

SOME THOUGHTS ON LOGOTHERAPY ENCOUNTERING ART

James R. Wanner

In most societies through history, art was seen as something inseparable from spirituality. For instance, Byzantine Icons were painted by Orthodox monks, fashioned in prayer and viewed as a channel between the spiritual world and the finite world. The sand paintings of southwestern Native Americans, especially the Navajo, were created by Shamans and used as a portal for spirits to come and heal, as a way of bridging the gap between the worlds of matter and spirit.^{6, p.27}



Art as an enterprise, done by someone designated as an artist instead of someone designated as a holy person, is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the Western World, the Greeks of the classical period were the first to conceptualize the activity of art as something separate from its spiritual purposes, but it was the Renaissance humanists who took the concept to its logical conclusion. Art, for the humanist, existed to show beauty (which was often understood in a purely human form) in terms of design, harmony, and mathematical proportion.^{6, p.152}

Art, whether seen as spiritual or as an activity of humanity seeking beauty, is something that requires years to master. The Icon painter spends a lifetime honing the craft and working towards the perfection of the Icon. The Shaman's use of color and line must be precise and practiced in order for the painting to work its healing effect. In the humanist tradition the artist studies until he or she produces a masterpiece. Only then is he/she designated an artist. Techniques of mastery include the use of line, color, proportion, and perspective.

Because of the difficulty of achieving mastery, art is something revered. Yet art is also something that is natural, something so common that everyone does it. All children draw, sing, dance, and tell stories. Art decorates our rooms and becomes part of the background of our everyday lives. In a bored moment almost everyone will doodle on the corner of a page, draw a mustache on a picture in a newspaper, or proudly put a child's drawing on the refrigerator. The spontaneity of a child's art makes art often indistinguishable from play.

There is something unique, and uniquely human, about art and the making of art. Georgia O'Keefe has said, "I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way."^{8, p.2} The language of art is a unique language. There are some things that can only be said through art. It could be said that art speaks to the place in our lives that exists

between – between the material and the spirit, between the ordinary and the beautiful, between play and work.

In Art Therapy, art is not a technique of therapy but is an aim, a teleos, of therapy. Similarly, meaning is not a technique of logotherapy but is the aim of logotherapy. A meaningful life can be seen as the goal of logotherapy, its teleos. The specific techniques of logotherapy are at the service of facilitating and birthing this.

Art Therapy can be a fruitful enterprise. But the origins and history of Art Therapy subsume art under the category of therapy, and are therefore reductionistic in relationship to art. Art, in Art Therapy, is conceptualized as a technique. A drawing is seen as helpful as a diagnostic tool or as a way of bringing emotions out into the open. Art Therapy utilizes art as a means to an end – insight, diagnosis, assessment, or expression. But the drawing is not seen as an end unto itself.^{7, p.5}

Art, as a unique enterprise essential to every culture and to individual potential, is not a mere technique. It is an enterprise through which something can be elicited that cannot be elicited any other way. In Viktor Frankl's dimensional anthropology each individual is conceptualized as being a body, a mind, and a spirit (noos).^{2, p.23} Art is the language that speaks to all the areas in, around, and between those realms. It is rooted in the body, activates the mind, and accesses the noetic. Art is a concrete expression of authenticity, awareness, creativity, defiance, beauty, individuality, and uniqueness. It is an essential work of our humanity.

Therefore, art transcends therapy.

So, if art transcends therapy, how can therapy go about encountering art? An analogy can be made to how meaning is seen in logotherapy. Meaning is a goal of therapy; meaning is not a technique of therapy. But is it, then, the case that exploration of meaning is not a legitimate enterprise of therapy? No, in fact, exploration of meaning is a central aspect of logotherapy. Briefly, meaning is explored through a number of techniques in logotherapy.

The Socratic Dialogue is one such technique. It is a means of self-discovery, a way of catching a peek into the higher self, a glimpse of meaning. The Socratic Dialogue is truly an act of discovery – at the beginning neither participant is aware of what will be discovered. Fostering responsibility is another technique at the service of meaning. Joseph Fabry pointed out that there are three ways a person can find meaning through responsibility: by responding to the meaning of the moment, by making responsible choices where choices exist, and by not feeling responsible when there is no choice.^{4, pgs.22-23} Another area in which therapists explore meaning in logotherapy is through self-transcendence. Meaning is explored through finding those areas where a person can reach beyond themselves toward causes to serve or people to love.^{5, p.82}

Likewise, art, as an end unto itself and not a mere technique of therapy, remains a legitimate enterprise of therapy and a crucial enterprise for the

logotherapist. It could be argued that art is essential to a therapy that seeks the authentic, creative, and transcending self. Thus there are many ways art can be encountered in logotherapy.

This enterprise could be called “therapy encountering art,” turning the phrase “art therapy” on its head. Three basic concepts – paralleling the concepts of pursuing meaning through the Socratic Dialogue, seeking responsibility, and fostering self-transcendence – are at the core of therapy encountering art: (a) discovering and nurturing creativity, (b) seeing and creating beauty, and (c) finding a unique voice or style.

When a human being stands in front of an empty canvas, a blank page, or an uncarved block of wood, they are confronted with an impossible possibility – to bring into being something that did not previously exist. It is a miracle that this happens every day.

Creativity involves risk. Being creative, by its very nature, means venturing somewhere new, doing something that has not previously been done, and/or seeing something that was previously invisible. It is walking off into the dark woods without a map. Sometimes you find yourself alone and deep in dark woods with no way out, as Dante did at the beginning of an adventure called *The Divine Comedy*.^{1, p.25}

Perceiving beauty (or aesthetic perception) is the ability to perceive something as beautiful. It is a capacity that is unique to human nature. Perceiving from a utilitarian standpoint, seeing something as useful (for instance as useful for food or for shelter) could be seen as the antithesis of perceiving something as beautiful. Beauty is in the eye and the mind and the spirit of the beholder and what is beholder.

In fact, finding a voice is finding a way of seeing and expressing reality as well as finding and choosing which parts to emphasize, and what emotions to express. A visual artist will use color, texture, form, composition, and perspective, to create a unique style, content, and effect. This is the unique voice of the visual artist.

To encounter art in therapy is to encounter the unique, the beautiful, and the creative. These attributes reside in the noetic. As Frankl said “...not only love and moral conscience are rooted in the emotional and intuitive, nonrational depths of the spiritual unconscious, but also what I would call the artistic conscience. Thus, ethics and aesthetics as well have their foundation and basis within the spiritual unconscious. In fact in his creative work the artist is dependent on sources and resources deriving from the spiritual unconscious.”^{3, p.42-43}

James R Wanner, Ph.D., Diplomate in Logotherapy

References

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James R. Wanner, Ph.D. is a clinical Psychologist in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is a diplomate in Logotherapy through the Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy. He works with the psychological sequelae of drug addiction and incorporates Logotherapy into a 12 step model at the Caron Foundation in Wernersville, PA.