

Nourishment as Ground: Laying the Bones

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GEXTH 5102.02

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October 30, 2022

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Upon beginning this paper I found it difficult to locate words for the transpersonal possibilities which I currently feel the most drawn to in this course and field in general. In my struggle to cognate, I thought it necessary to begin with the basics. Before a transcendence into the transpersonal can become accessible and sustainable for myself and with future clients, I must identify my roots in the expressive arts in order to establish a sense of safety and ground; to create a tether within the “holding environment” which D.W. Winnicott (1953, 1971) as well as humanistic practitioners, such as Carl and Natalie Rogers, speak to as foundational to the most important aspect of therapy, which is the client-therapist relationship (Applegate, 1997; Rogers, 1993, p.8). In “starting close in” as poet David Whyte (2012) suggests, I am led to the body; In starting with the body, I am led to the senses—the senses being our most primary means of taking in information and communicating, or *attuning*, as infants (Kossak, 2021). The idea of infancy and childhood then ties into the foundational concept of play within expressive arts theory which, again, begins in the body (Kossak, 2021, p.51).

Keeping with notions of childhood, I am reminded of another term coined by Winnicott: the good enough mother, parent or caregiver (Applegate, 1997, p.9). Naturally, we carry with us the “tuning forks” of our most primary caregivers and the family systems they came from and so on into the therapeutic environment (Dr. Mitchell Kossak, group communication, October 27, 2022). The therapist then has the opportunity to play the role of the good enough practitioner where, in the mirror of the safety of that quality of client-therapist relationship, there is possibility for a re-attunement of the nervous system to take place over time both in and out of session. This is useful when working with clients who have a history of trauma or otherwise

dysregulated nervous system responses or general dis-ease as many who seek therapy experience.

My primary therapeutic intention then becomes the re-establishing of safety and spaciousness within the nervous system as I begin to lay the bones of my identity as future therapist. I am particularly drawn to traditional attachment theory which emphasizes the role of “mother” (Bowlby, n.d.) and how the Jungian archetype of the Great Mother can supplement the spiritual sustenance that may be lacking as a result of traumatic maternal mis-attunement during our most primary years (Neumann, 2015). This disconnect then impacts our connection within and without and is literally and metaphorically reflected in the greater disconnection from our planet, Mother Earth. Mindfulness and nature-based expressive arts therapy provide pathways we can take to re-establish inter-, intra- and trans-personal connection in all aspects of our lives.

The archetypal mythology of mother and child naturally ties into my earlier commentary on the body and the felt experience in ways which encompass notions of physical and emotional nourishment from suckling during feeding and beyond. There are several theories and schools of thought from Western scientists as well as arts and nature-based practitioners which all place emphasis upon the soma and the senses; This perspective at the same time de-emphasizes intellectual processes which tend to take us out of our bodies in ways that can be employed as coping responses to trauma, potentially manifesting as disconnection or dissociation.

A widely known example of this sort of “bottom-up approach” (Kossak, 2021, p.52) is evident in the title alone of Bessel Van der Kolk’s (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score*, which encapsulates the significance of the body’s role as cartographer of our histories. On a similar note of stored trauma and more generally, memory, Daria Halprin (2003) states that “our bodies hold our life story in both a literal and metaphoric sense” (p.170). Upon the notion of the

creative, nature-based expressive arts therapist Melia Snyder (2018) suggests that “all creative expression begins with our presence with the sensory experience of the body” (Atkins & Snyder, p.55).

Neuroscientist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor’s (2008) miraculous recount of her experience while stroking out provides immense insight into what is happening neurologically when we are fully inside our bodies and felt experience. I have since thought of this state in terms of right brain engagement or functioning. Dr. Mitchell Kossak (2021) refers to it as “right brain *intelligence*”, placing emphasis on the innate creativity which resides there—rendering imagination, creativity and eventually the arts as inseparable from this state of being. Other expressive arts therapy pioneers such as Sean McNiff (1999) refer to the healing function of the creative imagination as a sort of “intelligence” as well; “a force that is capable of creating new life” (p.1 & p.5-6).

McNiff (1999) goes on to note that such “medicines” of the creative imagination operate in ways that cannot be explained by linear thinking and analysis (p.1). Shifting away from over-intellectualization and traditional talk-therapy, I am reminded of concepts introduced by body-oriented depth psychologist Wilhelm Reich, which put simply, tell us that “talk is cheap” (Dr. Mitchell Kossak, group interaction, October 2022). In this way, the art-making itself becomes the therapy as artist-therapists such as Paolo Knill (1994) believe. Though Halprin (2003) aptly qualifies that such art-making must remain about process over product—allowing “its circular, its meandering, its sometimes fragmented nature to exist without any one particular goal or outcome” (p.87).

In speaking about creativity in terms of intelligence and using language which implies a certain energy within—rich with life-giving and life-sustaining capacity—I cannot help but notice the presence of something “else”; an “other” which I am called to name as spirit and that

which Knill refers to as the “third” (Knill, et.al., 2005). I am particularly moved by his definition of imagination as “the visiting place of soul, where the depth of Psyche is revealed” (Knill, 1994, p.321). This is where inklings of archetype and the transpersonal come in for me (see figures 1 & 2). As I spend time in contact with the rich nourishment of spirit, the third or perhaps what might be the essence of the Great Mother archetype, I begin to agree that that *is* the therapy at work, working me. In this way, I become the instrument of my existence and am practicing becoming the good-enough instrument or tuning fork as therapist.

Kossak (2021) gracefully provides us with clinical examples of how the presence of a third may manifest in an array of populations from the perspective of therapist/facilitator in his book *Attunement: Cultivating Embodied Empathy*. He notes that in order to meet in and be met by this space, it becomes necessary to let go of some degree of control in order for this sort of embodied and more whole sense of self to emerge (p.54). I like to call this letting go a temporary “suspension”—suspension of mind and of left-brain processing. This notion again possesses spiritual application as it requires a certain amount of trust to temporarily abandon the illusion of our sense of control enough to relinquish our typically ceaseless grasping for answers, demand for instant gratification or desire for relief from discomfort or pain. The trust of course begins in the container of the client-therapist relationship where titrated amounts of safety to explore the third may (or may not) build over time to create a greater spiritual connection or faith in the unknown. I think of this quality of letting go as analogous to the task of the tight-rope walker or act of trapeze where the left-brain and its neuroses are suspended in the ethers of the liminal. At the same time, we have the opportunity to find freedom in the “gap” and discover ground in what meets us there (Chödrön, 2022).

This gap or spaciousness that I have been referring to is actually impossible to describe, yet possible to know intimately and recognize when we are in its presence as Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön (2022) acknowledges. However difficult to conceptualize, many cultures and traditions do have names for it which is telling of its importance across the human experience: We have the old English, “betwixt and between”; In German, there is Frank Grootaers’ “zwischenwelten” which means “worlds between” (Kenny, 1995, p.93); The Latin root of Victor Turner’s term “liminal” is “limen” which translates to “threshold” (Kenny, 1995, p.95); To follow the Latin etymology a bit closer, we can find the word “*lumen*” which literally means “light” and is also the anatomical term used to describe the open spaces in hollow organs; In Taoism, it is called the “mysterious pass” (Robbins, 2022); And in some traditions of Buddhism, it has been referred to as the “middle way” (McNiff, 1999).

In apt timing with the beginnings of this paper and point in my overall process, I stumbled upon the Tibetan Buddhist concept of mother and child luminosity which accompanied the arrival of the archetypal image of the Great Mother. Chödrön (2022) presents this analogy in the context of Buddhist philosophy about death in her book *How We Live Is How We Die*. In summation, “the child luminosity is the experience of our mind’s sky-like nature” and the mother (or ground) luminosity is “the ultimate nature of reality, which is no different from our own nature” (Chödrön, 2022, p.37). As the metaphor goes, the child luminosity is analogous to “the space inside a vase” and that of the mother is the larger space outside (p.38). The vase breaks at the time of our deaths which results in the ultimate merging or re-meeting of the same energies once separated by the illusion of distance, space, time and thought. She goes on to beautifully note that “when we’ve prepared ourselves well [for death] by training in the child luminosity [by means of sitting meditation], we will recognize our mother when she shows her face” (p.38).

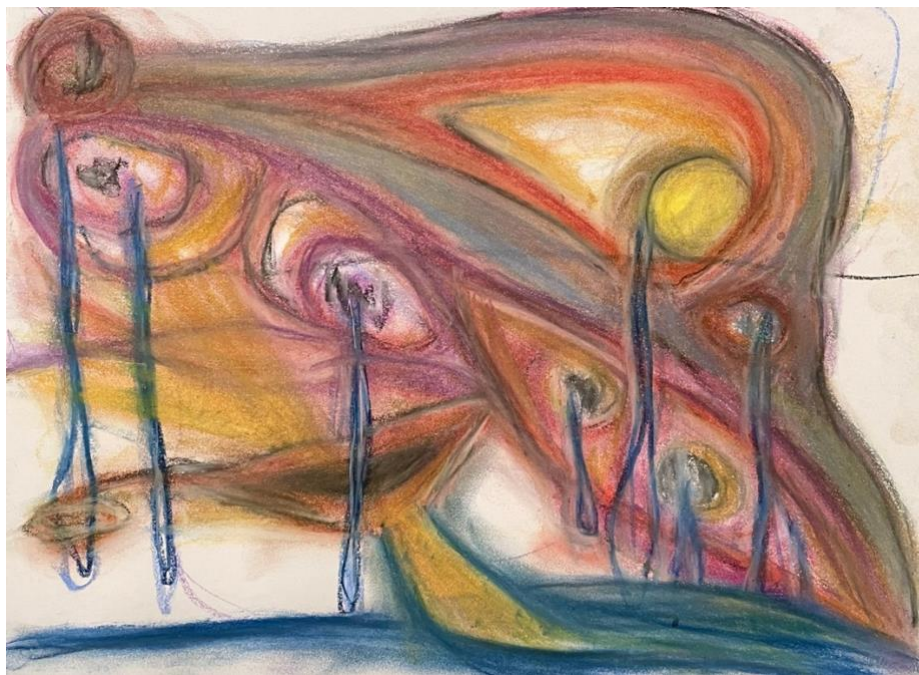
I suggest that it is possible to temporarily lift the veil of the illusion of separation from our ultimate source of nourishment, however we like to call it, during time spent in the liminal throughout our waking lives. In addition to breathwork, meditation and other mindfulness practices such as yoga, tai chi or qi gong, the expressive arts is another powerful pathway that we can employ to train in, or rather play with, our own childlike luminosities. In Western capitalist society, an intentional re-connection with nature becomes an essential means of de-centering in order to access this sort of play within space (Knill, et.al, 2005). Snyder (2018) actually suggests that “In a larger sense, all expressive arts work is nature-based” (Atkins & Snyder, p. 55). When we remember and re-establish our belonging and role “as part of the intricate web of nature”, we begin to aestheticize our anesthetized senses and bodies; In doing so, we awaken the imagination and our capacities for creativity, improvisation and play within an arts context (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p. 55). The play that happens here then translates to our inter-, intra- and trans-relational lives; resulting in a felt sense of nourishment as deep as the marrow of our bones.

Immersing ourselves in the natural processes of the earth and our own bodies paves way for the organic embodiment of our senses from which I suspect practices like authentic movement and 5Rhythms must arise—although this is an area I would like to further explore for potential integration in my final paper. Additional areas of deeper study or play include getting curious about theories and practices of poetry therapy, personal experimentation with tai chi or qi gong, further exploration of the Great Mother archetype and Jungian archetypal connotations in general (especially within the context of the collective and their potential applications within expressive arts therapy), as well as more time to sit with psychosynthesis (potentially reading Assagioli in the original language to see where meaning might have been lost in translation) and overall exposure to more theories within the transpersonal psychology field.

Figures

Figure 1

Multi-Modal Artistic Expression (1 of 2): Visual



Suspension (2022), chalk pastel pencil on paper.

Explanation: I made this piece mostly in a liminal state following some time spent in a few Yin yoga postures while listening to contemporary piano music. I put myself into shapes that targeted an opening of the hips which always tend to stir emotions that feel historical, even inter/trans-generational. The hips and pelvis being home to the womb, I felt a deep connection to my own femininity as well as a longing to connect with my own mother or perhaps the Great Mother. I initially drew a line to represent a tightrope, placing left-brain thought in the large yellow circle which ended up looking like a fertile egg in one of the several anatomically feminine shapes and images that were presenting themselves. Elements of nourishment from a sense of darkness and moisture also arose as represented.

Figure 2

Multi-Modal Artistic Expression (2 of 2): Written

Reflections On the Third

There is a place that meets me and I meet it. This place is full of nourishing story, archetype and images. I hear melodies that I do not know how to play and allow movements to come through my body that I am not formally trained to make. I feel safe in the container yet somehow free in the infinite; I remember my true nature and most authentic self. In this state, I am not *doing* much. I am not actively figuring out a solution to my problems. I am not really thinking at all. Yet, the intervals of time, however brief or long that I am able to spend here, impact the way I return to the everyday mundane—which also somehow begins to feel more like play over time. The problems don't seem so problematic. Things have a more spacious quality about them, there is less urgency. And answers, when needed, arrive in their own timing in the form of strange knowings, urges or intuition.

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