

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Speaking with Listening: Art Therapy and Poetic Practice.

Beverley A'Court

Abstract

Poems written in response to art therapy sessions may be less of interest for their artistic value than for their contribution to reflection on art therapy practice. Spontaneous poetry is often an intensely honest and inclusive way of recording a relationship or process & provides a vivid record of what is noticed. It may also indicate transpersonal, peripheral and 'field' effects during sessions, which may have been contributing to the therapy in ways which need acknowledgement and understanding. Poems may work as mini-oracles, bringing subliminal perceptions and pre-cognitions to the surface, serving as a helpful contribution to self-supervision and the therapeutic work. Similar mind states are involved in art therapy and poetry; primarily an awake, compassionate 'presence' and a willingness to connect with, and witness, 'otherness' and our shared world. Such core therapeutic skills can always be enhanced and refined.

The author proposes that poetry becomes more openly recognised as a medium for and respected form of, reflection on art therapy practice in our professional literature. This may further extend what is accepted as 'professional' discourse to include more 'thick' descriptions of our work and enable it to be more artistically communicated. It may then become less charged to ask clients/patients about publication, just as it has become easier for medical and social work staff to ask patients for permission to publicise their

intimate verbal accounts of medical experiences to help other patients and practitioners.

The article includes quotations from several writers and extracts from the authors 'poem-notes' and poems.

Key Words

Poetry, art therapy, skills, transpersonal, Buddhism

Making Connections [Click for audio](#)

I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed or lost; something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a bell.

(Dillard: 1996:40)

The foretaste of realisation is connection.

(Quasha 1991)

Art therapy practice, in my experience and understanding, involves making connections that often go beyond what our theories have been able to describe and explain. Poetry, like visual art and therapy, can be an act of unconditioning, in which we find ourselves writing into the space outside the poem, outside the known. (Quasha 1991)

Art, art therapy and poetry, when authentically practiced, constantly lead us beyond our comfort zone into the unknown, where unexpected and subversive connections dare to present themselves, challenging our paradigms of thought and feeling. All three are reflexive practices, potentially transforming the practitioner. All three repeatedly face the practitioner with an experience akin to the Zen koan; apparently irreconcilable realities are presented to the mind as a challenge, and we are forced to experience this resonance or trembling until

there is a transformation in our awareness. Just as in therapy we are often faced with poetic paradoxes, metaphors and riddles, the 'poem-like language of koans in Zen is used to foster enlightenment.' (Kornfield 2009)

Koans' answers come only as we deepen our ability to live in the reality of the present. They do not point to an ideal state, but to the flexibility of the Tao,... They teach a letting go of fear and self-consciousness, of worldly and spiritual clinging...

(Kornfield 2000:19)

Session notes may summarise and chart a process in a narrative form.

'As mental health professionals we make new stories out of the stories that patients tell us.' (Timmi 2005:34)

However these may fail to integrate into the account many other participating dimensions of body-mind-world so intricately and implicatively ordered. For example, in my margin notes I try to include 'field' effects but often these phenomena only become conscious or adequately articulated when a poem including them arises. Sudden silences in sessions often mark, and are the eloquent, mutually recognised, testimony to, powerful connection; an understanding, or a glimpse of a transfigured reality.

As professionals we are challenged to describe, explain and communicate to others, using a verbal medium, what is happening in our largely non-verbal work. Poetry making and speaking is an artistic language act in itself and testimony to inner events, and as such differs from verbal discourse 'about' a subject. It does not have the status of, or a recognised role within, our professional literature. Yet visual image making and poetic language are intimately connected; like many artists I have always made visual art alongside word art; poems, phrases and verbal images interact and intersect with visual marks and forms. The language of art therapy sessions often strikes me as a hybrid of these two.

Everything is Information

As a therapist I aspire to keep a spacious mind, as Rumi says, to welcome any 'guest'. Into the flow of consciousness come visceral and imaginal responses to what the client says and does, theoretical concepts, cultural associations, fragments of story and poetry, and all manner of epiphenomena. Poems may also point to what I may have missed or undervalued during the session. Everything is information, to use a current slogan. Information is neutral; it informs investigation, research, exploration. Poetry is information when it arrives, pushing its way into the room of consciousness. It may wake me up or come in a dream. Any significance I give it is up to me and I have come to value its perspective on therapy.

Practices of Attention

Therapy is the practice of attention, and art therapy that of attention to the emerging art work, the client and the therapeutic relationship. Poetry is a language of attention, sometimes seemingly, if we look at its place in world religious literature, as close to pure awareness as we get, verbally. Like poets and Buddhists, art therapists learn to surrender expectation to listening and aesthetic prejudice to an open state of attention. (Quasha 1991)

Poetry involves using words, or letting yourself be used by them, to wake up, become aware of what you are noticing, and listen to what it may have to impart. It acknowledges the transformative power created by simple attention. In a sense it animates or personifies everything, every creature & object has its 'spirit' and its view.

Accompanying my session notes I find three main kinds of 'poetry':

- Prose thought-streams and stories in verse form, when I have need, as record keeper for our joint work, to delineate a certain moment or

process. Akin to the making sacred or ritualistic, pre-therapy preparation of the space, it is a form of figure-ground, boundary drawing around an observed event, marking it out as worthy of special attention, by the simple act of telling its story in versified, minimally rhythmic, form. It may be an act of aesthetic pleasure on my part to turn an interesting moment into art, and it is also a way to honour a person and their life by telling their story.

- Authentic poetry: expeditions into life's labyrinths, risking the unknown, getting carried away and lost and being taken over by word-drunkenness, intuition, transpersonal and transrational forces, to encounter subtle, hidden levels of meaning. These poems may include very personal responses to a client's art work, written after the session when the art work is left with me and I feel something residual in relation to it
- Praise-song poems, which celebrate the beauty of a moment, a person, an episode, a life process, and are outpourings of gratitude, respect and awe. .

The Tenderness of Strangers

In the series of verses *The Tenderness of Strangers* I was witnessing a group of 15 workshop participants absorbed in their work; an array of processes and an atmosphere that I felt the urge to describe. Usually I 'park' such impulses until after the session, but in this instance I wrote quickly as I focused on each person in turn, with intermittent room 'scans'. The group had been together for several weeks and were settled and absorbed in their work with sand, full body-size gestural drawing and painting, working deeply on personal material in this session.

Through the lens of the poem, I saw more fully some of the themes, body issues, personal histories and preoccupations of the participants. I 'saw' more than I included in the final poem but the poem-making alerted me to a greater degree to what was happening with each person and the group as a whole. I submitted this poem for publication because it captured for me a simple beauty,

and I hoped it might communicate something about the breadth of art therapy to readers.

The Tenderness of Strangers (selected verses)

i.

Sandplay;

building a wall, judgement

and expectation.

Demolition time!

ii.

Dreaming her drawing

across a paper ocean;

ache for the sweet care of Mother Horse,

arc of neck, shine of eye,

horses, brown, dappled, white,

a quiet galloping.

iii.

The infinite curves of tenderness,

of protection.

Winternight mare, dark as earth,

great moon of warm body,

sacred circle.

iv.

Gesture in sand;

this sickle in the crooked elbow,

antler,

wave,

the horse turning around,

a gathering in of energies.

v.

Dream-memory;

erupting through hands-on-paper,

children in the garden

broken by adult shouts, red fists,

bitter print, sour fruit.

vi.

The right form is the one that

reveals itself.

even emptiness has its shapes.

vii.

The sweet unfolding shape
of things-to-come.

viii.

Opening at the elbows, the fall
of fists – deep drumming, lightness
in bird-shapes, freed.
Flight is the stretch, wings
unclasping at the base, pectoral hinges,
opening like a love-letter,
secret envelope of the flying self,
our angel.

ix.

Winter painting; softness of snow
melts the leaf. Frosted grass
starched into cactus spikes.
Muscles shift inside
velvet animal clothes.

x

Cascade of feeling, teardroplets'

damp signs on her skin.

Wrestling with vapour on the snow-field

of paper,

pristine warrior, laser-eyed.

Scorch marks

where her prayer caught fire

Permission; Whose Poem is it?

The issue of what it means to make and publicise art from our meetings with clients depends very much on what we intend and do with our writings. Every artist draws inspiration and provocation from their life and the lives of those they encounter. I can distinguish to some degree between writings primarily for-

- Reflection and supervision, not intended to be shared publicly with anyone other than perhaps a supervisor, and only rarely shared with the client/patient.
- Story-telling poem 're-mixes' of client stories and others from real life encounters and media reports. These stand more independently as art works made from my experience. Occasionally it has been appropriate to share these with clients, a few have been published. Stories for the Greening, below, is one such poem.

Stories for the Greening*

This composite piece includes images from several people's work and lives and one fictional element, which arrived as I was writing but felt very alive. Many psychiatric patients and their artistic lives in the community, seem to model ways of working with discarded and natural materials that have delighted and inspired me over the years and could be valued more in the current 'greening' of the world.

Stories for the Greening [Click here for audio](#)

If all the leaves on all the trees were eyes
would we wake?

They are among us, the greening ones,
our crazyselves, seeing through
leaves' eyes, mad with green visions
seeking birth.

i.

The girl who could feel every hair on her head,
her antennae for photons, neutrons,
the quantum dust of aeons
pricking its messages across her skin, her mind' eye.

What she saw from the edge of the black hole
kept her awake.

They are among us, sensitives,
decoding secrets from the seeds, the stars.

ii.

From city tenements old ones
slip out early and travel out of town
to spend their days among

the roots of old Caledonia's forest.

The trees are gone, sunk like ships

into the peat-bogs,

but roots drift skywards,

dark angel-shapes, wingbones

jutting through the heather.

We tug them out with bare hands,

inhaling their sweet aroma.

Back home, we polish them,

rubbing old bones

into new life, taking in their shapeliness,

their earthy stories.

iii.

When she died they found her room piled high

to the ceiling

with roots, lovingly burnished

into their full poetry, the shapes of eagle, salmon,

angel, emerging.

A ton of ancient forest brought home

to her heart.

v.

We are the greening ones, the crazies, barely visible
in the bright city, our clothes are dried mud fastened with twigs,
our boots stiff as peats.

vi.

She died in her usual chair, wearing her old green cardigan.
She had woven a hundred flowers and silver-headed grasses into the knitting.
Slumped, softly, she was a mossy bank, a garden of wildflowers.

*The Greening': term used by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (13th century)
denoting the sacred life-force permeating all creation.

Poetry – Language of Body and Soul

Therapeutic shifts, in both the art making and the client's experience, frequently arrive with a freshness, a sense of something newly born and I sometimes resist clothing these in familiar concepts, that can reduce a person's direct encounter with the numinous to a set of clichés. Poetry, if it avoids cliché, can, like dance, embody meaning, presence and mystery - the transpersonal and the transrational - in the sensory experience of breath, rhythm, gesture and image. It is a holistic modality.

I have explored writing in response to art work, authentic movement and dance in joint sessions with professional colleagues, including body psychotherapists and dancers who also paint and write. This form of mutual witnessing has been an enriching experience, both in terms of the poems and prose poems created

and the quality of holistic feedback we were able to provide using this medium. Poetry is also a language of love, sacred song and shamanism, and, I propose, a valid language for the shape-shiftings, intimacies and alchemical transformations that occurs in art therapy.

Listening to You Drawing [Click here for audio](#)

All-body listening is a familiar part of art therapy practice. I wrote this next poem in a moment and felt it captured a process in a way I hadn't thought of before. The drawer was using chalks and pencils on a hard surface, making an expressive gestural soundscape, quite unconsciously, as it transpired.

Listening to you drawing

Listening to the shapes of your drawing appear

I carried a question for you

in the delicate shape of an ear, the delicate

question mark ear, sea-echoing cave

of earshell,

polished with old stories.

Listening to you drawing

Listening to the shapes of your drawing appear

I carried a question for you,

a question like a song

half-remembered,

a question you had forgotten

to keep asking yourself.

What she makes [Click here for audio](#)

This was written for G. who attended groups following a recent trauma. She sewed fabric scraps to create humorous, sensuous and vividly feminine artefacts, which inspired others to be more playful and experimental. As the poem emerged in this clear list of imperatives, I could feel the strength of the art works' voice. G. said she felt seen by the poem, which accurately reflected how she had felt and she was happy for it to be published.

What she makes (extract)

What she makes says:

'Love me, touch me...'

I am striped furs, pink and
sea-green satins,
sunshine stitching.

What she makes says

'What's inside is vivid, shining.'

What she makes reminds us
there is mending to be done,
hearts to be sewn together...

Poetry has helped me in work with psychotically disturbed patients. Intentionally focused portrait poems allow me to explore the client's sensorial experience of the world. While working with a young patient who made intricate, minutely detailed drawings of animated plant forms, I began to experience a 'snakiness'

(her word); a visual scribble and vibrato approaching dizziness and disorientation. While psychodynamic theory might explain such an occurrence between us, it was writing, and repeatedly re-reading, the poem I wrote that moved my perception forward to more deeply connecting with a quality in her drawings and how she was experiencing the world around her. I shared with her about how I had come to look differently at her art and what I experienced there, which, in turn, shifted our relationship and progressed our work together. The poem had made the information in the physical experience more intelligible to me.

Poetry and the Transpersonal

Most therapists will be familiar with the synchronicities and other phenomena that accompany therapy. When we enter the transpersonal and loosen our grip on local time and place, we may remember the future and see across continents. American poet Laureate Billy Collins is reputed to have said, on being asked to write a peace poem, that a good poem about a mushroom is a peace poem because it includes the whole world.

So making a poem about a session or a client or our process together can reveal what I may be, at this level witnessing or anticipating. As a form of self-supervision, it can reveal archetypal, stereotypical and other perceptions of a client and their process. Poems often share content with the client's dreams or symptoms, as later disclosed, and form an imaginal bridge.

Occasionally poetry is oracular. A metaphor may subsequently be revealed as describing an unfolding truth for the client, either forwards or backwards looking. Many Beat poets have written vividly about the role of stream of consciousness, poetic writing in illuminating the less visible, sometimes prophetic, contexts of events.

Typical examples;

- ‘Seeing’ a client in a poem as on board a ship, or as a ship, and they tell me in a later session how their mother made a sea journey when pregnant and a pivotal event occurred, creating traces for both mother and child.
- In the poems the client is always with, or riding, a horse and in a state of concentration. Later they tell me, with much shyness, of a secret, long held dream to work with horses. This person went on to a new career in this area.
- The poem pictures a voyage to a specific location, one which, it later transpires, has great significance for the client so much so that at the end of therapy they travelled to this place.

Such phenomena are well documented in Jungian and Transpersonal psychology but here I am focussing on how we access and interact with this material via poetry. I only rarely share such images with clients.

The following two examples from my session notes describe familiar synchronous ‘intrusions’ from outside the therapy room;

i.

Making a nest for herself,

birds gather outside, line up on log.

Pointed faces

peer in at us and her fingers busy

with wool and twigs. ‘I need a nest’ she says.

Birds dip their heads,

fly away.

ii.

She talks around about it,

without saying it. Inside her skin- trembling,

muscles thin as glass, the hot electric wait

as imminent invaders gather, and then the tap, tap,

tapping happens; Invisible twig on the window?

Tiny, bony finger at the door? Bird? Cat? Spirit?

'Let me in' it taps.

And out pour words words words,

as the hungry ones disperse, the room cools, and

she laughs,

'As soon as I said it, it stopped'

Clarity, Openness, Sensitivity.

Poetry often attempts to capture, or let itself be captured by, the essence of an event; to absolutely, specifically illuminate a single diamond in Indra's cosmic net. In this respect it is a respectful language practice, acknowledging uniqueness. To me this is vital; no matter how many of us share a diagnosis we each express and manage it in unique ways. The specifics are crucial. Conversely, a grain of sand minutely observed in a poem, a haiku leaf or iambic falling water droplet, gives us the whole, interdependent world.

Metaphor and other traditional poetic figures of speech, often dismissed within the scientific paradigm as anthropomorphism, are a bridge between things and point to inter-subjective space, as these haiku by Basho illustrate.

Wake butterfly-

it's late, we've miles

to go together. (Stryk 1985: 75).

Spring's exodus-

birds shriek,

fish eyes blink tears. (Stryk 1985:10)

Bird of Kyoto,

in Kyoto, pining

for Kyoto (Stryk 1985:90)

Three concepts from Buddhism - clarity, openness and sensitivity - accompany me through many moments and passages in both therapy and poetry. We have much language and multiple languages in which to describe and account for what is going on in therapy, but for me these three concepts are useful both during sessions and afterwards. Their language is the brief, concentrated language of contemplative poetry; as in this fragment from a Scottish teenager's Gaelic poem,

Suilean –

Dath a' Chuain Tuath annta;

na bais nad bhroinn bhon chuan mhor sin...

Eyes –

The colour of the North Sea in them;

The deaths inside you from that great sea ...

(Ballantyne 2007:5)

Concluding Remarks

Dante is sometimes able to describe a phenomenon in such a way that there is absolutely nothing left of it...he so strongly emphasises the fluidity of the phenomenon and with such a flourish cancels it altogether, that direct contemplation, once the metaphor has done its work, is really left with nothing to live on.

(Brown et al 1973)

Like the Zen koan, accompanying art therapy practice with poetry practice can restore us to a state of emptiness, immanent and spacious, where non-conceptual awareness can arise and multiple realities are possible. Authentic expression and connection, like the pause between in breath and out breath, can deliver us to such a moment.

And if the song is sung truly,
from the whole heart, everything
at last vanishes: nothing is left
but space, the stars, the singer.

(Poem 54. Mandelstam 1913)

* 'Speaking with Listening': George Quasha's phrase to describe the act of writing poetry.

References

A'Court, B.A. (2008) The Tenderness of Strangers, Listening to You Drawing, What She Makes. *Northwords Now* Issue 8 Spring 2008

A'Court, B.A. (2007) Stories for the Greening. Unpublished.

Ballantyne, N. (2007) *Aodann Athar* in *Northwords Now* Issue 6 Summer 2007
Northwords ISSN 1750-7928

Brown, C. Merwin, S. Hughes, R. trans. (1973) *Conversation about Dante* in *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam* New York Review Books

Dillard, A. (1996) quoted in *The Sun Magazine* Issue 242 Feb. The Sun Publishing Company Inc. USA .

Kornfield, J. (2000) *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry Rider*

Miller, J. (2008) *At the World's Edge* Interview with Les Murray in *Northwords Now* Issue 9 Summer 2008

Shenpen-Hookham, Lama (2006) *There's More to Death than Dying*
Windhorse

Stryk, L. trans. (1985) *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho* Penguin

Timmi, S. (2005) *The New Practitioner; The Emergence of the Post-Modern Clinician*. In eds. Malone, C. Forbat, L. Robb, M. Seden, J. *Relating Experience: Stories from Health and Social Care*. Routledge London

Quasha, G. (1991) *A Virtual Account in Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary Poetry* (p.210-18) Johnson, K. Paulenich, C. eds. Shambala

Related Reading

Levine, S.K. (1997) *Poesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* JKP

Biography: Beverley is a resident in NE Scotland and has provided *Visionary Arts* & other courses within the Findhorn Foundation Community's Eco-Village & other programmes, sees a few private clients, contributes to Post-Graduate. Diploma training in St Petersburg & is developing joint projects with Russian art therapists. Her poetry is published in a number of national journals & anthologies.