

## **Interactive Group Imagery on a Psych Ward: Circling Around a Cooking Vessel**

Juliet Rohde-Brown. Ph.D.

While attaining my post-doc hours, I worked at a psychiatric hospital in an adult ICU, where I was responsible for case management and running process groups. In my desire to encourage and facilitate as much self-reflection and anxiety reduction as possible in the patients, I tried various approaches in leading these groups. I was often in a quandary over exactly what to do with the particular cluster of individuals thrown together on any given day. At times, the level of mania and/or active psychosis was so high that it was almost impossible to contain the energy in the room. At other times, patients who happened to be on the unit were interested in self-reflection and exploring their issues and processes in some level of depth. Usually, we were faced with a blend of unique individuals at different levels of interest and awareness in regard to their inner life. Either at the extreme of active psychosis or existential angst and hopelessness, the suffering individual had hit bottom or gone over the top, so to speak, resulting in ending up on a locked psych ward.

There were several Imagery exercises I used that served to Clarify positive aspects in these patients who had, more often than not, had the disheartening experience of being perceived as a walking diagnostic category rather than a complex human being with valid feelings. These exercises involved exploring their favorite animal or place in nature, for instance and reflecting on the positive aspects of these animals/places as aspects of themselves.

Occasionally, I thought the room was ripe for exploration of shadowy aspects as well. Jungian work opened me up to the elegance and profundity of alchemical metaphor. One of my favorite alchemical Images has been that of a vessel over a fire. Just the evocation of this Image takes one to a numinous and interconnected place. Alchemical Imagery represents the deepest layers of our collective unconscious. Images speak to a pre-verbal and elemental core of our human meaning-making system, to our deep-knowing that is clear and stable regardless of any chaos that may exist in the internal or external environment.

In order to begin this process as an initiation into integrating opposites, I drew a pot with its lid slightly open on an ink board small enough to pass around the group. My drawing of the cooking pot was to implicitly introduce a representation of the self through that of the Image of a container, a vessel. I told them that the pot was cooking a stew on a stove. I asked them to feel a sense of the heat on the stove and I asked them how high to turn the fire on. A patient said "just enough to let it simmer." In our world's traditions, the element of fire has been a symbol for both objective and subjective sacrifice and it has been

equated with the inner fire, with purification and regeneration. I thought it an apt elemental symbol to work with.

I asked the participants to talk about the ingredients of the stew. We got a good discussion going about what makes a good stew with varying flavors and consistencies: sweet, bitter, sour, hard, soft and so forth as well as what it might taste like. We talked about the danger of cooking with too much fire, blowing the lid off and ruining the stew or the result of turning off the fire. I introduced the idea that all of those things could cook together in one pot, making an interesting and unique stew, just like a person who isn't all good or all bad.

I then made the metaphor explicit by suggesting that they think of the pot of stew on the fire as themselves. I invited them to pass the ink board around the room so that each person could write their own qualities in the pot and tell us how these qualities blend and cook together. A woman who had spent a great deal of time raging and threatening others wrote the words "aggressive" and "kind" in the pot. She did not share right away, but passed the ink board on. I was actually quite surprised that she stayed in the room, as it was her pattern of behavior to wander in and out and refuse to participate in any endeavor. I watched as she stared

ahead with a quizzical, yet softened look in her eyes, listening to others. She finally said "I get so mad sometimes and people tell me that I'm aggressive. I usually think I'm a bad person, but I do kind things for people sometimes, like I told the new lady who just came in not to be scared. I like doing this group today. It makes me feel better, because I didn't realize that I could be both aggressive and kind at the same time or that I could let other people know that I am not just an angry and aggressive person all the time." She appeared calmer than usual and she actually smiled at and validated other patients. It seemed that the exercise

helped her to accept herself more, at least in that window of time, and to be recognized by others as a multifaceted human being who is not just aggressive, but also has a capacity for kindness. She also felt safe enough to share herself with others in that moment.

She set an example for others, and the group was able to explore the concept that when they feel angry or when scary thoughts or voices enter their mind, they are not ALL that— they too have many varied ingredients cooking all at once in their own selves. By taking the marker in their hands, drawing and writing their qualities into the pot that represented them both individually and collectively, and then passing the pot on to the next person, I hoped for a quality of universality and ritual to be created as well as a window of Clarity. I saw it manifest in a small way.

Imagery is a way to take back our projections. When we engage in symbolic

Images objectively and interactively, we are priming ourselves for a greater capacity for reflective processes wherein we are not devoured by subjective experience.

Imagination is truly one of our greatest resources. It is also an important component in being able to perceive the bigger picture and to have empathy and compassion for ourselves as well as others.

As we who work with Guided Imagery know all too well, a self-punishing inner voice can take on mythological proportions from the Images that arise from the unconscious of those who are suffering. Piero Ferrucci (1982) wrote “Images can either imprison us or liberate us. We can be their unconscious slaves and let them govern our lives, or we can deliberately put their immense power to effective use. By clearly imagining a possibility, we automatically bring it closer to actualization.”

Sometimes the next step in ones personal evolution is to emerge out of a psychotic or suicidal/homicidal episode and to imagine other possibilities for the future—other ways of being in relationship with oneself and others. On a psych ward, an available place, sometimes the only place, to start exploring Imagery in relation to oneself is in the support and community of the group. It was my honor and privilege to be able to participate in such a way with these diverse and fascinating human beings.

#### References:

Ferrucci, P. (1982). *What We May Be*.

Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in Santa Barbara. She did her doctoral internship at the Los Angeles Jung Institute and she is currently a core faculty member and interim clinical director of Antioch University Santa Barbara's Psychology Department program. She also has a private practice in Santa Barbara. Juliet's recent endeavors include writing and singing devotional pieces in collaboration with Energi music and serving as a founding member of one of the programs for Tiera Sagrada: Sacred Earth Foundation involving elder support.