

My healing journey with its many setbacks and wrong turns has definitely been facilitated by the creation of art. Creating art proved a less threatening way to communicate experience that was not easy to put into words because it provided a safer context to explore and process. It has facilitated memory integration, contributed to acceptance and understanding of how my beginning has influenced my later life experience, choices and decisions. It also allowed others' debilitating stories to become visible again or to come to conscious awareness once more. Apart from helping me address and contain difficult experience like grief, anger, fear or resentment, I have found that art can also help us assert our individualism and increase self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. Hagood (2000) supports that 'involving survivors in the art process in itself tends to improve self-esteem'. One school of art therapy, the humanistic approach, suggests that 'the process of art making is an opportunity for self actualization and it has a transformative quality' (Malchiodi, 2007).

However, apart from my personal experience I was able to further witness the healing and empowering potential of creativity or art making while working in an outreach programme during my internship experience with a 40 year old woman. She lived in an independent flat below her sister's house, where she remained in bed most of the day totally depending on her sister's aid and support or that of the people from the outreach programme (Assisted Living- Βοήθεια στο Σπίτι) during the hours that her family were not home to help her with basic needs like eating, bathing, dressing and so on. My supervisor gave me a description of her condition and family history. I did not receive any formal diagnosis or assessment so I went along hoping I would figure it all out on the way. I was more or less required to help her during lunch time and then provide activities to keep her occupied. It proved both a rich and interesting experience. One lesson that has really sunk in now is that it is wise to leave room for one's own evaluation of a situation or person to evolve along the way without depending 100% on others' assessments or judgments. I found that her emotional intelligence was more advanced than had expected and despite her difficulties with speech, she would continually surprise me and she acquired a richer vocabulary as time went by. The titles she gave to some of her artwork were amazing, often had a sense of humor and seemed to reflect deeper understanding. In a nutshell, during the summer I worked with her I

witnessed how art making gradually broadened her lived experience, increased her self confidence and capacity to reflect on her condition and created pleasurable experiences for both of us. Art making became a means for her to communicate inner experience and the feelings she could not verbalize and she seemed to rise above her physical limitations and disabilities when she engaged in art making. The creative process and product created a basis or context from within which we could discuss various issues. I also think that during the process she experienced a sense of flow as she got absorbed in the activity and it also provided relaxation. ‘Creating art may be helpful in tapping the body’s relaxation response, a calm confident state of being associated with perceptions of health, wellness and happiness’ (Benson, 1996, cited in Malchiodi, 2007).

Creating art both when I visited her, but also when she was alone, reduced her boredom levels and provided her with an interesting activity during the endless hours she spent in bed. We discussed how it uplifted her mood, allowed her to express distress in a safe context, but drawing, sticking and cutting also helped her improve her right hand dexterity. Another interesting observation which I have observed both in my personal experience, but also with others, is that narratives – not only our own but those told to us by others’ – can creep into or inhabit our creations, without initially our realizing it. These stories often found their way in her pictures and sometimes we discussed this. Additionally, because we engaged in both free drawing and more directive activities due to her difficulties I often cut out images for her, helped her stick them on her collages or assisted her with her drawing by verbally directing her when she asked for guidance in relation to the form of an object or figure. So some of the art pieces of the more directive activities could be considered co-creations only in the sense that I supported her in expressing what she needed to express. Edith Kramer refers to therapists’ assistance as the art therapist’s ‘third hand’. Malchiodi suggests that ‘the third hand can be summed up as the art therapist’s ability to facilitate a person’s artistic process [such as strategically helping the individual mix paints for a desired colour or intervening at critical moments during art making]. To me, the “third hand” exemplifies our modern-day interpersonal neurobiology paradigms of attunement and empathy’, as well as, Daniel Siegel’s over-arching concept of “mindsight” and Daniel Goleman’s ideas about “focus” and emotional intelligence (*from psychologytoday.com posted on Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014*).

This exchange and corporation facilitated communication and trust building. She liked my reading stories to her and this became a routine, which evolved into the type of assisted art making mentioned above. More specifically, we created drawings of children's stories and fairy tales, which she often adapted and provided happier endings and which provided an opportunity for talk therapy. For instance, we worked on Hans Christian Andersen's story *the Little Matchbox Girl* and provided a different ending, which helped us tap into difficult emotions and concerns and also discuss the importance of love and hope. In addition, this artwork was displayed on the walls of her room and on her fridge, which personalized her room and created a more colourful and stimulating interior. Finally, her drawings were bound into books, which she could show others and feel that her work was appreciated, which as a result boost her self esteem and she seemed to beam with satisfaction.

Finally, I will provide another different example of an extreme case of disability and neglect. This took place in 2008, I think, while I was doing some voluntary work in a children's hospital in Athens. This little girl had been abandoned by her parents and was taken care of by the nurses who had also given her a name, as I was told. She seemed about 10, although no one knew for certain, did not speak, walk and she lacked dexterity, seemed to be in pain, did not eat much and often had tantrums. The first time I saw her she was lying in a baby's cot and she seemed spaced out. She broke my heart and even as I write this today emotions and compassion move inside me. I worked with Maria for a little while. It was not easy, but it deeply brought home to me that even beneath apparent apathy or out of control behaviour, even when there seems no possibility or hope of getting through to someone this may not be the case at all and acceptance, patience and love can shift things, even a little. Feeding her was difficult. She'd often spit the food. Changing her nappy was a similarly difficult event. So I thought that just being patient and consistent might play a regulatory role and win her trust. She would spit the food and I would simply use wet hankies to wipe her, over and over again, and I soon found that this soothed her. Gradually she started making eye contact and smiling. She soon also calmed down and was happy when her nappy was changed. I would then praise her, using simple sentences and lots of positive adjectives. I also used her name every time I addressed her. She didn't enjoy story telling so I introduced art material. Initially, she would throw the markers or paper on the floor so I started drawing or making

simple things like flowers or hearts and little animals without trying to engage her. Very soon she would calm down and concentrate on what I was doing. Then I hung the products on the wall or on the cot railings. She started holding the art material giving me what I asked for each time. In time she would stick things and hold my hand. To my surprise, she started repeating words, pointing to the right object and responding when I called her name. After a while, each time I left she would grip my hand and cry and often she would display extreme frustration. It was painful to watch her as I tried to console her telling her that I would return, but it was clear that she could understand more than was believed and that she was capable of feeling anxiety separation and much more.

I recently came across a copy of one of Marina's books of drawings and then a few days ago during my loving-kindness meditation practice the experiences described above surfaced vividly out of the blue as it seemed. I have seen neither Marina nor Maria since, although I have learnt from her family that Marina is doing much better and that she can walk and I am really happy for her. I do not know in what place Maria may be, but I hope that her suffering has been reduced and that she is safe and taken care of in whatever context she may find herself in. As I would normally do during a loving kindness practice, I send them both my love and lots of positive wishes.