

Beauty and the Expressive Arts: Tales From My Practice

by

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“My life is not beautiful,”
says Maria, her head on her arms.

My mommy cries at night
and I couldn't stop my father from holding
the knife
on my brother's neck.

Maria is crying as I sit at the table across from her in the playroom

“You were too little,” I say.
“Yes, I was little then,” says she.

Maria is seven now
Then she was four.

“Do you know what rape is?” asks Katie.
She is five and draws a picture on the blackboard.

It's a circle with a stick poking into it.

“This is the boy and this is the girl and it hurts them both,” she says.

Her mother dreams she'll get work in a laundry where things are clean.

These moments with my clients are beautiful for me, as beautiful as the sweetest music or the perfectly turned phrase. My client, Cynthia, paints pictures of shapes and shades swirling with life. She is an academic and says her paintings are ugly. She tells me she can't speak when she's not lecturing. I write her a poem and give her Elizabeth McKim's book to read, the one about making poetry with children. My client continues to paint and I believe she will soon begin to talk to me.

I think beauty is a perfect moment in time. I feel those moments physically as just that right note is struck, the exactly timed line delivered, when the tension has become almost unbearable. It is finally the sob released or that bubbling laugh when my client realizes the absurdity of the dilemma. What if we could have every one of our moments so perfect – wouldn't that lead to a better world?

Many of us have forgotten beauty altogether in our world. I think expressive arts therapists are remembering beauty. We enter the realm of the beautiful when our clients share their stories and images with us and together we work to shape them and make them sing. Talk to us, dance, become a poem. Make a speech, engage us. Give of yourself generously, be real.

My client, George, says he hates me. I say, “Louder, please. Now try it softer – make it hiss. Yes be a snake and I’ll be your prey. Yes, that’s OK with me – you can be the Palestinian and bomb me to pieces and I’ll be the tank crushing your life.” I know his despair and rage are real and tell him so. “Louder now. Make it louder. I can hardly hear you. Ahhhh... yes. That was beautiful. Now I believe you.”

George is trying to get his life together after prison and alcohol and... and... and... He is afraid of his anger and his strength. He has been wandering for years without direction while dreaming of sailboats. The decision has now been made to face his childhood abuser in court and then take off around the world. He’s found a sailboat for sale and he’s begun to write stories envisioning his upcoming voyage and they are filled with storms and calm waters too.

George is in a therapy group with Leonard. At a weekend retreat, Leonard said he had no self-esteem. “Let me be your self-esteem,” said George. He climbed the stairs to the upper balcony of our retreat center and sat there looking down at Leonard and us. Leonard began to tell us that he felt less than everyone there. George, his self-esteem on the balcony said, “I feel different than everyone else.” He paused, and added, “I am unique.” Leonard became confused and said he didn’t know how to think and had nothing more to say. “Sometimes I need to dance my thoughts.” George’s words floated down from the balcony.

Leonard said that was true and began to dance a lonely dance – reaching out to connect to us and never quite able. When he was done, he collapsed on the floor and said to the hushed room, “I can dance but I can’t think. Thinking is a way to connect to people. I wish I could.”

George from up high said softly, “That was an interesting thought I just had.” And in this way their dance continued.

In pausing to recognize such moments in our work, expressive arts therapists, coaches and consultants treasure beauty. Like the crystals appearing suddenly in a liquid, these are the instants of truth, the ‘aha’s’. That truth is sometimes so ugly it is hard to bear is a given. Yet, through the holding power of the arts, we manage somehow. When through the arts we help people crystallize the essence of their experience – suffering and joy – we make space for the emergence of beauty in our lives. We offer the opportunity for shape and form and presence so that we can stand back in awe. And when we do, we fall a little more in love with each other and ourselves.