

The Healing Power of Art Therapy & the Imaginal:

A conversation with Mimi Farrelly-Hansen, LPC, A.T.R.

Margaux Laughlin

The interweaving of art, spirituality, religion, and healing appears in many indigenous cultures and wisdom traditions. Cave-paintings and petroglyphs attest to humanity's earliest urges towards image-making. The devotional painting of Hindu artists, the illuminations in the Book of Kells, the sandpaintings of the Navajo, Buddhist thangka painting, the shamanic art of the Huichol; each reveal how art, spirituality, and healing are intimately related and that the very act of image-making unifies people across time and contexts. Art therapy, particularly transpersonal art therapy, may be seen as a modern emergence of an ancient tradition; the use of art and creative processes in the service of healing.

This increasingly relevant modality found its emergence in the early twentieth century, when Carl Jung developed his active imagination techniques. Accessing images from the unconscious,¹ his landmark work of drawing and dialoguing with client's dream images informed the foundations of modern art therapy.¹ Margaret Naumberg, Florence Cane, and Edith Kramer built upon these foundations and pioneered the discipline of art therapy by integrating psychoanalysis with studio art, education, and psychotherapy.²

Art therapy is highly effective with children, adolescents, adults, families, and elders alike. Clients seek out and are referred to treatment for a variety of issues ranging from normal neurosis, mental illness, eating disorders, grief work, trauma, anxiety, cancer,



MIMI'S BIOGRAPHY

Mimi Farrelly-Hansen is the founder, former director and faculty member of the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology and Art Therapy graduate program at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. She has provided art therapy services to children, youth and adults in a variety of outpatient settings for over twenty years. Currently, she combines a small private practice with participation in a community-based art program for persons with severe and persistent brain disorders. Mimi continues to hone her skills as a visual artist. Her book, *Spirituality and Art Therapy*, was published in 2001. Her poems and monoprints appear in *Portrait of the Artist as Poet*, due to be released in spring 2006.



spiritual issues, etc. Art therapists may practice privately or work as part of a clinical team in a variety of settings (mental health, rehabilitation, medical, educational).³ Sessions are tailored to a client's unique needs and can take many forms. Some therapists adopt an "art as therapy" approach, in which clients make art in a non-clinical studio setting. The process of art-making itself is recognized as intrinsically therapeutic.² Edith Kramer, who first developed this approach, emphasized the importance of sublimation in artmaking as a way of "transforming emotional material into fully formed images."²

Other therapists may adopt an "art-based psychotherapy" approach, in which a counseling session may involve traditional talk therapy accompanied by art interventions that deepen the inquiry and help clients explore the issue in a non-verbal way. The art therapist must know how different media can evoke different responses in clients, and thus offer appropriate materials. For example, painting on large paper tends to be more opening and elicit deep effects, while working with clay can provide grounding, structure, and support. Central to all art therapy experiences is working with the client's response to art as a reflection of self. The American Art Therapy Association lists some of the benefits of this modality: "Through creating art and talking about art and the process of art making with an art therapist, one can increase awareness of self, cope with symptoms, stress, and traumatic experiences, enhance cognitive abilities, and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of artistic creativity."³

One of the pioneers of integrating a spiritual or transpersonal approach with art therapy is Mimi Farrelly-Hansen, LPC ATR. A practicing art therapist for over twenty years, Mimi has worked with adolescents, children, and adults addressing a variety of issues. Founder of the Art Therapy graduate program at Naropa University in Boulder Colorado, she helped create a unique curriculum within the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology department, which integrates traditional western psychology with contemplative practice, using art as a primary healing modality. She is also a practicing artist, exhibiting her work and continuing "to do art that is challenging personally, that leads me, that pushes me to my own truth." I sat down with Mimi to discuss her perceptions and insights about the healing power of art and image-making.

Absolute conviction in the healing power of any modality is usually born of one's own subjective experience. Mimi candidly shared how meaningful art in a therapeutic context has been for her personal journey of healing. She struggled with bulimia as a young woman, which in part led her to this profession. It was suggested to her that scribbling with charcoal in a large pad of paper might have a therapeutic effect. With little prior experience in the visual arts, Mimi began filling sketchbooks with marks whenever she



felt the urge to act out her addiction. "The newsprint pad became sort of this self-soothing place, a containing place, and a place where, curiously, I had no emotion about what I drew. Again and again, feeling upset, confused, angry, scared...you name it, I would go to my basement art table, get out charcoal sticks and begin to make marks, random marks, intense. After filling one, two, three pages, I would feel some relief, close the pad and go on about my life in a calmer frame of mind."

Eventually, these abstract, pressured outpourings became more graphic, prompting Mimi to show them to a counselor since there were no art therapists in Colorado in the mid-seventies. She was assured that the drawings were actually a sign of health, rather than the pathology she feared. The counselor offered ongoing support as witness and companion for her creative work. Looking back, Mimi is full of gratitude for how those seemingly unconscious scribbles so accurately communicated her inner turmoil at a time when words failed. This therapeutic experience with art offered not only a path of personal healing, but also a purposeful life path/vocation that has continued to nurture her and many others.

In helping to shape the evolving branch of transpersonal art therapy, Mimi often finds a concrete definition to be a bit elusive. Being frequently asked this question is what inspired her to create the book, *Spirituality and Art Therapy; Living the Connection*. During our interview, she reflected on how she would

define transpersonal art therapy at this juncture:

Transpersonal art therapy is an aspect of transpersonal psychology, which is, in and of itself, a bridge discipline connecting 100 + years of the advances and understandings of western psychology with thousands of years of teaching about happiness and ethics and the moral life and what makes people feel fulfilled...all described in wisdom traditions from around the world. I see the transpersonal movement, in psychology as a whole and in art therapy, as an attempt to marry those two bodies of knowledge, western psychology and world wisdom teachings. Sort of standing on the shoulders of existential and humanistic approaches, and reaching for the broadest possible definition of what it is to be human.

I think of how my intake sheet for clients has changed over time, to where I now ask people about how they're doing in body, mind, emotions and spirit.....actually asking clients about their spiritual resources, what gives them hope and meaning in life, what helps them feel connected to something larger than their own problems. Throughout our field, I notice more attention paid to aspects of art making that artists have commented on for centuries: things like present centeredness, mystery, surrender, play, transformation, community, ritual. Transpersonal art therapists also tend to welcome other holistic practices like meditation, breathwork, guided imagery, or body-centered therapies.

The transpersonal and healing qualities of art are implicitly and explicitly acknowledged by those who

make art; they may speak of the relaxing quality of using their hands or of the calmness that comes over the mind and body. Anyone who has ever centered a lump of clay on a potter's wheel, or felt the sensuous quality of oil paint, knows that making art is intrinsically pleasurable and calming. Even if no 'finished' work is produced, simply handling the materials and exploring one's creative process can be "a way to come into the present moment, to kind of quiet oneself and just be relaxed." While some may not describe the experience as spiritual, there are inherent aspects of the creative process that transcend the normal boundaries of self. Mimi describes how artmaking may be seen as a transpersonal event:

How many artists know what it is to lose time, to just disappear into the moment? And thank goodness we've learned how to do that, and that's a transpersonal event. I think that the whole idea of surrendering the "small I/small self" to something larger... You can consider that larger "something" to be Spirit or God...however you name it. But it can also be a surrender to the creative process, where you just get out of the way and the painting paints itself. And you don't really know how you got there, except that it happened; you were just going to the next color, the next mark. Something was flowing through you. So I think that process is of a very transpersonal context. Most artists wouldn't consider themselves transpersonal (it's such a ponderous term!), but they might refer to the mysterious, even mystical, path of creativity, of how they tuned in to the painting or sculpture, let themselves be led by it and were amazed at where it let them.



Making art in a therapeutic context provides a means for self-inquiry; this is one of the reasons art therapy can be so effective. Because images serve as psychological mirrors, art can be used for gaining self-awareness and cultivating compassion for oneself through understanding. Jung said the purpose of therapy is making the unconscious conscious; that awareness itself is curative.¹ Images that spontaneously surface during artmaking can reveal the unconscious, offering information and insight to our conscious awareness. Mimi often begins her time in the studio by asking herself "What do I most need to understand about what's going on right now?" She believes the images help us better understand ourselves, often providing insights that are non-linear and startling. Sometimes that encounter with the self can be shocking and requires trained assistance; in her role as therapist, Mimi has learned the importance of humility and restraint in such circumstances.

Frequently, things will come out in an image that the client's not ready to see.... So that has taught me to be very cautious about this whole business of interpretation, and to wait for the client to wonder if this could mean that. As opposed to me saying, "Well, what do you think about that?" Because I believe an unsettling or shocking image might need to be held in that metaphoric space... Down the road, when the time is right, the client will go back to that and there might be another image that's similar. The earlier image will come back and the client will say "How interesting, I did that a year ago! And now I can see this and I'm remembering that; I'm wondering if it's more about this?" And they do it. I might ask a question, "So

what do you make of that, the fact that you did this a year ago? What might that suggest?" So I can ask that much. But it's made me pretty cautious about saying what I think.

There's that old book *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, about a young girl who had severe mental illness. Her therapist went on vacation and this other psychiatrist stepped in and offered all these brilliant interpretations and it was not enough, it didn't touch her. She said the more he did that, the more distant she felt. ... It didn't mean anything. It was him trying to be clever and wise and brilliant. So I think it's a very fundamental lesson. The more we work with people and their images, the more hunches we develop; we have a repertoire of images. But we honestly don't know what it all means to this client.

Art therapy is uniquely suited to facilitating a meeting with one's self because the language of the psyche (soul) is image-based and pre-verbal.⁴ Shawn McNiff writes that the "psyche manifests itself through images."⁴ Artmaking allows us to reach deep levels within the psyche because the creative process often bypasses the intellect. Information may be revealed in an image that the client wasn't even aware of, and the creative process can sometimes evoke powerful emotions unexpectedly. Mimi feels it's important for art therapists to be aware of their responsibility in keeping their clients safe and knowing how to appropriately assess a client's needs.

One of the strengths and one of the vulnerabilities of art therapy, is that it does bypass defenses so quickly. Because of that, I feel responsible to not



offer new clients or more fragile clients materials that are too opening. I wouldn't offer a new client red and black paint and large paper..... The larger the paper and bodily movement, the deeper the breathwork, the more the effect. It's part of my job to regulate how much I'm evoking within someone and to teach clients how art can help them contain these powerful feelings. I take that very seriously, and I think that's one of the things that distinguishes art therapists from therapists who use art. We know that much more about the whole regulatory capacity with media. We know it from our own experience; there's a reason why we've chosen small paper and colored pencils one week and another week we really want to paint large, need to paint large, need to push ourselves to get past that controlled place. We know how those places feel.

So when we work with others, I think we have a responsibility to begin cautiously, to help people "resource" themselves...identify their current sources of strength, support and, if necessary, create additional ones. Once those resources are in place, then we can move into looser media and more sensitive emotional material. We can help a client explore the dark, shadowy corners of the psyche, wade into the muck to retrieve parts of themselves which have long been hidden or locked up. And here's another area where art therapy excels... in our tolerance for chaos. We've made a lot of messes in our creative journeys and we're not afraid to let clients go there, once we've assessed their strengths. We know the side of ourselves that likes things to be tidy and aesthetically pleasing and the side that needs to cathart on paper. We've experienced firsthand how out of the mess comes the next stage of clarity, the next stage of insight, the next guiding moment. You can't hide the mess; mess is part of our psyche.

Mimi shares an illustrative example from her early volunteer work, prior to any formal training in art therapy. This story about a young child reveals how provocative materials can evoke powerful responses in clients, opening up material to be released. It also points to another healing power of art; its storytelling potential. Telling a story in images about a trauma or wound can often evoke spontaneous healing. Simply giving the image a space to express itself through artwork may be an energetic release. Sometimes artwork is the only place people have to hold their stories, especially for young children with limited verbal capacities, as revealed in the following case. Mimi describes an art therapy session with a four-year old boy who had been placed with a foster family. She was told little about him; he had a history of mutilating



animals and it was hoped that art therapy would help address his suffering.

I was sort of fumbling along, but he seemed to like building sculptures with scrap wood and Elmer's glue. He made all these great constructions and created stories about them, so it was sort of like play therapy... But one day I thought "Well, wouldn't it be nice if he painted these?" So I asked him which color he wanted and he wanted red. I didn't have any warning bells go off in me. So I got him a smock and a brush, put out a container of paint and his sculpture on a drop cloth. He starts painting red, and all of a sudden he is painting with a lot of energy and I'm noticing it. Then he gets red on his hands and he has red hands; he starts painting his hands. And so, almost intuitively, I grabbed a piece of paper so it wouldn't go on the wall or whatever it was headed.

Then he put his hands down and he talked about these bloody hands. Just totally intuitively, thank God, I said "Tell me about the bloody hands. Is there a story? How did the hands get bloody?" And so he tells me this whole story; this little kid has watched his dad get shot in a murder. Nobody told me that, so I didn't know where we were heading. And I was just shaken by the drama of the story for this tiny little guy; there I was with these bloody hands, not knowing what I was

doing in particular. But the interesting thing was after he had done that and I wrote it down and read it back to him and said "Do I have this right? You tell me." that he then calmed down. Just calmed down. He left; his foster mom came and picked him up.....The mutilating of animals totally stopped after that, after one time. He had a way to tell the story, a way to express it.

What is the underlying source of healing in art therapy? While Chinese medicine speaks of Chi, and chiropractic speaks of innate intelligence, some may say that the underlying energetics of art therapy is accessed through our imaginal capacity. Art therapy engages the imagination, which has an intrinsic urge towards wholeness. Art therapy can be viewed as a therapy of the imagination; seemingly negative or disturbing imagery is often a catalyst for profound healing.⁴

"I don't want to just dismiss these images, because I think they're so potent. It's the imaginal; the imaginal has a huge capacity for health." Mimi believes the source of healing in art therapy lies with "the image-making capacity we have as human beings that is quite remarkable and mysterious. But I know too, at least in my own understanding, that it's sort of like the imagination is in the service of prana, of a greater energetic capacity." When held in this way, art therapy can be understood as sharing the same goal of any healing system; that is, supporting people in accessing their own innate impulse towards healing and wholeness. One of the tenets of transpersonal psychology is to avoid pathologizing clients and instead affirm their innate health; a therapist helps the client make contact with that core within themselves.⁵

In a sense, a therapist's true role is to help the client recognize the illusion of limiting stories and

beliefs, while affirming what is true; that each person is truly whole, complete, and perfect.⁶ Art therapy offers a transformative opportunity; we can use our creative capacity to invent and choose images that affirm who we really are. "To use Buddhist terms, people are innately healthy. I think the desire for health, the impulse to health is part of being human. Whether I even mention the word spiritual, that's really how I hold the [therapeutic] relationship and how I hold art-making."

Working with people in this context has offered Mimi "such an amazing glimpse into how people make sense of their lives and their suffering." Being invited into a person's inner life through their imagery is truly a gift; and one which Mimi holds with deep reverence.

References

1. Chodorow J, *Jung On Active Imagination*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
2. Malchiodi C, *Handbook of Art Therapy*, Guilford Press, NY, 2003.
3. American Art Therapy Association, <http://www.arttherapy.org>
4. McNiff S, *Art As Medicine; Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1992
5. Cortwright B, *Psychotherapy and Spirit; Theory and Practice in Transpersonal Psychotherapy*, SUNY, Albany, 1997.
6. *A Course in Miracles*, Foundation for Inner Peace, Mill Valley, 1992.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaux Laughlin, BA, is an artist and graduate student in transpersonal counseling psychology and art therapy at Naropa University. Prior to her graduate studies, Margaux earned a bachelors degree in integral psychology and consciousness studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, as well as a certificate in clinical energetic herbalism from the Blue Otter School of Herbal Medicine. She presently teaches art classes to young children in Boulder, Colorado, where she lives with her husband.

