

Barrett, D.P. (1997, February). A way of thinking; a way of working. *Minnesota Women Psychologists- Newsletter*, pp. 8-9.

In the fall of 1978, I was looking for a therapist to help me deal with the grief of losing my parents and my maternal grandparents within the span of a few years. As I was driving back home to Boston from work one day, enjoying the foliage along Route 2 from Central Massachusetts where I was a counselor in a junior-senior high school, I remembered hearing about a therapist named Marie. Marie's office was in Concord, a rather quaint New England town, which I passed daily on my way to and from work.

I was looking for a therapist who had a more creative, less analytical approach than I had experienced in a previous therapy situation. I knew that my thinking was a problem! I was very adept at talking about and analyzing my concerns (after all, I had been an armchair philosopher, probably at the age of five, or by the time when formal operational thinking kicks in anyway, as well as having been through a traditional graduate program in counseling), but as my ten years of journals revealed, I usually went around and around in my thinking about a problem, but rarely go to deeper layers of feeling and insight.

My internal readiness certainly was a factor. I also had the sense, though, that a more creative, intuitive approach might be of help in opening the way to deeper levels of awareness, integration, and healing. And, looking back on it now, I believe that my hunch was right.

In a moment of impulsiveness (or decisiveness) I steered the car to the Concord turnoff, found Marie's office, made an appointment with the secretary, and shortly thereafter began a therapy adventure which was to impact my personal and professional life profoundly. The main therapeutic modality I experienced with Marie was an interactive imagery approach which she had learned at the Boston Pyschosynthesis Institute. It was basically a very simple procedure where, after a few minutes of check-in and discussion to determine an issue to focus on, Marie would suggest that I invite an image to appear, reflective of the particular concern.

After the appearance of the initial image, we would proceed in an interactive way, whereby I would describe what was happening and Marie would ask questions about the details of the image and related feelings, as well as make suggestions at various strategic points, such as for me to dialogue with a person or object in the imagery scene,

to “become” an element in the imagery landscape, to become an observer for a larger perspective, to invite a wisdom figure to be present, etc.

I must say that, although I had some anxieties at the beginning about whether images would actually appear or when they did whether they really meant anything or contained “truth,” the cumulative effect of these sessions was that of a major paradigm shift. I was essentially being introduced to an intuitive way of knowing, to an experience of a natural unfolding of my own creative and spiritual resources—a shift to an internal sense of authority through a process which was fascinating and often even entertaining!

It is, of course, not surprising to me that, given the positive and helpful experience I had had in this type of therapy, I would soon choose to get training myself in the clinical use of imagery and begin applying this method in my professional work. Also, having been a literature major as an undergraduate and having taught literature and writing in secondary school, I already had a strong appreciation for the power of “the image.”

My therapy with Marie ended in the Fall of 1979, when I completed a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Counseling Psychology at Boston University and moved to Minnesota to pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota. I had begun training at the Psychosynthesis Institute in Boston some months before and continued my training in the clinical use of imagery at the Psychosynthesis Institute of Minnesota upon my arrival in Minneapolis.

It has been quite an intriguing professional journey over these past 16+ years since my somewhat shy and tentative attempts at imagery use with clients when I was an intern at West Hennepin County Mental Health Center in 1980. As I look back, I remember images: images of being stuck in a jar, being pulled under by quicksand, exiled in the land of the dead; the image of a client diagnosed with OCD, seeing himself in the basement laundry room trying to touch unlaundered clothes and being full of terror.

More images: the image of death as total blackness by a group member in a seminar on death anxiety for health care providers working with the dying and their families; in a couple’s therapy session where anger was escalating and the distance between the two getting wider, of individual images of cowering in a corner and hanging precariously off a cliff, crystallizing underlying feelings; the image of a client with an eating disorder, of being in a rage and eating uncontrollably from boxes pulled down from kitchen cabinets; in a group on loss for women in the process of divorce, images of a colorfully dressed gypsy woman and the mysterious woman in the slinky red dress, reflecting aspects of self wanting to “break loose”; in a consultation situation, of a therapist who

saw the rage of a client as swelling up and permeating every space in the office. What has been especially rewarding and inspiring for me has been the witnessing of the transformation of many of these images, over time, in the direction of integration, healing, and transcendence.

Finally, I want to say that I do not use imagery extensively with all clients and certainly do not think that it is a “magical” therapy technique. However, I have found that it fits in very well with my depth psychology/psychodynamic orientation, as well as having transpersonal and cognitive-behavioral applications. And, imagery therapy gives me hope— it reminds me, almost on a daily basis, of the power and wisdom and natural healing ability which are available within each of us.