"The Power of Imagination in Healing Trauma" by Biggi Hofmann

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I have always been inspired by the creativity of imagination and how it finds its way to our consciousness through dreams, play, stories enacted or told, art, music, dance, as well as active visualisation. Having trained in psychodrama psychotherapy and in Deep Memory Process regression therapy, I wanted to find a way of integrating aspects of both methods as they share the use of dramatization and a psycho-spiritual approach. Both J.L. Moreno who developed psychodrama, and C.G. Jung, who created active visualisation, argue that creativity, spontaneity and play are rooted in each person's inner divine spark grounded in spirituality. Both creators emphasise the importance of the healing power of symbolic play and fantasies based on imagination which they experienced and witnessed in children. Chodorow points to the healing process of child play: *Unlike the original experience that may have been overwhelming, in play the child gets to imagine all kinds of variations and creative solutions: for example, an imaginary companion may bring courage, strength, magical powers – whatever is needed..... in a seemingly magical way the life-enhancing emotions (joy and interest) modulate and transform the emotions of crisis.* (p.6 Chodorow 1977) Consequently symbolic enactment based on imagination is an innate psychological process that provides a natural healing function for emotional pain. Jung emphasised that the mind in general has creative and imaginative activity that happens all the time in many ways, as in dreams, fantasy, play, and in creative as well as active imagination which Allan (1998), Erikson (1963), Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1970), C.T. Stewart (1981), LH Stewart (1982) and Winnicott (1971) also came to recognise. (Chodorow 1997)

Active visualization is a guided internal process with eyes closed to connect with the inner world. The client tells what is said, what happens and how it feels in the visualised encounters. Psychodrama is a guided, externalised process in the seen and shared reality. The client shows and enacts encounters and conversations using role taking and role reversal. In both approaches the story is created in the here and now to increase spontaneity, imagination, and the use of fantasy to enable the freedom to imagine anything, in order to reclaim power with the help of spiritual figures. Chodorow describes this process well in child play: *in such a state of pure being, no thought is unthinkable. Nothing is unimaginable. In the spontaneous dramatic play of childhood, upsetting life situations are enacted symbolically, but this time the child is in control.* (p.6 Chodorow 1997)

Case Example:

One of my long-term clients, I will call her Josie, wants to explore in one of the sessions her resistance to attend and care more for herself, and address the inner saboteur. Speaking from role of resistance while standing in front of her chair blocking her view, she recognises the envious voice of her mother who doesn't want her daughter to blossom and reach her potential. Resistance blocks Josie's growth by constantly criticising and doubting herself. I ask Josie to take on the role of her mother I call her Mona, to find out why she resents her so much. As Mona she takes seat in a different chair, facing her daughter's chair. Mona tells her how unhappy she is in her life, having had no opportunities to live out her hopes and dreams. She recalls her own mother suffering from a severe mental illness and never having been really available to her,

spending many years in a mental institution. She was expected to look after the house and siblings instead of pursuing her dream of education. Her resentment grew over the years, feeling also trapped and stifled in her marriage.

I had a sense that Mona might benefit from talking to her mother using active imagination. I ask Mona to close her eyes, turn her attention inwards and relax her body. In an imagined space of her choice, she calls upon a guardian angel to support her meeting mother who had passed away several years ago. Mona feels she needs a supportive power greater than herself to help communicate with mother. Mother appears physically crouched in a corner feeling afraid and lost. The guardian angel gently helps mother to get up and be present for Mona to have a conversation. Mona shares with her mother how sad, angry, lost and abandoned she felt during her upbringing, believing she wasn't good enough, blaming herself and becoming over-critical and bitter towards life. She feels bereaved of an independent and fulfilled life, as well as a loving, present and supportive mother. Mother responds how sorry she is that she hasn't be available to her, feeling trapped in a terrified mind-set, and couldn't therefore give her the support, care and love she needed. She also realised how terrified, lonely and abandoned her daughter felt as a child. Mona asks her for a hug to feel mother's loving energy and presence. While both embrace (Mona holding a cushion close to her chest to give her the as-ifness of physically embracing mother) she takes in the heart-felt connection. Mother tells Mona she loves her and how much it pained her to be trapped in a chaotic world. Mona cathartically releases many tears and expresses deep unexpressed sadness and pain.

After the visualisation Mona is facing the chair of her daughter Josie in the therapy room. Her energy has changed; she appears gentle and warm in the way she speaks and acts; she responds differently, no longer feeling envious, resentful and over-critical. She tells her daughter she really wants her to have a fulfilled life and live out her dreams and hopes while she can; she encourages Josie to take good care of herself and gently reassures her to make the time for things she loves.

Back as herself, Josie lets the caring and supportive words she spoke in role of her mother Mona resonate. Then suddenly she feels her anger rising and the need to talk to her ex-partner who like mother stifled her growth by being over-critical and unsupportive of her needs. For the first time Josie is able to express her rage and frustration verbally and physically, shouting and hitting the chair representing the ex-partner with a bat until all is released.

Role taking and role reversal in psychodrama are powerful techniques that can connect and inform us of deeper processes; taking on and experiencing the role of resistance enabled Josie to identify her mother's over-critical and dismissive voice, which in turn gave her insight into her process of self-sabotaging. Reversing roles with her mother Mona, offered Josie greater understanding of mother's internal process. J.L. and Z.T. Moreno maintain, role reversal is important not only for interpersonal socialization with others, but also for personal self-integration, whereas in Kellermann's view, role reversal resembles a re-enactment of the process of separation and individuation. (Role reversal in psychodrama, Kellermann 1994)

The combination of both approaches facilitated the expression of unfinished impulses on different levels in the transgenerational process between Josie, Mona and her mother in surplus reality or the realm of endless imagination. Zerka Moreno describes surplus reality as a timeless and spaceless realm and one of the most vital, curative and mysterious elements of psychodrama (Z.T. Moreno, L.D. Blomkvist, T. Ruetzel 2000), which is also behind the power of active visualisation. The encounter between Josie and her mother Mona, as well as Mona and her mother, are typical scenes where each needed to hear or express something that was crucial to healing and moving on in their life, but which has not been possible or available to them in real life, hence facilitating a cathartic process and corrective experience and providing inner peace and hope. In the as-ifness Josie was able to express her negative and sabotaging voice in role of resistance, and as mother, as well as her anger and rage physically, emotionally and verbally towards the ex-partner after experiencing love from mother, which freed her up to direct the anger where it belonged rather than toward herself.

In the active visualization Mona chose the help of an angel, a spiritual resource, who assisted her to have a corrective experience with her mother and transform the pattern of powerlessness and suffering into empathic understanding and care. This internal correction enabled Mona to express her deep sadness and tears when being held by her own mother. Josie became more caring and loving towards herself after internalising mother's expressed love and care. In all three encounters the reconciliation with the loved one was an important part for healing and transformation. Mona first needed to cathartically express her angry sad and disappointed feelings towards her mother until she felt ready to reconnect with her desire for love, asking for a hug, and then releasing tears and mourning the loss. In both approaches it was important to find resolution to the experienced loneliness, abandonment and separation, by facilitating the need for belonging and reconnection, as demonstrated with Josie, Mona and her mother. (Published 2018)

Resources

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