

# *The Many Paths to Healing*

*From the practitioners of Sutter Center for Integrative Health*

## THE CREATIVE ARTS AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

By P. Nandi Szabo

When medically ill clients enter the realm of health and wellness, often they are faced with a need to listen deeply to their own truths. Movement and art can provide a vehicle for listening - listening to oneself, listening between selves, listening to the uniqueness of these exchanges. Listening is a crucial ingredient for healing, for, as the psychiatrist and artist Charles Johnston writes "health is as much a function of internal listening as it is external intervention."

My experience as a dance and creative arts therapist has shown me that listening is a much harder experience than most people acknowledge. The need is to listen deeply to one's own truths, and many people assuming good health may not be prepared for this. It is not that we don't tell the truth, it is more that we don't know what the truth is. Our truths speak adamantly when we are shocked by the reality of disease. They speak in image and sensate language: mythic poetic phrases, visual, auditory, or kinesthetic images, body sensations, fantasies, memories, deep silences, relentless darkness, numb emptiness.

These languages can be experienced as fears and frighten us, or as saviors that help aim the direction and meaning of our healing process. The task of movement therapy, for both client and therapist, is to act as a creative detective in this land of imagery, movement and health.

The Creative Arts Therapies (dance, art, writing, psychodrama, music) are based on the premise that the use of the arts in the healing process awakens a language of images, symbols, and metaphors. This language speaks for the deepest aspect of the self. It promotes an interactional approach to mind/body wellness with the emphasis on helping individuals take an active part in their healing process and develop outlets for creative expression.

Through movement, poetry, psychodrama, ritual, artwork, creative writing and story, we can bridge the inner experience to the outer world of words, transforming unconscious knowing into conscious reality. One of the keys to their effectiveness is that the arts provide a non-threatening opportunity to express feelings that are often too painful for words. The art forms provide a safe structure to uncover, contain, and assimilate the feelings that surface in therapy. The expressive medium becomes the "container" for feelings that if verbalized may escalate and become overwhelming. For individuals who feel they have "no words", the art form can serve as their "voice".

The roots of the use of creative arts in therapy date back to early civilizations. Ancient peoples seemed to be aware that mind-body-spirit were interconnected in some powerful way and various art forms were an integral part of the religious and social rituals of their daily lives. These primitive modes found modern expression in the early 1940's through the pioneering efforts of dancers, visual artists and musicians.

Recognizing the healing potential of art, they began to explore it as a form of therapy in mental health settings. Since then the use of the creative arts in therapy has continued to grow as a therapeutic discipline and is today widely accepted a potent bridge that links soma and psyche in a healthful balance.

Creative arts therapies envision the client as an artist, creator of his/her own self and life. The creative act (artwork), whether it be a painting, a poem, or a song, or a dance, directly symbolizes the self-in-the world. In the creative process the client has an opportunity to recapture elements of the past and create new images of the present and future.

Although the "healing" may not lead to a cure of the particular conditions or situation that the clients might be struggling with, they may begin to feel more in charge and less victimized by their pain, to capitalize on their strengths, and to develop creative outlets for expression.

Health has been defined as "the movement towards wholeness" and imagery as "the movement toward wholeness made visible." By engagement in the creative, aesthetic experience, we offer ourselves an opportunity to integrate mind and body; sensation, emotion, image and thought. This type of experience returns the individual to a more sentient state; an enriched physical and emotional way of being in the present moment. A therapeutic environment that supports creative activity, expressive interaction, physical vitality and spontaneity can be a growth-promoting and enlivening place to confront the issues that are negatively affecting the rest of their lives.

*{P. Nandi Szabo combines her art and dance training with her clinical training in psychology to create a holistic healing process that furthers the emotional, physical and spiritual integration of the individual and/or group. She can be reached at Creative Interventions 916-457-1966, or through Sutter Center for Integrative Health 530-759-9804.}*