Art Therapy

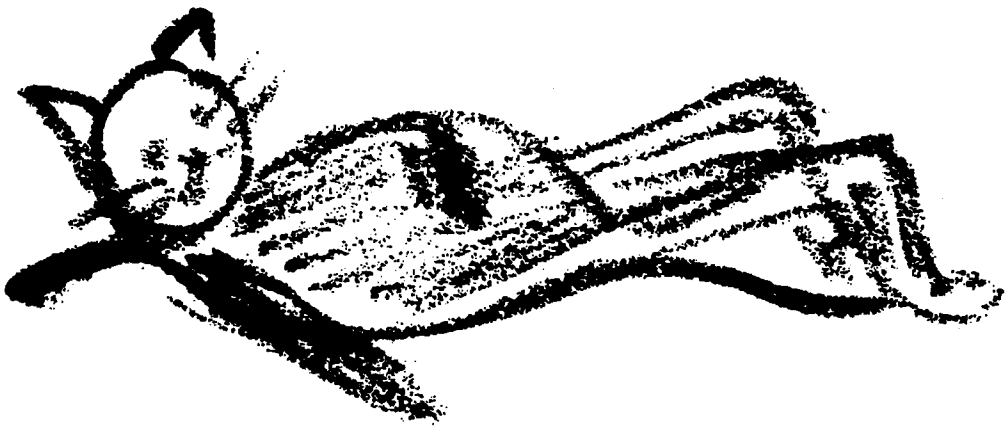
Liesl Silverstone

I was trained, as a social worker, to solve the client's problems, to know best. I had been well-accustomed to that model since childhood — someone telling me what to do, what not to do.

Then, as a student on a counselling course, I came across the approach originated by Carl Rogers – the person-centred approach based on the belief that the person is responsible and can reach her own potential in a climate of acceptance, congruence and empathy. I discovered the benefit for myself, sitting in the client's chair: to be heard empathically, to be deeply understood. That kind of listening felt like a precious gift where, in turn, I could dare to listen to myself. Being accepted without judgement allowed me to look at the unacceptable aspects of myself, to work through and go beyond them. Experiencing the counsellor as real and genuine encouraged me to trust her and, in turn, let myself be real.

Intellectually I embraced this approach at once and with enthusiasm. It made abundant sense on many levels — personal, social, political, international. Yet it took me a very long time to integrate, to operate. The old authoritarian model had to be uprooted first.

Slowly I began to see the benefits in my work as a school counsellor, as I extended



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the person-centred approach to young people, and watched their self-esteem grow. As a tutor on counselling courses I offered 'Rogers' workshops with ever more enthusiasm and congruence. And yet, and yet — I began to note the limitation of mere words, began to search for another mode of knowing.

I discovered the power and truth contained in images made visible. I trained as an art therapist and learned that images, like dreams, tap into the world of spontaneous knowing that has nothing to do with thoughts. Images help us away from cerebral, verbal judgmental processes, and into the here-and-now world of imagination, intuition, inspiration. The paradox applies that by thinking less it is possible to know more. By making visible our images we can tap into material from the subconscious which is denied to the forefront of our awareness, and can gain valuable insights. Importantly, we need to engage both the thinking and intuitive mode of knowing to become integrated.

Some schools of thought believe in interpreting images, telling the client the meaning of the image. But working with an image in a person-centred way enables the client to discover the message of the image for themselves, thus gaining self-awareness as well as moving towards a more autonomous way of being. I hold the mirror up to the client's words and image alike. If I stick my own reflection into the mirror, by interpreting or identifying, I get in the way of the client's reflection, and of her/his ability to see herself.

Working with an image can be a safe, visible, accurate process while talking about images can have a once-removed flavour. Images offer immediacy and enable the client to be more spontaneous, more trusting. When thoughts are pushed aside, spontaneous images can emerge, symbolic aspects of the self in need of recognition.

I see four stages in the process:

1) allowing images to present themselves to the inner eye
2) making those images visible in art-form
3) trying to elicit the meaning of the image with a facilitator
4) working on the emerging issue in counselling

A client draws a tiger. She cries: 'I want to show my tiger, but I only show my pussycat'. The image discloses its message quickly. It takes somewhat longer, in counselling, to enable the woman to 'show her tiger'.

There are three aspects in working therapeutically with art which the counsellor needs to work on. She or he may need to develop a shift of focus to incorporate these ways of working.

Firstly, the counsellor holds the 'mirror' up not only to words but to the picture. The counsellor may reflect position and size:

'You put yourself on the edge of the picture', 'What about the size of this shape?'

That which is missing can be significant:

'I notice there are no hands', 'You have left this part blank'.

Wider reflections can be fruitful:

'You drew mother in red paint, yourself in grey chalk', 'Last week you used small paper, today a large sheet'.

Size, colour, material used may be reflected:

'This is the only bit you did in red', 'You used black chalk for the whole picture'.

The counsellor may reflect the whole process of image-making, not just the end product:

'You took a piece of paper and folded it in half', 'You began with this shape, ended with this mark'.

Secondly, the counsellor must remember that the picture is an extension of the self made visible in symbolic form. Therefore she or he needs to help the client towards recognition of such projected material by making 'bridges' from the picture to the client.

'This stag is in Scotland.'

'Does that ring bells for you — the stag in Scotland?'

'My grandfather was Scottish. I come from South Africa. I need to know I have roots here too.'

'I need to define the shape of this cat.'

'Can you associate with that? Defining the shape of the cat?'

'Oh yes, I need to define my shape. Me!'

Thirdly, when talking about an image, the client becomes unselfconscious. Their words are spontaneous, uncensored, of potential significance and so need to be reflected back to them (unlike many occasons in verbal counselling when the counsellor lets things go). One client said, 'I couldn't bear to draw the image. It disturbed me so much, these three black roses.' These spontaneous words led to denied feelings about the three children who had left home, the client's changing role as mother.

Working with art is in itself a creative spontaneous process, as the counsellor moves from words to image, to body language, to wider reflections. Images are very emotive. There is a danger that the counsellor projects his or her own associations onto a client's picture. Beware! Be aware!

Counselling which incorporates the therapeutic use of art has a wide scope. Imaging can be suggested on the hoof during a session to explore a feeling, a situation, an emotive word further. A client talked about a friend who had promised to ring her the previous night, and did not do so. She felt disappointed, abandoned. I suggested she close her eyes and let an image come to do with 'abandoned'. She drew a baby crying in a cot, a wall, and a woman the other side of the wall, turned away. She spoke of herself, the baby, and the mother who never came when she wanted her. She was amazed. A memory from pre-verbal times, and her work in earlier therapy to do with issues of inclusion/exclusion had not brought up this crucial memory.

Imaging can be very effective in groups. Constructing a 'group picture' with a family, a team, a management or staff group, will reveal the group dynamic more accurately than lengthy discussion. Who keeps apart, who is busy everywhere, who dominates, who splits the group, all made visible on the shared picture. It is difficult to deny, conceal, avoid, with the image before you. Much progress can be made based on such symbolic evidence.

I have used imaging as a tutor. For example, a group may be learning about acceptance. The theory is easy enough to comprehend, but owning the concept at a deeper, more personal level is hard. I ask each student to identify the behaviour she would find most difficult to accept. I

suggest the students close their eyes, focus on this behaviour, and allow an image to surface, perhaps from an earlier time. 'Sexual abuse' took a student back to a memory of her father's friend whom she had trusted but who kissed her, then aged 8, on the mouth. 'Cruelty' for another student brought an image of herself, as a young child, locked up in the broom cupboard as a punishment. 'Meanness' — the mother who refused her daughter pocket money. Non-acceptance is learned by personal experience. Only when the projection is taken back responsibly, can we become more accepting. Image work makes these vital links.

Some years ago, before a general election, I suggested an imaging exercise around Margaret Thatcher. One student drew a rock, solid, dependable. 'Not like mother, who was a wimp.' He voted Conservative. Another student drew a slave driver. 'Father, an authoritarian despot.' She voted Labour. Imagine art therapy sessions at the polling booths, to take back our projections so that we might vote in a level way!

The scope of art therapy is vast. For the past ten years I have offered a training course in person-centred art therapy. Students come from a wide range of settings. They apply their learning at work, as art therapists, counsellors, teachers, nurses, social workers. Carl Rogers, the course's consultant, saw it 'as an effective course in person-centred art therapy based on the philosophy which empowers the person and helps to make them more self-directed'.

It is my hope that ever more counselling courses will incorporate the creative therapies, of which art is one, in their training programmes, as a valuable means towards integration and growth. In turn, more art therapy courses might benefit by including some basic counselling skills on their syllabus. The person-centred approach, at first developed in counselling, was later seen as relevant to a far wider range of settings: education, management, family, religion, industry, politics. Similarly the person-centred approach linked to the creative modes has relevance in a wider field. Integrating both the verbal and non-verbal way of knowing can help people function more fully, wherever and whoever they may be.