

Oasis – a support group for living creatively

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Oasis, which is facilitated by two therapists, Karin Jarman and Pauline Marksteiner, aims to awaken a greater sense of self-worth and ownership of responsibility. It works with the metaphor of being on a journey, and is inspired by Rudolf Steiner's spiritual cosmology, Anthroposophy. The Foundation Stone Meditation, a verse written by Steiner, provides a structure. The process is about listening and sharing. Mutual respect and confidentiality are the ground rules. Artistic exploration of soul experiences through colour is an important tool. Oasis is structured in three twelve-week pathways – remembering the past, acknowledging the present, envisioning the whole. Interest in Oasis is growing.

Keywords: personal journey; self-worth; sharing; creativity; soul colour; spirit

In an age of growing isolation, loneliness and inner emptiness, supportive self-help groups based on human encounter and the forming of relationships have become an increasingly important part of Community Health Care programmes. Oasis offers a supportive programme for anyone seeking new perspectives on life in the face of challenging life circumstances, within a caring, confidential and well-held space.

The Oasis programme is co-facilitated by two experienced therapists (art therapist Karin Jarman and biographical counsellor Pauline Marksteiner). It is designed to encourage self-help and individual empowerment through the mutual support of the

group. The artistic exercises – using clay modelling, painting, drawing and creative writing – and work with biographical narrative provide a vehicle for sharing and conversing together. The process aims to awaken a greater sense of self-worth and ownership of responsibility. The physical, emotional and structural support given by the group offers the possibility for individuals to develop new faculties and greater confidence in the future.

The Oasis model

The Oasis model came into being through two separate streams of activity. The one stream focused specifically on the needs of people diagnosed with cancer, and was led by two

counsellors at The Blackthorn Medical Centre in Maidstone, Kent. The other, led by an art therapist at the St Luke's Medical Centre in Stroud, Gloucestershire arose from a group for women experiencing the challenges of menopause.

In 2001 Karin Jarman undertook a life-changing journey on foot from her home in Stroud to a castle in the Czech Republic near Prague (Jarman, 2008). On her way there she was offered hospitality by the counsellor Melanie Taylor, one of the founder-members of the Oasis group at the Blackthorn Medical Centre in Kent. The connection made between them on that occasion laid the foundations for a new collaboration that was to combine their two professional approaches – artistic work and biographic narrative as part of a process of self-development. The metaphor of being on a journey arose directly out of Karin's experience of being on a pilgrimage. Both Karin and Melanie recognized that their work was, and continues to be inspired by Anthroposophy, a spiritual understanding of the human being initiated and inspired by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and which has now become a worldwide movement. The three pathways of Oasis (described later) are based on the so-called Foundation Stone Meditation, a remarkable verse which Rudolf Steiner gave when the worldwide Anthroposophical Society was founded. Its content addresses three core activities of the human spirit: *Spirit re-collection*, *Spirit mindfulness* and *Spirit vision*.

It is this spiritual dimension and understanding that sets the Oasis model apart from other support groups. At the same time it also incorporates the transpersonal understanding of psychotherapy and the human soul which Carl Rogers (1902–1987) developed through his Person-centred, humanistic approach; the work of James Hillman (1926–2011), author of many writings on the psyche and the soul, and who challenged the mainly medical model of psychotherapy; and of Robert Sardello (1941–), co-founder of the US School of Spiritual Psychology. At its core is the principle of Salutogenesis, based on research carried out by Aaron Antonovsky (1923–1994), professor of Medical Sociology

(Antonovsky, 2014). Antonovsky interviewed people who had suffered serious levels of stress such as in concentration camps, in order to find out what had enabled them to survive intact. He discovered that the ability to access inner resources of resilience was closely connected with their ability to experience the coherence of life's events and finding meaning in even the most adverse of situations. The work of Oasis is about finding access to, and tapping into, these often hidden inner resources.

To be in the company of fellow travellers on the journey of life and have one's experiences listened to, reflected on and validated through the warm empathy of the group is one of its most important features. The course facilitators carefully guide the process to ensure that it is 'safe' (to ensure mutual respect and confidentiality is maintained), and always honours the freedom space of each individual. There is no coercion to speak or divulge anything. In fact, it is possible to remain a silent participant, should one so wish. Listening is as important as speaking. The facilitators include themselves in the process, and share their own stories too. This has often been reflected back to the facilitators as being very valuable. As human beings we are all fellow travellers and no one person's answers are better or worse than any other; they are just different, or are questions that lead deeper.

Having two facilitators is important. This prevents undue focus being placed on one person, provides support, and allows for honest feedback. Their task is to ensure that the strong form and structure developed over the years, provides the necessary framework for participants to be as free and as spontaneous as possible while at the same time following an inner thread in a disciplined way. Mutual respect and utter confidentiality are the essential ground rules. Within them 'radical honesty' is encouraged (Blanton, 2005) so that feedback can be given to enable each person, including the facilitators, to grow. If conflict does arise between members, the opportunity is used to model non-

violent resolution within the group.

Each life story is honoured as the unique expression of individuality with all its colours and textures. Individual stories are embedded in the myths, legends and fairy tales from all over the world. We are not alone with our experiences of tragedy, heartbreak, loss, despair and feelings of hopelessness, nor with our struggles with demons and shadowy beings and encounters with evil, both within and without. Embracing the imaginations provided by those stories and linking them to our own adds coherence and meaningfulness to our experiences.

This is where artistic engagement is very important. We work with painting, drawing, clay modelling and creative writing. Exploring colour in nature, and observing how it appears in the morning and evening sky, and experiencing how light and dark interact dynamically with one another – all can throw light on our inner colours, our feelings. We may be aware of times in our own biographies when light and dark mingle, or when darkness threatens to overcome the light. Or again after experiencing feelings of anger and rage, a sense of deep inner sadness may arise which is akin to that mysterious last glimmer of light in the evening sky. Following this line of thought we might ask ourselves whether there is a connection between our own soul and that of the world. Can our inner feelings of hope be compared with the gentle colours of the morning sky at dawn, or the fresh colours of spring after the harshness of winter? Is the abundance of joy like the ripe harvest of summer that gives rise to a feeling of gratitude embracing all that has been?

Clay modelling allows us to touch something of the earth, to transform what is heavy, clammy and cold and breathe life into it by creating a form, which may be as simple as a sphere or an egg; and then passing it around to feel the differences in temperature and surface texture that the human hand imprints upon it. This exercise always evokes a sense of wonder. Starting off as the same

substance, it is individualized through the human touch. We may ask ourselves whether our own earth, our bodies, are transformed by the touch of our inner beings.

Poetry is another valuable resource, and participants are invited to share their favourite poems or even their own creations. Towards the end of the Oasis journey participants are invited to 'condense' a part of their story by creating a new piece of writing that transcends what was initially spontaneous and descriptive. Such 'condensed' versions can often bring us very close to the universally human aspects of myths and stories referred to earlier.

The three pathways

Oasis is structured in three twelve-week pathways containing weekly three-hour sessions.

Spirit remembering

The first pathway honours our beginnings. Participants are encouraged to tell the story of how their parents met, and the outer circumstances around the time of their birth. We imagine our conception, and the wonder and miracle surrounding our coming into existence. Participants are invited to share the story of their birth (known and not known) and their very earliest memory. This may also have been a traumatic event that pulled our conscious awareness to the fore. We look at how rhythms and repetition shaped our early lives, whether we were able to connect to nature, or whether it was an urban landscape that gave us our playgrounds. We speak of important relationships, how they began, unfolded and possibly ended. And we look at how all of this still impacts on our lives today. Through remembering, we can perhaps gain a new understanding for the events by having our stories heard, reflected back and loved by others.

Yes, the word 'love' seems appropriate here. How often do we hear people dismissing their biography as something insignificant, unimportant and irrelevant in the bigger scheme of things? Almost invariably the listeners find some hidden

gems, see the unique quality and perhaps also discover the resourcefulness that is so often overlooked. The bond created by this group sharing is unlike most other relationships. Personal experiences that may never have been voiced before are being shared among people who as yet hardly know one another. The 'safe space' (see above) built into the structure of each session enables this to happen.

Spirit Remembering means that we are not only tracing the outer events. By 'stringing the beads' of outer events together on to a silken thread, hidden meaning begins to emerge by looking back and truly accepting what has been. By changing our relationship to events, the past is changed. The artistic sessions of this pathway are guided in such a way that the process itself becomes important, rather than the outcome: the care taken in making the first mark on the paper (our conception) and adding more colours; expressing our first memory purely in colour using a circular shape that can surround, protect and honour the experience for what it was; experiencing the movement and rhythm of line drawing; modelling a human figure with our eyes closed and accepting its imperfection even before we look at it. Feedback from participants confirms that working artistically in this way allows what was discussed in the conversation to be felt on a deeper level.

This pathway concludes by reflecting on the moment of leaving home and entering adult life.

Spirit mindfulness

It was interesting to read the articles in the spring 2015 issue of *Self & Society* on 'Mindfulness and Beyond' (Vol. 43, No.1, Spring 2015), particularly by Manu Bazzano who wrote the guest editorial 'Before and after mindfulness', and in David Brazier's 'A popular misconception', where the point is made that, contrary to popular belief, mindfulness and awareness are not one and the same in the understanding of the original Buddhist practice of mindfulness, from which the now ubiquitous secular version on offer is derived.

Just as it is important to be aware of breathing in Buddhist practice, *spirit mindfulness* in Anthroposophy is acknowledged in the context of the rhythm of heart and lung (Steiner's Foundation Stone Meditation). Each breath moves between two polarities: the in-breath connects us to our bodies, the out-breath to the world around us. Something similar – impacting directly on our breathing – can be found in the realm of our feelings. We may hold our breath in disbelief and emphasize the out-breath when we are exhausted. With laughing and sobbing there is also an interesting polarity between breathing in and breathing out. In this way we can see how our feelings are gradually imprinted on to our body via the breath, and how this gives us the basis on which to understand the phenomena of somatic illness.

This second pathway is very different in character to the first and focuses on the present time. We consider how we are really doing in terms of self-development, what we would like to change in our lives, and whether we have the power to change or are at the mercy of our past. We are invited to surprise ourselves, discover entirely new aspects, and create a 'map and compass' to navigate the bewildering world of our feelings and emotions as they come and go in the course of a day, in ways that often feel random, unbidden, unsettling and unpredictable.

We explore the fascinating world of colour using a prism. An interesting starting point, apart from observing the colours that arise, is to note the points of contrast between the darker and lighter surfaces. We discover that instead of a full and balanced colour spectrum, there is a division into a polarity of warm and cold colours. We can ask ourselves whether this can also be applied to our feelings and emotions. In looking at a single colour, we miraculously discover that a totally new and light-filled colour gradually emerges. It is the opposite or complementary colour. It is not physical but nonetheless objective, since everybody sees the same after-image of the colour in question. We

can then ask ourselves if we can find a similar after-image in relation to our feelings. In nature we see the full colour spectrum in the form of the rainbow. It is a sight which can still fill us with awe and wonder. Colours always appear there in the same harmonious order. It provides a bridge between the earth and the sky. Children love rainbows and often draw or paint them. We sometimes have to remind ourselves as adults that we, too, were once able to fill our souls by simply looking, by just sitting and staring at the script of nature.

After introducing the phenomena of colour in the outer world, participants are invited to paint their feelings and get in touch with their inner colours. As with the previously mentioned clay exercises, we can begin to individualize what is outwardly revealed in nature. There is a connection between them. Our inner feelings are just as real as what is manifested outwardly. They should not be judged. There are no 'good' feelings and 'bad' feelings. We allow our feelings to be present, to be wondered at and to hear their messages, as is expressed in this poem by Rumi (2004):

The guest house

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

We also use a wonderful set of exercises called STIGA from the book *Group meditation* by Michael Lipson (2011), an American Psychotherapist. STIGA is an acronym for 'Surprise, Touch, Inspiration, Gratitude, and Amusement'. The exercise invites us to contemplate each day what surprised us, what touched, what inspired us, what filled us with gratitude, and finally, what amused us. Although a seemingly playful and light-hearted exercise, it offers unexpected depth if carried out over a period of time. In his description of the sequence, Lipson points out that we are not necessarily just looking at the positive aspects of our lives. One can have a nasty surprise, be touched by a truly sad event, be inspired by resourcefulness in adversity, and feel deep gratitude towards all aspects of our lives. Lipson says that this practice helps us to transform our emotions – which tell us only about ourselves – into feelings which relate us to the world and the people around us (see Lipson 2018 in this volume).

Spirit vision

The final twelve weeks are dedicated to the totality of our lives. Instead of looking at our biographies chronologically, we view it as if spread out spatially before us. This demands a leap of imagination, but a very valuable one. We consider our biography as we experience it today. We return to the theme of Biography as a Work of Art and ask ourselves the question: 'Who then, is the artist of my biography?' This question often follows a moment of silence, of quiet contemplation and engaged interest.

We think of important meetings we had with people, and how different life would have been had particular encounters not occurred – and how easily we may have missed each other! A sense of awe and wonder accompanies these thoughts. After these stories have been shared in pairs, and occasionally with the whole group, particular

events are then painted or drawn. Reflective writing after the painting or drawing encourages deeper engagement with the process. There is then an invitation to condense these writings into a poem for sharing with the group. We gather together what we have worked with in the two previous pathways and bind it all together in a Book of Life – a beautiful and colourful work of art! Needle and thread is literally used to sew up the pages, using the metaphor of stitching our lives together. Life is then no longer seen as a medley of seemingly unconnected and random events. Our stories have been looked at and shared, without the need to analyse, pull them apart or apportion blame to either ourselves or others. The achievements are honoured, and the perceived failures are put into the context of experiences that have made us who we are today, aware that we are still growing, developing, changing, making mistakes, and learning from them, and hopefully encouraging us to forgive others as well as ourselves and see life as a work in progress.

This work naturally creates deep bonds among the participants. Comments have been made such as: 'This is really my family; this is my community'. The last three sessions of the third pathway focus on addressing the group's closure. It is about letting go and moving on into the future, noticing the feelings that arise, and becoming aware of what the process has enabled in them. This is often a very moving time, mingled with sadness about the ending, but also excitement when new impulses are voiced. Occasionally, groups that have ended decide to continue meeting without the facilitators. No two groups are ever the same, of course; there is no blueprint or template. The aspects of Remembering, Mindfulness and Visioning carry the programme in acknowledgement of the spiritual aspect of our shared humanity.

The path of an individual human life is a mystery. The respectful presence of empathy, the sharing, listening and reflections offered throughout this programme, allow participants to become aware of how the alienation and separation they may

have felt from themselves and/or others begins to dissolve, and how over time a greater sense of personal connection, continuity and coherence is encouraged, and they begin once more to trust in themselves and their life.

This reflective journey is an invitation to discover a new purpose to our lives, take on greater responsibility and empower ourselves as individuals. By developing a deepened and non-judgemental interest in our own biographies we begin to develop a new 'sense organ' for perceiving not only ourselves but also others in a deeper way. We learn what it means to be truly 'authentic', to acknowledge and value our life experiences without judging them, to make use of our new 'sense organ' and to become more truly ourselves.

Oasis groups have been taking place in Stroud for the past twelve years and are now also being offered in Hereford and Stourbridge, UK. Outside the UK, groups are starting in Barcelona, Madrid and Alicante, where the model is currently being taught. An Oasis workshop was also offered in Thailand in April 2016 as part of a medical conference.

Oasis is an activity of The Association for the Promotion of Artistic Therapy, Charity no: 266040.

Individuals self refer, or are referred by doctors and therapists from the local area. 📞



Karin Jarman was born 1953 in Baden Baden, Germany. She trained as an art therapist with Vera Taberner at the Fox Elms School of Artistic Therapy and graduated in 1986. She works (since 1990) at St. Luke's Therapy Centre in Stroud, runs occasional artistic courses for public and is currently facilitating an art therapy training in Thailand. She is married with three grown up children and is a long distance walker.



Pauline Marksteiner was born in 1958 in South Africa. After an initial profession in nursing and midwifery she is now working as a BACP accredited Biographical Counsellor (qualified in 2004). She works at St

Luke's Therapy Centre in Stroud (previously known as The St Luke's Medical Centre) since 2004 working with individuals, couples and groups and teaches biography work. She is married and has a son.

Encouraging others is her passion.

Website: www.oasis-stroud.org

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