

Expressive Arts Therapy and Transpersonal Psychology

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In this chapter, we begin with a brief theoretical presentation of the difference between expressive arts therapy and the creative arts therapies. We then go on to discuss the philosophical foundations of expressive arts therapy, focussing on the concept of *poiesis*. After these theoretical reflections, we present the framework of a typical expressive arts therapy session. The authors then write autobiographical summaries of their experience with the transpersonal, followed by phenomenological accounts of two sessions of expressive arts therapy in which they guide each other.

What is the relationship between expressive arts therapy and transpersonal psychology? We will focus on the approach to expressive arts therapy developed by Shaun McNiff, Paolo Knill and their associates, first at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then subsequently by Knill and others, including Stephen K. Levine, at The European Graduate School in Saas Fee, Switzerland.

The expressive arts therapy approach that we will focus on in this chapter differs significantly from that used in the creative arts therapies. The term “creative arts therapies” may refer to any of the separate disciplines of the arts in therapy, each with its own method and history, for example, visual art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, poetry therapy, etc., or it may mean approaches to the creative arts therapies which are interdisciplinary and draw on all the arts, as does expressive arts therapy, but these approaches, unlike the latter, tend to base themselves in psychological frameworks that are used to explain the meaning of the art. These frameworks might include Jungian analytic psychology, Gestalt therapy, Humanistic approaches, etc. In using a psychoanalytic perspective, for example, the work is not considered as a phenomenon in its own right, as in expressive arts therapy, but as something which we can explain from a psychoanalytic point of view, in the same way as we would understand a neurotic symptom. The art-work, like the symptom, is thus considered to be a mere reflection of the psyche, expressing internal psychic conflicts of which the individual is unaware on a conscious level.

In expressive arts therapy, on the other hand, the art-work is looked at as having a life of its own; it does not come *from* me but rather it comes *to* me from somewhere beyond me. For example, in writing a poem, the poet has to enter a space in which she listens for the words; she cannot make them appear. They thus come from a place beyond the poet, a trans-personal dimension. This is also what enables poems to go beyond the individual poet and enter the world, speaking to others. In expressive arts therapy, art is not understood as an expression of the self of the artist. The artist does not express herself; rather the work expresses that which it is

about. For example, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is not about Tolstoy but about the Napoleonic Wars. The work is what is expressed, not the self of the creator.

The philosophical ground that underpins expressive arts therapy is thus a phenomenological perspective in which the notion of "bracketing" or "putting in parentheses" is central. Bracketing means that all of one's preconceptions are put aside, and the phenomenon is considered as it appears, not in terms of some hidden meaning. The various psychological frameworks which are often applied on an explanatory basis within the creative arts therapies in order to understand the art-work make no sense from a phenomenological point of view that looks at the phenomenon as it presents itself through the senses. We can call that the "literal reality."

However, the art-work presents itself as going beyond literal reality, accessible to sense experience, toward a dimension which can only be accessed through the imagination. For example, a painting not only shows the colors and shapes that are on the canvas but depicts a world that cannot be grasped solely through the senses. We have to use the imagination in order to see the painting as it presents itself. We can call this the "imaginal reality" of the arts. If the work shows itself as a product of the imagination, then, we must use our imaginations in order to understand it.

In the practice of an expressive arts therapy session, clients may start a session by talking about their experience in ordinary life. We call this the "Filling In" part of the session. After discussing the issue with clients, we step away from their ordinary life situation, no longer centering our inquiry on the literal reality. Rather, we "decenter" from the literal reality and pass into the imaginal realm, suggesting to clients a process of play, art-making or ritual creation that might appear to have nothing to do with the issue in question.

For example, a client could be talking about difficulties that they have with their boss at work. The temptation, in a more psychologically-based arts therapy session, would be to relate this conflict back to their past experience of the family, specifically their relationship to the authority figure in the family, usually the father. The therapist might, for example, ask the client to draw an image of the father and talk about the feelings that come up. In decentering from this issue, on the other hand, we might suggest exploring the objects in the room and putting them together into a new constellation, or we might invite the client to move their body in different ways which can then be connected together in the form of a dance choreography. There is no obvious or explicit reference in these artistic explorations to the literal presenting issue which the client brought into the session at the beginning, yet what comes up in the Decentering phase may very well illuminate the presenting issue itself.

In Decentering, we often begin with play and improvisation, sensitizing to the materials that we have decided to work with, whether they be visual materials, the body, sound, movement or words. Many times, this part of

the Decentering stays in the play realm and does not get transformed into an art-work. H.G. Gadamer, in his work, *Truth and Method*, has suggested that art can be understood as the transformation of play into a structure. The dancer initially plays with movement, the painter plays with the paint, the musician with sounds, etc. Then, in the context of an expressive arts therapy session, the therapist can help the client shape the movement into a dance, or the paint into a visual image, or the sounds into a musical composition. It is through this transformation into a structure that the full meaning of the play emerges. This artistic exploration may also lead into a ritual process which can be repeated at significant transitions in the life experience of the person, for example, mourning a death.

After the active portion of the session, we engage in a reflective process, an “Aesthetic Reflection,” in which we use a phenomenologically descriptive method to look back at the experience of clients and of what they have made. We ask them to describe their experience, particularly any moments that “moved” or “touched” them, and, if an art-work has emerged, then we ask them to describe it as well. We take a step back and look particularly at the part of the experience in which they felt moved or touched by the work, looking for any moment in the process that provoked a feeling. We call this the client’s “Aesthetic Response.”

After the phenomenological description of the process and the work that has emerged, we can ask, what would be a good title for the Decentering and what is the message that it gives to us? We are asking the client to step away from themselves and imagine the work as having the power to speak to them. The message does not emanate from the self or personality of the client. It goes beyond that, and therefore has the power to tell us something we did not know before..

After this exploration, we enter into the final phase of the process, called “Harvesting.” Here we go back to what was discussed and identified as the problem in the Filling-In phase of the session and ask: Does the Decentering process and the message that it gives to you have anything to do with what you spoke about in the beginning when we were talking together? It is amazing how often a new understanding of the presenting problem comes as a result of this process of staying with the art and finding out what it has to say to us.

How can we understand this uncanny process in which moving away from a life problem through decentering into the imagination often provides a new perspective on the person’s life? In order to do this, we have to consider the difference between imagination and mere fantasy. The latter does not consider the actuality of the person’s life situation, but rather seeks to escape from that reality. On the other hand, imagination refers to and stays connected with the actual life situation of the person coming to the therapist for help.

How to understand the role of the imagination here? To do that, Stephen K. Levine introduced the concept of *poiesis* as providing a philosophical foundation for this work. “Poiesis” is a word from the classical Greek

referring not only to poetry but to all forms of imaginative production or making. *Poiesis* thus signifies an imaginative act that is a creative response to a real situation. The response is often surprising and introduces something new into our understanding. Imagination cannot be reduced to the literal reality of the person, but, rather, it provides a portal into a dimension of reality in which possibilities arise which can be transformative. The important point here is that the act of *poiesis* is transpersonal; it does not come from the self of the person but rather from another place entirely which provides surprising and unexpected solutions to the life problem. Expressive arts therapy thus rests on the possibility of *poiesis*.

Two Accounts of Experiences of the Transpersonal

In this section, the authors of this chapter relate their own experience of the transpersonal. They each take this up again in their accounts of the two sessions that they had guiding each other.

Gracelynn Chung-Yan Lau: Autobiographical account

The desire to understand transpersonal experiences made me a spiritual nomad between traditions and practices for nearly twenty years. But it was when expressive arts therapy came into my life that I somehow found a way back to where I belonged.

I grew up in a Pentecostal Christian home environment where nearly all my relatives and family friends at church had bodily transpersonal experiences – such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia), being slain by the Holy Spirit and miraculously being healed – on a regular basis. I too experienced it occasionally; though more often I saw images or received words during prayer. Later, when I was an undergraduate student in philosophy, I questioned various aspects of Christian theology and biblical interpretation of doctrines; I could bracket every experience – as phenomenological philosophers have suggested – except the spiritual or mystical experiences that I had, because those divine encounters were so existentially profound that I couldn't deny them.

In my early 20s, my parents were involved in a tragic accident in Egypt, in which I lost my father. It put a new spin on my wrestling with the notion of God and Christian theology. In deep grief and anger, I lost all “Godly” vocabularies and found myself speechless in prayer. Nevertheless, I postured myself in contemplative prayer in prolonged silence, gut-wrenchingly crying at times, and taking hour-long solo walks on Yonge Street, the longest street in Toronto, Yonge St. I find it hard to articulate how it felt to be me, but when words or phrases sometimes arrived during those long aimless walks, I would turn them into prose letters to my imaginative

future daughter, telling her about my father, without knowing that I was moving around and below and through grief.

During this “dark night of the soul” period of my life, spontaneous body movements emerged from deep-long contemplative prayer. At the beginning, the movements were slow and involved deep stretching of particular body parts; soon they turned into full-blown movements and gestures on a continuum, as if my body were doing automatic physiotherapy, or teaching me how to dance. I was shocked and terrified at first, for I knew nothing about dance, and I had never felt comfortable with moving or touching my body; I worried whether I was in any spiritual danger or crisis. The senior pastor at a Pentecostal Christian church with whom I consulted had never heard of similar physical phenomena in prayer, though he assured me that the Holy Spirit was working in me to heal me, that my relationship with God should be the focus rather than trying to understand any bodily manifestation as a spiritual sign of the Holy Spirit.

Still, I wanted someone to explain what this experience was and why movement could come from absolute stillness. In research, I found only a small amount of scholarly literature in the Catholic tradition and Kundalini yoga practices that described similar physical phenomena in their spiritual awakening processes. The literature wasn't enough to explain my unique context, though, so I began to explore the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Jesuit tradition, with the hope that some spiritual directors might have the answers. At the same time, I started attending Vipassana retreats and studied mindfulness meditation at the University of Toronto School of Social Work. These new avenues of searching brought me to insights so exciting that along the way I somehow forgot about my wrestling with God and my question about the relationship of stillness in prayer to automatic dance movements.

Then, in my early 30s, when I became actively involved in the Ecovillage Movement, I delved deeply into group processes for cultivating transcendent consciousness to restore a wider sense of ecological self and inter-beingness for creating sustainable change. I came across frameworks such as the 5 Rhythms movement practice, holotropic breathwork (by Stanislav and Christina Grof), systemic constellations (by Bert Hellinger) and ecstatic body postures (by the Cuyamungue Institute), just to name a few. In all my inquiring endeavours, I accumulated numerous surprising and divinely inspired epiphanies and mystical moments. Nevertheless, I felt even further away from finding an answer to my question; rather it felt like being dropped into an endless void of ecstatic peak experiences, being on the receiving end and having very little or no control.

Expressive arts therapy training came to me then like a divine gift. I had heard many artists declare that creativity is a birthright belonging to everyone, but only until my encounter with expressive arts therapy did I truly understand what it meant on an embodied experiential level. The decentering process almost always feels easy and familiar; if I entirely let go of any agenda and attentively open to and trust the process long enough,

the images or the movement or something else always come. The creative process feels very similar to the transpersonal experience I have had in other methods; but in the container of *poiesis*, I am an active participant, a partner in the shaping. There is a give and take. A call and response. I stopped worrying or mystifying the automatic movement that came from contemplative prayer/deep meditative silence. Instead of desiring a critical explanation of the spiritual experiences, I joyfully embraced the emerging moving gestures and found myself amazed and surprised by them as they changed. I also became more curious about the interaction between my moving body and the surroundings, taken by the dramatic and subtle qualities of the movement in different spaces and cities. The unsettling desire to analyze or understand why gradually disappeared; I became far more drawn to working with the emerging movements, playing with rhythm, sounds and patterns, growing more comfortable being in my own skin. After the movement always came some words, usually poetic but sometimes in prose form. Sometimes I would take the movement into play with watercolours and let the movement transfigure into a dance between the paint brush and the paper. Whichever shape it took, the creative process has always shown me something that I didn't know that I knew already, or that I didn't know that I didn't know.

This poietic way of being and knowing in the world in expressive arts therapy began to restore a broken part of me that had always been yearning to move, speak and live artfully. This part of me stumbles to find words for experiences that cannot be articulated and sometimes believes that the intensity that I witness in multiple worlds and hold inside is my own problem and that I'd better, "Get my shit together," move on and lock myself into normative patterns like everybody else. I have always heard the whisper nudging me to embrace my creative purpose to be an artist; yet my conditioning by "reality" had never allowed it to be fully nourished.

In the creative process in expressive arts therapy, I was able to relax into this part of myself, stepping out of its way and letting it show itself to me without any filters. To me, expressive arts therapy feels like a divine invitation telling me that being an artist does not need to conform to the ways that fit into the narratives of the contemporary art world or of traditional arts and their marketable transaction systems. There is another way to live and be an artist wherein the innate creative gift imparted to each of us is celebrated, where we are all invited to participate in the ongoing creative process with the Creator – the greatest creative mystery - in our own terms, at our own pace. Of course there's the diligent work to hone our skills and perfecting our craft, but first and foremost I am here to serve the beauty and the things that are asking to come into the world through me, to the best of my aesthetic skill and ability. Imagination and images come to me as a gift; to materialize the imagination in processes of *poiesis* is my aesthetic responsibility. It is my divinely given assignment.

Our ego's attachment (or desire) to generate/reproduce transpersonal experience, or to critically analyze/understand it, always gets in the way of the experience itself. Interesting enough, the same goes with the creative process – the way to get into the creative process is to get out of the way (our own way). Similarly,

the Christian tradition speaks of surrendering, laying down one's life, and serving humbly. The creative life of the world is always happening; whether we choose to participate in it or not, it goes on. In the expressive arts, every "decentering" is a deepening in surrendering to the creative divine mystery, and every act of *poiesis* is showing up to humbly and diligently serve the work of art. "The Spirit of God, who raised Christ from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you." I memorized this bible verse in Romans 8:11 as a child. Many years later now, a deeper meaning of it is slowly revealing itself to me in my creative process.

Two Expressive Arts Therapy Sessions: Exploring the Transpersonal

There are several levels to expressive arts therapy: theoretical, methodological and practical. In this section of the chapter, we report on two sessions that we conducted to investigate the transpersonal level of experience through engaging with the arts. Stephen K. Levine (SKL) guided the first session with Gracelynn Chung-Yan Lau (GL) who subsequently led the second one with Stephen K. Levine.

The following is a summary report of the two sessions. The sessions follow the architecture of a session which was presented in the first part of this chapter. To repeat, the architecture begins with a Filling-In in which the person being guided discusses their presenting issue or question. It then moves into a Decentering phase, including active art-making and aesthetic reflection on the art-making. Then it culminates in the Harvesting phase in which the person being guided is asked to reflect on how the results of the Decentering connect with their initial presenting issue or question.

First Session: Gracelynn Lau guided by Stephen K. Levine

Filling-In

SKL: How do you understand your relationship to the transpersonal?

GL: As I said, I have engaged in many forms of transpersonal practice, ranging from Pentecostal childhood experience in church, including speaking in tongues, Holotropic Breathwork, Ancient Postures, Vipassana Meditation and Ecstatic Dance.

SKL: And how do you now understand your work in expressive arts in relationship to transpersonal experience?

GL: In expressive arts therapy, I engage in creative processes in which I get out of my own way. Recently I did some movement work for three hours. I experienced a deep knowing in my body in which I seemed to turn into a magician, discovering another world waiting for me to explore.

SKL: I am curious about how you might explore that further.

GL: A specific gesture keeps coming back. There is a pattern, but I have never shaped it into a dance piece.

SKL: Would you like to work on that today?

GL: Yes, I would.

Decentering

SKL: Can you describe the space that you are in?

GL: It is sound-proofed and feels safe. I can yell in it. There is a dark red floor. It's a small space. Like being in a womb, but I don't feel constrained. It's comfortable. I don't feel the need for a lot of space. I feel it is more potent to work with the minimal.

SKL: I would like you to stand up and close your eyes. Now touch the walls, run your hands over them, flatten yourself against the wall as if trying to climb it.

GL: There is a sound when I touch the wall

SKL: What does it sound like?

GL: The sound feels good

SKL: Can you reproduce it?

GL: (Makes a sound)

SKL: Keep going. Take the sound and sing it.

GL: (sings it)

SKL: Find the gestures that go with the sound

GL: It shifted (GL continues moving—planted in one spot with her upper body moving in a sinuous way as if in water)

SKL: (coaching the movement) Follow the shift. Is there a pattern in the movement? Can you repeat it? How would you bring it to a close?

(GL shows the pattern)

SKL: What would be the name of that movement pattern?

GL: "Jellyfish" (laughs)

SKL: Let's see what comes if you put words on paper now.

GL: (writes for a period of time)

SKL: Please read me what you have written.

GL: (reads her words):

Solid

Planting firmly in the ground

Unmoveable

Unshakeable

I know and I know

There's a rhythm

Following this/Following that

And the feet do not move
The solid and the flow
The hard and the soft
All together
Yin and Yang
All together at once
“You’re OK
You’re more than OK”
The opposites merge when I move

SKL: Is there a title?

GL: Yes: A Tree in the Sea

Aesthetic Reflection

SKL: (summarizes the movement pattern GL engaged in) What was your experience of the Decentering?

GL: I was surprised at the shift in the movement. The lower part of my body was rock solid and strong. The upper part was fluid, like moving with air or water. It was as if the water was moving me. It was soft but it had strength. The lower part of the body was stable in the midst of chaos. The contrast is interesting to me. Both parts need to be together to engage in the movement. They are like different departments. I felt like a tree standing in the middle of a deep ocean in which my roots were there in the water.

SKL: Is there a message that comes to you from the decentering?

GL: The physical and the metaphysical are together, joined. There is a thin layer between them. They need to be together to be complete. The message I am getting is that the transcendental can flourish when the physical is there and vice versa.

Harvesting

SKL: Let’s go back to the Filling-In. Does anything that we did in the Decentering shed light on the repetitive gesture that you spoke about initially?

GL: The movement experience before this was like opening and closing a curtain, opening and closing continuously, moving between them. There is so much more waiting for me to explore in movement and gesture. I would like to go there. It is telling me that you can go there and also stay here. The exercise can go back and forth, and I should stay at the crossing point.

SKL: Crossing point between what and what?

GL: Between the habitual and the imaginal. I need to stay in the in-between, and exercise the muscle to be there. In the breathing that happened in the movement, there was a pulse. I need to follow that beat.

SKL: What is your concluding reflection on this experience?

GL: It is so simple. The heart of the work is very simple. As the mystics say, I need to be in this world but not of it.

Stephen K. Levine: Autobiographical account

My encounter with the transpersonal in my life and in my experience in the arts occurred at the same time. In the 1950's, I was living in Philadelphia and attending the University of Pennsylvania. This was the period in American history in which any form of unusual behaviour was considered potentially subversive. There were strict controls on what people could say or do, exemplified by the activities of the "House Un-American Activities Committee" which monitored people's behaviour and communication for any sign that could be considered "un-American." It was an atmosphere in which creativity and personal expression were stifled. Consequently, I went into a deep depression in which I felt hopeless. However, I began to write poetry as a way of finding myself in the world and articulating my experience. The words that came to me in this dark state of mind seemed to emerge from beyond my personal life. Writing poetry gave me access to a transpersonal form of experience which restored some sense of hope.

I subsequently became interested in cultures and religions which acknowledged the transpersonal, particularly Taoism and Buddhism. The Taoist notion of the "uncarved block," an emptiness which is the foundation for action, struck a chord in me particularly. Spontaneously acting without premeditation is called in Taoism, "wu-wei," literally, not-doing, a form of acting without effort. At the same time, the Buddhist concept of "transience" also called to me, leading to non-attachment to anything mundane or personal. For me, my relationship to the transpersonal coincided with the beginning of my artistic life. In poetic expression, as I have said earlier, I had the sense that the words were coming to me from a place beyond myself, a space in which I entered into a state of listening without knowing what would come. I began practicing Tai Chi as a means of accessing that condition of wu-wei and also became interested in Buddhist meditation as a path of non-attachment. In an early poem from the 1950's, the following words came to me:

The beauty of flowers

is a beauty of endings

Let it die, oh, let it die

By writing this short poetic fragment, I found a relationship to transience in which even passing away could be accepted.

At age 85, when contemplating the possibility of my own death, these words came to me in a similar way:

Ode To The Future

O Future

You await me

I open my arms

Calling on the sacred

With my feet on the ground

And my eyes on the sky

I go to you with passion and art

Friendship and love

Falling Rising

Facing death

With fear

And love

Thankful for life

Yes, I say,

Thankful for this life

As an undergraduate in the 1950's, however, I entered into such a state of despair that I stopped going to classes and writing exams at the university. The Dean, sensing that I had the capacity to do well in class but that some inner conflict was holding me back, called me into his office and said that I either had to go into therapy or I would be expelled. At first, I resisted this, feeling coerced. However, at this time men could be drafted into the army if they were not in school. Thus, I reluctantly agreed to work with a therapist. Surprisingly, I found psychotherapy to be a helpful process which gave me insights into my thoughts and feelings which had previously been inaccessible. I subsequently continued in one form of therapy or another for many years.

In many therapeutic sessions, I often had the experience of entering a state of mind similar to what D.W. Winnicott calls "the intermediate area of experience" or "transitional experience" in which what was happening seemed to go beyond the distinction between what was me and what was not-me. I believe that these experiences resemble the activity of "Decentering" discussed earlier.

Outside of therapy, something similar happened when I began to engage in performance work in the 1970's. I studied physical theater, particularly clown and Commedia Dell'Arte, based upon improvisation. These performative states differentiated themselves from traditional theatrical performance in which a text is usually relied on as the basis for action. In improvisation, on the contrary, one does not know what will arrive, one only has to be prepared to "expect the unexpected." As one of my teachers, Phillippe Gaulier, often said, "movement first, text later," meaning we cannot rely on a script that has already been written but instead need to discover the words as they come spontaneously from our bodies as they move.

In physical theatre, we also break down the "fourth wall" separating the performer from the audience, thus establishing a relationship with people in the audience as co-collaborators. On reflection, this seems to me to be similar to a therapeutic relationship in which both therapist and client enter a non-ordinary reality in which neither one can control or anticipate what will happen. What transpires in this state of non-ordinary reality should not be interpreted, since interpretation re-establishes the dichotomy between the participants, one in which the therapist knows the meaning of the client's experience. On the other hand, in transitional experience, dichotomies do not exist. I think this is what Martin Buber speaks of when he differentiates between I-It and I-Thou relationships. We can call I-Thou experiences transpersonal, since they go beyond the personal, individual self into a state of unity between self and other, a condition often experienced as a union of the human with the divine.

In 1985-86, at Lesley University in Cambridge Massachusetts, I encountered expressive arts therapy. This field combined my interest in the therapeutic process with my passion for the arts. As practiced at Lesley, this approach to therapy refused explanatory models which reduced the artwork to a reproduction of a psychic state, whether conscious or "unconscious." Shaun McNiff, who founded The Institute for the Arts and Human Development from which expressive arts therapy emerged, called the interpretations of works of the

imagination a form of “image abuse.” Rather than letting the work tell us what it means by showing itself, these therapeutic approaches tell the work what it means. McNiff called this kind of interpretation “abusive,” since we do not respect the work as it shows itself but instead search behind it for a hidden meaning. The work is then understood within these psychological frameworks as an expression of the self of the maker.

Paolo Knill, one of the original faculty members at Lesley, often spoke of such a psychological reduction as a “toothpaste theory” of the arts. Like toothpaste in the tube, where we think what is inside the tube is the same as what emerges when you squeeze it out, these therapeutic approaches assume that the artwork is a reproduction of a pre-existing self, whether conscious or unconscious. For Knill, rather, the work emerges out of an experience of inspiration which ultimately takes us beyond ourselves into the world. It does so by engaging in artistic processes which bring inspiration into a form which is shaped into an art-work. Moreover, as Knill often remarked, “The work works,” meaning that it transforms the maker and allows for a new perspective on the world, not the reproduction of the old one in a different form.

The inspiration for the work, then, comes from beyond us, as artists have claimed since ancient times when speaking of their “muse.” In a recent issue of *The New Yorker* magazine (December 11, 2023), in an article written by Casey Cep entitled “Close to the Bone,” the poet Christian Wiman says that his poems, when they are good, seem to come not from his own mind but as though they were emerging from some perfect sound which he seemed to have overheard, some indeterminably inward or outward voice which he did everything he could to capture in the poem.

In the same article on Wiman’s poetry, his wife, Danielle Chapman, also a poet, recounts a similar experience of spiritual awakening in which Cep writes that, “A series of religious images appeared, and something ineffable took hold of her, language and light bursting both around and within her as if it were the Holy Spirit itself” (p. 23). Chapman goes on to say, “My religious consciousness and my poetic consciousness are fused...because not only was this an encounter with God but it was the first line of poetry that ever came as an inspiration, instead of having to gin it up.” (p.23)

I have a similar experience myself in writing my own poetry. In order to write a poem, I have to give up trying to find the words myself and instead must listen for those that are coming to me. Wiman and Chapman describe this experience in spiritual terms which can also be called transpersonal.

Second session: Stephen K. Levine guided by Gracelynn Lau

Filling-in

GL: Okay, let's stand up together and shake everything off, gently shifting space... See which part of your body needs some release... just let it shake following your own pace, your own sound...

SKL: (Moving and gently shaking, then making sound)

GL: See which part of your body needs some love at the moment. Gently put your hands around that part of the body and say: I'm here with you. Thank you for being with me

SKL: (Places both hands place on his heart) Ah... I am here with you. Thank you for being with me .

GL: We're still in this together.

SKL: (Rubs hands on his heart tenderly) We're in this together... I think that's what I'd like to work on. I'm feeling that I am at a stage of life in which my body is starting to disintegrate. Parkinson's is making me lose some of my cognitive functions. I want to say to my body to stay with it. To stay with me. Or else it's asking me to stay with it. I'm not sure if I'll be able to accept it.

(He begins to move his hands in a circular motion in front of his body, with his palms facing up)

I am wondering how. This revelation of where I'm at is really new to me. I've been taking a course at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center on aging and awareness. The leader talks about aging as a process of "diminishment." From a Buddhist perspective, we need to accept this by letting go and not holding on – It's interesting this idea of not holding on to what I used to be. What I'd like to explore is, how can I do that? What do I need to do to let go.?

GL: As you were speaking, I notice that your hands keep moving like this. (GL demonstrates the movement.) Does that feel good to you?

SKL: Yeah, it does.

GL: It seems like when you speak, your hands were doing something already. Let's listen to both of your hands, let the hands take us and see what comes.

Decentering -

SKL: (Arms swinging beside the body) The hands are going towards me, or towards the world and back. One hand is going in one direction. The other is going in another direction.

GL: Let the rest of the body follow the hands, see what happens?

SKL: Okay.(moves, then sighs)... Maybe there's some sound

GL: What's that sound like?

SKL: (Sound and movement) Ah ~ Ei ~ Ah ~ Ei ~ Ah ~ Ei ~

I'm coming but I'm going back, I'm coming but going back. Towards and backwards and towards. And then something about lifting my arms up in the air.

GL: Aha, is there any sound coming through when you're lifting your arms up in the air?

SKL: (Makes two sounds that turn into a melody) O ~ AH ~ O ~ AH
I like that.

GL: There seems to be a song forming itself from two very different sounds. I notice that when your hand is moving this way, there's a tone and a rhythm, but when the hands go up there, there seems to be another tone. They form into a song. How about you keep following where your hand goes, and see what song is arriving to you?

SKL: (Singing in a mournful tone and in a minor key and moving arms)

I'm going.
I'm staying.
I'm going.
I'm staying.
I'm flying in the air.
I'm reaching for the sky.
I'm coming, going.
flying in the air and reaching for the sky...

I like that.

GL: Wow, let's take the song and the hands further. Shall we bring together the hands and the song and sing it, let the sound feel the space and see what comes?

SLK: (Singing in the same mournful tone and minor key, adding words and moving)

I'm coming and going, coming and going. Going to the sky.
With my feet on the ground, my hands in the air.
I'm going somewhere.
Where? I don't know. I'm going somewhere, I don't know where.
Maybe it's a new place. Maybe I don't have words for it.
Maybe it's something I need to explore ... ooh

(His song turns into spoken words, with movement)

What's going to sustain me, during this period? That's my question
As I'm diminishing. I want to be able to accept that without collapsing, without losing something essential in my soul.

I want to go through it with grace. I think I need to find grace.
Funny that your name is Gracelynn.
What does that even mean, finding grace?
Yes, gracefully accepting and going with and passing through
and finding joy. Finding the joy. Gratitude.
Acceptance and feeling gratitude for loss!
This is really interesting to me. To be grateful for the loss.
Ah ~ I don't know if I can sustain it,
but right now, it feels good.

Everything is... letting go. It's all about letting go.
I've got my eyes closed and what I'm imagining now is a flame. The only thing that's left is the flame.

GL: Ha, the flame.

SKL: (Continues with spoken words and movement)

The flame of life, of spirit, and the essence.
Everything else is let go

Keep burning! It hasn't given up.
I mean, you can't. If you extinguish that flame, you'll die.
They say nirvana is like the blowing out of the candle.
That's about right.
(Hands moving in the shape of a cup, gently rubbing the heart)
The flame is still there, which feels really good.

I think I need to keep the flame there.
Keep the flame there. Yeah.

I'm not sure what comes now.

Aesthetic Reflection (deepening the decentering)

GL: There was a monologue arriving, and it seems like a dance itself, leading to the song. We started with your hands moving, and it brought us the song, and then the spoken word, like a monologue. If we do a “take two” with all of that, what would it look like?

SKL: Well, let's see

(Moving and singing)

Coming and going, coming and going.
Coming and going, reaching for the sky.
Coming and going, coming and going.
Reaching for the sky.

When I'm reaching for the sky, I'm opening to some kind of spirit.

(Turns into spoken words)

Some kind of spirit sustains me, I'm not sure what it is.
It's sort of coming down to the essence. Letting everything go.
Everything except the essence. The soul.

Those are the words but I'm not even sure what they mean,
but something about... I want to be sustained;
The essence of the soul, it's alive.
It's the flame of love that keeps me going.

I don't want that to diminish. I may have to, but I don't want it to turn into despair. I need to accept it, let go into the diminishment. I just can't do things that I used to do. It feels like I need to accept what's happening to me. What I have to do is to get rid of everything except the flame. Of everything that interferes with the flame. That should be the guide for everything I do.

Yeah, that feels about right.

Harvesting

GL: When you're ready, let's come back from decentering...

SKL: I'm going to sit down. (Sits) Wow! Okay, now I'm back.

GL: Wow. Before we go into Harvesting, I have written some words as an aesthetic feedback to witnessing your work:

“Where is grace to be found? That's what I have to do.
The flame of life sustains the essence. Letting go, except the essence. Everything except the flame that keeps me going.
Where is grace to be found? Sustain, the flame of life.”

Would you like to tell me about your experience?

SKL: It's a confirmation. I am thinking further what I was beginning to realize. There's so much in life that's disposable; so much stuff is unnecessary, so let it go! Maybe not much is left, except talking to a friend, eating a meal? Maybe that's enough. Finding the essence in the everyday.

My wife, Ellen, and I used to listen to a program on the radio in New York. On this program, a woman was talking about the difference between two characters, One she called the “World Beater,” and the other we heard as sounding like, “Nunzio Nessuno,” (which we mistakenly thought meant “Nothing Nobody” in Italian). The World Beater is out there in the world, accomplishing things, getting things done, striving and succeeding. Nothing Nobody just wants to sit around doing nothing.

Doing nothing really appeals to me. The mystics talk about doing nothing. In my meditation practice, one of the things I’ve observed about myself is that I’m always looking for the next thing. What’s the next thing? It’s very hard to stay in the moment, not thinking about what comes next.

GL: Is there a message related to what you were hoping to explore in the beginning of the session?

SKL: The message is to stay in the moment. Stay in the moment!

GL: Does this message have anything that speaks to you about the transpersonal?

SKL: I have a sense that the moment is the transpersonal that goes beyond me, my little projects and my ego, my needs and wants. It’s going into stillness, emptiness and openness. When I write a poem, I have to give up everything else and just listen. Sometimes the poems come. Where do they come from? I don’t know.

GL: And we wait for them and listen attentively, so we notice them when they come.

SKL: That’s right. Later we can try to work on them, shape them. But we listen when they come. They always come as a response to something in the world.

GL: What would be a title for the song, the movement and spoken words that came to you?

SKL: “Finding the Flame.”

GL: Finding the Flame... Is there a second title?

SKL: (Long pause) “Love.”

GL: If you were to share this piece of song/movement/spoken words with an audience, where would it be?

SKL: Where would that be? Well, a few years ago, I did a performance about my Parkinson's and how I’ve come to terms with it. It was a very long, interesting process. At the beginning it came in the form of a poem called, “Welcoming Mr. P,” in which I tried to accept the physical condition I found myself in by finding a form for it through poetic language. Then the next summer a doctoral student at the European Graduate School in Switzerland presented her dissertation work to a large audience of students and faculty. Her work was about trying to understand disability through the expressive arts. In her presentation, she talked about her own disabilities; I thought, I have to do that!

So the next thing I did was a little mini-performance. I went to the bottom of a hill outside of our summer home. Using Butoh-style movement, slow and rooted in the earth, I came very slowly up the hill as though I were repeating the course of my life from birth to the present.

After going back to Toronto, I worked with Sara Porter, a dancer and movement coach, and developed a performance piece in movement and spoken word out of my experience of Parkinson’s. I then performed it in front of an audience. This was very satisfying to me. Maybe it was the sense that I could have an active relationship to the disorder, and not just suffer from it. I could do something like this now, showing people what came in our session.

GL: It sounds like a work that is “on the way.” It’d be interesting to shape the next... well, we’re going on to the next again, but I think the thing is coming to you, it’s not you trying to go there. I wonder what would that be, and where would that be?

SKL: I can’t envision anything else than doing it as a performance in the same place. It’s very strange. How public do I want to be about this process? Asking other people to accept it? Just by performing it, you establish a certain distance from the experience. But I imagine that this might be interesting to people – How to accept diminishing with grace.

GL: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to say before we close?

SKL: No, I feel like I’m passing it on. I’m going to pass it on to you. (Laughs) It’s your job now. You have my blessing.

Conclusion

Through these autobiographical reflections and our accounts of the two expressive arts therapy sessions in which we guided each other, we hope that we have given the reader a living sense of the relationship between expressive arts therapy and transpersonal experience.

In our work, we discovered that when we engage in art-making, many elements that contribute to the experience of the transpersonal come to the foreground:

- Embracing the emergent
- Relaxing and stepping out of our own way
- Serving beauty and the things that are asking to come into the world through us
- Decentering as surrendering to the creative process
- Not knowing or controlling
- Non-attachment, letting go
- Entering a state of listening and waiting without knowing what is coming
- Embracing stillness, emptiness, openness
- Experiencing that the inspiration for the work comes from beyond us
- Realizing that the moment opens to the transpersonal, that it goes beyond us, our projects and our egos, our needs and wants.

In reflecting on the sessions in which we guided each other, we realized that certain themes emerged that we would not have come to otherwise. For Gracelynn, it was the experience that the metaphysical depends upon the physical. That is to say, we need to be grounded in reality in order to go beyond it. For Steve, it was letting go of everything in the face of death and coming to an encounter with the essence of life in the experience of the flame, then realizing that the flame is love.

These are themes that came to us through the creative practices in which we engaged.

We encourage readers to undertake similar investigations, to find and enter a transpersonal space through open and exploratory acts of art-making. You may find, as we did, that the creative process itself is inherently transpersonal.