



What is Expressive Arts Therapy?

A personal statement by Stephen K. Levine

What is Expressive Arts Therapy? I see it as a therapeutic approach that puts creativity at the center of human experience. In this approach, we conceive of human being as essentially creative, as capable of bringing something new into being. Perhaps all life has this capacity on the biological level – to constantly renew and regenerate itself – but in humans, the creative capacity also manifests itself in art. Art-making or *Poiesis* not only enables us to bring something forth but also to bring it forth *as* something that is created – to exhibit its createdness itself in the form of beauty.

We experience beauty also in the face of nature, but this beauty is mute. It does not signify or lead beyond itself to the world. In this sense, *Poiesis* completes the work of nature – it lends significance to life, showing us new possibilities in what is given. It leads us beyond ourselves and thus gives meaning to our existence.

Suffering, then, occurs when the creative impulse is stifled. When we are stuck and unable to go beyond the actuality of what exists, we lose our sense of vitality. We become “dead” to the world and to ourselves. Creativity always exists in the face of death – it represents the fragility of life itself. In spite of the inevitability of loss, we go on to build new forms of life, knowing that they too will pass away. As the poet Elizabeth McKim says, “We are scared and sacred/in the hoop of the world.”

In the therapeutic relationship, we try to help the other person to find the possibilities that are present in her way of being, even though she cannot see them or actualize them on her own. We do this by recourse to the alternative world of the imagination: helping the person to step out of the closed-off world of their experience and instead to open to what may come. The experience of *Poiesis* in therapy can become a guide to its experience in life. If I have a sense of my creative capacity in the therapeutic space, I can more easily become aware of it in my daily existence, my work and relationships.

As the therapist, I must be there for the client, not imposing my own sense of what is best for her, but facilitating her ability to grasp a new conception of her life. I must affirm her experience through empathic attunement, but at the same time encourage her to go beyond her experience of suffering toward that of creative growth. Thus the therapeutic relationship is the ground which provides a base for the client to go forward, but it is not itself the goal. Empathy is not enough – we also need the encouragement to create a new world and self.

This is true not only for the individual but for the social group. When society blocks its creative capacities, it affects the individuals directly. Meaningless routine and conformity to rules that are experienced as outside of the self characterize daily life. There is such a thing as the social imaginary – the capacity of a society to envision the possibilities that lie within it for a more creative life for all. Thus it is possible to bring the approach of Expressive Arts Therapy into a broader social sphere – to work toward social change that will create a world in which everyone is able to live more fully by accessing their own creative potential.

Whether working with the individual or the community, the same principle holds true: the facilitator can only help those with whom she works to bring out what is possible for them. She cannot impose her own sense of what should happen upon them. This way of helping requires an attitude of receptivity and responsiveness. In fact, this is the same attitude that makes the creative act possible. We cannot force something new to arrive; we can only prepare the way by being attentive to the possibilities in what is there. Whether it is through the making of an Art-work or through the therapeutic act, we must let go of the need to control what is happening. Instead we need to allow something to emerge without knowing in advance what that will be. Here is where the “courage to create” comes in – it takes courage to go forward into unknown territory, guided only by our confidence that somehow together we will find a way through.

This confidence is based on our own experience of trail-blazing. Unless we have faced the abyss ourselves and found the courage to go on, we cannot presume to serve as a guide for others. Our own skills can then be put at the service of the other person: “It takes an agile guide/to cross a fragile bridge” (McKim). This agility is not based on pre-existing frameworks, whether psychological or social, but on our own capacity to create in the face of emptiness. We have been through the wilderness ourselves, and have learned that we can survive and find new pathways to go on.

Expressive Arts Therapy is the re-discovery of something we have known throughout history: we are not only determined by outside forces (economic, political, psychological, even neurological), but are capable of responding to what is given and to actualize possibilities that may have lain hidden until now. We are in the service of new life. Let us celebrate it in all that we do.