

PART

# I



## Principles and Application

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## CHAPTER

# 1



## Creative Process

Life. Meaning. Creativity. Art. In the largest sense, they are all one. In presenting *Art Psychotherapy*, the appropriate place to begin is in these larger realms that form the context for my profession. So I begin with meaning in life. Much of human striving, beyond mere survival needs, appears to me to be directed toward the creation of meaning in life. *Creation* of meaning, not discovery of meaning. Although an object or a process may have intrinsic characteristics, we determine its importance to us in the way we structure and integrate experience. For example, an intrinsic attribute of fire is its heat. The meaning we give it may be destructive force, weapon, necessity for warmth, useful tool, gift of the gods, magic power, and so forth.

An important part of the acculturation and socialization process in human development is the learning of shared meaning. Some beliefs are widely shared in our culture, such as a germ theory of disease. Others are prevalent but less universal, such as concepts of a divine being. And others may be particular to a small subculture, such as belief in reincarnation. It is evident that each of these examples has wide implications for how people choose to live their lives.

The issue of belief and meaning is a complex one and much more subtle than these obvious examples illustrate. The evolution of a culture's myths reflects humankind's ongoing search for meaning and the importance of these myths in directing the individual lives within the culture.

The meaning of meaning is central to art and psychotherapy. To limit ourselves for the moment to the graphic arts, the art products are visual productions related to other visual perceptions. Visual perceptions themselves are nothing more than shapes of color we integrate into visually meaningful experiences. Optical illusions demonstrate the tricks that can be played on our integrating ability. This ability is so significant that we can even have visual experiences without use of our visual perceptors. We can close our eyes and see with the mind's eye, and see involuntarily in our dreams.

The image that is produced in graphic art is created to be seen. It does not duplicate the natural world, although it may bear a strong resemblance to objects in it. The artist has created an illusion, a separate reality, a personal vision that through transformation into an art object may be shared with others. The compelling nature of this communication gives art its power.

Much has been written about what distinguishes great art from other comparable expressions that don't achieve greatness. I won't attempt to hazard the complexities of the field of aesthetics, but a few points appear obvious to me. Art that is considered great must communicate at a significant level of meaning. Expressions in art that are purely idiosyncratic do not achieve this end. Secondly, it seems to me that art that comes to be considered great does not merely reflect the status of the times, but in some way advances consciousness in the human view of the universe. Present meaning becomes transcended, and new forms emerge.

The relation of meaning to psychotherapy is both obvious and subtle. Troubled people who seek psychotherapy are obviously not giving their lives the meaning they want. They're depressed, unhappy with themselves, confused, angry, or disappointed. Others are sent into treatment because someone is unhappy with them. They may not ascribe to the consensual meaning endorsed by the culture, as illustrated by some of the schizophrenic patients described in this book. (One of these people believed he could control the weather; several were visited by the devil.) When the behavior predicated on such beliefs is threatening to others, these people are likely to be incarcerated. For example, a woman was hospitalized by her husband because she kept jumping out of their moving car to obey God's commandments to her. Thomas Szasz (1970) has

written eloquently of society's measures for dealing with deviancy through institutionalization in mental hospitals.

The more subtle issues of meaning emerge in the actual therapeutic work. Many values and doctrines of meaning are conveyed in the institution's and therapists' reaction to their clientele. These aspects of meaning are discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Creativity is not the same as art. Not everyone is capable of becoming a great artist. But all people are creative, no matter how limited. Frank Barron (1968a) writes:

Because we are capable of reflecting upon ourselves, we are committed, willy-nilly, to an artistic enterprise in the creation of our own personality.

Consciously and unconsciously, we use the multifarious influences that have played upon our lives to create meaning, to make choices, to fashion our behavior. Throughout our lives, we are engaged in an ongoing creative enterprise, in the broadest sense.

The field of the art therapist is one in which clients use the particular creative medium of art expression to advance the larger creativity of making their own lives meaningful. Reciprocally, art therapists create meaning in *their* own lives through their particular expertise in encouraging and relating to the meaning others create in their art expressions.

## **NATURE OF THE CREATIVE EXPERIENCE: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT**

Creativity is difficult to discuss. No one seems to know exactly what it is or why some people are more creative, imaginative, or original than others. Several psychoanalytic theorists have written on the subject (Kris, 1952; Weissman, 1967; Arieti, 1976, to name a few). Barron (1968b) has conducted studies on it, and Koestler (1964) has described the process. I will not struggle through the maze of whys and wherefores but will instead say a few words about my own creative experience.

Many of my most deeply satisfying moments have been spent in the act of creative expression. For me this experience is an important part

of my life. For others it has been even more—the mainspring of their existence. What makes personal artistic endeavors so compelling?

I believe my early relationship to art was an important influence and that the direction of my professional life has been a logical consequence of my childhood and adolescence. My mother used to boast: “Harriet painted before it was stylish, before everyone was doing it.” Art expression has been an important outlet for as long as I can remember. I used to make up stories and tell them through a series of pictures before I could write. Artistic expression was reinforced further by the acclaim of classmates and teachers as well as the many uses I found for this expression.

For example, when my brother and I believed our mother had instigated a campaign of discipline and, to us, harshness, I hung posters around the house depicting her as a gestapo agent. I remember as a small child spending hours in our attic looking over prints of the paintings of old masters. What musings they prompted, I don’t remember. Even today, there are pictures at the National Gallery of Art that I view fondly as old friends—friends from whom I have grown away but who have a special place in my affection because of our history together.

I never considered art as a career, however. For one thing, I didn’t think I was good enough. But perhaps even more significant, at the time of career choosing and most of the time since, I very much wanted involvement with others. For me art expression is a solitary experience. At times I have found it a necessary one in the development and exploration of my own individual relationship to myself and my world, but it is a journey into myself rather than an engagement with others.

I don’t believe I can articulate how an amorphous mass of clay in my hands comes to take the form of a mother and child lying together in a way that says much to me about myself as both mother and child, as well as pleasing me aesthetically in relationships of shapes, mass, space, texture, and material. The message is one of image—beyond and before words. Usually I give myself over to the material and am surprised at what emerges. The element of surprise is certainly one of the delights. Sometimes, however, nothing much happens and the result is disappointing.

A significant question for me is what is it that makes the creative experience so satisfying? I believe that it is a particular sort of paradox. On the one hand, there is a getting out of oneself, the sort of transcendence

Koestler discusses in *The Act of Creation* (1964), a feeling of touching and being part of a more universal experience than the unique conditions of one's own life. For me, there is illumination and possible alleviation of pain in this sort of occurrence. On the other hand, the stuff of which the creation is made is deeply personal, often putting one more profoundly in touch with oneself. It is here that understanding is achieved, and integration is probably the result of the interface of the personal and the universal. Finally, there is the pleasure. I as creator can look at my creation and admire it, and realize that I am looking at myself.

I do not believe that the process is a magic one, but rather a flowering of germanating images and techniques. In this sense, each work of art takes a lifetime to produce.

## CREATIVITY IN ART THERAPY

Therapy conceived as an art form is created in the same manner. Each therapeutic intervention (like each brush stroke), each therapeutic case (like each work of art) is the result of the therapist's (artist's) training and experience. Both artist and therapist develop their sensibility so that their efforts flow from the heightened awareness of long discipline and reflection.

What is the place of creativity in the client's experience in art therapy? Some art therapists believe that the quality of the art product indicates the degree of sublimation achieved (Kramer, 1971). Followers of this school of thought propose that the synthesizing effect of the creative force produces art therapy's beneficial effect. I do not hold with this belief. Although I have worked with many people who achieved clarity and direction seemingly unconsciously and almost mysteriously through their art expression, I have worked with many others whose art expression was minimal or undeveloped, who achieved important insights and changes in themselves through reflecting on their images. In either case, creativity is involved, but not necessarily only the narrow artistic sublimation Kramer suggests.

The client's creativity, as well as the therapist's, encompasses the entire art psychotherapeutic process. Such is the case in any form of therapy. In art therapy, however, the medium of expression is an art

form, thereby encouraging a more focused creativity than otherwise. Because expression in visual imagery encourages production of fantasy material (as discussed in the next chapter), some of the deeper layers of consciousness are stimulated, bringing to bear on the creative processes richer resources than may be ordinarily available.

Finally, the art-making process can be meditative or cathartic, soothing or playful. It can be an absorbing time out of time that transports the art-maker out of everyday life into the realm of the creative process, and in the end provides a satisfying product.