THE GROUP TAKES CARE OF ITSELF: ART THERAPY TO PREVENT BURNOUT

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The following will describe an art therapy experience for a staff of nurses and doctors providing home-care assistance to terminally-ill patients. The aim of the paper is to give an account of how the creative and group process unfolded. Each phase of the process took on a symbolic form as a leading theme, like a movement in a symphony. In this sense it is the purpose of the paper to present the group’s actual creation and performance. This author is aware that symbolic and mythical meanings as well as group dynamics may need further exploration. Furthermore, the choice of a chronological structure stresses a specific function of the art therapist—not playing a therapeutic role—as a Storyteller, the memory of the collective imaginary journey, the weaver of a narrative plot. The story portrays how the group experienced and transformed the inner resonance of its task in real life; the protagonists were the images that represented the group’s feelings, how they developed their dynamic and social function, “the feeling function” (Hillman, 1971), so new group resources were called into play and served the project’s objectives.

The Project

The project, which consisted of 20 sessions, was proposed to the Oncologia Medica of Ferrara, Italy by Dr. Roberto Boccalon, a mental health consultant and expert in burnout issues. According to Dr. Boccalon, the staff pioneered home-based care for terminally-ill cancer patients leaving public medical institutions in Italy with “a high degree of motivation and emotional investment,” but “a growing need to exchange experiences and reciprocal support” (Belfiore, Boccalon & Indelli, 1992). Their work was no longer protected by the traditional hospital setting and thus raised issues regarding distance and sharing with dying patients and their families at home. The group ran a high risk of stress and felt in danger of burnout syndrome. It asked for a preventive intervention in the light of a quite unusual perspective in medical care.

In previous meetings with Dr. Boccalon, participants seemed ready to share and face the deep emotional intensity of their work. Through art therapy it was possible to offer another “language” to the participants to enable them to express the deepest and hidden levels of their personal experience in the fulfillment of their duties.

Objectives

The objectives of the art therapy group may be summarized as follows:

1. to offer the group itself the chance to function as a container, where individual members and the group as a whole can express the hidden and painful aspects of their work;

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2. to activate a process that allows the group to undergo, in an evolutionary sense, the mourning process as well as the experience of loss and limitations that can be involved in working with the terminally ill;

3. to offer both verbal and nonverbal means to work through the issues regarding the relationship with patients and their families. The same issues can be seen in the dynamics of the working group and concern closeness, distance, involvement, empathy, communication, reality testing and so forth;

4. to provide a symbolic, creative and unhampered context to experiment and understand other aspects of one's own personality and where reciprocal exchange and support can find preverbal interactive forms. Giving symbolic form to one's feelings can refine and enrich the caregivers' capacity to tolerate anxiety and pain and consequently increase the quality of individual and group care;

5. to give, through playful and expressive materials, new opportunities for psychic representation of the relationship with each other and the patients and their feelings in facing death. The group itself represents a sort of mental space that is able to contain and elaborate the complexity and the richness of the experiences encountered in their daily work.

The Experience

The Setting

The group setting was consistent—3 hours every week for about 6 months (including holidays)—and the 8 participants (5 nurses and 3 doctors) seemed to be highly motivated and increasingly involved in the process. The art therapy group was conducted by myself and supervised regularly by Dr. Boccalon. Being a time-limited experience, creative projects were proposed according to needs and dynamics as they occurred. In fact, the projects were intended to have an open structure and focus. Far from being too directed, they were always linked to group themes and imagery.

The Process

The experience unfolded with its own timing and inner order. In the initial stage, projects and art materials (from finger paint to charcoal drawings) were proposed to introduce participants to the experience of producing images, of relating to them and through them to each other. Group process was then activated. Subsequently, to enhance participants' capacity for introspection and symbolization, expressive modalities concerned the differentiation and the links between inner and outer individual space (the cover and the clay mask).

The project of sculpting an inner guide allowed each participant to discover the function of inner representations for themselves and for the group as a whole. In the following sessions eight different themes and their related projects were suggested by each guide image and proposed to the group by the sculptor. Different materials were used. The guide images were chosen in no particular order, but nevertheless the sequence traced the group process development through an imaginary, but quite meaningful journey.

The Initial Stage

Early on, a series of recurrent themes and dynamics seemed to express the actual functioning model of the group. By the end of this phase the group seemed more aware of the pattern—involving a massive use of defensive mechanisms as well as coping strategies—that everybody followed according to a sort of silent agreement or rigid group rule.

In the meantime as the experience proceeded, different attitudes toward each other and the artwork came to light. Individual needs as well as styles to survive stress were acknowledged; the effort to respond to the institutional and the emotional demands was no longer denied and the temptation to appear perfect and omnipotent to oneself and to others (false self) gave way to the experience of more authentic feelings.

In the beginning the group was encouraged to produce artwork through scribbles and the use of finger paint; this undirected activity was provided in order to overcome resistance, the need to control and fear of judgment. In this way a freer and more spontaneous relationship between gesture and sign was uncovered.

The most common feelings, related to an initial ambivalence toward the group process, were the need to express oneself as an outlet, of adopting a carefree attitude, and the fear of regression, of letting oneself go and giving up the defenses, which were built up in order to survive. On the one hand, these defense
mechanisms were perceived by each participant as "too tight"; on the other, they ensured a sort of stability and an area of security even if it was narrow and restrictive.

In the first meetings the images seemed to represent the common wish of the participants to have space and time for themselves. Many images concerned closed places, family life situations, pleasant memories. The group had to be distanced from or to wait “outside” individual imagery. In the meantime the fear of changing or facing the unknown was expressed by images of darkness or confusion. Some images seemed to directly represent such defenses as they were experienced—a man in a cage or repetition of so-called reassuring images among others.

Relation to Images

Behind an overt wish for lightness and evasion it was possible to see the more authentic need to keep a “security distance.” An image of flying flowers, which was meant to represent lightness appeared to communicate immobility and was seen by the group as static as a wallpaper drawing. The group began to perceive certain images no longer as just a representation of pretty things, but as an avoidance of self-disclosure.

The fear of revealing oneself as well as the defenses against this fear were acknowledged and supported in order to facilitate reciprocal trust. Through a delicate balance between lightness and solidity, between play and effort, trust became part of the process itself. Participants began to see different meanings in addition to those they initially wanted to represent. The unpredictable quality of the creative process as well as the structural ambiguity of images helped participants to let go, to let the process flow and to see beyond the surface how the images could represent what the individual and the group were truly experiencing and feeling.

Thus the group became accustomed to experimenting with a new attitude in relation to experience. It was no longer conscious will, a preordained choice, a clear plan or the repetition of known schemes to make things happen on paper as well as during verbalization. A deeper meaning, a sense and a value of their experience could be called up by a receptive attitude and a special attention to the aesthetic form, to the feelings experienced by each person in relation to a particular image. This attitude developed flexibility to the unexpected side of emotional life, an increased desire and curiosity to explore behind first sight and an acceptance of what was expressed without having to decide if it was right or appropriate.

The First Interactive Project

Among the projects proposed at this stage, one should be mentioned. The group was asked to sit in a circle. Each participant had to share two big pieces of paper, one with a partner to the right, the other with the partner to the left. On the first piece of paper the participant had “to help” the other; on the second, help had to be asked for or to be received from another. Working on the right side or on the left depended upon the wish to give or to receive help. No other directive was given. Participants worked on both sides, spending a different amount of time on each.

During verbalization everybody noticed that it appeared easier to help. In the case of asking for or receiving help, the fear of exposing oneself, of not being understood, of not receiving what one needed or wanted was overwhelming. In the meantime participants expressed how much they did not like to be in a position of dependence, of passivity or confusion, which seemed to be connected with the need for help. To give help, for this group, implied to be competent and careful, always present and totally available for the other—which could range from pleasing to, in a more rigid fashion, organizing or even correcting the work of the other—these were considered more comfortable feelings. The images showed the strain and the difficulties faced by the group in relating to such a crucial theme in the participants’ personal as well as professional lives.

On the safe ground of playing, the group could reflect upon different styles of interaction and be aware of how difficult it was to give form and space to personal needs. The group understood that to help another did not necessarily mean to decide, to do and to think in place of them, nor to feel omnipotent or impotent because of the urge to fulfill needs that simply had to be acknowledged. Therefore, during verbalization the major insights that seemed to take form regarded sharing and distance.

The Awareness of an Inner Space

The considerations that emerged in the initial stage of the process concerned the defensive attitude that made each participant present their most pleasant and
acceptable side that they liked or knew best. In order to overcome resistance of calling upon the other hidden self and to introduce topic differentiation in the individual space, specific projects were proposed.

Participants were asked to make a cover for their drawings using the technique of collage (choosing and pasting images or words cut from magazines). On the outside they were asked to give an objective representation of themselves. On the inside, in a protected area, a more private and intimate view could emerge. The deeper and hidden wishes and fears could find form and be taken into consideration. The awareness of an inner space allowed the individual experience to be represented in its entirety and its complexity.

**The Clay Mask**

The next project pursued the same line. Participants were asked to make a clay mask that represented someone they wished to be or they had to be at a certain point in their lives. Masks spoke more clearly about defenses and the way participants pictured themselves in order to fulfill inner or outer expectations and demands. For example, a participant made a mask of a dead warrior. This began to speak about past fights and old injuries he had suffered in order to protect his family and village against enemies, but now he was dead and there was no longer need for him at the village.

The group entered a mythical dimension where the intensity of personal experience could be faithfully translated by using metaphorical and symbolic language. The hero’s fights and injuries corresponded to participant’s emotional experience. The fact that he was no longer needed could mean that now, and only now, the war was over and so was the urge to defend oneself against the group and others as enemies.

**The Guide Images**

In this way the door of symbolic imagery was opened and a deeper level of meaning became accessible. The major group project as well as the core of the experience then followed. The main idea came from a phrase uttered by someone in the group: “... everybody in this group takes turns in being strong and pushing the others ...”

The project consisted of making a sculpture of a sort of inner guide, which could be inspired by a real figure in the participant’s past, someone who made them feel protected, who was perceived by that person’s presence or example as a reference point. Members of the group could also seek an object or an animal that had the same function, the same meaning as an inner representation. During one session the group made all the sculptures, put them in a circle and very briefly presented each guide figure. In the following sessions a different sculpture was chosen each time to suggest a theme or a project to the group in relation to its specificity.

The object of this project was to find a link between personal and group imagery and to relate to an ongoing positive horizontal group dynamic: each participant could give something that was rooted in their history and inner life and still was very functional to the group process. Understanding this dynamic developed the participants’ awareness of the deep strength and resources available within the working group. In the meantime everybody felt they were giving to the group something it needed at a certain point. Following each guide, the group was able to tread a path toward what we can consider higher developmental levels. The previous defense mechanisms, such as denial, repression and false self representations (or the difficult balance between omnipotence and impotence in the complex relationship with dying patients), evolved into a viable method for self-protection. The guiding images were spontaneously presented in the following sequence:

1. **The Elephant or After the Battle**

The same person who made the mask of the dead warrior began presenting her “elephant,” which expressed the wish and determination to keep going ahead. She proposed the title “After the Battle” for the group project, participants were asked to make a three-sequence story, before, during and after a conflict.

The images spoke of the conflict as it was experienced. The most frequent representations regarded a danger coming from the sky, something overwhelming and destructive that covered the space, leaving astonishment and fear. The group associated this series of images with the feeling of fighting (and losing) against terminal illness. The scenes after the battle, however, seemed more detailed and powerful than those before.

Very few stories represented an anthropogenic enemy, a castle to be conquered, the idea of a challenge, a conflict in its developmental
sense. The project made the group aware that it perceived part of its work as an inner and outer fight against death. However, the elephant in its symbolic meaning (the sculptress’ personal meaning and also in classic Indian representation) was suggesting perseverance even through pain and destruction.

2. *The Empty Chair or The Loss*

Inspired by these associations, the sculptress of an empty chair proposed her theme for the following session. The guide image of the empty chair indicated a loss; somebody—a father or grandfather—has just left, leaving the seat still warm and the mark of his body on it. This image wanted to affirm the absence and the loss of someone as a reality that has to be faced.

The woman who made it associated the image with the fact that she could not cry, admit or experience sadness and that she felt like a robot looking at the others’ mourning as if it did not touch her at all. In the powerful image she created she could recognize the need for mourning as a process she prevented herself from experiencing because she was too afraid of falling apart.

The chair acquired two meanings. It was an invitation to face the lack or the loss of someone and in addition it provided a holding space for the experience to take place. The group shared the same deep need to allow sadness and mourning to be experienced. They said that after a few years of relating to dying patients and their families’ pain, the sense of loss was chronic, a sort of frozen mourning process that left them deprived of its inner function.

Participants were asked to do drawings about missing someone or something they considered particularly meaningful in their past. In this way each individual identified the feelings they considered threatening. Reciprocal empathy warmed up and seemed to begin removing the blockage in their psychic lives. Giving form to the experience of loss paradoxically helped participants to recognize its enriching quality, which seemed to be reflected in the quality of the touching and powerful images produced in this session.

3. *Romeo or Living Without Links*

It appeared that the group needed a break after the intensity of the previous session. Fear of relating to others, of getting too involved and being hurt, brought the guide image Romeo into play.

Romeo came from a childhood memory, he was a “weird” man, half gypsy, half wise man; he liked children and as a child he was taken care of by a small community in a little town. He had nothing of his own, but everything he needed was given to him. He was completely independent yet completely adopted by the community; he was not connected to anyone in particular, relative or friend, but everybody was Romeo’s friend.

The sculpture of Romeo had a backpack and a hat, but he could not stand on his own feet. In the drawing inspired by Romeo, the group fantasized about living without any link or responsibility in an idealized form of primitive freedom. Like Romeo they experienced wandering as a guest in other people’s homes, without anything of their own, in the paradoxical condition of being completely autonomous and completely dependent.

However, Romeo and the images he inspired were soon addressed as representing a sort of false hero. The group recognized that aspects of this guide responded to an “evergreen” wish to escape, to break with all links and everyday burdens. To run away, yes, but just for a little while, the group agreed. Nobody identified with him completely, but they used his example to give themselves a vacation. The theme of their drawing in this session was “to escape.”

4. *The Witch Monk or Travelling Through Scary Places*

At this point the group was ready to follow the next guide to a deeper level of awareness. The guide was half hermit, half witch. The sculpture represented a monk; its hood was empty, covering a dark, deep emptiness. The sculptor suggested that this guide go into a place of darkness and depression, a forest or a swamp through which the participants had to go, facing the fears and dealing with the anguish of not knowing, like experiencing a rite of passage.

Everyone made a drawing of their version of an obscure and threatening place. All the drawings were presented next to each other in order to represent the complete map of the group’s
fears. Each participant had to explore all the pictures, making a story of the entire sequence, where they could project different aspects and developments of this particular journey. However, in order to be able to travel to these places, group members, like the heroes of a classical fairy tale, had to provide themselves with some tools, such as a magic wand.

In a symbolic way, the group was ready to recognize the importance of working through what they were afraid of, namely depression and sadness, the most uncomfortable side of their work and of human life. They learned that denial did not help and that it was necessary for them to feel equipped enough not to lose themselves in this experience, to avoid being either overwhelmed or destroyed by it.

A wide variety of tools for travelling into the darkness was chosen, from flashlights and compasses as the concrete representations of what they needed to orient themselves, to medical equipment as the symbols of their roles and function. Both kinds of tools were used to preserve them from feeling too confused or lost.

In the visual representations as well as during verbalization, the group was now able to represent the mourning process in its dynamic quality. When travelling through an obscure zone, it was possible to come out knowing something more about themselves (even ghosts were no longer the expression of a residual diffuse anxiety, but could be named and confronted) after providing themselves with something they needed in order to overcome this task.

Defenses now were no longer a blind screen that prevented the participants from feeling or even seeing the other, but were perceived as a necessary protection. They helped each person to find structure and a more adaptive way of functioning within the group resources and to restore the individual capacity for sharing and giving empathetic responses to patients and to each other.

5. The Baby in the Crib or A Wish for Merging

Coming after the previous effort, the following theme expressed a group wish for regression. In the swamp, a participant said, a basket with a baby was found. This guide was used to give voice to an apparently opposite need: after the presentation of an active courageous self, the group explored its more needy, passive, helpless side. The image can be seen as representing the ultimate result of depression, but the sculpture of a baby also seemed to express a desire for rebirth.

In the group process the baby in the crib suggested a group project, a mural, where individual boundaries could be suspended for a while, merging into a collective image. In the rhythm and the pattern of group functioning, this project—like the one of Romeo—can be considered as another pause. The shared quest for closeness and merging within the group seemed to satisfy the individual need to be nurtured and reassured by the group itself, a holding space, which could allow regression. At the end of the work, however, participants said that they enjoyed it, but at one point felt somehow uncomfortable and confused.

6. The Child Climbing a Tree or Measuring Distance

The previous theme evidently made group dynamics the center of attention, so the next guide image chosen seemed to refer to each individual relating to the group as a whole. The sculpture represented a childhood memory. Its creator recounted that in her adolescence she often used to go into the garden where she climbed a tree, waiting for her mother to call her for dinner and she looked at the house full of people with a very special pleasure. This appeared to be an experiment in autonomy and practicing separation (this session took place after Christmas vacation). The perception of the group as a whole was balanced by a growing awareness of individual identity.

The project concerned individuals in relation to the group. Everybody then explained what role they felt the group played for them and vice versa. The only way that participants were able to recognize the role the group played for each of them was to create a distance (in much the same way as the house represented nourishment, meaningful relationships and a place to go back to). The awareness of the individual’s dependence upon the group, however, did not prevent individuation and left room for each group member to prove one’s self (the child climbing the tree), measuring a functional and flexible distance.
7. *The Snail or A Place of One's Own*

The guide image representing a snail made participants work on individual space in relation to each other. The project was inspired by the "group interactive art therapy project" (Waller, 1993), which consisted of choosing a box and working inside and outside, using different kinds of art materials. The box, which represented the self, was then connected to two other boxes, building a common space to be shared. Afterward the subgroups formed connections with each other to arrive at a construction involving the entire group.

The snail for a group of professionals taking care of patients in their homes could represent their working conditions. Some of the verbalization after the work showed how the group—nurses in particular—dealt with this situation and how they used aspects of their private lives to be able to step into patients' privacy. It seemed to them that they had to bring their own homes in order not to feel intrusive. To talk about their personal lives to patients seemed to help them to cope with the atmosphere of death that surrounded the places they were visiting.

In addition to this, the project entailed giving volume to the inner space as well as a solid shape to the protective shell outside. Participants no longer presented themselves through a facade, but in a tridimensional form to be related to other tridimensional forms. Even the common space had to be taken care of, thought out, considered. In this part of the project, which required four sessions for completion, group dynamics were the main object of exploration. The group was surprised to see how much the casual grouping and the way each subgroup structured its space was so responsive to the reality of their relationships.

A variation of the original project was then added. Boxes—most of them appeared pretty houses more or less open or accessible to the inside—again seemed to represent the known or accepted self. Therefore, participants were asked to make a place for the other side of themselves, a place for "garbage" in order to call into play their shadows. To find a location for these new series of boxes within the previous villages was the next task.

This variation created so much movement that new alliances and some warm discussion among participants took place. Then the group seemed to become aware that their diversity, which was previously projected outside—in particular into one of the subgroups—seemed to be accepted as part of each individual space. In this way the opportunity for a richer dialectic among participants was given. Some insights emerged about the silent rules and prejudices that governed the group. The sense of trust that grew enabled the group to move quickly to a new pattern—of the possible patterns available—as the previous rigid balance seemed already disrupted.

8. *A Listening Father or Looking at the Problems*

The last guide image represented a father rediscovered by an adult son. The father was in reality an artist and expressed a form of wisdom his son felt he wanted to re-discover, a wisdom connected with a receptive and creative attitude. The creator of this sculpture said that he felt he could be helped by just talking about his problems; once expressed they seemed different. No solutions or answers were asked of the father, but a trusting, open and creative view of things and the opportunity to step back and to look at problems from different angles.

Participants worked on projects connected to changing views of what they considered to be their problems, which they had represented through symbolic forms. Here the group re-experienced some of the changes they went through during the entire course with art therapy. They realized that even giving a visual representation to problems could help uncover the way they were experienced. Images pointed out the blocked or energetic areas that needed to be transformed. The inner "wise father" was called into play by each participant as soon as they were able to represent and elaborate in some form, visual and verbal, their experience. Each personal style (cognitive and emotional) of looking at things was no longer dependent upon the usual rigid and secure perspective, but could move as through a space to be explored.

The function of the creative process and visual form with which participants could experiment in the art therapy group might be internalized and help to deal with inner and outer issues and difficulties. These were no longer considered as an element to be ashamed of or scared by—once removed they could always mani-
fest themselves through symptoms or distress—but as an essential part of which to be aware.

Conclusion

In this paper an art therapy time-limited project with a medical staff running a high risk of burnout has been presented. The description of the experience as it developed within the group process showed the function of imagery in making inner and emotional life accessible to consciousness and in providing participants with more viable modes of relating to others, to the life/work experience as well as to oneself. Symbolic and mythical imagery as well as group stories and dynamics suggest further exploration.

References

