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Awakening the Imaginal

Karen Estrella

***Editor's Note:** In this essay Professor Estrella explores eliciting the development of the imaginative capacity in the process of healing, and the ability to act on one's images, through expressive therapies.*

First let me thank Susan Gere and Michele Forinash for bringing together IBMS and the Expressive Therapies PhD community. Thank you Yishiuan and Mandi for your support and hard work, and thank you Jared for an interesting talk, and for many years of scholarship and commitment to spiritual development as a resource for resilience, wellbeing, and peace.

I'd like to begin my remarks with reading a short paragraph from a collection of essays by the poet Robert Hass from a text called *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. He says:

It seems to me that we all live our lives in the light of primary acts of imagination, images or sets of images that get us up in the morning and move us about our days. I do not think anyone can live without one, for very long, without suffering from deadness and futility. And I think that, for most of us, those images are not only essential but dangerous because no one of them feels like the whole truth and they do not last. Either they die of themselves, dry up, are shed; or, if we are lucky, they are invisibly transformed into the next needful thing; or we act on them in a way that exposes both them and us. (p.303)

Now I don't know about how it is for you, but Hass is making it sound a whole lot easier than I think it is for me. Sure, occasionally I'm able to grab hold of that light that shines off a primary act of imagination that graces me... but more often than not, I lose track of the image that gets me up in the morning or moves me through my day. Yes, my images die, dry up, and shed—on most days, before I even get out of bed! Occasionally, very occasionally, I am able to act on my images in a way that exposes them and me—I will tell you about one of those occasions in a minute—but first I wanted to say that I think I was able to act on my images because I have come to practice a way of attending to those images that I learned because of the practice of expressive therapies. It is the very practice of playing mid-wife to these images that I think of, when I think of the practice of expressive therapy. For me, expressive therapy is about eliciting the development of the imaginative capacity in the process of healing.

Steven Levine, a Toronto-based expressive therapist, poet, and philosopher writes,

Psychological suffering is intrinsic to the human condition; in that sense psychopathology is normal. The task of therapy is not to eliminate suffering but to give a voice to it, to find a form in which it can be expressed.

Expression is itself transformation; this is the message that art brings.
(Levine, 1997, p. 15)

And if ever we were in need of a source of light, we are in need of one now. Jared has already explained so eloquently, the need for an antidote to our current world's chains of pain. The arts offer themselves to us as a path to wholeness.

As with nature, the arts are for many their avenue to the divine. Many people have spoken of creativity's connection to spiritual practice. Julia Cameron's work comes easily to mind—in her book *The Artist's Way*, Cameron proposes that by opening ourselves up to a creative practice we open ourselves up to divine energy.

Carl Rogers' daughter, Natalie Rogers, has developed an orientation to expressive therapy called The Creative Connection, and in this practice, she explains:

The Creative Connection describes the process of allowing one art form to influence another directly. Using various expressive arts in sequence heightens and intensifies our journey inward... By moving from art form to art form, we release the layers of inhibition that have covered our originality, discovering our uniqueness and special beauty. Like a spiral, the process plumbs the depths of our body, mind, emotions, and spirit to bring us to our center. The center or core is our essence, our wellspring of creative vitality.
(Rogers, 1994, p. 43)

For many, their experience of art, music, dance, or poetry brings them directly into contact with their God, and allows them not only to have that experience of inner connection but of outer connection as well.

So what does it mean to engage the imaginal—to live with images? To act on them? I was recently on sabbatical. During my sabbatical I decided to do three things that I hoped would feed my future work as an expressive therapist. And I've come to see these things as my way of engaging the imaginal.

The first thing I did was to begin taking cello lessons. When I was ten years old I played the cello—and I was so discouraged by how heavy I thought it was in those nine blocks between the school and my house, that when we had a chance to switch instruments six months later, I asked for the smallest instrument they had. I played flute for the next thirty-seven years. Yet somewhere in the back of my heart, I think I have always nurtured a dream of being a cellist in an orchestra, and I think on some level, that dream became one of those images that got me up in the morning. I saw the sabbatical as a chance to see if I could act on the image of me becoming a cellist in the community orchestra, to see if I could fatten the image even more.

The second thing I did was to join a women's interfaith book club. I've always been a big novel reader, and I found the idea of creating interfaith dialogue through a book club compelling and inviting. I knew about the group for years before I joined, and perhaps it too had become one of those things that had captured my imagination. Perhaps somehow I had begun to see myself there, engaging in dialogues that were rich and engaging. In my

own mind, the book group became a vehicle of arts for social change—I imagined us, a group of women, reading novels and bridging gaps of understanding and difference.

One of the things I was able to do with this group was to travel to Spain. A group of us from several branches of this interfaith group went to Spain in January for two weeks. While we were there we traveled to Avila, the home of the mystic Teresa of Avila. Now the town of Avila is an old world city with a walled city center, and interesting enough, the city is known for its storks. So talk about an image... between it being close to Christmas, and the story that storks mate for life, and of course our old stories of storks and babies, I felt full of images of the town—enough so that I wrote a poem entitled *The Storks of Avila* within a day of my visit. This was the kind of imagery I was used to. I felt graced by the poem that allowed me to capture and expose the image and myself, to capture and expose our group to itself. I felt a sense of wonder and holding as I shared it with my fellow travelers.

*The storks of Avila
for the Daughters of Abraham*

*In real life
they are regal
austere overseers,
tall and elegant,
the white of their bodies
in stark contrast
to the black tips
of their wings
and the deep coral
of their beaks,*

*not at all
like the fairy-tale deliverers
we're used to.*

So much is not how we imagine.

*Along the walled city
we stand, ten women,
modern and yearning,
watching old men
in berets and blue jackets*

*walking arm in arm
with the sun on their faces
through the gates
to the plaza
for a mid-morning coffee.*

*Later, at the train station
we watch as one, then two, take flight,
stunned by the effort
it appears to take,
and by the incongruity
of our lives with this place.*

*What birth within us
have they heralded?
What purge?
With whom shall we walk arm in arm?*

The last thing I did was to go to the American Art Therapy Association conference in New Orleans. The setting and the conference both seemed to act on my imagination in such a way that by the end of the conference I had decided to develop a course in Expressive Therapy and Social Action.

Like playing the cello, and joining the book group I did not believe that any of these actions had begun as acts of the imagination—I did not think of the images I carried about each action as even an image—instead I only saw them as conscious choices motivated by will, not the imaginal. It was only in preparing this talk that I came to see that Hass' images did not only mean the images I could easily imagine turning into art, but the images that capture my dreams as well.

Prior to this paper, I thought of the imaginal realm much more concretely—for example, as the storks. How I see that images act on us in many ways.

I believe the work of expressive therapies is to accompany our clients in the work of midwife-ing their images—of helping them to recognize the images that get them up in the morning, and of helping them to act on those images in a way that exposes them and us, in a way that makes the world less dead and futile, in a way that enlivens an awareness of spirit, of meaning and connection, not only to self but to others.

But this work is not only for those that suffer the psychological wounds in the clinic, I believe Hass is calling us all—to enliven our world, to allow the imaginal to awaken our spirits and to move us towards resilience, well-being, and peace.

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