

Art and Therapy

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(This is a copy of a talk that was given at an “Art Salon” sponsored by the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis on October 17th, 2010 in N.Y.. The event involved Art Exhibits by both Michael Robbins, M.A., L.M.H.C., and his father Arthur Robbins Ed.D., who is one of the founders of the Expressive Therapy movement. Father and son each talked about their relationship to Art and therapy. Afterwards, the audience participated with them in a lively dialogue on the subject.)

This is a wonderful event! How many sons can share this kind of creative dialogue with their fathers? I feel very lucky indeed!

Over the past couple of months, Dad and I have been talking about what we each want to share. There are lots of similarities as well as differences. We are also open to what will happen in the space between us as we talk. Who knows what the final result will be! We have the structure of having thought about this for a while, and we are also standing at the edge of the unknown, open to whatever shows up in the space. So even at the beginning of this sharing, we have all of the qualities of a creative act.

A successful art piece and a successful therapy session have many of the same qualities. Since this is an “Art Salon”, lets start with a work of art.

A work of art starts in the body/mind of the creator and lands in the shared space between the artist and the viewer. A successful work of art changes the space into a transformational event that leaves everyone touched and changed in some way. The quality of the transformation differs from one creative event to another depending on what the artist is trying to express.

Each artist brings the dynamics of his or her inner world to the creative process. Every creative expression is an intimate window into the inner life of the artist and an invitation to participate in the particular flow of creative juice that is moving through the creator. Every viewer also brings with him his own unique sphere of possibilities and capacities to resonate (or not!) with the creative event that is being offered. As each viewer enters the space of the creative offering, a new energy is borne of the alchemical mix of the inner life of the viewer and the artist. Sometimes the viewer is totally transformed by the art work in front of him. Sometimes they are left cold. Sometimes they are repulsed. Sometimes they are invigorated or even enchanted. What is important is that they are affected. The more successful the art work the more affected they are.

All of that is rather general. So lets get specific about the art work that I create. What are the guiding principals that are moving both consciously and unconsciously through my body/mind as I am creating? Here are some of the themes that have been with me consistently for decades.

Vitality. When I am creating, I am constantly asking myself if the space that I am creating carries the quality of aliveness. Do the lines “sing”? Are the colors vibrating? Is the texture engaging? Does my body/mind feel alive in the creative act? Is the space redundant or boring? When I am creating something – whether it is a two dimensional piece, a sculpture, a poem, a movement improvisation, or a performance piece, I want to feel more alive at the end of the creative process than I did at the beginning. Often I go to creative work precisely because I feel flat, disengaged, or cut off from something that I can’t even fully name. Creative work gives me a window into unconscious processes, roto-rooters the sludge out of my pipes, and re-establishes a sense of flow and honesty in my body/mind. As I create, I kick my super-ego out of the way, find my instinctual vitality, speak truths that might be too provocative or inappropriate for polite society, and express and integrate ALL of the information that is flowing through my system. Wherever I find the current of my vitality, I wrestle it out of the shadows of my unconscious into the light of my conscious mind.

Dynamic rhythm, holding the push and pull of opposites. Every creative event has to hold a charge. A charge is created as soon as there is positive and negative, yin and yang. The existential fact is that we live in a world of separation. Our solipsistic world is constantly and necessarily shattered by the experience of the Other. It is only in experiences of meditation or deep sleep that we catch glimpses of a non-dual consciousness. The first movement out of this primordial stillness shatters this purity. Every creative act is a mirror of this first movement, an invitation to a dance that contains subject, object and the space between them. This is the first dynamic tension, both in creative life and in everything that happens in life in general. Whenever I create I am keenly aware of this dynamic tension.

In every creative act, I am both aware of the existential fact of separation, and of moving from the world of separation back towards union. The creative acts that hold the most charge for me have an ecstatic quality. I am sure that this has something to do with my early psycho-dynamics. A difficulty that I often encounter is that my creative work can be over-stimulating, too much, or lacking in empty spaces where the eye can rest. The early dynamic between my mother and I, which was highly charged, joyous, and also at times overwhelming and over-stimulating for my immature nervous system is most probably being reflected here. Unconsciously, I am often drawn back to the intensity of this early object relation when I am creating. This unconscious draw towards intense contact and stimulation gets expressed in the colors that I choose, the textures of the material, or the way that I carry my body when I am interacting with the creative space.

This brings us to the dynamic rhythm of structure and chaos, form and flow, emptiness and content. After I have allowed my flow to boil over into the space, it is time to step back, to engage my left brain, to analyze and structure the creative event. Too much chaos creates an anxious, disorganized space. Too much structure, creates a depressed, deadened or disconnected space. A balance of the two creates a space that has both the vitality of instinctual life and the rigorous meaningfulness of a unique creative happening. Siphoning out the noise of extraneous brush strokes, lines of poetry, or physical movements, must be done with the analytical mind. Shaping a creative act into a

form that carries a meaningful charge with elegance and simplicity means making skillful choices. This accent on skillful choices is a deep and spiritual discipline that applies both to art and life. Through my choices I create a particular kind of transformational space that carries a unique charge that is reflective of my state of consciousness at the time of the creative act.

O.K. , so what does all of this has to do with therapy? Lots. As a therapist I am aware of the same dynamics as soon as I enter the space. The key difference, is that the primary energy, the first impulse, is flowing from the client. I am in the receptive role, the viewer if you will, being affected by the creative manifestation of the person or group that I am working with. As I feel the effect of their particular expression of creativity, I then respond to it in a way that helps the two of us or a group, co-create a transformational space.

You might ask how do they express their creativity, as generally I do not ask my clients to paint, sculpt or perform during sessions. (Although I do often use creative modalities, this is only a small percentage of my therapeutic interaction.) They express it through their bodies, in the tone of their voices, in the patterns of tension and relaxation with which they move through a space, by how much or how little energy is in their field, and by the words that they choose and don't choose. All of this creates a resonant field of magnetism and attunement between our nervous systems that is the stuff of a developing healing process. As a therapeutic artist, my job is to make this expression of my clients creativity conscious, to wake them up at each fork in the road and empower them to co-create their world with skill and intelligence. As their field becomes more deeply imbued with wakefulness, they become more skillful partners in co-creating a therapeutic space that is transformational. The more potent the transformational space, the more potential energy is available to reach therapeutic goals.

This transformational space has all of the qualities of a good art piece that I have been describing above. It leaves all the participants feeling more vital and alive than when they entered. At every moment there are important choices to be made by the participants. It is filled with the dynamic tension of subject, object and the inter-subjectivity of the space between. Like all creative acts it is limited by the raw materials. In therapy these are the constraints of the participants ages, the space that the exchange is taking place in, their sexual orientation, the socio-economics of the exchange, their inner development, and many other variables as well. As a therapeutic artist I bring a variety of tools to the creative event that are the equivalent of paints, brushes, canvas, or clay. These tools are the modalities, theories and methods that I have been trained in which create a sphere of unique therapeutic possibilities. Deeper than the particular modalities and methods is the sensitivity and aliveness of my own consciousness and energy field that day. The more awake and conscious I am the more energy and presence I have to bring to our exchange. With these raw materials both the client and I are charged with creating an exchange that will be transformational, creative and healing. If we are successful, both the client and I leave the space feeling a deeper integration and awareness of our unconscious patterns, greater access to our instinctual, libidinal aliveness, and more deeply awake to our choices at every moment and at every level.