

Editorial

The Art of Liberation: Carrying Forward an Artistic Legacy for Art Therapy

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Art as a force that contributes to freedom from oppression—what a hopeful message for art therapists today! Although art alone cannot transform injustice, the experience of art plays a powerful role in shaping consciousness and freeing the life force. Survivors of the Nazi concentration camp at Terezin found life and freedom with their art teacher Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, whose historical influence on art therapy is recounted in this issue by Linney Wix. From the horrors of their confinement, we can only imagine the ill-fated children gazing out a window with Dicker-Brandeis and contemplating the distant mountains. “Look, children! Look at how *beautiful* they are!” one survivor recalled her saying (Myer & Myer, n.d.). “Behind those mountains is freedom...”

And so they saw what she saw, and opened themselves to the beauty of the flowers she placed before them to draw or marveled with pleasure at a postcard of an old masterpiece their teacher showed them that had life in it still. The children learned to observe and to draw with sensitivity all that the art encounter awakened in them. Art was not merely a diversion from the brutality of their daily lives but was an act of liberating their feelings and confronting their experiences. Art strengthened the children of Terezin by helping them access their own images, perceptions, and experiences—something that the oppressor could never rob from them.

The Art of Liberation

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis’s artistic legacy lives on today in the experiences of countless people who turn to the emancipatory spirit of art against that which stifles and oppresses them in body, mind, and spirit. Artistic practice carries them beyond the narrow confines of life to a feeling of connection with all others who are struggling, loving, and breathing just as they are. Studying a photograph in art therapy, an elderly woman breathes life into the memory of her long departed husband. Vivid red graffiti conveys a youth’s passion or anger, the imprint of an identity, or the graphic reminder of blood spilled on the sidewalk. A child makes a discovery one day when she climbs up a narrow ladder into a gnarly thicket of branches heavily laden with sun-ripened apples. Forever after her per-

ception of how to “draw a person picking an apple from a tree” is revised and transformed.

We learn about the world solely through our perceptions but for these to be authentic we must first rid ourselves of ideas that distort them. Whatever the reasons for confinement, a captive is locked in and the world is locked out, locked away, and ultimately shut down. Any potential within that person lies dormant. The tool of release is human touch or empathy, a life-giving imperative that Dicker-Brandeis brought to her students from her own training in aesthetics. To appreciate a work of art, the barriers that separate the observer from the work must be crossed. Empathy is a matter of “gliding one’s feeling into” the dynamic structure of the object of contemplation using the perceptions of one’s own muscles (Buber, 1947, p. 96). Likewise, to see the truth of love as Dicker-Brandeis did, we must be free of the imprisoning processes that separate or destroy human life and disintegrate the world around us (Krishnamurti, 1993).

The art of liberation arises from the imagination’s struggle against the forces of fear and ignorance that enslave us. Throughout history, this struggle has been “one of the leading political processes that push forward the liberation of the human spirit by rescuing and creating new territories of freedom” (Escobar, 1990, p. 86). All over the world today artists are using the tools of empathetic imagination and global communication to witness the struggle for justice. Artists Against Apartheid, an international alliance committed to equal rights, sponsors art events for children living in Gaza who are recovering from the trauma of last year’s 23-day assault on their refuge camp home. “We are humans just like you” is the message of solidarity behind the “Longest Letter”—a 2625 meter section of the Separation Wall in Palestine that is being transformed with painted messages from around the world to strengthen hope for those trapped within its borders. The Combat Art Project, featured on the website of the International Art Therapy Organization, invites veterans of war to reclaim their uniforms through papermaking and turn them into works of art. And there are thousands more: Artists Against Racism, Youth Art Connection, Taking IT Global, Art for AIDS International, freeDimensional, Apathy is Boring,

Arts Against the War, as well as Art Without Borders, Artists Without Borders, Art Therapy Without Borders—we are witnessing a global revolution of the art spirit that is striving to be free.

The Changing Borders of Art and Art Therapy

Art is moving beyond the narrow confines of institutional health care as well. We are seeing a cultural shift take place as more people are replacing formal health care with health-promoting alternatives in new locations and environments. They may be sensing an interpersonal void in professional medicine, which out of economic necessity prioritizes the needs of large populations and tends to treat patients as objects. The restrictions placed on formal health care can mirror the psychology of captivity, producing barriers to empathy and a desire to medicate or numb perceptual awareness, to forget, to look but not see. In an effort to preserve the humanistic core of health care, in this issue, Geoffrey Thompson describes the “gallery model” of art therapy that embraces patients as artists and reframes the typical roles, identities, and self-defining experiences of the psychiatric hospital within which the gallery is located. Thompson argues for the cultivation of an artistic sensibility in patients and art therapists that echoes the artistic legacy of Dicker-Brandeis, with his assertion that “art provides perceptual freedom and engages the whole person in...pursuing beauty” (p. 160).

The liberating meditation that art promotes an empathetic relationship between the self and inner and outer realities seeking validation. Art demands this introspection and often, as well, a confrontation with the very existence of the self. Thus it is no surprise that adversity can free the imagination, for surely artistic freedom begins with the freedom to claim and experience our identities (Escobar, 1990, p. 92). Thompson makes this case for psychiatric patients whose identities are liberated in the gallery from the limiting confines of diagnoses. Holly Feen-Calligan and her coauthors in this issue trace the history of dollmaking as a uniquely empathetic art form for strengthening identity in the recovery from grief.

Whether drawing from the imagination or from careful observation, art making utilizes cognitive, perceptual, and emotional processes. Art therapists have long studied how these processes may be assessed and put to therapeutic uses. Another artistic legacy in art therapy is gathered and presented in this issue with a retrospective review of Rawley Silver’s 40 years of research developing the Stimulus Drawing Task and Draw A Story assessments. Also in this issue, Daiki Kato and Miyako Morita show us an expansive world created by Japanese youth from Lego blocks within the tiny confines of a 25 cm square of green plastic.

What Liberates Art Therapy Today?

People construct their life spaces through cultural and social milieus. Like any world we create, the art therapy world can be colonized by oppressive, distorting influences that confine us to a small, narrow place. Thus it is exciting to witness this historical moment in art therapy today as the field rapidly expands with the influx of global perspectives. New artistic legacies are being established with the creative energy arising in many venues such as the Art Peace Sustainability interactive art event (www.youtube.com), the virtual networking of such art therapists as Cathy Malchiodi (www.internationalarttherapy.org) and Gretchen Miller (www.arttherapyalliance.org), the growing number of art therapists who are blogging (go to www.arttherapyalliance.org/MemberWebsites.html to find such art therapy blogs as: Paint Cut Paste, Art Heals, The Unfolding Moment, The Parenting Toolbox, The Healing Arts, Knowing Imagination, Creativity in Motion, and others), mentoring new professionals (www.americanarttherapyassociation.org), and establishing artistic and therapeutic websites (see in this issue Nicole Martin’s www.arttherapyandautism.com and Rachel Mosler’s www.rachelmosler.com). These and other socially aware art therapists too numerous to mention are carrying an artistic legacy forward in their visions of a less oppressive environment in which to live and to heal.

In all stories of captivity, freedom is accomplished only when the prisoner achieves a fundamental shift in the balance of power. Dicker-Brandeis taught that people can hold fast to who they are by engaging artistically in the realities they have to endure (p. 154). In so doing, they thwart their oppressors by regaining their life space. Such a teacher or therapist understands the imperative of being creatively alive for one’s patients. The therapist’s own inner freedom is the agent of hope transmitted to others. How can art therapists cultivate inner freedom if not through the embrace of transformative, creative power? What stops us? What holds us in captivity? These questions are well worth exploring as we reflect upon the messages of freedom taking place artistically in the world today.

References

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