic experience across the cultural and historic spectrum. When joined, the two vantage points create a synergy that deepens theory and practice. There is a tendency to view the archetypal perspective as archaic and thus irrelevant. Although this criticism may have merit when applied to more highly technical aspects of modern medicine, creative expression and the making of art are among the most enduring human behaviors. Every conceivable application of art therapy requires skillful clinical practice. But I also feel the same sense of primacy for the studio. We need the partnership and a prevailing openness to new ways of practice.

Over the past three decades my techniques, theories and experiments with art therapy have constantly changed, but the process of making art and its therapeutic benefits have remained relatively constant. When I first studied art therapy, the work of Hanz Prinzhorn was my most consistent source of inspiration and guidance. Prinzhorn wrote about the essential elements of the art-making process. He probably has not received the attention he deserves within the United States because he did not write about therapeutic methods and ways of practicing art therapy that are understandable to people within the contemporary culture. Prinzhorn does not tell us what to do in therapy, although he has written one of the most lasting and useful accounts of what art does for the people who make it.

In the first years of my career I was less interested in being told what to do with art made by people in

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