



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Art, Healing and Universalism

Lyn Farhi © 13th November 2022

[Angeles Arrien](#), cultural anthropologist and author said, "[The portal of healing and creativity always takes us into the realm of the spirit](#)"

Morena Everyone. I am Lynn Farhi. It is great to be here this morning. As some of you know I have a love of art and creativity in all its forms. Today for brevity's sake I will just speak about Art and its therapeutic uses. I have used Art therapeutically for the last 14 years in hospice volunteer work and in school chaplaincy. And I thought in light of the Unitarian principle to search for truth and meaning, it may add a tool to some of your toolkits.

I had an "aha" moment recently at a bereavement workshop. Our lead therapist began with Demasio's theory of [Somatic Markers](#): that we tag every single memory with an emotion [1] because, as Demasio says "*We are not thinking machines that feel – we are feeling machines that think.*" Emotions (stress, pain, optimistic or calm) affect our every decision. When we meet a similar situation the emotion of other encounters affects us. And the therapeutic way to alter a negative tag is [reframing](#) [2].

This related directly to my recent experience while painting a spiral mandala (round painting). I was painting figures spiralling out on the spiral when I started feeling anxious, even sick. Something about these figures... It took me a few days but eventually I realised that the figures (innocuous in themselves) reminded me of the falling figures from the 9/11 Twin Towers falling outward into chaos. How was I going to work through this? I intuitively started drawing other figures spiralling back in towards the centre. Somehow the balance worked to symbolically calm my horror. There was my somatic marker and reframing at work.

The Somatic Marker works when a Monet painting reminds you of the that perfect day near a river, or an O'Keefe lily evokes memories of your grandmother's garden.

Back at the workshop our last exercise was creating two sided masks. It always reminds me of the Roman god [Janus](#), **god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, frames, and endings**. He is usually depicted with two faces. [3] Participants are not artists so we provide magazines, stencils etc alongside art gear. One side was for the persona we present to the world. The reverse spoke of our inner state, feelings, the side of ourselves we don't show to others.

The group was weary when we started. But doing art is similar to meditation, in that creating an artwork often results in [slower breathing patterns to increase Alpha and Theta brain waves](#) [4].

On finishing the same faces were visibly relaxed, with a few chuckles, as we gathered to look at the masks. Exterior masks were laden with flowers, houses, different people, relationships, tears, religious emblems, hearts broken and whole. A coffin shape with a stick figure inside. Then there was one with a lizard with wonky eyes and patches of colour. The artist piped up; “Oh that’s me. I am a chameleon”

The inner masks had question marks, tears, tomb stones, rain washed windows and people bent, or broken. A snake slithering out of a dental hygiene advert. One had a cartoon demon, pitchfork in hand. Another had a picture of Munch’s painting “The Scream”.

It hit me that these masks were very different from the ones I see in self-development groups, where most masks use tamer imagery. But when emotions are raw, the inner masks move strongly into the darker shadows of our thoughts.

We moved into discussing each mask in turn. The artists using the Scream and demon said they were surprised how the figures personified their feelings. A William Morris vine twisted around tiny figures. The client said they represented family members suffering from grief. Someone suggested pruning the vines as a symbol of release. The snake protruding from a mouth related to the artist’s tendency to snap at her family in recent months.

Summing up: the therapy allowed us to recognise figures (the demon and the Scream) as emotions and label them anger, fear and frustration. [Labelling emotions immediately lessens their impact.](#) [5] Metaphorically pruning an ensnaring vine allows a reframe and enables the exploration of possible solutions.

Sometimes an image resonates A tomb stone. Tears. Some images are straight catharsis. I often wonder how Picasso felt after finishing his antiwar painting “[Guernica](#). When he heard the Republican stronghold Guernica had been bombed and women and children massacred, Picasso propelled himself into a rage-fuelled explosion of creativity resulting in “[Guernica](#)” the massive mural considered one of his greatest masterpieces.[6]

Guernica portrays terror, torture and death, flames, swords, stylised skulls. Mayhem and the all seeing eye. As he worked on the massive mural he commented, “In ... *Guernica*, and in all my recent works of art, I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death.” A protest, a masterpiece, a catharsis.

So an artist can open the eyes of others to profound truths. And in our own search for truth and meaning, art exhibitions can be strongly thought provoking. As Banksy said “[Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable](#)” [7]

However, here is the irony. A disproportionate number of well known [artists have problems with mental wellness.](#), in particular addictions, mood disorders and [narcissism.](#) [8]

Go to any advanced art class and you find over-inflated egos. This became clear to me when as a 20 year old I attended life classes at AUT, and found myself in a group who thought they were Gifts to the “Whole Wide World”:- bigger than Raphael, brighter than Renoir, stranger than Dali. Someone with a dark sense of humour once suggested, more out of touch with reality than Van Gogh? Only he and I laughed... However, the fantasy-driven cut-throat

world of professional art is a perfect fit for the self promotion, manipulations, and entitlement of Narcissism.

Note that very few narcissists undergo therapy, as self-adulation is full of its own rewards. So many artists choose to ignore the teaching moments of their own creation, preferring denial.

[I sometimes meet a child who is only acknowledged for achievement. Perfect situation for developing narcissism](#) [9]. A talent for drawing especially elicits exaggerated praise. They usually come from dysfunctional homes with rigid roles. The more dysfunctional the home the more rigid the role. So a drawing may show one child with a crown, another holding the baby, while another child is pilloried for being naughty and another is NOT there. We see the “prince”, the “surrogate mother”, the “scapegoat” and the Nobody child. Ask what the scapegoat has done and the answer will be, “Oh he’s just bad”.

One boy I worked with had been ejected from home. He wouldn’t speak but we got out the crayons. His outer mask had a scar on one cheek, raggedly stitched, cuts, bruises, an eye missing, serrated tooth. His inner mask was a tiny stick figure on an island surrounded by an angry sea. Frankly my heart bled for him.

We worked on this image for the rest of the day. We gave the stick figure clothes, a boat to escape the island. We talked about who could help him, on the boat. He named an aunt, known to the school. In a way this artwork saved him. The work showed such obvious distress. Urgent intervention saw him safe and eventually living with his aunt. A far better situation.

In Art therapy clients don’t have to be good at art. Magazine pictures, printouts, stencils etc complement normal art materials. Exercises include time lines, montages, scrapbooks and sculptures. Stick figures work perfectly. Draw the situation in the way it feels. Metaphors are often best. So a person with depression may draw themselves in a rainstorm. To help them reframe, the therapist can ask how can we make you more comfortable? An umbrella? Grab the spare paper, scissors and a glue pen. Can we get out of the rain? Will the clouds clear? Can we find shelter? If the person draws themselves in a hole, we bring a ladder.

Sometimes dead grandparents appear as angels, birds, or stars. We may ask why has this person returned to you? “Draw me a happy time you had with this person.” A person may draw themselves as non-binary, or an alien. Borders are down. The imagination is freed.

In self development work, symbols become much more important. They are also personal – the client must interpret. However some symbols are universal. Terminal patients have often drawn a white dot on a black background or a black spot on white. The end. A rainbow is hope or gay pride.

So what about my mask?

My outer mask has music clefs, rainbow, art nouveau designs and Celtic knots. Words like “Universalist” “coexist” and “tolerance” and a paleolithic Venus figure for feminism.

Inner mask words are “sceptic”, “Hoarder?”, “impatience”. A spiral, for change, new life, dynamics of the universe. A quote “Nothing stays the same” and an amoeba with a number 1 in it (yes, odd but relevant). A small boy for my animus side. I am never a round peg in a square hole, or vice versa. I am octagonal - I never fit. Looking at it another way I am uncontainable. There are strengths in my shadow.

Doing this exercise taught me a great deal about myself. What would your masks teach you about yourself?

So what has this to do with you? As Unitarians we are committed to a search for meaning and truth. This requires self awareness. This is where Art Therapy, the human sciences, and the major religions all agree.

Jesus said "*The Kingdom of God is within us*" (Luke 17:21)

Even better, the Gospel of Thomas says "*Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father/mother. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.*" (Chapter 3)

The Tao Te Ching says, "*Ordinary men hate solitude. But the Master makes use of it, embracing his aloneness, realizing he is one with the whole universe.*" (Chapt 42) [*]

Art Therapy techniques are empowering tools available to all, no matter age, status or IQ. Since [the first hand was placed on a cave wall](#), humankind have used art spiritually and as a symbolic healing shamanic gift [10] [Leonardo da Vinci used art in problem solving](#) [11]. And Einstein, who was an artist as well as a theoretical physicist, explored problems artistically to use both intuition and imagination, As he said "[Logic gets you from A to B. Imagination will get you anywhere. I never made one of my discoveries through rational thinking](#)" [12] if you are struggling with a problem, try to draw a picture symbolic or metaphorical of the situation. Address the metaphor and a solution may appear.

Herman Hesse said "[Within you is a stillness and a sanctuary, to which you can retreat any time and be yourself](#)". Art offers you that safe space to rest process and find yourself. [13]

Closing words

I finish with two quotes

Thomas Merton: "[Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time](#)" [14]

Leonardo Da Vinci: "[A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black because all things in nature are dark except where exposed to the light](#)".[15]

Meditation / Exercise Questions

If you were to cover a mask to show your outer persona what would you put on it? What interests would you place on the front? Would there be flowers? Musical notes? Hearts, tears, a solitary boat? A butterfly? stick figure dancing? What animal/plant/pattern do you see as a symbol of yourself?

On the inner self what do you feel? How will you symbolise that? What are your hopes and dreams. What is the symbol for that secret fear? How do you see yourself – in a crowd or alone? What metaphors characterise your life?

More art therapy exercises can be found at

https://aucklandunitarian.org.nz/podcast/20221113_LynFarhi_ArtTherapyExercises.pdf

References and links

[1] Angeles Arrien personal history https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angeles_Arrien

Quote: “The portal of healing and creativity always takes us into the realm of the spirit”
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[1] Antonio Damasio, (1994), “Descartes’ Error” Penguin Books.

Somatic Markers link https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somatic_marker_hypothesis

[2] Cognitive Reframing Definition: Cognitive reframing is a psychological technique that consists of identifying and then changing the way situations, experiences, events, ideas, and/or emotions are viewed. Cognitive reframing is the process by which such situations or thoughts are challenged and then changed.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_reframing

[3] Roman God Janus <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus#:~:text=In%20ancient%20Roman%20religion%20and,depicted%20as%20having%20two%20faces.>

[4] Andrea Zaccaro, Andrea Piarullu et al (2018) “How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing”
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[5] Labelling emotions

Jared B. Torre, Matthew D. Leiberan. (2018). “Putting Feelings into words: Affect Labeling as Implicit Emotion Regulation.” Sage Journals

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[6] Picasso links:

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_\(Picasso\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_(Picasso))

[7] Banksy Quote: “Art comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable”

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/601947-art-should-comfort-the-disturbed-and-disturb-the-comfortable>

[8] High proportion of narcissism in well-known artists (two links):

i) Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, (2015), "The Dark Side of Creativity". Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2015/11/the-dark-side-of-creativity>

ii) Ben Davis, (2016), "Major Artists are Also Major Narcissists" Artnet

<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/major-artists-also-major-narcissists-says-science-455327>

[9] Ellnor Greenberg (2017), "How a Child Can Become a Narcissist", Psychology today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/understanding-narcissism/201705/how-child-can-become-narcissist>

[10] cave drawings Jean Clottes, (2022). "Cave Art", Encyclopedia Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/art/cave-art>

[11] Leonardo Da Vinci engineering drawings

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Technical_drawings_by_Leonardo_da_Vinci

[12] Einstein quotes

<https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/albert-einstein-quotes>.

[13] Herman Hesse "Within you, there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself."

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/943780-within-you-there-is-a-stillness-and-a-sanctuary-to>

[14] Thomas Merton (1955) "No Man is An Island", Harperone publishers

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<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7942175-art-enables-us-to-find-ourselves-and-lose-ourselves-at>

[15] Leonardo Da Vinci, Quote: "A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black because all things in nature are dark until exposed to the light"

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1251-a-painter-should-begin-every-canvas-with-a-wash-of#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20painter%20should%20begin%20every%20canvas%20with%20a%20wash%20of,where%20exposed%20by%20the%20light.%E2%80%9D>.