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Science, Passion & Healing

Lea Birch

Lea Birch, Dip. Philophonetics Counselling, B.A. Fine Arts, Dip. Ed. is an Art Therapist for the Oncology Haematology unit at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. For the past two years Lea has been developing an Art Therapy Program Based on Philophonetics Counselling and Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. The art therapy program has been geared specifically to give emotional support to children with cancer and their siblings. Lea's intention is to assist the children in adapting to the often frightening reality imposed by their illness. She does this by creating a space where the children feel safe to explore their feelings and concerns related to their illness. Thus developing in them an inner strength and a sense of well-being. Lea's love for children and her ability to easily communicate with them has led to the ongoing success of this unique art therapy program.

Lea Birch

Fortifying the Healing Process — Art Therapy for Children with Cancer

Introduction

Over the past two years I have been developing an art therapy program based on Philophonetics counselling and the arts as a form of therapy for children with cancer. We use painting and drawing as the tools for inner exploration and to gain a deeper understanding of one's inner experiences.

Philophonetics counselling, on which my work is based, has grown out of the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, (the study of man) and Psychosophy, the anthroposophical approach to psychology, which encompasses the whole human form, mind, body and soul.

Dr Rudolph Steiner developed a modality that takes into account the whole human being, (body, mind and spirit). He first developed these ideals through education, opening his first school for children in Germany in 1919. The Steiner schools soon spread throughout Europe and world-wide, with many schools now located all over Australia. He also founded wholistic approaches to medicine, bio-dynamic agriculture, and new artistic forms in painting, movement and architecture.

The practise of Philophonetics counselling, addresses the conscious relationship to one's inner experience. Philophonetics counselling provides a range of tools for self care, well-being, and personal development. Philophonetics counselling offers a bridge between the conscious to the un-conscious, and it incorporates the belief that each one of us is potentially equipped to deal and make use of the challenges and the opportunities presented on ones journey.

“Direct experience is the starting point for any Philophonetics counselling work. For experience — verbal communication is but a second hand medium, a translation. If we want to come to know experience directly — we need to find direct means of communication with it.”

(Tagar, 1996, p.13)

Gesture, sensing, visualisation and sounding are all forms of non-verbal communication, they are the basic aspects of Philophonetics counselling methodology, they are expressive forms of intelligence that have a direct link to our inner experiences. I have utilised these fundamentals of Philophonetics counselling as I have extended the essence of this methodology by applying it to the use of painting and drawing, as another form of non verbal communication. Verbal communication is a reflective dynamic of intelligence — it operates in response to ones inner content therefore it can alter the true meaning as it tries to interpret the information rather than just expressing what is there as is achieved with non-verbal communication.

Non-Verbal Communication

Through the means of sensation every aspect of one's life can be traced and mapped in the subtle dynamics of the body. It is through this process that Philophonetics counselling sees the subtle body as a tool for contacting life experiences. With the use of movement, gesture and the arts we are able to directly express the sensations that are stored in the subtle body to unleash a wealth of information. Through the use of these forms of gesture we are able to move into any aspect of our life, to revisit, to behold, to release and most of all to heal.

Within everyone there is the ability to create accurate mental pictures that reveal the psycho-somatic dynamics underlying any given condition in question. For example physical, emotional and mental illnesses can be traced to conditions such as, inner blocks which may be preventing the natural flow of life forces, fear and anger that is not being expressed or released, wounds and scars from passed neglect; such as poor parenting and unresolved feelings associated with sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

We see the human body as a living instrument for personal experience and meaning which enables the inner being or psyche to exist in the outer world. 'Meaning' results from one's personal reflection where the mind contemplates one's experience. Our definition of 'experience' in this context is 'awareness of impressions,' from inside and from outside of the human being.

Rudolf Steiner said in his 'Lecture on Action And Interaction of the Human Soul Forces':

"We can now ask about those impressions in the soul that we experience through our sense organs... . You hold the tone, the colour the smell and so forth — that is the impression of these — only as long as you are in contact with the external stimulus. The impression, the interaction of inner and outer factors, ceases at once when you turn away, close your eyes or the like... . If you consider the immediate perception in conjunction with the fact that later you know something (you know the tone, the color, etc.), it proves that you have retained something of your experience of the outer world, even though the experience has ceased... . something has completely entered your soul life. Something that has become part of your soul life must inevitably run its course because you carry it with you." (Steiner, 1909, p. 74).

Dynamics of Non-Verbal Communication

Anthroposophy views the human being as comprising three distinct dimensions of overlapping dynamics. These dimensions on which Philophonetics counselling is based, are termed as the physical dynamics, the life dynamics, and the sentient dynamics. These three forms of dynamic are attributed to the existence of three overlapping bodies, which together make up the human body. These are the physical body (an entity made of natural materials, minerals and forces combined into an human organisation), the life body (an entity as real as the physical, composed of formative forces, life processes, rhythmical and

vibratory dynamics i.e. (Chi or Prana) and the sentient body, which is the domain of the senses.

Gesture and movement finds its expression through the manifestation and nature of the relationship between these three body dynamics. The sentient body is host to impressions both from inside and outside the body. The life body, with its supple vibratory substance, receives each and every impression as a pulse which journeys through, eventually to pass away, this ripple or vibratory pattern continues to echo in the life body. These impressions do in fact remain in the subtle layer of the body to become permanent features of the living body.

The sentient body works in an outward direction when expressions take place in us. Things experienced in our psyche vibrate through the Sentient body from inside-outward into the life body. In the medium of the life body vibratory patterns continue to resonate, manifesting into bodily patterns motion and gesture. Between the life body and the sentient body we find the 'formative dynamics' at play. It is this overlap which enables the absorbing, carrying, reflecting and expressing activities of the human body to occur.

We can absorb experiences from our outer environment. These experiences make impressions on the physical and life-body and our inner world of our psyche connects to these outer dynamics making its own impression. Both the inner and outer impressions echo as an experience within the body. This can be conscious or unconscious. We are continually absorbing experiences good and bad from the outer world which remain within us as echoes within the subtle body. It is these echoes that we can tap into using gesture, movement and the arts. We go directly into the subtle body of any past impression, sense it and gesture from that experience directly.

We can carry experiences within us. Some of the outer experiences will be felt consciously and make an impact. These conscious experiences good or bad will go on re-sounding in the subtle body for ever. They do not leave or go away they remain there either as good experiences supporting and nurturing us or as bad experiences causing deep seated pain, despair which can damage one's well being.

Through movement, gesture and the arts we are able to utilise life's good impressions to aid in continual support and nurturing for one's self especially in times of crisis. We can also move into the bad impressions to transform and heal them. We can sense them and bring their dynamics out through movement, gesture and the arts.

"Every human experience, from every layer, can be brought to full awareness through attention, sensation and movement. We can bring experiences up because they are always there, carried by the living body." (Tagar, 1996, p. 32)

We can reflect on our experiences. This is where the body becomes a precise 'map' for one's life experiences. Even when one cannot consciously remember a particular event or

dynamic that occurred in their life the body never forgets. We may have blocked or buried particular events as at the time they were too painful to deal with, or there was not the right support for healing. Yet these unresolved issues still remain hidden within the body still in need of care. As these issues resound within the subtle body, accessible to the emotional and mental dynamics of the psyche, with the use of gesture, movement and the arts we can contact these hidden issues so that we can bring them to the surface and then give them the appropriate healing.

We can express directly our experiences. This is the main source for using the body as a means of expressing one's inner dynamics. Not only does the body absorb, carry, and reflect experiences but it can be utilised as an important tool for direct expression.

Gesturing Through The Arts

The arts, and in my particular experience painting, drawing and sculpture are mediums that can be utilised as forms of non-verbal communication. These mediums can extend the quality of the expression of one's inner experience. For example anger can be physically punched, hit and beaten into clay. Water-colours can be used to support the expression of issues related to the flow of the life forces. The colour of the paints can aid to give colour and form to this gesture. Painting and sculpture can also play a very important part if there are many problems around the one issue. For example the child may feel overwhelmed and through painting or sculpture the child can work through all their feelings.

Painting and drawing can also be an important tool for children's expression, as it is easier for them to express themselves through a visual medium as these skills are already highly developed and supported by an active imagination.

"Activities such as art, craft, and playing a musical instrument encourage self-expression and are ways of getting children to 'think with their fingers'. Through being creative, children exercise their imagination which leads to a mobility of thinking, as well as a greater capacity for coping with the joys and woes of adult life." (Thompson, p. 320, Natural Childhood).

Children are easily able to gesture through painting because at a young age it is a natural process that children can connect freely to their inner feelings. Painting is not as confronting as it is easy to separate the focus from themselves so that the child feels that this focus is on the painting and not them. It helps me to gain a true window into how the child is feeling.

Fortifying The Healing Process With The Arts

A drawing can become the key to unlocking these unexpressed feelings and in turn can become a positive implement for self development, strength and centredness. Art therapy

can also be an important tool for getting in touch with unconscious feelings and unexplained behaviour so that a new attitude and sense of well-being can be achieved.

This is where art therapy can play a very important part in complementary care. Children with unexpressed feelings easily retreat into withdrawal, depression, anger and bouts of lashing out, often making it difficult for their care givers to look after them. Children with unexpressed feelings may enter into all kinds of behaviour problems. For example refusing to take their medicine, uncontrollable behaviour while having needles or other medical procedures, refusing to eat or talk and other behaviour patterns uncommon to their true nature.

These children can also feel isolated and alone because of their illness and therefore feel unable to express their true feelings and needs, this too can interfere with the care givers ability to understand what the child truly needs. For example children not telling medical staff that they are in pain or telling them they are in so much pain when they don't have any pain at all. By offering art therapy as a vehicle, painting and drawing now becomes a very personal journey where the children are able to safely enter into their new, and often frightening, reality imposed by their illness.

Just after initial diagnosis I begin exploring this new reality imposed on the children, as this is a time of many emotional concerns. It is my aim with the use of art therapy to help the children release their emotional pain and anger to create a stronger sense of well-being within the child so they are more able to cope and come to terms with their illness. I can't offer a cure for their illness but I can support and assist them in maintaining a sense of inner strength, and or at least a stable frame of mind. Children in this frame of mind are more able to accept the care and treatment given to them by the doctors, nurses, and other care givers. I feel that this gained acceptance becomes a real aid in the healing process as it unfolds. In terms of palliative care art therapy can be used to overcome fear and help to find a place of peace and acceptance of the child's destiny. I do this by giving the child the space and opportunity to confront these feelings giving them support and love through the process.

Art therapy can also be of value to support the siblings of the child in care as it gives them the chance to explore their many feeling and concerns, as these children often have trouble coping as most of the attention and support is directed at the unwell brother or sister.

Case Study

Annie was four years old when she first became my client. She was a patient of the Oncology Haematology ward diagnosed with Osteosarcoma of the upper arm which is a soft tissue tumour growing out of the vicinity of the joints. The recovery rate is 80–90%. Upon first diagnosis the possibility of amputation of her arm was a real factor in her prognosis. She was to commence twelve months of intense chemotherapy and radio therapy to reduce the tumour so that surgery could be performed.

The first session with Annie was two days after diagnosis and she remains my client to this day. She is presently in remission. The sessions that I have included span this time and occurred originally when Annie was hospitalised for her chemotherapy and then later as a private client with sessions geared towards supporting her ongoing well-being. All the sessions take the forms of drawing and paintings because for a four year old child I have come to know that these are the best tools for self expression.

First Session

I asked her to paint a picture about what it was like to be in hospital. Annie drew her hospital bed, big dark and black. She drew a few items in the room yet the painting was void of any people. As she painted she talked about what she was painting. It was through this painting I was able to develop a picture about the emotional state she was possibly in. I then moved on to creating some nurturing for Annie by getting to know her and talking to her and becoming friends so that she wouldn't feel alone and frightened which was the feeling that was portrayed in the big black hospital bed she had painted.

Second Session

It had been requested by the nursing staff to start some in-depth therapy with Annie. She was having extreme problems coping with her medical procedures. She was bed wetting and suffering long bouts of withdrawal and hysterical fits of panic.

I asked Annie to do an exercise that I call the 'feelings exercise', so that I could gain an insight. In the feelings exercise, I asked Annie to tell me 8 different feelings that she has been experiencing since being in hospital and draw those feelings. From doing this exercise with Annie I found the biggest problems she was facing were in the treatment room itself where she was taken to have her needles and other medical procedures. I asked her to draw what it was like in the treatment room for her.

Annie drew with full force releasing herself into the picture. I asked Annie to explain the drawing to me and she told me that all of this happens in the treatment room. In the picture she drew red rain which she told me kept away the black poison rain which she had also drawn.

"The red is the good red rain and it sends the black rain away."

I asked her what the black rain was and she said that if it touched her she would die. She also drew blue islands and the sea, and her teddy bear that takes care of her. Annie told me that she hid on the islands with her teddy bear Boris where no one could harm or find her and she was safe.

After Annie shared this with me I was completely amazed at her ability to transform painful and stressful experience at the age of four into a place of hiding and safety with the support of her teddy bear. I was also interested in how she used her imagination to protect

herself, so I decided if we could heighten this, then I may be able to help her. I felt if we could develop a place of safety within the pain then Annie would be able to cope.

To gain further insight I asked Annie to draw a picture about the islands and what they meant to her. Her response to this was "oh that's where I hide so that nobody can hurt me" In this picture she told me that there was lots of red rain to keep away the poison rain. There was also a magic wishing tree where she hid inside the tree trunk with her teddy bear where no one could see her and no one could find her. There was also Blackie the bird on which she flew to get to her special tree. I then asked her to draw a picture about what she did in the tree and what was it like. Annie drew the tree with Boris her teddy bear, herself and Blackie and told me that they hid inside, ate teddy bear biscuits and drank orange cordial and they were safe and nobody could hurt them.

From the sequences of drawings we were able to find Annie's place of safety. I worked on developing this with her and we used her story as a visualisation meditation every time she had to go into the treatment room or have a medical procedure done. I did this by teaching her and encouraging her to fly to the magic tree and then also go on different journeys in her imagination. Over time Annie was able to do this on her own and she was even able tell me the different places she had visited when she came out of the treatment room. Often I would ask her to draw me a picture of the places that she had visited so that she would feel encouraged to continue with her visualisations. In one of these drawings Annie drew herself, Boris her teddy bear and Blackie the bird all in a plane flying over a waterfall.

Third Session

As a follow up session a month after the first session with Annie I felt it was important to find out how she was emotionally coping in the treatment room. I knew things had changed a lot but I thought it would be important for her to be fully conscious of the change and for us to talk about it.

I asked Annie to draw a picture about how she felt now in the treatment room having her needles. Annie drew herself lying on the treatment room table with a smile on her face. Her favourite nurse was also there with a smile on her face. She was also supported by Boris her teddy bear. This drawing gave me the insight that Annie now feels safer and more supported. This was revealed to me by the presence of the nurse in this drawing and the drawing portrays a feeling of Annie being emotionally stable.

Summary

Art therapy as a form of non-verbal communication is a powerful tool for gesturing ones inner experiences. For children with cancer it offers ongoing support in all stages of the child's illness whether that be remission or palliative care, as it addresses the ongoing needs of the child and offers assistance in maintaining a stable frame of mind and sense of well-being. It gives the art therapist an honest window into the inner state of those

children in need of care so that we can further open the lines of true communication with them so that we can assist and support them in their healing process.

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