

Seized by Beauty

The Imaginal Basis of Art Therapy

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Influenced by the work of both James Hillman and Shaun McNiff, I have been working on applying the perspective of archetypal psychology to the field of art therapy. This has led me to inquire into an imaginal base for practicing art therapy. In this essay, I ask, “What makes for sensitivity or responsiveness to images?” and “What qualities promote a turn or twist in our normal ways of perceiving that encourage us to feel closer to images?” I have also synthesized ideas that not only address these questions, but represent how to come to images with sympathy and sensitivity. These ideas refer to qualities of perception—ways to help us enter into the life of the images. They are: *poetic seeing*, *concreteness*, *love and appreciation*, and *dissolution*.

Poetic Seeing

When I was a child and an adolescent growing up in Bronxville, New York, my friends and I used to frequently visit the grounds at Sarah Lawrence College. There seemed to be a mysterious air surrounding this place. There was a particular spot I went to during each visit, where there was a statue of St. Francis of Assisi. He had birds resting on his shoulders, and a calm, compassionate look on his face. The statue was housed in a small alcove, which made the spot feel even more secretive. Time after time, I felt that this statue was alive. I talked to it, worshipped it. It gave me comfort and solace.

What makes an experience of sensing that objects are alive? Is it only what we project onto them, or is there a relationship occurring between the seer and the object? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that during these moments, life is

vibrant. We find ourselves participating in the world differently. Life takes on a poetic quality, one that stirs the imagination. The poet Karl Shapiro says,

The rational person is least able to understand poetry. He does not perceive, as all other people perceive, including children and primitives, that poetry is a way of seeing things, not a way of saying things. Poetry is “different” not because of meters and figures of speech, but because it is a way of seeing a thing differently. (*Poets Work*, p. 100)

In feeling that the statue was alive, I was experiencing a poetic state of mind, which is the ability to see “differently,” according to Shapiro. To experience something as alive, a switch out of ordinary perception is necessary. For example, when we see an object in our usual or ordinary way, it appears as it is. However, if we can penetrate through the object, past its utilitarian familiarity, we reach into new areas of perception with it. Then it is possible to have a relationship with the object beyond the ordinary. The difference between the two is reflected in Cartesian dualism: the world as dead matter versus the world as ensouled. Ensoulment can be thought of as a stronger degree of attention mixed with a dose of imagination, or what psychotherapist Douglas Belknap has called “realism that shines with another dimension.” John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, says that the poetical, in whatever medium, is always akin to the animistic. Animistic seeing makes it possible to penetrate into images as if they are alive. This is a necessary prerequisite for imagework.

For example, if someone paints a picture

of a red horse, I want to leave my ordinary perception of red horses aside (if I have any), and work towards entering into a relationship with this particular horse. I want to position myself in such a way that the horse can talk to me and suggest to me who and what it is. I really have to believe that the horse has its own kind of aliveness in order to do this. Then I can believe that my soul is interacting with the horse’s soul, and that the interpretation that occurs is based on a relationship between us.

This style of interpretation relies less on intellectualization and more on sensitivity into the aliveness of the particular images. The philosopher/poet, Gaston Bachelard, who has influenced many psychologists, has said,

...the psychoanalyst, victim of his method, inevitably intellectualizes the image, losing the reverberations in his effort to untangle the skein of his interpretations. He understands the image... that’s just the point, he “understands” it. For the psychoanalyst, the poetic image always has a context. When he interprets it, however, he translates it into a language that is different from the poetic logos. (*Poetics of Space*, pp. xx)

Bachelard’s work serves the essential role of reminding us that first and foremost, psychic images have poetic ancestry, and that if we are to regard them as such, we must honour their poetic nature.

Concreteness

In his article “The Poet and the Muse,” Herbert Read finds it strange that there is a distinction between sensation and imagina-

tion. He finds that, more often than not, we do not realize that imagination can be concrete. Artists, crafters of imagination, are completely concerned with materiality and concreteness. They turn their images into concrete form. For those of us who work with the interpretation of images, we might best serve the artist and the art by being concrete and sensuous in coming to meet the images. Many artists mistrust psychologists and critics because they feel that the search for meaning becomes too analytical, distanced, and intellectual; unfortunately, they are often right. To them, psychologists are people for whom the sensual body is often absent. Unless one can feel one's way into shapes and forms that are vividly concrete, one may have a difficult time in seeing art. But when one can perceive the vibrant reality of a colour, or the perfect voluptuousness of a curve in an object, no longer is there a question about meaning. It's only when we're not caught, not engaged, that we want an explanation. For example, when experiencing beauty, do we wonder what beauty means, or are we happy (and blessed) just to be in its atmosphere, just bearing witness to it?

Language used in the interpretation of images should match the specificity and detail of the visual images themselves. Susan Sontag, in her article "Against Interpretation," delineates the possible pitfalls in the interpretation of art. She describes what is needed not to usurp the work of art:

What is needed, first, is more attention to the form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. (p. 12)

Her statement tells us that there is much more to look for besides the content of a work. Atmosphere, or context, is missed when content is given too much attention. Psychology, like art criticism, has been stuck in a narrative genre, looking only for the causes (content) of the psychic material, without regard for its representation or manifestation (form). There has been too much focus on reading works of art only in terms of the artist's life, as biographical statements of pathology.

Recently, immediately following a performance given by performance artist Laurie Van Wieran, I sat in the audience for a question and answer period. Laurie had performed in a dance piece in which she played LaLa, a character she described as "a circus performer—young and bratty, passionate and pathetic." A man from the audience asked Laurie many ques-

tions about LaLa. He wanted to know how LaLa related to Laurie's personal past history; he commented that LaLa seemed infantile and in pain. After having been absorbed in a world distinct from her own, Laurie seemed stunned by his questions. She remarked, "I don't know the answers to your questions—ask LaLa." LaLa, to Laurie, is an autonomous character, the same way that a writer writes the life of a character but isn't that character. The questions that were being asked were too direct, given the timing and circumstance; they killed the mystery of experiencing the uniqueness of the character on her own terms.

In the creative process, many artists talk about forgetting what they have previously learned as a necessary step in seeing more precisely. The artist Kiki Karatheodoris stated, "Part of seeing is forgetting—forgetting what we think we know about the subject, what we have been taught, or what we think we know about drawing itself." Forgetting stops our minds from knowing. At this point, one is confronted with the object itself, and one's knowing is arrested. The more one sits with the image as it is, the more one can see and appreciate it: its voice, tone, texture, and shape appear with authority and autonomy.

What keeps this "being in the presence" of a thing from happening? One artist's reply was, "The fear of losing control." Not knowing can make us feel dumb, but the most extraordinary experiences that I have ever had, in which things were revealed to me, all had the quality of bearing witness, of just being there. Until we can suspend the need for meaning, we can't experience direct revelation. Why can't meaning include sensual, or as Sontag says, erotic responses? Why does meaning, for us, refer most often to content

(history)? Why can't, as Douglas Belknap has said many times, seeing be an end in itself? If it were, we wouldn't always feel the need to "dig deeper" to where the "true" meaning lies. We would trust our visual and feeling capacities as ways of seeing the image. Rudolf Arnheim, in *Toward a Psychology of Art*, said,

We must not be caught by the prejudice that the mental layers most remote from consciousness are the "deepest" ones, and that, therefore, they are the most valuable for artistic creation. (p. 177)

Oscar Wilde expressed the same feeling in a different way when he said, "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (quoted in "Against Interpretation," p. 3). If we trusted our responses more, we might acquire ways of speaking about art that would describe exactly what it is we are seeing and sensing. Staying with this description could be a way into the image; we could enter the image to a point where it would reverberate. Little symbolism is needed when this is done. One's own description itself, as it stays close to the image, enlivens it. Symbolism, on the other hand, takes us away from the particulars of each image, tending to make the particular into the general.

An art therapy student came to me once with a painting made by a four-year-old child. The student said that a therapist was concerned that the child might be depressed because there was a lot of black in the picture. The student wondered if this is something that she should be concerned about. I asked her to describe what she saw in the image, and to express her sense of it. She went on to de-

scribe the big black shape that was covered by green paint, and how on top of the green paint there was red paint. The red paint extended into the blank part of the paper. The red looked particularly energetic and loosely painted. I asked the student to describe the child as she painted. "She was really having fun," she said. We also talked about how, at the age of four, many children love to layer paint, and also to make muddy-looking messes. Is this depression? The student said her gut doesn't think so.

It is not easy to be unarmed before a thing. Something in us leaps to a kind of paranoia. Matthew Lipman has said, "For half a century now we have been exhorted, by Rilke and by Hofmannsthal, by Husserl and by Heidegger, to return to things themselves, but the way to them is difficult." (*What Happens in Art*, p. 65) Perhaps things themselves scare us! Things contain such precision, detail and unique life energy that perhaps we reject that power of life. Mostly, though, I think that we are untrained in regarding things, because we are overtrained in regarding ourselves. We are usually at the centre of our attention; thus, we can't see too far outside of ourselves. A story from James Hillman's article, "Anima Mundi," illustrates this point:

When asked, "How was the bus ride?" I respond, "Miserable, desperate, terrible." But these words describe me, my feelings, my experience, not the bus ride which was bumpy, crowded, steamy, cramped, noxious, with long waits. Even if I noticed the bus and the trip, my language transferred this attention to notions about myself. (p. 85)

In another article by James Hillman that appeared in the magazine *Sculpture* (March-April 1992), he said, "It takes a lot of courage to open your heart to beauty. Now that's a big sentence, but why it is so hard to let yourself be seized, without irony, without making a statement or being part of a contemporary movement?" His question is a good one. In art therapy training, we were, I felt, too concerned with making a diagnosis to the detriment of staying with the image and being seized by it; following it even if we didn't know where it was leading us.

Love and Appreciation

Art's purpose is to inspire, and is a "joy unto itself." Therefore, any method that seeks to appreciate art should have enjoyment as its goal. When we seek to enjoy an image, we are not called to be analytical. The

best we can do is to learn how to enhance our capacity to “drink” in the image. Hans Hofmann called this capacity empathy. He explained that empathy was the primary quality needed not only to produce art, but also to “experience art, to enjoy art, and particularly to criticize art.” (Hofmann, p. 67). In terms of formal art education, empathy is the intuitive faculty to sense the formal and spatial relations of the picture, as well as the plastic and psychological qualities of form and colour. But, even without this formal training in art, art education, art criticism or art, therapy could also rest on empathy—what the picture makes us do, what emotions it evokes in us, as well as precise description of what we see before us. Reacting to images emotionally, and perhaps physically too, would not be as concerned with meaning as it would be with response.

The artist Agnes Martin, a painter in her late 70s, places utmost importance on responding to images. She says,

You must discover the art work that you like and realize the response that you make to it. If you are not an artist, you can make discoveries about yourself by knowing your response to work that you like. Ask yourself, “What kind of happiness do I feel with this music or this picture?” The response to art is the real art field. (“Agnes Martin,” *El Palacio*, Fall/Winter 1989.)

I am struck with her emphasis on the importance of awareness; to how one responds to art work. Even without knowing art history or art criticism, responsiveness is open to everyone. Art education could rest on sen-

sitizing people, allowing them to familiarize themselves with feeling the nature of images, and in giving them encouragement for trusting that as a methodology, or a way “into” the image. Douglas Belknap, referring to my particular interest in painting, has called my tactic “Dream the painting onward,” after Jung’s statement “Dream the dream onward.” We become receptacles for their energy, having become inspired by them. It becomes our responsibility, as therapists, critics, or educators, to carry enthusiasm through ourselves, transmitting what we feel to others. Having allowed the image to have its own personality and vitality, we want to teach others to do this as well.

Poet C. Day Lewis echoes the emphasis on response in this definition of what critics should do: “The critic has one pre-eminent task, the task of easing or widening or deepening our response.” Responsiveness requires participation from the viewer, the ability to be in relationship with the work. James Hillman talks about this as the ability to surrender oneself. When we surrender, he says, we are in a place where we can become stopped by beauty. Being seized by beauty creates a “gasp.” The word “aesthesia” originally means “to breathe in.” He points out that people are reluctant to be affected in this way, as they avoid being moved or touched. By the same token, Suzanne Famljak, of *Sculpture* magazine, states that much of art criticism itself avoids the rapt attention of artistic experience, turning instead to deconstruction or other styles that she claims are “built on the fear of influence.”

Responsiveness allows impressions of the whole image to be felt in one’s entire body. I see this approach as based in the body, be-

cause we are not necessarily thinking about the images. There may be impressions and dialogue taking place, but not analysis. We are sensing the image, feeling its life, receiving it, and responding to it in the ways we feel moved to respond. Perhaps it is this way of approaching images that Susan Sontag was referring to when she called for “not a hermeneutics, but an erotics of art.”

Love is central to the imaginative process. It evokes interest in the image or object. It is a feeling that pulls at one, making it necessary to investigate something, to work at it in order to bring it to life. Art educator Seonaid Robertson, in her book *Rosegarden and Labyrinth*, notes that Stanley Spencer spoke of the necessity for the artist to see his or her subject in a way that would enable him or her to love it. Love, interest, and curiosity lead us into the image.

I recently looked at a photograph of Ansel Adams standing beside his darkroom. His face appeared open and relaxed. I imagined the great love that he must feel for his images, his extraordinary care for them. The love that artists have for their images can teach us all something about non-personal love. Loving or appreciating a thing heals us precisely because we are not concerned with ourselves.

One should love without ownership because non-personal love releases us from ourselves. Paradoxically, we grow larger and beyond ourselves as a result. Robert Frost captured this sense of the creative when he said, “All the great things are done for their own sake.”

Judith, a dancer who is interested in working out a sense of her emotions as opposed to learned techniques, told me about her struggles with illness. She said, “I finally found the proper attitude when I began to make something of my illness.” Instead of trying to fabricate inauthentic movement, or stopping her movement entirely, she decided to work with being ill. What this created for her was a richer emotional vocabulary in her dancing, because she stayed with pain or discomfort. In this way, she showed love, appreciation, or gratitude for what was a given in her life at the time. I’m sure that it was difficult for her to love the illness. Perhaps acceptance is a better word here. Acceptance implies not fighting, not wanting things to be different, or not concealing the illness, but, in a sense, serving it by allowing it to speak.

In an example of giving for the life of “others,” the painter Franz Kline stated,

You don't paint the way someone, by observing your life, thinks you have to paint, you paint the way you have to in order to give, that's life itself, and someone will look and say it is the product of knowing, but it has nothing to do with knowing, it has to do with giving. (Franz Kline, *Art News*, 1981, p. 8)

Painting, to him, is giving—that's beautiful. There's little self-reference in his statement. Giving, as one makes art, enables loving the images to happen. When I make a photograph, I am only interested in realizing the image, articulating it and crafting it well so that its expression can be captured in the truest way.

Dissolution

There is an emptying of ourselves, a humility that occurs before an image. Giving ourselves over to the image, we abandon our own agenda. We adopt the image's point of view, letting our eyes move behind the image's eye. From this vantage point, we see how the image sees and what it sees. We can feel the world that it inhabits. There are two things that happen in this type of experience: dissolution of the ego takes place, and as a result of this, there is an immersion into the image.

Immersion is like being a sponge to experience—we become saturated with whatever the theme or mood of the experience is. We can absorb and try different points of view when we are immersed. We become influenced and shaped by the phenomenon; for example, when a potter works with clay, he or she may literally have to sit and feel the clay, fondle it, and speak with it for a long time be-

fore knowing what shape is to emerge. There is great value in this kind of submergence. It makes us even closer to images by being dissolved into them. This is the way that a dream feels. During the dream, there is no "I" and then "it." I am in it, and can't get out of it until it releases me.

It is because of this immersion that detail, precision, form, and other necessary elements of art can be seen so accurately. We know what an image is and what it needs when we can feel into its nature. Feeling its nature, we work from within our experience in a dialogue with the art work. Helen Frankenthaler states, "When one made a move toward the canvas surface, there was a dialectic and the surface gave an answer back, and you gave it an answer back..." (*Frankenthaler*, p. 36) In this statement we can recognize how absolutely alive the canvas was for Frankenthaler. It was not just making strokes on a canvas: her canvas talked to her in quite an extraordinary and fascinating way. She was highly receptive to the nature of the paint and waited for its answer to her questions. She was in an active relationship with the canvas. The object, canvas, etc, may disapprove if one does something to it that it does not deem fitting to its composition. We have to be sensitive to these nuances, for these are the qualities of aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgment is hard to define. That is because it is based on a relationship that one has with things in given moments. Knowing when to add more colour, when to end, or when to insert a new figure are all decisions that are made as we relate and actively engage the object. There is an immediacy to these decisions. Engaging the object may take many forms—listening to it, talking to it, staring at it, touching it. What all of these things have in common is caring

for it in some way, or attending it, as the old word *therapeia* connotes.

Conclusion

The psyche speaks poetically; when we apply a poetic understanding to our images, we are in closer connection with the way that Psyche expresses herself. We have more of an opportunity to be closer to her speech. When we speak diagnostically, we have less of an opportunity to be close to Psyche's speech, because she herself doesn't speak in those terms; they are not inherent to her native vocabulary. Poetic understanding leads us to the use of metaphor, puns and analogies. It is essential to use these tools of language in working psychologically because what we do in image work is to make likenesses between things. For example, visiting the moon as an image may be like going to a place that is different from the earth. We don't take the moon as a literal place, but as a metaphoric one. Engaging in poetic language makes available to us the richness and depth in language; possibilities of language become more expansive with poetic speaking and listening.

To be concrete means to be descriptive. Particularity is to be favoured over generality. Detail and precision, either in drawing or painting an image, or in verbally expressing an image, are important to characterizing the image. In art therapy, when interpreting a picture, if we are working out of concreteness, we will describe exactly what we see in the image. We will try not to label the image, but to stay with the details. We will also try to recount the experience we had while making or viewing the picture.

Loving an image will evoke a caring feeling towards it. When we care about a thing, we treat it respectfully, with honour and dedication. Caring for one's images makes us appreciate them, and enables them to appreciate us. Loving the psyche and its productions will give us a feeling of respect for the experiences that it brings to us.

Dissolving ourselves in an image allows us to become closer to the image. Closeness to the image allows us to feel into its nature, to feel what kind of world the image is evoking. Dissolution also helps put subjectivity and self-concern aside, allowing immersion into the image to take precedence over personal stories about the self. In both dissolution and immersion, loss of subjectivity or personalism is experienced. The focus is on reading the image and trying to decipher what it is telling us in all of its rich, mysterious, archetypal language.

These qualities of perception—poetic seeing, concreteness, love and appreciation, dissolution—increase our sensitivity and responsiveness to images. They bring the image alive and bring us closer to it. To practice art therapy on this imaginal basis will enable us to be “seized by beauty” and truly open to the aesthetic nature of our work.

This article was previously published in CRE-ATE: Journal of the Creative and Expressive Arts Therapies Exchange, Volume 4, 1994. Minor editorial changes have been made.

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