

An abstract painting with vibrant colors and textures. The top portion features a light, textured background with soft, blended colors of white, pink, and light blue. Below this, the painting transitions into a more dynamic and textured section with bold, sweeping brushstrokes in shades of teal, turquoise, and deep red. The overall effect is one of movement and emotional intensity.

ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

Toward an Understanding of
Embodied Empathy

Mitchell Kossak

**ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS
THERAPY**



Mitchell Kossak, Ph.D., LMHC, REAT, is an associate professor in the Expressive Therapies department at Lesley University. Previously he was the Division Director, 2006-2013 and academic coordinator for the Lesley University Israel extension campus 1999-2006. He has been the executive co-chair/president of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) since 2010. He has been a licensed mental health counselor since 1994, and a registered expressive arts therapist (REAT) since 2009. He is the associate editor of the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* and fellow of the Institute for Arts and Health at Lesley University. His clinical work combines expressive arts therapy and body-centered approaches. Dr. Kossak has trained in a variety of mind body modalities and has studied and practiced energy-based healing forms such as Tai Chi, Chi Gong, Vispassana meditation, and Iyengar yoga for over 30 years. He earned his doctorate from the Union Institute and University in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Expressive Arts Therapy and Transpersonal Psychology. He has written about and presented his research on rhythmic attunement, improvisation, psychospiritual and community-based approaches to working with trauma and embodied states of consciousness at conferences nationally and internationally. Dr. Kossak is also a professional musician, performing for the past 30 years in the Boston area.

ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

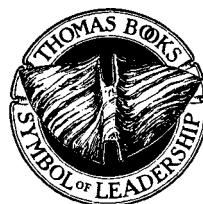
Toward an Understanding of Embodied Empathy

By

MITCHELL KOSSAK, PH.D., LMHC, REAT

With a Foreword by

Shaun McNiff



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

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ISBN 978-0-398-08136-2 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-398-08137-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2014042360

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*Printed in the United States of America
CR-R-3*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kossak, Mitchell, author.

Attunement in expressive arts therapy : toward an understanding of
embodied empathy / by Mitchell Kossak ; with foreword by Shaun McNiff.
1 online resource.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by
publisher; resource not viewed.

ISBN 978-0-398-08136-2 (pbk.) -- ISBN 978-0-398-08137-9 (ebook)

I. Title.

[DNLM: 1. Sensory Art Therapies. 2. Empathy. WM 450]

RC489.A7

616.89'1656--dc23

2014042360

FOREWORD

As a close colleague of Mitchell Kossak for over 30 years I have witnessed his practice of therapeutic attunement through artistic expression emerging from the ongoing refinement and testing of methods and concepts with people worldwide. This book is itself a realization of attunement principles, first striving to get as close as possible to the source of art healing and how it happens in his own life and in therapeutic environments he creates for others, and then communicating the discoveries in a way that looks and feels like the experience, that is attuned to it.

Attunement is described as an immersion in the present moment and a sensory awareness of ourselves, others, and the spaces we inhabit. An idea derived from the acoustical realm of art is applied to relationships with other people and establishes a new and complete theory of therapeutic practice. Just as the musician responds to the vibrational qualities of sound to realize a more effective and harmonious expression, we do the same in sensing the pitch and tone of pulsations and feelings with other people. Empathy starts with being attuned to our own sensory presence and internal pulse.

As an advocate of art-based psychology and research, Mitchell demonstrates how a principle and mode of practice emerges from experimentation with empirical artistic processes that inform broader life experience. In keeping with James Hillman's belief that callings are present in childhood (1996) he describes how a sensitivity to attunement originated in early experiences playing and listening to music and continued through the various phases of his artistic career. He illustrates how his most personal experience generated an understanding of universal principles. Insights formed in response to music were applied to all of the arts where total sensory expression furthers more complete states of physical and spiritual attunement.

I have been thinking about the attunement process, exploring Mitchell's writings with my students, and discussing it with him for many years since serving on his doctoral committee and through this book he himself fully "tunes in" to how "the arts touch something deep inside me ... the deep

groove ... coming through viscerally from the sensory receptors found mostly in the muscles ... and informing the conscious mind.” As someone in dialogue with Mitchell on a daily basis, this book gives me an even more comprehensive and focused view of the vision he has singularly introduced to the arts and therapies. It presents a new depth psychology of art and furthers the emerging focus on the arts therapies as contemplative practice (Rappaport, 2013) whereby immersion in the present moment and being attuned to oneself, others, and the environment is a foundation of well-being.

One of the most important features of the book for me is the demonstration of the constructive and necessary role of what is described as “misattunement” in creative expression. Those of us who serve others through the arts have a natural tendency to provide positive experiences within optimum conditions, doing our best to eliminate setbacks and obstacles. We do not always realize how in spite of our efforts to instill the good, the deepest and most satisfying creations may require engagement of troublesome conditions and emotions.

Boredom, going too fast, doing too many things, periods of confusion, and distraction play key roles in helping us practice tuning-in to the present moment. Dissonance may direct how we respond and adjust, offering a sense of what is needed to get on the same frequency with our selves, another person, a group, or an environment; and if accommodation maintains unhealthy conditions, problems may promote change.

Rather than always trying to avoid, fix, or eliminate difficulties, there are times to embrace them as necessary conditions within the overall intelligence of artistic expression, making us aware of what we need to do to get re-attuned and in touch with the present moment. These mistuned moments spur on a new and more complete integration of experience “bringing a more profound sense of alignment and awakening to each moment.” As I have discovered, we create with our tensions; they fuel artistic transformations which in keeping with world traditions of indigenous healing restore the soul to the body. I like to say, the soul has to be lost in order to be recovered, like breathing out and breathing in.

Misattunement “to one’s true sense of expression in the world” and being out of sync with our environments is also presented as a source of our ills and discontents. In every section of the book, varied examples are given as to how achieving attunement to the here and now through the arts furthers spontaneity, the ability to improvise, and an overall satisfaction. For example, introducing recorded music with lyrics is described as potentially being overly suggestive, eliciting associations taking us away from the present moment as contrasted to a simple beat opening imagination through access to a rhythmic pulse which corresponds to concentration on the breath in contemplative traditions. As a skilled musician and master expressive arts ther-

apist Mitchell knows that the sustained rhythm evokes the sacred base of the work we do, a greater sensitivity to the sources of healing in nature, and letting our hearts, as Henry Miller described in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, “beat in unison with the great heart of the world” (1941, p. 70).

Building on experience with his teacher and colleague Paolo Knill, Mitchell uses artistic play in various media to demonstrate how the state of attunement is a moving condition, never realized nor controlled as a stabile entity. We practice moving with it, losing contact and regaining it like water running through our fingers and learning how to relax with it all. Paolo describes Mitchell’s work as “a brilliant testimony to engaging the fullness of the arts with a concept based in music. He is attuning expressive arts therapy like musicians tune their instruments preparing for a transforming new creation” (personal communication, November 3, 2014).

This is an inspired and full-bodied book offering a comprehensive tune-up to those of us who believe that art healing is all about the circulation of creative energy versus blocked and “frozen states.” *Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy* will find its way to be one of the classics of the ever-emerging literature on art and healing.

Shaun McNiff

University Professor, Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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PREFACE

This book started a long time ago when I was just a small child learning to play the piano. At the time I had no idea that this early training would lead to writing a book about attunement. I had no idea at the time what was happening, although I suspect I have felt the qualities of attunement all of my life. These qualities include embodied rhythmic experiences that can be individual as well as communal, leading to a more awakened state of consciousness similar to peak, or unitive experiences spoken about in spiritual, mystical, or transpersonal experiences. Artists often use the word attunement to explain experiences when they feel a continuous and unbroken flow of heightened sensitivity to each passing moment, or a feeling of being so involved in their work that time seems to cease and shift their awareness. While I had no idea that sitting and playing the piano for hours on end would lead to writing about attunement, I did know what I was feeling. I knew that the sounds that came out of the piano fascinated me, and moved me in an embodied and stimulating way.

It was not just the piano that made me feel this way. My early life was about a large extended family that valued and participated in the arts. On my mother's side of the family, my grandmother had six brothers and sisters and they all had multiple children, so by the time I came on the scene we were a very large community. Three of my grandmother's brothers owned a nightclub together in the Bronx, NY and the tribe would gather there on holidays, birthdays, and any occasion there was to celebrate something. These gatherings would always include singing and dancing, and they would bring in some of the acts from the nightclub such as magicians, comedians, singers, or other performers. I had lots of cousins who would play guitar and sing, dance, or act out short plays. I was immersed in art in all of its forms, taking in the essence of artistic creativity on many levels.

From these early beginnings I have always been most interested in how the arts touch something deep inside me, how I feel moved, and how my heart and soul are affected. I remember as a young teenager listening to Mo-

town hits and just feeling this deep groove inside me, something so soulful and alive, it was such an embodied ecstatic experience. Later on in college I listened to Joni Mitchell for hours on end, just to get that feeling deep inside, sad, melancholy and pensive. Then I would put on Jimi Hendrix and it made me feel defiant and rebellious. These were my heroes, who guided my way through the tumultuous teenage years, until I heard my first jazz album. The feeling of the multilayered sounds and grooves affected me deeply and profoundly. I started to study jazz like there was nothing else that mattered in the world. When I played now it was with the intention of listening deeply, and tuning in to what the sounds were communicating on a deep visceral level. I heard in the music something transcendent and alive, something that took me deeper into my unconscious. I began to realize how playing music was an embodied experience that created a feeling of flow, or the sensation of being completely absorbed in the moment, with a sense of spontaneity, and feeling more connected to myself and the people I was playing with.

At this time in my life I was also very involved in both traditional and experimental theater. After college, I started a small children's theater company with a close friend. We spent our time writing and performing original scripts complete with original musical scores. My interests in theater and music were becoming more acutely focused on improvisation and this interest led me to The State University of New York at New Paltz where I began to study music therapy, psychodrama and Playback Theater. After New Paltz I spent two years at Lesley University (then Lesley College) immersed in both creative and clinical pursuits, guided by some of the founding pioneers in the field of Expressive Arts Therapy such as Shaun McNiff, Paolo Knill, and Norma Canner. What initially drew me to this program was the opportunity to be involved in a multiarts community focused on a polyaesthetic approach to working therapeutically.

At the same time that I was pursuing my master's degree in expressive therapies, a parallel process was occurring. For years I had been an avid athlete having played sports in high school and college. However, a series of injuries began to limit my abilities to compete. These unfortunate circumstances led me to study Yoga and I found that the physical aspects began to relieve my symptoms, and that the practice itself began to arouse my growing interest in subtle energy. I found myself engaged in an individual therapy that incorporated expressive arts, and a body-centered approach. My interests in body-oriented psychotherapy began to expand and led to further training in Polarity, Reflexology, Craniosacral Therapy, and Bioenergetics. In the years that followed, my interest in energetic and specifically vibrational-based healing systems began to grow. I dove deeper into a practice of Yoga, Chi-Kung and Vispassana meditation and began to understand how attunement is the embodiment of what the Buddhists call Samadhi, a state of

complete absorption in the moment, leading to transcendent moments of insight, awareness and wakefulness.

In 1995, I returned to Lesley University as an adjunct faculty member in the Expressive Therapies program that later led to a full time position. My work has continued to evolve from my interests in expressive art therapy and holistic embodied approaches to health and wellness. I believe that the integration of the expressive arts and a body-centered approach are key ingredients in learning how to live a more engaged and healthier life. Teaching these past years has deepened my commitment to the importance that creativity plays in helping to reveal and understand the symbolic messages contained in the body and in the unconscious. I have joined my interests in improvisation and expressive arts to look at developing a deeper understanding of how artistic experience can help create a sense of attunement to self, others and group by increasing spontaneity and strengthening sensory awareness leading to what might be called a spiritual realignment.

These theoretical perspectives have led to an understanding of dis-ease as a dis-rhythmic misalignment, or misattunement to one's true sense of expression in the world. When we are out of alignment with our true self, there is a disrhythmic attunement. This book will look at the ways that the arts restore a sense of balance through affective sensory states, bringing a more profound sense of alignment and awakening to each moment. Deep play in the form of artistic process can help to facilitate this tuning in to energies that are personal, interpersonal and transpersonal by awakening an embodied creative intelligence. When I am creating through visual image, movement, poetic language or musical form, I am sympathetically resonating with the embodied creative intelligence as a way to bring about greater awareness, integration, and a sense of feeling more deeply connected to myself, others and a universal, mysterious and mystical presence. I hope this book will stimulate your creative embodied intelligence, and help to spread the seeds of attunement in your life and to those you love.

M.K.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I need to start out acknowledging my mother and father Joyce and Irving Kossak for inspiring me to be an artist. Without their modeling early on in life this book may never have been written. To Shaun McNiff who started this whole expressive arts thing and who has been a great friend and mentor and was the one who pushed me to write this book. I need to acknowledge my teachers, Paolo Knill for being a model of intermodality and for being the great musician that he is. John Beaulieu for his guidance in subtle energy and for being the great musician that he is. Abraham Sussman who has been a constant guide through the world of psychotherapy and the world of spirituality, and for being the great musician that he is. Vivien Marcow-Speiser for being a great mentor in helping me to navigate the world of expressive therapies, here and in Israel and for opening up the world of arts and social action. Laury Rappaport who invited me to teach at Lesley University and who has been a great friend and sounding board for questions that came up through the years and regarding this book. Thank-you does not go far enough to express my gratitude to all these teachers, mentors and friends. I also have to acknowledge my friend Tony Priano who has always been there and for all your help in editing and listening to me when I had skepticism and doubt. And to my other two great editors my son Ben and my daughter Sasha—I guess all that education really did pan out. You have both been my inspiration and always will be. And to my loving wife and life partner Catherine—thank you for your constant support, inspiration and for always being there.

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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS BOOK

“One needs to know Mitchell for three decades as an experienced practitioner, an accomplished musician and improviser who integrates all the arts with a sensitive diligence, to be thankful for this gift and appreciate his tremendous ability to focus on the principles of attunement in expressive arts. Each chapter is inspiring and thoughtful, bringing together the important theoretical underpinnings of expressive arts, with moving real life stories that enliven and inform the reader. As one of his mentors, I admire how much he was able to shape the concepts here for a far-reaching audience. Anyone interested in the field of expressive arts can widen his perspectives through this book and attune easily to it. Let's celebrate it as an innovative contribution of a musician working with all the arts.”

Paolo Knill, Ph.D., Dr. h.c., is Provost of the European Graduate School, Professor Emeritus at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA., and author of *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*.

“*Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy* is an inspiring book that brings to life the depth, wisdom, heart and soul of intermodal expressive arts therapy. Doctor Mitchell Kossak demonstrates through rich client examples across cultures—ranging from people with autism to higher functioning adults in graduate education—how mindfulness, presence, and the arts are integrated to carefully attune to others and bring about transformation. This important book palpably demonstrates that the expressive arts are much more than applied techniques. Instead, Doctor Kossak illustrates and transmits through his many examples and embodied writing style, the significance for therapists to ‘walk the talk’—demonstrating how the therapist’s mindful awareness, compassionate presence, attunement, practice, and improvisational artistic skillfulness in each moment are necessary to bring forth the most alive healing interaction to meet the needs of individuals, groups, and communities. A must read for anyone wanting to learn the true training in integrated expressive arts from a master musician, expressive arts therapist, body-orient-

ed psychotherapist, and spiritual practitioner!”

Laury Rappaport, Ph.D., MFT, REAT, ATR-BC, author of *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies: Theory and Practice*.

“Mitchell Kossak’s work in this book brings another voice to the choir of those seeking to understand and articulate the power, and dare I say magic, of what occurs in the contexts of creative arts therapy encounters. Drawing from the deep well of his experiences with music, drama, movement, visual arts and clinical work in psychiatric hospitals, group homes and other treatment settings, Kossak weaves an inspiring and intelligent description of the phenomena of therapeutic attunement. Each segment of the book is infused with the rich experiences of a skilled therapist, dedicated teacher, and practicing artist.”

Bruce L. Moon, Ph.D., ATR-BC, HLM, Professor of Art Therapy, Mount Mary University, Author of many books including, *Art and Soul: Reflections on an Artistic Psychology, and Introduction to Art Therapy: Faith in the Product*.

“Mitchell Kossak articulates a deep truth that often goes unacknowledged: it is the therapist’s self that is the instrument of the work. When the self is profoundly attuned to the body, heart, mind and soul an energetic resonance with the client is possible and information can flow from source of all wisdom that both therapist and client partake of. It is thrilling to read this gentle articulation of the most complex aspect of all creative work, attunement with the energetic sphere of existence. Mitchell displays the skill of an accomplished improviser honed in a lifetime of deep engagement with music, drama, movement and art and the soul of the mystic, developed through the disciplines of yoga, chi gung and meditation. How wonderful to have a book by one who walks the walk and so can speak simply and talk the talk so we all can learn.”

Pat B. Allen, Ph.D., ATR, HLM author of *Art is a Way of Knowing* and *Art is a Spiritual Path*.

“*Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy* by Doctor Kossak is a step-by-step guide into the integrative healing methods of the creative arts therapies using stories, research, and very practical exercises based on Doctor Kossak’s many years of experience. He brings us into the experience of the creative arts

from the inside out. Like all good improvisational musicians he “gets inside the sound” and allows creativity to take over. Being “inside Doctor Kossak’s writing” is like being inside sound. He has a unique ability to express the complexities of imagination and creative intelligence in a way that empowers his readers to access their creative self for healing and expanded success.”

Dr. John Beaulieu, N.D., Ph.D., Professor of Integrative Medicine CIIS University and author of *Music and Sound in the Healing Arts and Human Tuning*.

**ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS
THERAPY**

Chapter 1

CONTEXTS OF ATTUNEMENT IN THE ARTS AND THERAPY

In a forest I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me . . . I was there listening . . . I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.

(Paul Klee)

In this chapter I will explore how the arts can be used therapeutically for mental, emotional and spiritual health. While the arts have been used for centuries in community healing ceremonies, the arts were first used as a professional therapeutic practice in hospitals beginning in the 1940s to treat WWII veterans who were suffering from what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). Since that time, the therapeutic use of the arts for health and well-being has continued to grow. Out of this growth each art form has emerged in its own right as established therapeutic modalities, with each having recognized training programs and national and international sanctioning bodies. The kind of art-based method that I have trained in and that I use in practice is called Expressive Arts Therapy and is sanctioned by the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA).

For those unfamiliar with the field of expressive arts therapy, it might be useful to take a moment to describe the discipline. Expressive arts therapy is defined as the integration or use of all of the arts in therapeutic practice. Estrella (2005) explains, “Expressive therapists use a multimodal approach—at times working with the arts in se-

quence, at other times using the arts simultaneously, and at still other times carefully transitioning from one art form to another within the therapeutic encounter” (p. 183). In the practice of expressive arts therapy many factors are often considered, such as principles of play, creativity, improvisation, aesthetics, space, time, and mind/body connections. The overriding consideration in expressive arts therapy is the same as it is in any psychotherapy approach, which includes sensitivity to each client’s needs, rooted in the capacity of the human imagination to reveal creative solutions to complex problems.

What also distinguishes expressive arts therapy from the single modal art therapies is that the imagination is considered the main focus in the sense that it can be employed in a multisensory and multidimensional way toward the goal of health and well-being. When used in this context the imagination is what contains and reveals messages from the psyche in the form of images, sounds, movements, words, stories or dramas. The imagination has its own kind of language, which, can only be understood by responding to it with similar language. In other words, if the imagination reveals or expresses itself through an image, sound or movement, then the only way to increase understanding and add depth to that expression is by responding in the same kind of language. This is the idea behind Jung’s method of active imagination, which is a way to further artistic expression by using a technique of dialoging with an image or responding to the image through writing, sounds, movement, or dramatic enactment in order to bring the image to life through acting out various parts. This is what Jung meant when he said we must “dream the dream further” because he found in his clinical practice that when artistic representations were responded to using a similar or another artistic process (as opposed to just talking about the image), more insight would be gained. Jung’s *Red Book* (2009) is a perfect example of how he personally responded to his own dreams and inner thoughts through visual art, and creative writing.

In addition to utilizing the imagination for greater clarity and insight, there are other very clear principles in expressive arts therapy that draw upon established disciplines. Below is a chart of these roots and connections.

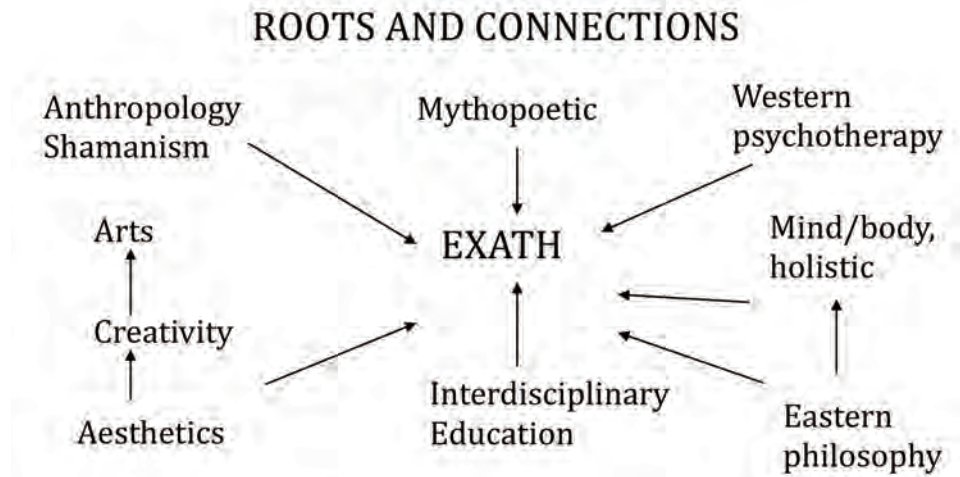


Figure 1. Roots and Connections in Expressive Arts Therapy

As can be seen in this chart, expressive arts therapy draws upon principles and theories from Western psychology, including psychoanalytic, existential, humanistic, transpersonal, feminist, Jungian, person-centered and theories of developmental play and spontaneity. Expressive arts therapy also draws on anthropological concepts especially as they pertain to the role of ritual, and to the concept of the shaman as healer within a community. In indigenous, spiritual and healing ceremonies, shamans use methods to link the everyday realm to the underworld (unconscious psyche). The role of healer in community as it relates to shamanism is well documented in McNiff (1981), where he points to the analogy that both artist and shaman are “practitioners of the sacred” (p. 1) understanding how to navigate between worlds.

Expressive arts therapy also utilizes knowledge embedded within mythology, folktales and folklore from cross-cultural studies done around the world. Within this discipline myths and folktales have the task of awakening the moral and guiding symbols of the inner landscape or unconscious. Stories handed down aurally or in writing hold important lessons. The lessons taught within the myth or folktale, whether taught through enactment or recreated in visual imagery help to develop self-awareness and problem-solving skills. Expressive arts therapy also draws on concepts and theories from aesthetics and creativity as well as traditional poly-aesthetic education, where there is the guiding principle that all art disciplines engage to some extent with