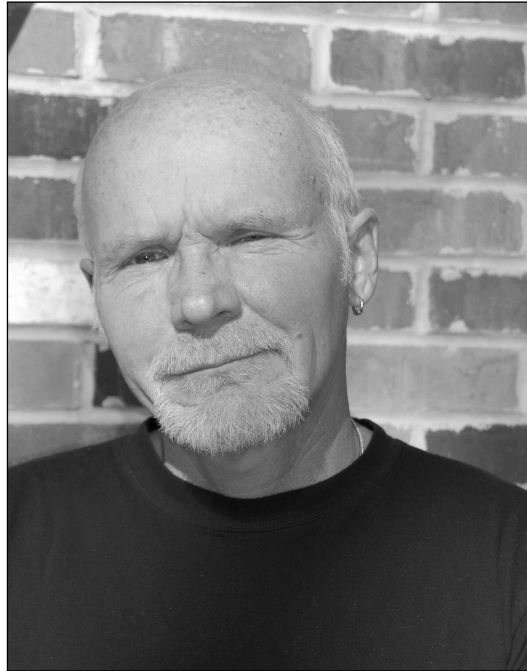


EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY



The Author, photographed by Catherine Moon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce L. Moon, Ph.D., ATR-BC, HLM, is a professor and chair of the art therapy department at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He received the 2007 Honorary Life Member Award from the American Art Therapy Association. 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. Doctor 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.

Doctor Moon is the author of *Essentials of Art Therapy Training 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*; *Ethical Issues in Art Therapy*; and *The Role of Metaphor in Art Therapy: Theory, Method, and Experience*. He is editor of *Working with Images: The Art of Art Therapists*, and co-editor of *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 art education, art therapy, theology, and creative arts, inspire his provocative theoretical and practical approach to the discipline of 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 while also protecting the privacy of individuals.

Third Edition

EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY

The Canvas Mirror

By

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

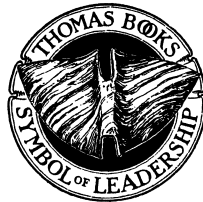
With Forewords by

Randy M. Vick, ATR-BC

Pat B. Allen, PH.D., ATR

and

Don L. Jones, ATR-HLM



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*This book is dedicated to Bob Ault, ATR, HLM, art therapy pioneer,
gentle role model, painter, and craftsman of the heart.*



Bob Ault, Ault Family Photograph.

FOREWORD

Bruce Moon asked me to write the foreword to the third edition of *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror*, and while I was delighted to do so, I was also a bit intimidated. The previous two editions have forewords by Don Jones and Pat Allen, two major figures in the field of art therapy. I wondered, what could I add to Jones's sage insights and Allen's eloquent reflections? Daunting, too, was the task of addressing a book that has become a classic in art therapy literature since its introduction nearly two decades ago. But I figured that as with any challenging undertaking or good story, it's best to start at the beginning.

First, I have always loved the book's subtitle, *The Canvas Mirror*, because I think it is about as perfect a metaphor for art therapy as you can find. Indeed, the artworks do become a mirror that reflects images back to anyone who takes the time to carefully look beyond the surface.

While the mirror is the primary metaphor in this book, by no means is it the only one. Image-rich stories of frightened rabbits and rootless trees fill the pages. Parables set in wheat fields and deserts convey truths about activities that a less keen observer might assume took place in a hospital. These ever-present metaphors, while conveyed in words and pictures, were always formed through the structured chaos of art.

Rereading this book after many years, it again became clear to me how the stories, like any good works of art, function on different levels. Tori's struggles to draw glass also show how she is transformed. Bill's fights in a dusty chalk "war" represents both an internal and external battle, and deeper victory. These are not didactic illustrations that tell one story; rather, they are complex artworks that leave room for interpretation and the possibility of future discovery.

Most importantly, these stories are not told by an anonymous observer, but by a real, flesh-and-blood person. Moon is both the narrator and a character in these tales. As he holds up the mirror, his own reflection is captured along with those of his clients. He is present in both paintings and words, and if you know him, you hear his voice reading along with you. (This mirror picks up sound, too, I guess!)

In the second chapter, this book addresses the ultimate concerns of existence—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness—which is no small chore. It is clear that *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror* is as unabashedly philosophical as it is unapologetically poetic. But do not think for a minute that this translates as impractical. Moon describes the intimate and universal struggles with the challenges of life with empathy and insight. I believe it is the rare therapist, practicing or aspiring, who would not benefit from the hand-on-the-shoulder reassurance conveyed by this narration. This book provides a model for thinking deeply about this work and is ultimately about hope—for clients, therapists, and humanity. I know of no more practical tool.

Randy M. Vick, ATR-BC, LCPC

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

Nietzsche (1956) decried the laziness of humankind, who would hide like sheep in a herd, never daring to own their uniqueness. He said:

Only artists hate this slovenly life in borrowed manners and loosely fitting opinions and unveil the secret, everybody's bad conscience, the principle that every human being is a unique wonder; they dare to show us the human being as he is, down to the last muscle, himself and himself alone—even more, that in this rigorous consistency of his uniqueness he is beautiful and worth contemplating, as novel and incredible as every work of nature, and by no means dull. (p. 101)

Bruce Moon is an artist who has contemplated his uniqueness through making art. Only through such a personal commitment is the art therapist, along with the client, fit to endure the anguish of emptiness, chaos of freedom, and terror of loss of meaning. Without this personal tempering in the fire of human suffering, the art therapist must rely on techniques and strategies when in working with others. Technique alone is insufficient and hollow in the face of the ultimate life concerns brought to the therapist in this day and age. For example, can the therapist dare suggest that a mother dying of AIDS “draw her pain” if that same therapist has not plumbed her own despair?

As Moon demonstrates, the purpose of embracing the meaning of life through one's own art is not to become an expert who can then advise the client but, rather, to become a humble fellow traveler who can be fully present alongside the suffering of another individual. Through this authentic presence and struggling in the studio in full view of others, the art therapist must decide that the struggle is worth it: that dropping the numbing cocoon that separates people from their pain is worthwhile, necessary, even joyful at times if people allow themselves to be fully alive. One's own anguish is part of this process.

After all, through one's brokenness, people can connect with others, which is how meaning is created. *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror* is a story of connections: Moon's connections with his clients, their connections with each other, and, ultimately, Moon's connections with readers.

He demonstrates how art therapists can speak in plain language about the difficulties of clients (and themselves), using words like suffering, love, boredom, and joy. Otherwise, art therapists are tempted to take desperate refuge in the cold disguise of clinical language more as a means of self-preservation than an effort to serve the client. Is it the making and doing of art, the mixing of color, and the priming of canvas that helps people stay real? I think so. These tasks are grounding: They are a reminder to create limits and boundaries for personal expression, a surface on which to exist, and an apt metaphor for creating one's life. Many art tasks containing urges and emotions have a comforting reality, a mundaneness so to speak; doing these tasks mindfully confers dignity upon one's struggle.

The current state of mental health care, characterized by short-term assistance and a problem-focused approach, makes *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror* even more relevant today than when it was first published in 1990. Even after lobbying officials and becoming vocal in the workplace, and with certification and licensure, there are no guarantees of what the mental health care system will look like in the foreseeable future or where art therapists will fit in. The only aspects of the therapeutic equation that art therapists can control are how and who they themselves are; how they view their profession; and how deeply they feel compassion for others.

This book provides a philosophy of how to be rather than a manual of what to do. Yet, in Moon's showing of himself, rather than only safely telling, he has also given readers plenty to do. He wonders out loud whether readers will find him narcissistic or self-indulgent for sharing his own artwork, taking risks and exposing himself regardless. Nietzsche (1956) said, "I care for a philosopher only to the extent that he is able to be an example" (p. 106). Me too, me too.

Pat B. Allen, Ph.D., ATR

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- Nietzsche, F. (1956). The challenge of every philosophy. In W. Kaufman (Ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (p. 101). Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books.

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Bruce Moon has written more than a textbook. What he provides is more like a medieval illuminated map, usable for navigation, but populated by dragons. In my view, he translates the first of Buddha's four Noble Truths, "Suffering is universal," into "Life is permanent white water" and invites the reader to plunge in.

It is clear in this work that the existential process of art therapy, though often unpredictable, is not a wild turbulence. There is a history and sequence: exposure, premise, practice, and theory. Moon builds on the foundations of art therapy that have evolved over the past half-century. The establishment of the Clinical Internship in Art Therapy at Harding Hospital in Worthington, Ohio, has been an innovative, unique contribution to the field of art therapy education.

There is support from Freud and precedent for promoting arts as a primary mode of treatment. Freud emphasized the importance of unconscious imagery. If dreams provided the "royal road to be traveled by night from the unconscious," then graphic metaphors might well be expressways to convey feelings when ordinary routes are impassable, Freud, S. (1965). Jung suggested, "There must not only be talk, but doing something about it" Freud, S. (1965). Years of art therapy practice have suggested that affects can surface directly into consciousness without traveling the circuitous route of word associations.

The process Freud labeled *hypercathexis*, which includes an enabling space, acute focus of attention, guided imagery, a relationship, and sensitive coaching, is a supportive treatment context for art therapists as well as clients. I believe it is the raft on the white water.

Some who read this book may conclude that the man is the message, implying that events portrayed in the case studies are personality-centered and, therefore, unteachable. There is truth in the cliché, but both the man and message are also a blend of history, talent, training, experience, and team practice. Glimpses of creative practitioners

at work in the mainstream are vital for students, colleagues of other disciplines, and others who strive to understand the classical tutorial methods that are the model for clinical training in art therapy.

Moon has taken personal risks in sharing encounters with clients and himself. I hope he is appreciated for highlighting the importance of existential aspects of art therapy in treatment and training.

Don L. Jones, ATR, HLM

PREFACE

According to Highwater (1994): “Art doesn’t want to be familiar. It wants to astonish us. It wants to move us. To touch us. Not accommodate us, not make us comfortable” (p. 9). The title of this book is an expression of my desire to link the practice of art therapy to the ultimate concerns of life, as expressed in existential philosophy and therapy. I believe that mental health care systems in America have drifted away from attending to clients’ quality of life and relationships with others toward focusing on observable, quantifiable, and verifiable data about functional behaviors.

At one time, the language of psychotherapy held a poetic quality, as evidenced by language used by Freud (1965):

When, after passing through a narrow defile, we suddenly emerge upon a piece of high ground, where the path divides and the finest prospects open up on every side, we may pause for a moment and consider in which direction we shall first turn our steps. (p. 155)

The same poetic quality can also be found in Jung (1964): “The sad truth is that man’s real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites—day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil” (p. 85).

In the twenty-first century, such poetic descriptions of the human condition have been supplanted by no-nonsense pragmatism, and the empirical classifications found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In so doing, discussions about the collective human struggle for people to understand themselves, as well as their relationship to others and the universe, have been banished. I believe that the poetry and soul language of clinical communication have been disinfected, rendered colorless, and, at times, altogether removed from the lexicon of how people speak of human struggles.

Art therapy literature has not been immune to the societal and economic forces that have fostered the trend toward pragmatism and what Allen (1992) termed *the clinification syndrome*. When I attend art therapy conferences and symposia, I try to listen not only to the content of presentations, but also to the form. Sometimes art therapists try to assimilate the style of other professions, which can lead to dry and unimaginative presentations. This leaves me wondering what has happened to the creative depth and richness of art therapy as a profession? This question inspired me to update this text.

The inclusion of *existential* in this book's title denotes an interest in human struggle with issues of life in the face of death. The subjects of anxiety, struggle, relationships, meaning, guilt, and love are prominent existential themes. Existentialists often present their thoughts through story and metaphor, rather than in linear and logical discussion or the classic form of Platonic dialogue. Existentialist writers seem less interested in intellectual argument than in imaginative and provocative description and metaphor.

In proposing a link between art therapy and existentialism, I speak only for myself. My intention was not to write a technical art therapy cookbook but, rather, to describe my practice and reflections as an art therapist. My references to experiences and encounters with clients, and session structures, are woven into deeper discussion of principles to promote understanding, not prescribe particular art therapy directives or techniques.

I consider most helping professions to be forms of art; thus, I consider most therapists to be artists. Despite increasing speculation, interest, and research related to the biological and chemical roots of human behavior and personality, the process of treating clients is more akin to art than science. In my experience as a clinician working in psychiatric hospitals, residential treatment programs, and private practice, I have formed relationships with clients through music, performance art, sports, poetry, and work experiences; however, I am most at home when working with visual images. The consistent theme of my writings and teachings over the past 30 years has been an insistent honoring of the visual metaphors that clients create. I am perturbed that some colleagues in art therapy and related disciplines seem to have lost their identity as artists and that their vision of the work as intimately connected to creativity, expression, and exploration of meaning has been replaced by a perception of self as technician or modifier of behavior.

This book is about the depths of the art therapy profession, as well as the art processes, products, artists, and human existence.

Art historian Janson (1971) uses the metaphor of birth to describe the process of creating art. Birth is a basic life event. In the best of circumstances, it involves an initial act of love followed by patience, preparation, labor, and surprise. My wife Catherine assures me that labor is an apt description of the process. “It’s awfully hard work,” she told me. Having witnessed and coached on two occasions, I can attest to the intensity of birthing. Although art therapy in the United States has been organized and nurtured by the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) for many years, the profession continues to grow and develop. This book is about the love, labor, and life of the discipline. When children are born, one can only imagine what their future holds; so, too can art therapists only imagine the destiny of the profession. As children grow, they master tasks, mature, and form unique identities. Parents cheer for their successes, encourage them when they struggle, and applaud their accomplishments. Of course children (like parents) make mistakes. In those times, caregivers provide redirection, challenging their logic and pointing out other roads of travel. As a participant in the birthing of art therapy, I look with loving, critical, and hopeful eyes at the discipline. There are many questions to be raised, directions to be challenged, and praises to be sung.

The subtitle of this book, *The Canvas Mirror*, is a poetic self-indulgence. Over the past 40 years, paintings and other artworks have often comforted the anxiety and pain of both my clients and myself; other times, I have been jabbed, torn, and discomforted by these artworks. The experience of being laid open by art is metaphoric of this book’s intent. I hope my work consoles and challenges readers. I believe in the power of images, artistic processes, and words to soothe when necessary and afflict when needed. I hope readers experience some of the calming effects and affliction that I have felt as an art therapist. May we all connect with the joy, pain, and “awfully hard work” of being born. “If a man loses anything and goes back and looks carefully for it, he will find it” (Tatanka Yotanka, as cited in Brown, 1970, p. 390).

INTRODUCTION

In the late '80s, I was sitting in a small pub in Cleveland, Ohio, with Shaun McNiff and Sr. Kathleen Burke. It was after midnight when our conversation turned to my writing this book. Sr. Kathleen asked, "What's the title going to be?"

"Well," I replied, "the working title is *Existential Art Therapy*."

Shaun scoffed, "Bruce, don't be redundant; all art is existential."

Working on this third edition of *Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror*, I have thought often of Shaun's admonition. He was right: All art is existential. Perhaps that is why the concepts laid out in this book continue to be valid despite radical changes in the world of health care over the last 20 years. All artworks have an existential quality, and all art processes are connected to the basic human experience of life.

When I entered the art therapy profession in 1974, it was common for people with mental illnesses to be hospitalized for years; in fact, some people were institutionalized their entire lives. Nowadays, people with even the most severe mental disturbances are rarely hospitalized for more than a few days at a time because of reimbursement restrictions, advances in psychopharmacology, and a multitude of cultural shifts. Things change. Still, the essential tenets of existential art therapy remain relevant.

Emotional distress, traumatic physical illness, and injury are often accompanied by a sense of meaning loss and existential emptiness. In the face of such emptiness, the arts and the therapeutic use of imagery can help clients restore a sense of purpose and connection to the world. In this text, art therapy practice and existential philosophy merge to form an understanding of therapy that helps clients fill the existential vacuum and create meaning in their lives.

In this book, the therapeutic approach to treating people with emotional and mental disturbances has an aesthetic and artistic foundation. My purpose is to describe a way to think about art and its place in the

therapeutic community. My philosophy and methodology are based on principles of engagement and imaginal dialogue with clients, their art processes, and their artworks, with an eye toward honoring their experiences.

Existential Art Therapy: The Canvas Mirror does not confine itself to concerns of the individual. Thus, meaning becomes a self-transcendent phenomenon. The ultimate concerns of existence cannot be eased in isolation; rather, only in relationship to others, including artworks themselves, can purpose be realized. “Concentration on the ‘other’ ensouls the world, and paintings are ensouled objects or beings who guide, watch, and accompany their makers and the people who live with them” (McNiff, 1992, p. 1).

I view this book as a practical, poetic, and idealistic work. It grew out of clinical art therapy encounters with many clients, as well as personal and professional life experiences. It is intended to pay tribute to the mystery of life. The stories that unfold among artists, their artworks, and art therapists are not limited to verbal conversations between clients and therapists. Art materials, processes, and products are part of the communication, as are the individual artists and the art therapist. In this book, I propose and illustrate an approach to art therapy—a theoretical structure and sequence of tenets that emerge from the structure-to help art therapists reflect upon their work with clients, not to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution. The tenets of existential art therapy provide a framework for understanding essential aspects of the profession.

The designation of this approach as *existential art therapy* resists concise definition. The foundational principles of existential philosophy do not lend themselves to quantification or empiricism. Still, I will begin with a definition to open the topic for discussion: Existential art therapy is a dynamic approach to the therapeutic use of arts processes and imagery that focuses attention on the ultimate concerns of human existence. The rest of the book is a series of illustrative explanations of this definition. I believe that many psychotherapists, counselors, and art therapists, regardless of their theoretical orientation, apply the tenets of existential art therapy that I will describe. Still, I suspect that many art therapists would not call themselves “existential art therapists.” One reason for this may be that the language of existentialism can seem imprecise, poetic, and unverifiable; nevertheless, I will often use such language in this text. Although it is difficult to measure

authenticity, intensity, anguish, struggle, love, play, prayer, work, mastery, and meaning, these are the road signs of existential art therapy.

Since the original edition of this book was published in 1990, I've been asked many times if ideas in this book still have clinical application today when the average length of stay for a psychiatric hospitalization is only a few days and clients' outpatient visits are kept to a minimum by third-party payers. My answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Many additions to the original text illustrate the relevance of existential art therapy even when treatment is brief, including a chapter about working with dream images.

I've never met an art therapist who does not believe in the power of imagery and creative process to deepen communications and offer insights beyond the realm of linear logical verbalization. Yet, there are prominent differences among art therapists determined by one's theoretical orientation regarding how one should respond to such communications. These differences become apparent in how art therapists view artworks and the people who create them. These manifestations of difference range from perceiving artworks as obscure clues in a pathological mystery, to welcoming images as messengers that soothe, afflict, comfort, or disturb.

In existential art therapy, the art process is a powerful medicine that evolves through stages of creation and contemplation. In sessions, art therapists can contribute to the therapy process as beholders, pathfinders, and assistants, but the central therapeutic instruments are art processes and products. The healing offered by the creation of and reflection on images is stimulated by clients' imaginations. In existential art therapy, resolving specific conflicts or alleviating stresses is less important than engaging clients with their own imaginations. Existential art therapy does not necessarily encourage clients to understand the meaning of personal artworks; rather, it advocates for a willingness to embrace multiple possibilities and meanings in life, which can be discovered through art making, even when meanings are unclear or perplexing.

Artworks invite people to look closely and think about themselves. Existential art therapy does not promote labeling client artworks as indicative of pathology or interpreting the messages of artworks in isolation from their creators; rather, existential art therapy proposes approaching art processes and products with a sense of wonder and awe to establish a respectful creative dialogue, create stories, and figu-

ratively invite artworks to teach what they know. When such methods are used, the therapeutic benefit of the arts is manifested. The capacity to engage in conversation about artistic activity and images can play a role in existential art therapy, but it is not the primary therapeutic element.

Because artistic activities have both constructive and destructive power, it is impossible to suggest that some artworks heal while others harm. I have stood face-to-face with artworks that I initially found repugnant only to be reminded that illness and antidote have much in common. The therapeutic nature of the arts is found in the faith that what needs to be expressed will be expressed. In this sense, artworks that appear to be disturbing may be regarded as provocateurs and life-enhancing messengers, rather than life-threatening demons.

Existential art therapy does not present a radical new view of psychotherapeutic encounters. It does not describe a theory of pathology. I would prefer to offer this work as a metaphoric paradigm, a therapeutic construct that offers art therapists a way to make sense out of a vast array of clinical information and design a coherent strategy for art therapy. It is a model for understanding the healing role of art that is attuned to the basic human need for self-expression.

When the first two editions of this text were written, I was a full-time art therapist working in a psychiatric hospital and a part-time art therapy educator. Now, I am a full-time educator and part-time clinician. Everything has changed, yet nothing is different. When I was practicing in the hospital, I was focused on clients' experiences and what I learned from them, not academic issues related to literary form. One change I made to this third edition is that I have adopted APA format to improve the scholarly quality of the book.

Human existence is doggedly unpredictable, and art therapists must have faith in the goodness of art processes and medicinal power of creation. Another less evident shift is in the overall tone of the writing. Looking back at the original text, I sometimes wince at the stridency of my arguments. I guess I had an axe to grind then that I have since lost somewhere along the way. I've either mellowed or grown wiser. Whichever the case, I know I am now less convinced that my way is the right way; rather, I recognize that there are countless ways to practice art therapy. I hope you enjoy this work.

Bruce L. Moon
Mundelein, IL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people who have contributed to the writing of this book. Special thanks go to Ellie Jones, editor of the first edition, for taking a rough stone and polishing it beautifully. (I still wonder how she endured reading my original piles of handwritten notes on legal pads.) My approach to art therapy has been deeply influenced by many art therapy theorists, such as Pat Allen and Shaun McNiff; without them, this book would not have been written.

I am also grateful to those who read, criticized, and encouraged me along the way, including Catherine Moon, Debra DeBrular, John Reece, and others like Don Jones, my mentor, who believed in me through rough times.

I've been blessed these past 34 years to work with a good number of creative, committed, serious, and funny colleagues and students at Harding Hospital, Marywood University, Mount Mary College, and other universities and clinical programs. In many ways, this book is documentation of the lessons they've taught me, which helped shape this third edition; their critical responses and constructive suggestions were both insightful and inspiring. I would also like to recognize the administration of Harding Hospital for supporting my original writing effort, particularly Dr. Richard Griffin, former Medical Director.

I would like to thank my clients, whose emotional, behavioral, and artistic struggles have motivated me to write; I hope this book honors them. Finally, I also want to express gratitude to Ling Olaes, a newly graduated art therapist who edited the final draft.

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EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY

Chapter I

PERSPECTIVE: WHERE IT BEGINS

Some time ago, I was in the creative arts studio at Harding Hospital in Worthington, Ohio, trying to teach an adolescent girl, Angie, the fundamentals of drawing one- and two-point perspective. No matter how I explained the concept of vanishing points and the rules of perspective drawing, she couldn't grasp the principles. Back then, I was such a modernist that I was convinced there were right and wrong ways to make art. Angie would ask questions like "are they real?" and "who put them there?" The more she questioned, the more exasperated I became with my inability to explain the concepts and her inability to follow the rules. Finally, I suggested that we take a break from this formal lesson and that she sketch. I moved to an adjoining studio to work on a painting I had in progress.

A few minutes later, Angie entered the painting studio. Smiling, she held up a piece of paper (Figure 1) with several small drawings of cubes using one-point and two-point perspective techniques. I smiled and asked, "How did you figure it out?"

She laughed and said: "You were presenting things all wrong. They aren't vanishing points, they are beginning points, and I can put them wherever I want."

That day, Angie may have planted the seeds of postmodern thinking in me: I, too, began to see vanishing points as beginning points. The notion that the beginning of things are on the distant horizon implies a relationship of foreground to background, past to present, and specific object to general environment, all of which hold a wider spectrum of possibilities. The assumption that beginning points are wherever people place them shows the paradoxical nature of art therapy: Where one person sees endings, another sees beginnings; where one sees tragedy, another sees opportunity; and where one sees

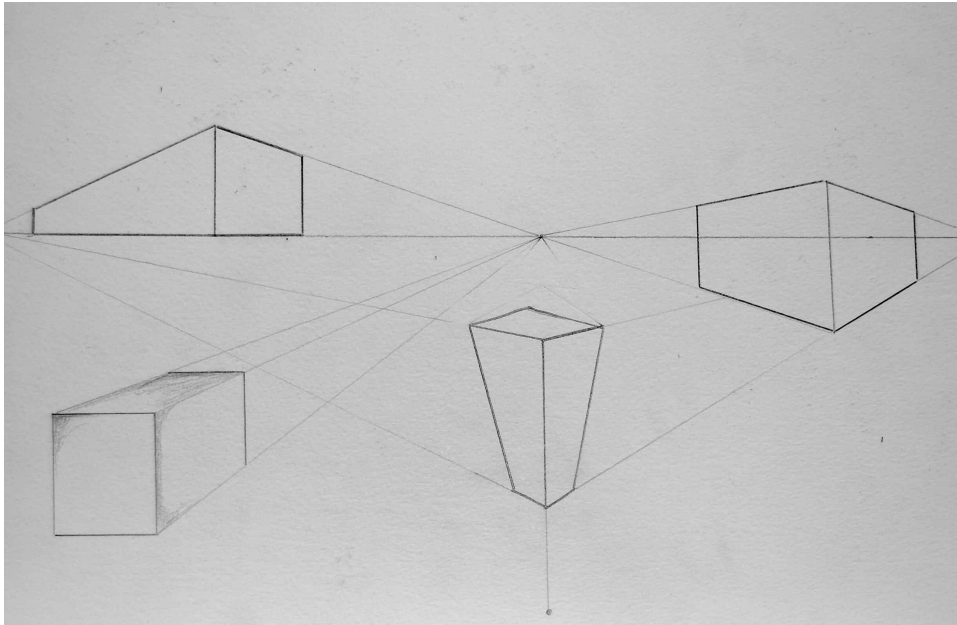


Figure 1. Beginning Points, #2 Pencil.

pathology, another sees pathos. The polarities for art and therapy are endless: temporal to infinite, specific to universal, shallows to depths, profane to sacred, and so on.

Where should I begin this exploration of existential art therapy? I could start with the primitive cave paintings in France, Michelangelo's notion of freeing the form from the marble block, the collected images of Prinzhorn, the essays of Freud or writings of Sartre and Nietzsche, or countless other places.

In the song *Crossroads*, singer-songwriter McLean (1971) reflects upon new beginnings:

*You know I've heard about people like me
but I never made the connection
they walk one road to set them free
and find they've gone the wrong direction
But there's no need for turning back
'cause all roads lead to where I stand
and I believe I'll walk them all
no matter what I may have planned.*

I agree: No matter where we start, all roads will take us to where we are. Let's go for a walk.

Chapter II

EXISTENTIAL VALUES AND ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

Existential art therapy is a dynamic approach to the therapeutic use of arts processes and products that focuses attention on the ultimate concerns of human existence. Although existentialist authors have unique points-of-view, common themes emerge in their literature. For example, most existentialists believe that suffering, anguish, and struggle are universally experienced and essential to life. Thus, according to existentialism, people who have never suffered cannot be living life to the fullest. Although an artist can create an aesthetically pleasing work without having suffered, existentialists would insist that such efforts should not be considered great artworks even if they are clever illustrations. Similarly, even if people say that they love each other, if they have not weathered pain and difficulty, their love can be nothing more than a sugar glaze because, according to existentialism, love is based on the potential for irreparable suffering, which grows from an awareness that death or abandonment is always possible.

Existentialism has often been misinterpreted as a philosophy of despair. People often find themselves so burdened by existentialists' doubt and rejection of traditional values that they fail to hear the subtle, yet constant, undertones of hope. Existentialists' skepticism that humanity can find self-fulfillment through wealth, fame, or pleasure is often perceived as cold, bitter, and impersonal. Their recognition that all life is marked by suffering and loss mocks the ordinary person's attempt at achieving a rich and happy life. The existentialist position that pain, frustration, guilt, and anxiety are unavoidable can be disquieting. Those who see the existentialist's embrace of these "life realities" often fail to see the accompanying belief that painful striving

generates nonmaterialistic values, which in my opinion are the only ones worthy of human searching.

Existentialist literature is unpopular with many because of its insistence that humankind's struggle for worldly goods is a misperception of the human condition, leading people to petty, shallow lives and away from what could be a noble struggle. At the same time, the existential rejection of the ivory tower detachment of academic philosophers is based on the belief that such distant objectivity impoverishes the human spirit by causing it to lose its uniquely human dimensions. Existentialists declare their values to be distinct from those of everyday materialists and hedonists, and charge both with inhumanity, since the underlying motivation of materialism and hedonism is a desire for a condition of well-being and comfort that is ultimately impossible and devalues human struggle.

Existential therapists are dedicated to liberating humanity from its denial of inescapable anxieties, fears, and shallow routines. According to Yalom (1980), these unavoidable anxieties stem from awareness of four ultimate concerns of existence: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. "The dynamic existential approach retains the basic dynamic structure outlined by Freud but radically alters the content" (Yalom, 1980, p. 9). In existential therapy, the Freudian model that postulates drive leading to anxiety, and anxiety leading to defense mechanism, is replaced by awareness of ultimate concern leading to anxiety that results in a coping style that can be either healthy mindfulness or unhealthy denial. Often, as people become aware of the ultimate concerns, an existential conflict develops. It is this conflict that existential art therapy seeks to address.

Death

All living things inevitably die. A central existential dynamic is the tension between the awareness of the inescapability of death and the profound wish to continue to exist. Yalom (1980) asserts two basic propositions related to death with significant implications for art therapy:

1. Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct; and