

# CREATIVE IMAGERY

## and how to work with our images

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*Imagery is something we all use, whether we are aware of it or not. Whatever we do or create in our lives, whether it's painting the walls, beginning a love affair or planning some work, begins as an image in our minds. Spend a minute thinking about what you're going to eat tonight – what are the images that come into your head? Did you start trying to remember what's in the fridge or the kitchen cupboards? Did you start wandering the shelves of your local supermarket in your mind? Or was it already planned and ready – and what images did that bring up?*

In July 2000 at the October Gallery, as part of AHPP's year long 20<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations, I facilitated a workshop on *Creative Imagery: making life choices and changes*. Thirteen people attended from a range of backgrounds and interests. We spent some time talking about what 'imagework' means – what it is and what it isn't.

'Imagework' is literally working with images, which can be sensed, felt, heard, smelled and even tasted as well as seen. It is a way of accessing internal information and dealing with inner events through imagery rather than verbal thought. We do this all the time both consciously (as in remembering or imagining) or unconsciously (as in dreaming) – and we can learn to do it more awarely as a way of helping us to make choices and changes in our lives.

It is not the same as guided visualisation, in particular because the images are produced by the person themselves rather than being introduced by a 'guide'. It is important to make a distinction between imagework and visualisation, because of the implication with the latter that it is about 'seeing' pictures in your mind. All of our senses produce images of one form or another. The phrase 'the mind's eye' – a very evocative one – uses visual language for something which is not necessarily a visual process. Many people are not strongly visual in this way and as a result believe that they do not produce images.

During an introductory exercise aimed at demonstrating that we all produce images, I took the workshop participants through what became known as 'that peach thing' during my training with Dina Glouberman (see

references) in the early 1990s. This exercise – imagining picking up, smelling, washing and finally eating a luscious, ripe peach – involves all our senses and everybody produces images of one kind or another. One person in the group swore that their hands continued to smell of peach for some time afterwards, although they had considered themselves to be more visual than olfactory beforehand.

I led the group through a breathing relaxation with closed eyes, inviting them to remain seated (on chairs or on the floor) rather than lying down, in order to remain conscious and alert whilst relaxed. It is important to stay with the first image that comes up when

working, even if (or maybe especially if) you don't like it – it probably needs to be worked with. As an ethical 'health warning' it is also important to say that there are occasions when it may not be appropriate to work with images, for instance with people who are very disturbed or with particular mental health problems. There are times when images are very disturbing and anybody who facilitates this sort of work should have adequate and appropriate training to deal with what might come up in a group or with an individual.

We then did an exercise aimed at surfacing conscious and unconscious feelings and beliefs about our current way of life and being – creating and

working with an image of 'your life as it is at the moment'. Working individually, each person was invited to explore their image in whatever way they chose and then to have a brief dialogue with it, asking and answering questions or making statements. Some people chose to 'become' their image, moving into a different space and experiencing how this felt – and maybe answering or asking questions from that other place. When this came to a close, participants wrote or drew what they had experienced and then shared it with one other person. In the whole group there was then the opportunity to briefly talk about what had happened for those who chose to do so.

A second exercise on making choices had more elements of guiding, although I made it very clear that if any of my promptings did not work for participants, they should ignore



them and follow their image in their own way. People were taken to their own personal crossroads, where they were invited to notice how many alternative routes there were and how they felt about this. They were then encouraged to explore all the paths or roads in turn, making choices about which to follow first – and then returning to the crossroads and making another choice. Each time they were asked to be aware of any changes at the crossroads and in themselves. They were invited to notice their surroundings, the sounds, sights and smells along the road and what this meant to them.

'What sort of clothes are you wearing as you travel along?' 'What do you have on your feet?' 'Are you alone or are there others around?' 'What's the weather like?' Finally, they returned to the crossroads and noticed which of the routes now attracted them the most and why – and how this might have changed from the start. Again, they wrote or drew their experience and shared this with another participant. In the whole group we reflected on what their images might mean for them in their lives and the choices they made.

There was time in this three hour workshop for only one more, very brief exercise, this time on change. 'Going ahead in time, what is a change you would like to make within the next three years? And what are the effects on your life – and those around you? ..... Then a change within the next six months – what are the effects on your life and others? ..... And now, a change you would like to make within the coming week. What do you need to do about this now this minute? What will you do about it tomorrow? What are the effects you hope it will have on your life and on others?'

When we did a brief review of the afternoon, many of the group said how powerful the experience had been – and how unexpected. For one or two it had brought up some difficult issues and we briefly talked about how they could deal with these elsewhere. The group were given my contact details in case other issues emerged later. Images, like dreams, go on processing internally and it may take days for some of the insights or feelings to surface.

Also like dream, images are your own creation which you can do 'imagework' with at any time and revisit whenever you choose. They can be an empowering and liberating way to communicate with your inner world in order to function more effectively in the outer world.

### Further Reading

Gawain, S. (1979) *Creative Visualization*, San Rafael, CA: New World Library

Glouberman, D. (1989) *Life Choices and Life Changes Through Imagework: The art of developing personal vision*, London: Unwin Hyman

Samuels, M. and Samuels N.S. (1975) *Seeing With the Mind's Eye: The history, techniques and uses of visualization*, New York: Random House

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