

Imagery on the Sly and Seeds of Gold

By Lee Raven, RN

There's a restless, vaguely anxious teenager with you on the steps of the museum. He's bored with the exhibits. His 7th grade classmates are still inside the John Steinbeck Museum.

Edgy, this young colt with his pent up energy has left the cool dark halls. Out in the bright afternoon sun, he seems poised to bolt from the field trip altogether, his body on the edge of the steps, his gaze anticipating more interesting diversions down unknown streets.

Just another parent driver on a field trip, you're not sure how to calm him and keep him there willingly. Unwelcome images of yelling after him when he takes off around a corner, or going back for help, or long searches after dusk for missing students, flash across your mind.

You notice that the sun is in his eyes, uncomfortably bright, causing him to squint.

Without preamble you edge a step closer and ask quietly, "If you could imagine a room for yourself, something like the room John Steinbeck dreamed and wrote in as a young man, what would your room look like?" Two breaths, three, then he chooses to lounge back on the stairs, for the moment. He lets his eyes rest from the glare of the sun.

A sigh.

Silence.

Then, "A small or medium room, not too big."

Then, quiet. A moment later, his body starts restless rearranging movements.

"What else?" you ask.

A pause.

"A book shelf. Kind of small, but it has all my favorite books on it."

A long silence.

"Where's the bookshelf?"

"Against the wall. Next to the desk."

"Tell me more about the desk."

"It's not too big. Kind of smallish. It's made out of wood and has scratches and some dents on it."

"It's been through some living already."

"Yeah."

"What else?"

"A lamp. It's small, but I can direct the light just how I want it."

"Just my paper and my pen. It's an old fashioned pen, like a fountain pen that you have to fill with ink."

A pause.

"My guitar's in the room. My favorite piece of fluorite is on the desk."

"Are there windows?"

"Maybe two windows. In the corner of the room."

"Which corner?"

"Straight ahead and to the left as you come in. So I can get sunlight, but not too much."

"What do you see when you look out?"

"It's a small town. Quiet. I can see the street with the stores lining it. It's just a short walk to get anything I need. But the town isn't big so I can get out beyond the buildings easily if I want to."

"Do you want to stay in the room for now?"

"Yeah. This is good right here."

Gradually his voice is softening and he's responding more comfortably. He can see trees outside his imaginary window lining the street, he can hear the birds

singing in them, there are people's voices far away. It's late morning, the sky is blue with a few clouds, and the air smells fresh. There is a gentle breeze that moves the light yellow curtains on the windows. He describes the green glass shade on the reading lamp. There's a sunny patch on the carpet, and his cat likes to lie there. He pets her, sometimes with his foot, sometimes with his hand. He plays his guitar-rock songs—between episodes of writing.

"If you were writing there now, what would that be like?"

"I sit at the desk, but my head is turned toward the window. I like looking out over the land leading up to the mountains. I think about things until the words form in my head, then I write them down."

"What kinds of things would you write?"

"Sometimes poems. Sometimes stories. Things that happen to me. Things I think about. What other people do. What they might be thinking or feeling. Finding words for what's in my head. Just things about living."

"How does that feel, being able to write down those things that are in your head?"

"It feels good. When I get going the words come out easily and I have to write really fast to get them all down."

Behind you, too soon, too soon, you hear the rustlings of the others coming out of the museum. You need to wind this up quickly but gently, before there's a startling interruption.

"In a minute, Ben, the others will be here, but remember this place and what you created, and how good it feels as the words flow easily onto the paper..."

Thus began my first foray into imagery on the sly. At that time, I'd completed only half of my training. While I more and more often gave sessions to friends and acquaintances, I'd always relied rather rigidly on the structure we'd been taught—first giving an overview of the process, obtaining agreement, and then going through a relaxation sequence before settling down to imagery. It had never crossed my mind to just jump right in to what seemed like the "middle" of the process. But in this case, I took a quick leap of experimental faith almost before I knew I was making the decision, and watched with great appreciation as the imagery unfolded.

Ben and I were only there about 20 minutes, and the ending was perhaps a little

awkward. From the look on his face I'm sure it was a bit of a jolt for him to come back to "reality" and realize that he was on the steps of a museum sharing some inside information with his classmate's mom. Not something a teen usually does.

But there it was for both of us to see—we'd shared a peaceful, spontaneous exploration instead of the usual chaperon-student Test of Limits, thrust and parry. We'd gone together on a short journey, and during that brief interval, we'd both been comfortable, interested explorers.

* * *

I think of that time often as I try to open to the possibilities of what guided imagery can offer. Not just the structured sessions that we are trained to follow, but the smaller packages, the more spontaneous moments—golden seeds that we plant in those around us.

For instance, after a group imagery session at an elementary school, for the child that says, "I couldn't see anything," I ask them to just make it up on the spot.

"If you could make your own special place, just the way you'd want it, what would be there?"

That's often enough to start the process of, say, "green grass and trees" that you can build on.

If, on the other hand, a child says, "I don't know," about what their special place would look like, then I might ask, "What is your favorite color?"

"Oh. What kind of green? Like grass or darker than that?"

"Medium green."

"Oh, fine. What could be medium green in your special place?"

"Maybe a big soft green chair."

"That's sounds comfortable. What size would it be?" And you're off and running.

Do you remember how we've talked about the 30-second elevator speech, that quick, concise introduction to whatever it is you do for a living? After the first sentence or two, in response to their first question (always make your short introduction an invitation to ask questions!), I might ask, "How many chairs are there in your house?" What does he do but call up an image of his house and walk through it room by room, mentally counting the chairs? It's a great way to

instantly get across two things: everyone can do imagery, and that imagery is an already familiar language of the mind. You have only to ask another question, say, "As you're looking at the room you're in right now, does it happen to be messy or clean?" to give an example of receptive imagery. That of course leads to more questions...

Toni Gilbert reminds us how she used brief, spontaneous imagery as a lovely way to calm an overtired and slightly confused two-and-a-half year old-her grandchild, Maggie. Maggie's mother had been away for a few days on a business trip and Maggie didn't have a concept for separation and the feelings it would invoke. As they rocked together in the rocking chair looking at the moon, Toni gently told her how the feelings she was having in her heart were called 'missing someone' and that it was okay to feel that way. Maggie eventually relaxed into her grandmother's arms and closed her eyes. Toni let the process unfold further by helping Maggie imagine how it was going to feel when Mommy came back, held Maggie in her arms, carried her to the car, drove home, and parked. And what it would be like being carried up to the door, into her house and up the stairs, and how it would feel being all snuggled into her own bed...All the while, Maggie had been intermittently saying, "Yeah," and murmuring additions to the story. The last thing Maggie said before she fell asleep was, "And we get up and have cereal."

Working with a cancer client who was too agitated and worried to even want to try relaxation, I introduced a directive imagery session without preamble. She could hardly sit still when she said she couldn't even imagine submitting to chemotherapy, or being so foolhardy as to not submit to chemotherapy. I asked, "What if taking chemo, or not taking chemo, both turn out to be something quite different than you expect?"

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine that you set your foot just one step down a path before you. You can still see the other path, and in fact, you can still get over there if you want to. In front of you, you see that the steep craggy path has a much shallower incline than you had thought it would...and the boulders are beside the path, not in it. Your muscles feel kind of good as they are being worked to get you up the path to the top where you'll have a wider vista..." Soon, I was asking questions, and she was getting answers from the imagery. It was only later on that she was able to relax, and closed her eyes spontaneously.

This became a journey to a safe place, from where, in the future, she was able to explore other paths and scenarios, feeling for which ones represented chemo, which ones 'no chemo.' But it got her started on the journey, and that allowed the relaxation, and that allowed possibilities to emerge.

You no doubt know of many more instances of imagery on the sly that have worked wonders. I hope you'll write in or email us and let us know what worked for you. We will all benefit from your shared ideas for more "golden seeds": on-the-spot imagery that turns the tide, calms energies, or helps someone see the possibilities.