THE ROLE OF METAPHOR IN ART THERAPY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

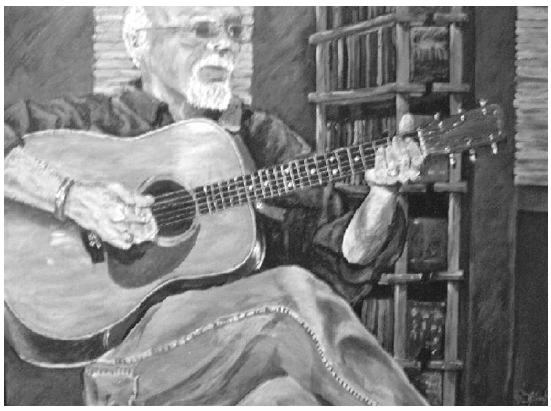


Figure 1. Self-Portrait, Acrylic on Canvas, 36″ x 42″.

Bruce L. Moon, Ph.D., ATR-BC, is a member of the faculty and chair of the art therapy department at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Formerly the director of the graduate program at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the Harding Graduate Clinical Art Therapy Program in Worthington, Ohio, he has extensive clinical, administrative, and teaching experience. He holds a doctorate in creative arts with specialization in art therapy from Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dr. Moon's current clinical practice is focused on the treatment of emotionally disturbed adolescents. He has lectured and led workshops at many colleges, universities, conferences, and symposia in the United States and Canada.

Dr. Moon is the author of *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror; Essentials of Art Therapy Education and Practice; Introduction to Art Therapy: Faith in the Product; Art and Soul: Reflections on an Artistic Psychology; The Dynamics of Art as Therapy with Adolescents;* and *Ethical Issues in Art Therapy.* He is editor of Working with Images: The Art of Art Therapists, and co-edited Word Pictures: The Poetry and Art of Art Therapists. Moon's many years of experience in clinical and educational settings, coupled with his interdisciplinary training in theology, art therapy, education, and creative arts, inspire his provocative theoretical and practical approach to the multiple roles and forms of metaphor in art therapy.

Author's Note

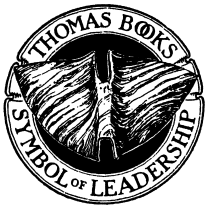
The clinical vignettes in this book are, in spirit, true. In all instances, details are fictional to ensure the confidentiality of persons with whom I have worked. The case illustrations and artworks presented are amalgamations of many specific situations. My intention is to provide realistic accounts of an art therapist's work with metaphors while also protecting the privacy of individuals.

THE ROLE OF METAPHOR IN ART THERAPY

Theory, Method, and Experience

By

BRUCE L. MOON, PH.D., ATR-BC



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FOREWORD

The profession of art therapy has faced identity battles since its formal beginnings some 50 years ago. In that time, art therapists have defined and redefined theory and practice, struggled for recognition in the field of mental health, and asserted the efficacy of art as therapy, art in therapy, and art psychotherapy. The function of art in assessment, diagnosis, and treatment is debated within the profession and challenged outside the profession. Other mental health practitioners use art materials in therapy and assessment while licensure bids, managed care, and insurance companies hold sway over who gets treated and who provides the treatment.

Dr. Bruce Moon challenges the system in this text on metaphor in art therapy. Moon engages children, adolescents, and adults in art making, situating the therapeutic relationship directly in the artistic dialogue. By Moon's definition, one cannot be an art therapist or be doing art therapy unless engaged in one's own art making both in and out of session. He is passionate in his philosophy that "the therapeutic alliance is fostered when the focus is placed on the art process, [that] the therapeutic relationship emerges from the shared experience of client and therapist making art in the company of one another." In addition to asserting that the relationship forms and transforms in this shared experience, Moon believes that all artworks are metaphors of the person who created them. He argues (and I agree) that art as a tool in verbal therapy or as a means of diagnosis is not art therapy. For Moon, art therapy involves the practice of creating personal metaphor and advocating multiple meanings. He opposes the "systematic labeling and reductive interpretation of artwork" and speaks strongly to the practice of talking to images, establishing a respectful conversation with the artwork, and responding to imagery with story and poetry. Dr. Moon has a way with story and metaphor, using them to help the

reader understand the process he describes throughout the text. He dubs himself "metaphoretician" and offers guidelines in his use of metaphor and the role of artist-therapist in art therapy.

Moon's assertions are rooted in the psychology of art, art therapy theory, and to a certain degree, the imaginal work of post-Jungian archetypal psychologists. Florence Cane (1951, 1983) and Edith Kramer (1971, 1986) give us roots in studio-based approaches to art therapy, and both note the artwork being representative of its creator. Mildred Lachman-Chapin (1979) writes of her own art making with clients as central to therapeutic process. Janie Rhyne (1973, 1994) describes work with clients and groups in which she actively participates with her group members in the art process and describes the art creations as speaking about the creator. In speaking of the art group, Rhyne states: "The added dimension of genuine contact and communication is the most essential part. . . . All of our training in techniques, structures, and methodology is meaningless sham unless we evoke and develop the reality of knowing and being known" (p. 167). Michael Franklin (1990) discusses the relevance of esthetics and empathy in looking at client artwork without judgment and in responding to the client through art making. Janis Timm-Bottos (2001) offers a furthering of the studio-based approach, alive and well in community-based centers today, where artists and art therapists work side-by-side, making art, exploring issues of transition, and listening metaphorically. Catherine Moon (2002) argues for the arts-based model of art therapy practice and the poetic response to the metaphoric language of the client.

Mala Betensky (1973, 1995) defines the phenomenological method of art therapy, noting the art product as "a phenomenon with its own structure" (1995, p. xi). She describes assisting the client in learning to see what is in the artwork and using precise verbal description, such that the connection between the artwork and the client's inner experience is recognized. Vija Lusebrink (1990) reminds us of the "multileveledness" (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972) of meaning in a work of art and of the concept of isomorphism (Arnheim, 1974) that allows us to consider the relationship between the internal state of the artist and the external manifestation or interaction in the art media. Sandra Kagin and Lusebrink (Kagin, 1969; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Lusebrink, 1990) also developed a continuum of expression and variables of artistic media, giving art therapists a structure by which they can under-

stand and make decisions with regard to facilitating the client's process. The continuum and variables can be understood metaphorically and provide a theoretical basis for what Bruce Moon defines as our responsibility "to translate clients' metaphoric messages into theoretical understandings and treatment interventions that are appropriate within the therapeutic milieu."

Shaun McNiff (1992) discusses the process of talking to the artwork, establishing conversations between the creator and the art, and Rhyne suggests such interaction from within a Gestalt psychology framework. David Maclagan (2001) and Linney Wix (2000, 2003), among others, discuss the early traditions (in what is now called art therapy) of bringing art to people in different situations. Looking at the works of artists in psychiatric hospitals, convalescent wards, and educational settings (Hill, Adamson, Lydiatt, Simon, Edwards, Henzell, and Huntoon), and in concentration camps (Dicker-Brandeis), these authors define art therapy as firmly situated in a studio approach and note the importance, in fact necessity, of the therapist's experience as an artist who understands art making from the inside.

Metaphor is a difficult concept and often misunderstood. Mary Watkins (1976) states that it "takes a different eye to see. When we understand the secret that things are not only as they appear to common sensible perception, we find the need to nurture an uncommon kind of perception" (p. 12). Watkins (1981) also speaks to the necessity of the art therapist being in touch with his or her own art making, insisting that we must attend to our own images if we are to be available to the images of others. "We must write out our dreams, illustrate them, speak to their characters, paint spontaneously, seek for the images that determine our responses to others, to ourselves, our patients and our life" (p. 125). James Hillman (1977) speaks to the de-literalizing, sometimes humorous, sense of metaphor and the importance of admitting one's lostness in front of the image. In the works of Hillman (1981) and Berry (1982), metaphor is found in the precise description of the image, hearing that description metaphorically, discovering the necessity within the image, and making the image matter. If indeed as art therapists we are not about fixing, interpreting, or diagnosing the patient, but about art making and "being trusting enough to convey to another an openness to images" (Watkins, 1981, p. 121) in therapy, then we must "discover what the image wants and from that determine our therapy" (Berry, 1982, p. 78).

Bruce Moon adds to this ongoing dialogue in literature with concrete examples and dedication to the idea that therapy is in the art making of both therapist and client. He confirms the viability of the concepts of metaphor and art in therapy, offering case vignettes that clearly, and often poetically, describe a reliance on an intuitive grasp of situations and an improvisational way of working alongside clients. He discusses the reciprocal self-disclosure, the sharing of vulnerabilities, the shared journey, and the therapist and client coming to know each other in the mutual art-making process. His passion for his work is evident throughout the text, in his storytelling and his poetry, as well as in the more didactic and practical components of explaining the practice of art therapy.

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My method and approach have been deeply influenced, both overtly and subtly, by many art therapists and related theorists. Among them are Pat Allen, Florence Cane, Shaun McNiff, Catherine Moon, Janie Rhyne, Bob Schoenholtz, and Mary Watkins. The writings of James Hillman have also inspired me. Without all the above contributions, this book would not have been possible.

I am grateful to the students at Mount Mary College who tolerated my rambling discussions of metaphors as this book took shape; their critical responses and constructive suggestions were insightful. I also want to express gratitude to my colleague, Dr. Lynn Kapitan, who read and commented on early drafts of the manuscript, and Ling Olaes, an aspiring art therapist who edited the final work. Finally, special thanks go to Catherine Moon for her patient and constructive critiques of the text. Cathy's support, encouragement, and painstaking assistance were instrumental to the writing of this book.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

THE ROLE OF METAPHOR IN ART THERAPY

INTRODUCTION

I believe that all artworks are metaphoric depictions of the people who create them. In art therapy relationships, stories that unfold as artists create and interact with their artworks are not one-sided or exclusive conversations. Art therapists (along with the processes and products of art making, and people who make the art) are active partners of the dialogues. To illustrate the interaction, I share stories from the art therapy studio that describe an approach to art therapy focused on the central role of clients' metaphoric creations and art therapists' metaphoric responses.

The word metaphor is derived from the Greek *meta,* meaning above or beyond, and *phorein,* meaning to carry from one place to another (Kopp, R. R., 1995); the latter is the same root as *amphora,* an ancient Greek vessel for carrying and storing precious liquids. Metaphors in language are also carriers: They hold information that hides meaning in symbolic form. My book explores the functions, qualities, and characteristics of metaphors in art therapy, and examines methods of relating with and responding to metaphoric artworks and the artists who create them. I describe encounters with people from psychiatric hospitals and my private practice who literally and metaphorically wrestled with emotional problems and existential issues, and then discuss the role metaphors played in their therapeutic journeys.

Pragmatic and poetic, this book is a tribute to the complexities and mysteries of working with people who are suffering and striving to tell their stories through expressive artistic processes. Its roots lay deep in encounters with children, adolescents, and adults who have come to me for help over the last three decades. It is grounded in my interactions with graduate art therapy students and in my own encounters with important themes in life. I make no effort to affix particular meanings to the metaphors discussed in the clinical vignettes, but I do

suggest ways to listen and respond to metaphoric communications.

Nearly every art therapist I know believes in the power of metaphoric imagery, and capacity of the creative process to unlock and deepen communication. Metaphoric imagery can provide clients and therapists psychological insights that go beyond linear rationality. However, there are significant differences in how art therapists behave toward and interact with the artworks people create.

Art therapists' theoretical and philosophical differences are evidenced in how they respond and relate to artworks, and the people who create them. For example, some art therapists emphasize the roles that art making and imagery play in facilitating verbal interaction in therapy. These art therapists believe that artworks and images are tools that assist in verbal psychotherapy. Other art therapists focus on the role of images as an indicator of dysfunction. These art therapists view artworks and images as projective aids in diagnosis. Still others regard art making as a practice of creating personal metaphors. From this perspective, art therapists act as beholders of, guides to, or creative assistants in the unfolding process, but the most important therapeutic agents are still the metaphors and clients who give the metaphors tangible form. Note that no single perspective is consistently superior; thus, many art therapists integrate a variety of approaches in their work, based on clients' unique needs.

In the methodology described in this book, art therapists do not necessarily seek to understand or interpret one single meaning of a client's artwork, but rather become advocates for a multitude of meanings. Although artworks are often mysterious and perplexing, they hold multiple truths that are open to many valid interpretations. As opposed to with systematic labeling or reductive interpretation of metaphoric messages, I approach clients' artworks with a sense of awe and wonder, and try to establish a respectful conversation with them that honors many possible meanings. In response to clients' metaphors, I often create stories or poems about the images, and encourage clients to do the same.

In art therapy sessions, I engage in dialogues with clients and their artworks in an effort to invite both to share stories. I often encounter art pieces that are disturbing, puzzling, and hard to grasp. Still, in nearly every circumstance, when I stay patient and keep an open mind, artworks inevitably uncover important meanings that are relevant to their creators. This book describes how to look at, listen to, and

respond to the metaphors that artworks divulge.

"I am going to tell you a story." For as long as I can remember, these words have filled me with eagerness and excitement. As a child, the words meant that my mother was going to make some special time to read me a book. In elementary school, when the teacher announced story time, I celebrated the precious break from math and geography, which I perceived as inflexible and dull. Story time would set my imagination free. In church, whenever the minister said, "Let me tell you a story," I was lured from my daydreams into the heart of the homily. It didn't matter what the story was about, or even how poignant, funny, or profound it was. There was always something immediate that captured my imagination and caused me to almost forget to breathe until the story ended.

Today, stories continue to capture my imagination. Some of my favorite stories are parables, a word derived from the Greek *para-bole,* meaning juxtaposition for the sake of comparison (Jones, 1969). In its simplest form, the parable conveys a single message by juxtaposing an abstract demand, and a vivid story or situation. Parables have both literal and figurative meanings, which listeners typically interpret themselves.

As an art therapist, I regard clients' metaphoric artworks as being akin to parables. There is a juxtaposition of the physical objects people create and the life experiences they bring to the moment of creation. My therapeutic goal is to help people explore different interpretations of their art so they themselves can decide what it means. To do this, I avoid making overt my preferred interpretations of their artworks. If I assign a particular meaning to a client's creation, I undermine the client's own ability to discover meaning. On the other hand, when the meaning of a client's art piece remains implicit, the interpretive work is left for the client. For art therapists, the ability to wait for clients to make their own interpretations invites a deeper therapeutic relationship.

Clients often interpret their works different from how I would. Sometimes this is difficult for me because I want my clients to understand my point and learn from my experiences. But I recognize that in poking around for themselves in metaphors, clients often come up with understandings that are truer, deeper, and more personally significant than anything I could have said. What people realize on their own from metaphors becomes truths they can harvest for themselves–