PANEL: SPIRITUALITY, ART THERAPY AND ACTIVISM:
THE USE OF NATURE IN CREATIVITY AND HEALING


Part I: Mimi Farrelly-Hansen

Welcome. It’s a privilege to be here in New York with so many artists and to be in a city which has claimed so many of our thoughts and prayers and, I suspect, creative responses over the last month. Our topic this morning is Spirituality, Art Therapy and Activism: The Use of Nature in Creativity and Healing. I’ll begin with some general comments, using slides of my own art to provide a foundation for Ellen’s discussion of the kind of healing which happens in her remarkable garden and beyond. Following that we’ll lead you through a hands-on exercise with natural materials and finish with 15 minutes for questions and comments.

It occurred to me that my job today resembles that of a surveyor...she who scopes out the territory, defining the boundaries of a given terrain and identifying major landmarks. Like a surveyor, my perspective will be somewhat general...more the eagle’s eye view than the mouse’s. So, let’s consider four landmarks in the territory we’re about to explore: spirituality, transpersonal psychology, art therapy and ecopsychology.

First there’s spirituality.

If you’ve been at this conference from the start, you’ve already heard a lot about this; what it might mean, why it’s important and how it relates to creativity. For the purposes of this panel, I’d like to start simply. Like its Latin root, spiritus, spirituality refers to breath, to that which gives life...quite concretely, to that whose presence determines whether a baby will live outside the womb, and whose absence marks the end of our days. “Breath on me, breath of God,” chant the Christians, while the yogis remind us to return again and again to an awareness of this often-neglected miracle of existence, our breath.

And yet, spirituality is more, isn’t it? No accident that when Eliot Ingersoll, a counselor at Ohio State University, created a panel of eleven leaders from different faith paths to define wellness for an inventory he was refining, the best they could do was agree upon ten quite distinct qualities or features of a healthy spirituality. Here’s what they concluded:

1. Spirituality includes some conception of the absolute or divine, and that conception gives meaning
2. Spirituality includes connectedness (it’s relational) and mystery (we can never know all there is to know about it)
3. Spirituality is based on experience, including experiences, which can be cultivated through ritual or practice and the pursuit of knowledge
4. Finally, spirituality confers a sense of freedom and hope and present-centeredness.

Like the crystal I often show my clients to illustrate the wonder of who they are, spirituality has many facets, none of which adequately describes its mysterious essence.
Now, let’s move to the second landmark in our territory, namely, art therapy, and in particular art therapy’s relationship to spirituality.

Here’s how the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), founded in 1969, defines its discipline. “Art therapy is a human service profession that utilizes art media, images, the creative process and patient/client responses to the created product as reflections of an individual’s development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts.” Art therapy offers a unique combination of the fields of art, psychology and therapy. Art therapists are employed in medical and psychiatric hospitals, education facilities, correctional institutions, rehabilitation hospitals, mental health settings, community art studios and private practice. Currently there are about 3000 professional credentialed members of AATA, while other art therapists have aligned themselves with The Society for Arts in Healthcare or The Association of Visual Artists.

Entry level positions in the field require a masters degree in art therapy, completion of a 35-60 credit hour program with coursework in the areas of studio art, psychology, art therapy history, theory and applications, assessments of patients and diagnostic categories, cultural populations, cultural diversity, ethics and legal issues, therapeutic and clinical methods, psychopathology, research, counseling theory and practice, and the creative process. Students in a master’s program must also undergo at least 600 hours of supervised art therapy practice at one or more internship sites.

Like psychology, art therapy’s American roots were strongly influenced by psychodynamic thinking. Subsequently, as chronicled in Rubin’s *Approaches To Art Therapy* (1987), it has journeyed through Jungian, behavioral, cognitive, and humanistic thought, finding ways to adapt each theory with a core set of beliefs about the usefulness of creative expression in relieving suffering and promoting health. Since we’re in New York, it’s relevant to note that the two sisters who pioneered art therapy in this country lived in Manhattan. Had this conference occurred in the 1920’s or 30’s or 40’s, instead of today, most participants would recognize the names of Florence Cane and Margaret Naumburg. For many years, Cane was Director of Art for the Counseling Center for Gifted Children of N.Y.U.’s School of Education; her innovations in the areas of evoking authentic, expressive art were chronicled in a memorable book called *The Artist in Each of Us*. Naumburg founded the progressive Walden School and went on to pioneer and write about the use of art in verbal therapeutic process.

Art therapy has much to contribute to the larger conversation about spirituality and wellness. Yet, until recently, relatively few of its members have spoken out about the transpersonal dimensions of their work. Noteworthy pioneers in this area are: Florence Cane (1951), just mentioned, who integrated meditative awareness and chanting into a series of art exercises for body, breath, and voice; Joan Kellogg (1978), whose use of mandala drawings led to a collaboration with Grof’s consciousness research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Institute throughout the 1970’s (Thayer, 1994); and Joseph Garai (of Pratt Institute) (1976), who developed eight methods for inner exploration through meditation and concentration which sometimes resulted in artistic images and symbols that led to self-transcendence and a redefinition of the personality.

Since the seventies, while the majority of art therapists have tended to closely ally themselves with mainstream psychology, a small number of individuals have continued to discuss the
spiritual nature of their work. Many followed in Jung’s footsteps (Wallace, 1987), using active imagination and a variety of art experiences to help clients explore and integrate archetypal symbols from dreams and the unconscious. Others explored topics such as art as prayer (C. Moon, 2001), the blending of art therapy with 12-step work (Chickerneo, N., (1993); Feen-Calligan, 1995), the spiritual growth possibilities of working in a community-based open studio (Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1992; Timm-Bottos, 2001), the creation of an art-based spiritual assessment (Horovitz-Darby, 1994), the usefulness of a contemplative practice to therapy (Franklin, 2001), how terminally ill people can transform and transcend their immediate circumstances by developing a strong connection with the imaginal realm (Malchiodi, 1999), and the private practice implications of a transpersonal arts therapy approach which includes past life work (Lewis, 1997).

Next, let’s consider the third landmark for this morning: transpersonal psychology. This field, which bridges psychology and spirituality, provides the largest umbrella for the inclusion of spirituality within the scope of mental health services (Boorstein, 1996; Cortright, 1997; Scotton, Chinen and Battista, 1996). Officially founded in 1968 (at about the same time as art therapy) by Maslow, Sutich, and others, and often called the fourth force in psychology (following behavioral, psychoanalytic and humanistic models), transpersonal psychology concerns itself with both the development of the self and the urge to push beyond the boundaries of the self into those areas of consciousness identified by every major metaphysical tradition throughout history (Wilber, 1977). Early contributors to the movement included the American philosopher-psychologist William James, who studied consciousness within the framework of evolutionary biology which included mysticism, Carl Jung, who hypothesized an individuation process which transcended the personal, Roberto Assagioli, who determined that healthy adult development included both personal and spiritual psychosynthesis, and Charles Tart, who collected interpretations of human psychologies by various spiritual traditions (Boorstein, 1996).

It’s important to note a common mis-perception about transpersonal psychology, namely that it overlooks personal ego development in favor of more transcendent or mystical states of consciousness, that it’s all light and no dark. In fact, the very definition of the term transpersonal indicates movement through and beyond the personal. As noted by McClure, Carter, and Franklin in a special transpersonal edition of Guidance and Counseling (2000), “descendence rather than transcendence might be a better descriptor, albeit less romantic, of the actual spiritual journey” (p.1).

Of relevance to any discussion about therapy is the notion of healing, or making whole. From a transpersonal perspective, healing is a naturally occurring process. As stated by Bernie Marek, one of the contributors to my book, Spirituality and Art Therapy, “healing has to do with allowing all the aspects of ourselves to be there, without judging ourselves” (in Farrelly-Hansen (Ed.), 2001, p. 58). While it is not in our power to create healing, we can cultivate it. we can create a safe place for clients or students or ourselves to connect to inherent health or what the Buddhists call basic goodness.

A key word in spiritual literature is transformation, which the noted Zen teacher Joko Beck defines as “taking your life as it is and working with it” (1998). This is a process well-known to artists, taking raw materials and manipulating them in various ways to create new form, and it is
transpersonal by its very nature for it requires a committed relationship to a source of being beyond the ego. Thus art therapists working from a transpersonal perspective stand on this truth: that intentional creative works transforms lives, beginning with their own. And its fruits resemble the outcome of many spiritual practices, as I hope the following slides will illustrate.

A. Art tells the truth, leading to a greater acceptance of self and others. When I go to my studio with intention, center myself and respectfully ask what I most need to understand about my life right now, surprisingly candid images show up. In my late twenties, this practice saved life when incest trauma, hidden under a debilitating eating disorder, slowly came to consciousness through metaphors and, later, graphic images. It has saved my marriage and my children for the last 22 years. (Slides of “Superwoman” and “Woundings”). Not only do I learn about my inner world. Art leads to a greater awareness of my outer world too. (Slides of “Red buffalo” and “Oh, My Sisters!”).

B. In times of transition, art gives me perspective; it connects me to something much larger than myself. (Slides of “Ghost Ranch”, “Dark Continent”, “Allerleirauh: Leaving My Father’s House”).

C. Art reawakens my body and my senses, bringing me fully into the present moment . . . sometimes to the point of losing time (i.e. non-ordinary states of consciousness). Sometimes it’s hard; sometimes comforting; often it’s playful and fun. (slides of “Aspen Grove,” “Mating Dance,” and “Abundance”).

D. Art often leaves me with a sense of awe at the mysterious ways that images speak of realities beyond our conscious understanding. (slide of “Coming Home”).

E. Almost always after making art I feel more loving, more grateful, more compassionate, and more whole.

Finally, there’s the fourth landmark: ecopsychology. As suggested by its name, ecopsychology describes the emerging synthesis of the psychological (psychotherapeutic and psychiatric) and the ecological, a theoretical perspective which goes beyond intrapsychic mechanisms or the social interactions of family to encompass the interaction of all life forms on the planet. Ecopsychology proceeds from the assumption that at its deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mother us into existence. (Roszak, 1997). Further, ecopsychology assumes that all nature is alive and that we humans are a part of nature, required not to have dominion over but to be with all that lives. Thus, when it comes to healing, ecopsychology would have us remember the oldest healers in the world, the ones our society called witch doctors, who knew no other way to heal than to work within the context of environmental reciprocity” (ibid, p.7).

Which brings us back to the topic at hand: spirituality, art, nature, activism and leads us into Ellen’s part of the program.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Part II

THE HEALING JOURNEY: FROM GARDEN STUDIO TO SOCIAL ACTIVISM

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To begin, picture us all standing along the shore of a lovely lake on a warm summer night, with the full moon high in the sky. We find ourselves at a slight distance from each other encircling the still water, and we each view the sparkling path of the moon’s reflection leading directly to our own feet. It takes only the stroll along the shoreline to another’s place to see that the light travels directly to her or his position also. I invite you now to take that journey along the lakes edge to experience a new perspective in the practice of the art therapy. We will be exploring the use of the garden as a therapeutic setting and its potential in expanding client and student awareness of self in relation to community.

To begin our stroll, I invite you into my garden. Please imagine you are breathing in the moist, pungent smells of the earth and herbs, hear the crisp crunch of leaves underfoot as you choose an art making alcove for your self, notice your inner rhythm in harmony or contrast to the movement of passing butterfly or darting lizard, feel the textures of leafy branches or gossamer spider webs, as you settle on a bench to draw or sculpt, journal or compose a poem.

Our senses are the gateway to the soul according to the Celtic mystic John O’Donahue. I find the garden evokes deep kinesthetic and symbolic resonance and clarity which enriches art making, deepens authentic experience and enhances the therapeutic alliance. The garden as personal space reduces the sterility of the traditional hospital or office, and by it’s personal nature, also introduces complexity to the therapeutic and educational relationship.

Although I am talking about the physical setting of garden, please imagine this as metaphoric as well: picture the connection to your own setting where you have designed a sanctuary for the imagination which reflects nature’s enduring rhythms and seasonal transitions, for we all are a part of nature. How does the framework you have built reflect the natural world for your clients or students? It has been my own experience of the healing qualities of gardening that has drawn me to create this as a therapeutic space for my work.

Though I won’t talk in developmental terms, I think the garden as metaphor speaks in the deep, sonorous voice of the Great Mother, nurturing early relational needs. The earth provides a lap on which clients sit to begin contemplating their journey—their descent into the exploration of self. This lap is not only one of safety but also of inspiration—a place to literally breathe in deeply as they create their personal text—their art—and then recognize their context—their connection to the community. Here, in the safety and beauty of nature, they can make profound preparation for addressing the harsh realities of the world. Through this sensorally rich contact, they are spurred to deeper experience of interconnectedness with the global community. I will be showing how this experience can empowered them to become activists in the world. It may well be that treatment and education within sterile environments, removed from nature and neighbors, unintentionally depletes the sense of personal wellbeing, and
interpersonal responsibility, within our clients by separating them from connection to, and identification with, their lives outside the therapeutic context.

Hippocrates was among the first to write about the intimate connection between our surroundings and our sense of wellbeing. In fact the ancient Greeks and Romans created gardens to promote psychological orientation and relaxation. Plants were seen as embodiments of the generosity of the gods. In Europe between the 10th and 14th Centuries, healing gardens developed widely in monasteries, serving to simultaneously restore body and soul. Ficino, a Renaissance healer recommended what he called a high culture of flowers and spices as a powerful way to ensoul the world. During the romanticism of the 18th and 19th Centuries, intense emotions were projected onto nature as a way to help patients recover their natural state, regain equilibrium and, through fresh air and sunshine, enhance their recuperative powers. The term malaria (bad air) illustrates the assumed connection between health and environment.

The world of nature has frequently been seen as the foundation of our human nature. In fact in the 20th Century, Jung observed that man feels himself isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature which results in the loss of profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.

As the lovely book Restorative Gardens advises that health care settings should mitigate the stresses of the difficult work being done in them. They should promote good health and serve as an example of healthful living. By the way, it wasn’t that long ago that smoking was allowed in hospitals. Bringing healthy environments into health care is an evolving concept with profound implications. Modern medicine is discovering anew that in the complex web of human response to stress, the experience of nature uniquely enables the various branches of our immune, endocrine, and central nervous systems—all beyond conscious control—to heal more quickly.

For example, we now know that patients with a view of nature from their hospital windows have a statistically significant shorter hospital stay, lower analgesic use and fewer complaints during recovery, than those who do not. In fact, after contact with nature our immune system works better, hormones that promote healing are activated, and neuropeptides that ease pain are produced. Nature stimulates the physiology of serenity and recuperation.

Mental fatigue, an inner weariness and inability to focus can be reduced when people unwind in natural settings, according to psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, in their research at the University of Michigan. In fact, James Swan, psychologist and activist, prescribes for patients suffering inner turmoil, that they spend hours alone in a natural setting, free from distractions, what Thoreau called a “tonic of wildness.” After his own prolonged hospital stay, the neurologist Oliver Sacks, found it was being moved into the hospital garden that returned to him his will to live.

Moving the studio into nature offers many ways of expanding the range of expression. When we create together with the earth we become more sensitive to its qualities and expressions. Sean McNiff has suggested that spaces are forever acting on us and stimulating a creative range of expressions. In fact the creative space both evokes and reflects our intention, as can be seen in images of Francis Bacon’s studio.
We, as art therapists and art educators all have observed the power of clay and water, sand and stones to evoke deep connection to the imaginal realm within our clients and students. These natural materials, provide the link between the mundane and the sacred, the transitory that reveals the transcendent. We know that art is the creation of an imaginal universe from the ephemera and scraps of the ordinary world brought to life by metaphor.

The studio can also be discovered in unlikely places. Over the past several years near my home, sculptures have begun appearing as spontaneous response to the interplay of ocean, stone, driftwood and sand. Beach goers, including some of my students, have been drawn to utilize these natural elements to create impromptu constructions. Through this mosaic of shifting Sculptures—a form of natural graffiti to be seen by the passing cars—each sculptor leaves a fleeting mark. This is truly outsider art, a response to the sense of place that nature generously provides, a mirror of memories of the wild places within ourselves.

Art therapy has the opportunity to bring our clients into this kind of enlivened connection with the world. The settings we provide are the artful frameworks for that connection. Working in natural surroundings, clients have said they find a simple balance and harmony, a sense of rootedness and comfort, respite from the chaos in their lives, a natural cathedral for their spirit. The rhythm and constant change of the seasons, life cycles of decay and death, growth and renewal, mirror their own inner fluctuations.

Secluded alcoves among the trees provide a sense of calm in the emotional storm, while the riot of colors, smells and textures stimulate the senses and energize the body. Harmony of the universal elements of plants, rocks and earth, supports the sense of connection to the spiritual, as clients and students work quietly, either individually or in groups. Meandering pathways remind us to slow down as we focus on process as well as product. Even when working indoors, introducing natural elements which reflect the changing seasons can provide the bridge to rich inner experience.

Now that we have established a sense of place, let us explore the heroic journey which begins there. Bruce Moon talks of art making as an avenue for reclaiming the soul. I’d like to take this one step further, believing that art has the potential to reclaim the soul in connection to social consciousness as well. Art making can serve as a motivator and pathway into social action for our clients in their final phase of treatment.

Contact with nature, in the creation and exploration of personally relevant art pieces, can carry clients and students beyond their individual preoccupations, into a deeper resonance with the plight of the world, enhancing their ability to respond to it. Tich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese monk, encourages us to hear within ourselves the sound of the earth crying, to experience consciously both the pain and the interconnection of all life.

Finding raw materials and incorporating them into the art making process helps provide the antidote to sound bites, fast food and plastic packaging. Thomas Moore condemns our uncritical acceptance of the values of the modern world of scientific progress, our blind faith in technology. He would like added to the next DSM a new disorder called “psychological modernism.” Perhaps art therapy in the surroundings of nature would be a part of the prescription he would write for this disease.
Although art is often born out of chaos, as we peer into the emptiness and loneliness so prevalent in our culture, we also encounter the core issues which, in themselves, offer deeper and more meaningful connections to community. As the Chinese expression goes, each problem has its answer embedded in it, so also, I believe, each presenting problem in therapy has the potential for social action within it. In this era of art therapy’s post modernism, each client’s socio-cultural reality provides the key to the shape of his or her movement beyond the therapeutic relationship. It may be through our sensitivity to each client’s struggle, linked with our knowledge of his or her community, that we can suggest possible connections between the two as a continuation of the therapeutic journey. Sardello has described the object of therapeutic treatment as the return of imagination to the things that have become only physical. We can help support this revitalization by joining the expressive process within treatment to the movement back into the world through an empowered sense of creative activism.

In the setting of the garden, group art making leads to an enriched sense of connection and responsibility, both towards others and towards the earth. Yalom identified altruism as one of the advantages of group therapy, noting clients benefit by helping others. Here in the garden they have the opportunity to recontextualize their sense of place. Like vines intertwined, with commitment to a larger web of relationships, they expand the frame of reference. They send down roots both into the individual unconscious and the deeper tap root of group consciousness. Although Alfred Adler identified communal feeling as the final goal of all therapy, we frequently treat our clients and their families as if they exist in a vacuum, separated from their social as well as environmental settings.

Group art therapy in connection with the natural world, can rekindle our responsibility and care of the community, promoting group identity and empowering social activism. This is the basis of the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam—to heal the world. Joanna Macy has created a model in establishing trainings for global awareness in response to the nuclear threat, and many artists, including Suzi Gablik and Suzanne Lacy, have woven social responsibility into the fabric of their media.

It is heartening to see that an increasing number of art therapists have been moving in this direction: Maxine Junge in her community work in Los Angeles, Hertencer Lindsay in dealing with racism in the Caribbean, Julia Byers in her art therapy in the West Bank and Gaza and Simone Alter-Muri in her work with prisoners in Massachusetts. Each has brought a sense of community into her art therapy practice. These colleagues have widened the lens through which our field can be viewed, incorporating social responsibility as an essential component.

If the root of the Greek word for therapy is “to be attentive to”, then expanding that attention to the community from which the dis-ease arises, allows and supports greater healing to take place. Thomas Moore talks of our need for genuine community in our care of the world. It is with this sense of community activism that I now share the stories of three clients who have extended what they have learned through their own healing, into social action beyond the art therapy studio and garden.

First the story of Elinore, who came to see me following the full term still birth of her son. She was finding this loss and her 2 preceding miscarriages, totally unsupported by her family and
coworkers. Angry, confused and isolated, we worked indoors at first, as she carefully created a cradle for her stillborn baby. Her early paintings, sculptures and dreams called us to create a space of withdrawal and protection. Next she found release for her rage through paper tearing and clay work, which took us out into the garden. Sadness spilled onto the pages as she painted her lost dreams. As we terminated treatment, she located a company which makes plaster kits for preserving children’s hand imprints and solicited from them the donation of one hundred packages. Each Friday Elinore takes these kits to hospitals around San Diego which have birthing units, and educates the nurses about the emotional responses to perinatal loss. She teaches the staff how to make plaster imprints of the dead baby’s hand or foot. In sensitizing the hospital staff to these issues, she continues to heal, empower herself, and create community. She continues to provide this service following the recent birth of her healthy son, Lucas.

Michelle also illustrates the journey from isolated anguish to community action. Although when we first met she was unable to talk without holding her hand over her mouth, her art eloquently screamed out her pent up emotions.

Her paintings, created both within the art therapy group and at home, repeatedly focused on her own pain in response to society’s abuse of women and the environment. Timid and withdrawn in her personal interactions and unfulfilled in her job, her art exploded with affect. She began exhibiting her work publicly, metaphorically speaking out on the existential issues of identity and responsibility. Through the support and encouragement of the art therapy group, she was able to leave her unsatisfying job and now works in a woman’s shelter, coordinating counseling and legal services. Out of her inner exploration and artistic expression she has found connection to the community from which she had previously been isolated. Her work and her beliefs have now come into synchrony through her creative exploration and the truth she found there.

And finally the story of Cindy. When she entered art therapy, Cindy eloquently conveyed her fear and isolation through these and other photographs she had recently begun shooting. For the twenty-six years following her violent rape at age fourteen, she had abused drugs and alcohol in an attempt to contain the symptoms of her post traumatic stress disorder.

Much of her pain and dysfunctional behavior was the result of her mother’s prohibition against ever telling the story of her rape. Cindy’s interest in photography gave voice to her silenced soul by creating a series of evocative pictures. Working with a friend to model for her photos between art therapy sessions, she opened up old wounds, while within the art therapy garden she carefully constructed a sense of safety. Through structured, contained art pieces, she was able to tolerate the reawakened emotional upheaval of her photographic exploration. Cindy could now move beyond the sense of individual victimhood into a powerful desire to share her story with others.

At the conclusion of our work together she had created a polished photo essay which she is now taking to women’s shelters to share the hope of recovery from abuse and addiction. Thomas Moore sees compulsions and neurotic behavior as ritual without imagination, addictions as creativity without a healthy outlet. Through Cindy’s group art therapy and her photo project leading to community activism, she was able to bring back imagination and
connection to her life.

As artists we have always functioned as the sensitive antennae of social justice and moral courage, keeping the soul awake to hypocrisy and the dangers of moral blindness. As therapists we trace the connection between individual inner chaos and the larger systems in which this chaos resides, and try to bring to it a sense of meaning and order. Humanity has been fouling its planetary nest and therapy can play an important role in averting ecocide—after all, aren’t therapists specialists in the causes and cures of self destructive behavior?  As art therapists we have the potential to use creative experience to heighten our commitment to activism in the community as we weave integrity between these two roles of artist and therapist.

The garden is a rich metaphoric setting for the social activist/art therapist in responding to the parallel plight of the distressed client and the diseased planet. A deep sense of connection with others during the creative act, within a natural setting, may be the antidote to the destructive tendency towards others and the environment which is often the result of isolation and despair. Acknowledging the web of relationship, based on empathy and compassion both for others and the earth, leads to development of what Suzi Gablik calls the ecological self. As we make art together in the metaphoric as well as physical garden, our clients and students experience what has been cultivated by us, and can use it to send down roots into the soil of the soul, harvesting the fruits of their inner work to feed not only themselves but their community.