



The art of therapy Jenner Roth

Winter workshop
Monday 7th February 2011

This workshop is about art: the art of therapy.

Over these days we are going to look at the many ways we can be artists in our work. I am not going to talk to you for very long, but I hope that the words that I say will plant seeds in your thinking, from which tendrils of ideas will grow and thrive for you.

I believe that therapy and being a therapist is a balance of skill, a practice that can be learned, and art, a less frequently defined, perhaps unteachable, quality of energy and viewpoint and outlook that we bring to our work. For many of us the art of therapy is the voice that called us to this work and keeps us at it. I do not think this is only true for therapy and therapists, it can exist in how we practice whatever work we do. But today I want to talk about how we can recognise and honour the art as therapists.

At the annual core staff away-days in December, three days when the core staff go away together to review the past year and look forward to the coming year, we were discussing the longer future and realised that we all planned and wanted to go on working for as long as we could imagine because we really love our work and enjoy doing it. Oriël then made the observation that you don't often hear about conductors, composers, musicians, artists and authors retiring. They go on creating all their lives.

Oriël's observation made us think about the undefined area of art in being a therapist. Terry suggested it was the process of organising and communicating a personal view of the world with yourself in it. I thought this was a very good definition. Let me say it again, a process of organising and communicating a personal view of the world with yourself in it. It is expression that attempts to capture and give form to all of the body's experience. And this experience is unique.

Art is differentiated by an artist's style and how well the artist can express and communicate to others something of their experience of the subject. It doesn't matter if we know or recognise the artist's name, we recognise their art, their style, their voice.

We are going to look briefly at some images of physical works of art.

There are two paintings together here, one by Claude Monet and one by René Magritte. Their styles are different, but we recognise both paintings as paintings of trees. As we look at more paintings, we recognise that all the artists are saying something about a tree or trees in their own way.

Another thing that the artist does is teach us. When I was a young sophisticate and thought I knew most everything, including what water and swimming pools looked like, I inadvertently encountered my first David Hockney painting of a swimming pool. In my arrogance and ignorance I was irritated by his painting of lines and patterns all over the water and swimming pool. Nothing, I thought, like real water and real swimming pools. Then I saw a swimming pool again and realised that, indeed, I had not really looked at swimming pools or water and Hockney had. He had seen it and I had not. My idea of water and swimming pools had got in the way of my looking at water and swimming pools. I learned from him to look differently and I think art does that for us. Let us look at a few of Hockney's pools.

The last set of images we will look at is of different sculptors saying different things about different subjects, but, again, each with their own voice.

Just as artists or poets or musicians can be recognised by their work, so, too, can psychotherapists. If you think about it, no one would ever confuse a session or group of mine with one of, say, Terry's or Maggie's. So now let us look at what the art of being a psychotherapist might be.

I think it is the willingness to bring ourselves fully to the session, to being honest about who we are and who the client is and what we are dealing with together: being committed to being present in our own skin. I think art allows for the high of a good session, the excitement of beginning, the low of being lost and confused and uncertain and determining to find a way through. I think it is the sense that I am a psychotherapist, that is what I do. The art is the moment your skills allow you to open up to a new way of looking at something, when your intuition puts words in your mouth, when you reach beyond what you thought you could do.

I think to honour and support the art, we must learn who we bring to the therapist's chair, we must learn to support the self we bring to the profession, not the role or stereotype, but the I.



After learning the skills of therapy, the models of approaching situations, the tools and techniques of listening, of hearing, of intervention, of questioning, of paradox, of empathy, of functioning in real time, we must recognise that we are sitting alone in a room with another, that we are having a unique exchange with another, a conversation and contact that has never taken place before and will not take place again. We must move beyond the cliché, the rules and perimeters that we learned, we must be brave enough to have a real conversation about what is really happening. We must ask ourselves, who is the I that I bring to this practice, who sits here?

Terry and I developed process oriented coaching to encourage therapists to externalise and recognise their inner dialogue so they could come to know their own voice in the therapist's chair: the thoughts, intuitions, questions, that were unique to them, that were their own, because this is the practice that takes us from the generic role of a therapist sitting in a chair to the specific - you sitting in your chair.

The art grows by practice, reflection, questioning, trying new ways, responding to what you know and are learning about yourself. And it will last as long as you keep engaging with it.

This is not the end or the answer, it is the beginning, the question. So, let me say again that our task is to move beyond the cliché, the rules and perimeters that we have learned, to be brave enough to have a real conversation about what is really happening with ourselves and with others. This personal endeavor is the therapist as artist, in which we use our personal experience as a point of orientation.

Thank you.