

Grief and the Expressive Arts

Practices for Creating Meaning

Edited by

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Kinaesthetic Imagining

Ilene A. Serlin

DESCRIPTION

Kinaesthetic imagining is an existential/depth form of dance movement therapy in which body-based images create a non-verbal narrative or text that has metaphoric, symbolic, and transformative levels of meaning (Serlin, 1996, 2010). It is compounded from the Greek word "kinesthesia" which means "sensation of movement" (Greek: *kinae*—movement; + *easthesia*—sensation). "Imagining" is an active process by which images are generated and formed. Therefore, kinaesthetic imagining is the process by which the perceptions arising from moving muscles generate and make explicit imaginative structures of consciousness. As embodied narrative or action *poiesis*, kinaesthetic imagining is a dynamic process by which people often compose themselves and form their lives. Since grief often stays stuck in the body, moving through the images and feeling the feelings in the body is crucial for healing (Serlin, 2013).

Kinaesthetic imagining has a simple three-part structure that includes (a) check-in and warm-up; (b) amplification; (c) making sense (action hermeneutics):

1. Check-in and warm-up. Use of breath, sound, stretching, and circle dance movements will warm up the body, bring body awareness and consciousness to self and others, create the container, and mobilize healing energies.
2. Amplification. Repetition and deepening the emerging themes explores images and emotions that arise from individual, dyadic, and group movements. Participants have an opportunity to develop their own personal healing images, stories, and mythologies.
3. Making meaning (action hermeneutics). This is a time to wind down, internalize the imagery, reflect on its meaning, let go, and make a transition into real life.

CASE STUDY

Marta is a 35-year-old Israeli student who joins a course in group process through movement as part of her master's degree. The class takes place during the 2006 Lebanon War, and group members are experiencing great losses and fears as sons and husbands are called to the front. During one morning check-in, Marta reports that she has had a significant and powerful dream the night before, and offers to share it with the group. I ask the group if they would like to hear and work with the dream, using movement and imagery to amplify its images.

Check-in and warm-up. When they agree, I ask them to spread out on the mats on the floor and get into a relaxation pose on their backs or sides. I lower the lights, and spread out some props on

the floor, such as dream-like billowy silk scarves and a large piece of pink chiffon stretchy fabric. I play relaxation music, something like Japanese flutes, and they sink into quiet. As they settle into the floor, I ask them to begin releasing tension, letting the floor hold them up, feeling their weight. The sensation of sinking down, following the out breath by releasing muscle tension, and sinking deeper and deeper brings a state of receptive relaxation.

During this part of the warm-up, the emphasis is on learning to literally sink into the body and consciousness, awakening bodily felt sensations, which turns attention from the world outside to an inner focus and listening.

A warm-up is not always slow or meditative. Sometimes it can be active, for example, physically isolating and warming up individual body parts, introducing rhythm and use of weight, adding breath and space. In this case, however, the mood was dreamy so the music and pacing needed to support that mood.

Amplification. A critical and creative part of the warm-up is to create an environment that maximizes the journey inward. Hence I dim the lights, simulate a familiar resting position setting, in preparation for the story to unfold.

I always keep a toolkit of props handy that help me improvise a creative environment. These all-purpose tools include music of slow-meditative to high-energy drumming or rhythm; a few simple percussion instruments; a (fake) candle and/or fabric to make a centerpiece; drawing materials; fabrics and other versatile props.

As the group settles in, Marta begins to read her dream:

The state of Israel—war in the north—I had a dream; I dreamt I lose all that is nearest to me, Arabs seize my home and take it under their control, into my sister's kindergarten bursts a strange man who proceeds to pack all the children's belongings into boxes; in one box he places all the children's handiwork of butterflies.

Marta then begins to recite the following poem written to describe this dream image. I notice that she is deeply moved, and ask her to repeat the poem. As she does so, her voice deepens in tone and gains power. I ask her to repeat it, twice, and she does.

Then she begins to rise, drapes herself in fabric and walks slowly around the room, chanting the poem. The poem grows in volume and becomes a mantra, connecting her words to her body and her breath. She circles, slowly and ghost like, chanting:

One small room,
Lots of boxes
One box,
Lots of butterflies
A struggle
The man closes the box
A woman tries to open it
The butterflies in the box struggle to fly and be freed of the box ...
One small room ... lots of boxes ...

As she circles, she creates a wind-like motion that begins to pull others into it. Slowly, others begin to rise off the floor and follow her. Soon there is a whole room full of draped figures moving dreamily around the floor. I slide the large pink sheet toward the circling figures, some pick it up and soon it becomes an undulating cover over and around them. It feels like we are undulating underwater in a primal sea.

In amplification, we begin by creating the environment and increasing kinesthetic awareness. We then are ready to "seed" the images. There are many creative ways to amplify dream images, but in kinaesthetic imagining, images are brought into the body, energized with breath and intensity, and amplified with music, props or colors.

Meaning: Action hermeneutics. As the group movement intensifies its imagery and emotional expressiveness, it reaches a crescendo. It feels, at that point, as if there is no one leader or follower, but everyone is caught by the same dream. The room feels alive, no words are spoken except the poem. And then the poem stops. And the movement slows. And people begin to sink down to the floor once more.

I ask them to slow the movement down even more, beginning to feel in their muscle memories the traces of the movement we just did. The echoes of the rhythms, and colors . . . but inside themselves. We transition again to an inner quiet space where each one has some time to feel and reflect on the experience. What does it mean to you in your life? Does it remind you of anyone? Any other similar time?

After the group members have processed their experiences, they move back toward the center once again forming a circle. In a few minutes I ask them if they would like to share what they have learned about themselves or others.

Action hermeneutics is the process by which the movement itself energizes and sharpens the dream image. Although Marta speaks in the circle, she also reflects on her experience through a journal. From this journal, Marta draws the following conclusions:

By means of the movement, by means of my participation in the movement therapy course, I search for the center part of my body and equilibrium: Within my emotions, movement and thoughts . . . what is the center of me, the place from which my movements evolve, where the things I say come from. I felt words and movements were connected as if they were one; sometimes there was no need for words to understand about others or what I do . . . We were able to turn our attention to another, to "feel" her, to touch her to touch us emotionally, spiritually and even physically . . . The amazing bond was between the personal dream and the group dream, in which each one could be in a place of her choice . . . It was wonderful how group members supported each other; joining together without words and I, in the background, used the words as mantra, repeating the words that strengthened the support of the group's physical movements.

I felt I was floating with the mantra that I had created for the group and myself; finally, I too, once a captive within, was freed . . . I felt that the dream told the story of the little spirits of the entire group, and the butterflies in the box desiring to fly to freedom were a metaphor for each one of the group members' hurt spirits. This same hurt spirit that desires to be free and to feel better, happier in life after the burden is released from its heart. I felt that through the dream and the movement, joint and individual, we had advanced one additional small step towards our joint task—to reach happiness.

I understood that this connection probably came from my strong unconscious thought of my connection with the Holocaust and the fear that enveloped me during the period of the war that we experienced recently. But why a butterfly?

In the LoChamei HaGettaot Memorial Museum, a special building in memory of the million and a half children lost in the Holocaust, was built. Engraved on the metal flooring are the words: "There are no butterflies in the Ghetto" . . . in the museum you lift up your eyes to see a huge stained glass window illuminated by incoming rays of the sun and it depicts a colored butterfly surrounded by flowers. This expresses the memory of the million and a half little spirits lost in the Holocaust; this picture is deeply engraved within me from my visits to the museum and I continually connect the butterfly with a hurt spirit wanting to be freed. Through the experience of our group process I also was released from the visions of the little children and their spirits in the Holocaust. When I accompany a group of school pupils to Poland this will surely assist me in dealing with the difficult journey. I understood that in the group we had succeeded in sensing the great curative strength that exists in the connection of body and soul.

In the image, the butterfly was trapped behind bars, but the sun illuminates it with hope, this is the hope that I found during the war through experiencing the realization of a dream by means of movement therapy.

VARIATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

This kind of work is by nature improvisational and therefore adaptable for many settings, depending on the needs of the group. Any adaption of this group would be expressed both as content and as structure. As content, this particular dream arose from the morning check-in. That check-in might have also given rise to another kind of experience to be shared, such as an emotion or a particular encounter. This group was capable of creative collaborations already, while many groups need more preparatory sessions. I have worked with this dream in a different group, for example, that did not pick up the scarves and where members stayed alone. That group expressive piece looked quite different than the Israeli piece. So the content will grow from the particularities of each group.

Some groups will also need more structure. For example, a group of boisterous children would need faster pace and shorter phrases/instructions, a tighter structure, and container. Again, though, these variations are not programmatic. The work is an art form in which the therapist acts as choreographer, constantly weaving in material from the group to form a live, organic, meaningful tapestry. That art form partly depends on the personality of the therapist, the experience level of the group, how long group members have worked together, and other clinically relevant material. The therapist ultimately uses aesthetic and clinical judgment to support the creative and emotional expressions of the group.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Kinaesthetic imagining is a powerful process of embodiment that can help people experiencing grief and trauma feel, express, communicate, and transform strong feelings. It creates a physical container that allows strong emotions to emerge, such as those that come from facing death, the ultimate existential threat. Understanding group process from an existential perspective is natural in Israel, where a large percentage of the population feels existentially threatened.

Additionally, the use of art, symbols and rituals, and the creative process allows people to express very powerful and scary emotions. The capacity to symbolize helps externalize and contain strong and often non-verbal emotions (Serlin & Cannon, 2004). Through the process of kinaesthetic imagining, a student from Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War was able to enact a dream image of grief and loss, use group support to develop its themes and feelings, and discover its meaning for her life.

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