



BOOK REVIEW

Spiritual Art Therapy: An Alternate Path

Ellen G. Horovitz-Darby, MA, A.T.R.

(Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1994. 169 pages. \$41.95 hard cover, \$29.95 soft cover)

I must confess, when *Spiritual Art Therapy: An Alternate Path* was published, I did not rush to buy a copy. Having worked for years in chemical dependency programs where spirituality is practically synonymous with recovery, I thought I had read enough. The skeptic in me also suspected nothing more than another book jumping on the spiritual bandwagon. After reading the book, however, I am a convert. This book is an important addition to the literature on spirituality, mental health and art therapy.

The author, raised Jewish and converted to Catholicism, has a long history of personal involvement in religious study and spiritual search for meaning. The ideas and experiences leading to the development of her book unfolded slowly over a lifetime and 16 years of professional practice, as she observed many of her patients grappling with their own relationship with God. She herself experienced simultaneous controversy with God and felt this was not mere coincidence. She encountered the work of Jaoudi (1993): "Psychology is the detergent which will eventually lead us into the realm of developing a solid spirituality. Psychology opens and cleanses us; spirituality leads us into freedom . . ." (p. 7). These and other experiences affected the author's conclusion that there was a need for assessing and incorporating a patient's belief system in art therapy in order to treat the whole person—body, mind and spirit. She subsequently developed both an assessment and an approach to working with patients who have identified spiritual concerns. The Belief Art Therapy Assessment (BATA) is an instrument for assessing the spiritual dimension of

a patient and how a belief or disbelief in God impacts functioning within families and in society.

The author explains that the intent of her book is "to animate the spiritual dimension that exists within all of us and embrace its resource for growth and change . . . that tapping into a person's belief system and spiritual dimension can provide clinicians with information that can impact both assessment and treatment" (p. ix). Horovitz-Darby works from a family systems approach with priority given to mourning issues and losses. She feels that investigating a family's belief system helps to determine nodal events and reaction to change and trauma. She describes her way of doing art therapy, which includes constructing a genogram to ascertain the origin of mourning and loss, the very start of the patient's "dis-ease" that serves as a benchmark for recovery and mental health, and sets the stage for the inclusion of the spiritual dimension. Additionally, a look at people's intrinsic belief or disbelief in God and how that impacts within their family systems is likewise significant to treatment.

The evolution and development of the BATA and the book, *Spiritual Art Therapy*, are described in chapter one. Chapter two, in which even skeptics will find something of value, consists of an engaging and thorough review of the literature on art therapy, mental health, religion and spirituality. Horovitz-Darby begins her review with the past history of the "unrelationship" between science and religion and notes that to this day ministerial and health care professionals have remained formally distinct, creating a "fis-

sure for any clinician who has faced a client's spiritual questions, struggle with faith, and/or desire for forgiveness" (p. 10). The author recommends that therapists not neglect patients' spiritual issues, however, for there are at least two ways through which spiritual support can impact treatment. First, the positive cognitive appraisal of the meaning and implication of negative life events leads to enhanced emotional adjustment. Secondly, emotional support is strengthened through the perception of being loved and cared for by God. She adds that the literature review upholds the notion that religion is associated with mental health benefits. Finally, she laments the sardonic recent addition of a "religious or spiritual problem" in the DSM IV, included in Axis V, an uninsurable category. Although the second chapter is devoted exclusively to the literature review, the author's philosophy and supporting documentation concerning the importance of tending the spirit continue to be woven throughout the remainder of the book through several compelling case studies.

The third chapter describes the Belief Art Therapy Assessment as a phenomenological investigation of people's belief or disbelief in God and how that theology impacts functioning. The author underscores the use of the BATA only when patients question their beliefs, only when the exploration of beliefs will serve the patients' needs, and only following the conclusion of a traditional art therapy battery of assessments. The BATA consists of an initial verbal interview related to past religious practices, adjustable for use with either children or adults, two art directives (encompassing two and three-dimensional works) and a post assessment interrogation. Considerations for evaluating and interpreting the results are given that include behavioral observation and analysis of the content and formal qualities of the artwork based on the developmental stages outlined by Kramer (1975), Lowenfeld and Brittain (1975) and Fowler (1981).

Although ultimately it seems that the art therapist's background and skill and the needs of the individual patient determine the course of each BATA, I am left feeling a little confused about how to administer and interpret the BATA. For example, the author stresses the importance of the initial verbal interview questions, yet qualifies that all questions need not be asked and may even be omitted entirely depending on the personality and psychological parameters of the patient. Moreover, she admits that the interpretation of the artwork portion is subjective, related to the background, skills and bias of the art therapist. Although the author notes that one cannot help another past

one's own level of development, I believe the expertise of the art therapist is a point in need of emphasis. It seems to me the art therapist would have to possess some knowledge about spirituality and spiritual development in order to be effective, as well as some clinical seasoning to know when and how to improvise upon the BATA directives.

At times, Horovitz-Darby seems to me to be either ambivalent or apologetic about her decision not to develop a quantitative scoring method for the BATA, if this were possible. She explains her preference to interpret the work holistically and abstractly to honor the mystery and awe invoked in the process. She does suggest that the developmental stages of faith articulated by Fowler can be a basis upon which to assess spiritual development in artwork produced in the BATA, however. Additionally, she suggests that when BATA artwork is analyzed according to Lowenfeld and Brittain's developmental stages, a cognitive delay might represent arrestment of spiritual development as well.

My only other conflict is a semantic one, stemming from my tendency when I hear the word, "assessment," to conjure up the words "reliability" and "validity" as well. How can one be assured that drawing "what God means to you" adequately reflects a belief system? I don't think I'm saying anything the author hasn't thought of, as she does define the BATA as a phenomenological investigation and notes the difficulty of finding test subjects due to the religiosity involved. Ultimately, I agree that the information brought forth as the result of the BATA procedure would add to the therapist's knowledge about the patient and contribute to the course of therapy.

Fowler's stages of faith are outlined in chapter four. Here the author also reviews her use of the BATA with four members of the clergy and relates their work to Fowler's stages. Chapter five is devoted to the author's use of the BATA with artists. Of particular interest to me is the attention devoted to the therapist's own process and learning when utilizing the spiritual art therapy approach. The importance of awareness of one's own sorrow and personal battles is noted as well as another phenomenon experienced—the therapist's own spiritual growth and development. The author feels this occurs while being in the presence of another human being who is engaged in contemplating issues such as meaning in life.

Also commendable is the author's sensitivity to and consideration of the beliefs of all patients with whom she came in contact, offering alternatives to her

approach when used with Moslem or Jewish patients or anyone for whom drawings about God might be offensive. She cautions, in addition, that “care must be taken with patients whose egos are so fractured and/or reduced that in using these . . . processes that one doesn’t subvert treatment to a higher power and induce psychosis or cult-like behavior” (p. 19).

Succeeding chapters describe the use of a spiritual approach to art therapy with various client populations. Chapter 6 offers examples of Horovitz-Darby’s approach with two adolescents. These case studies demonstrate the versatility of the BATA, which was administered in one case at the beginning of treatment to rule out religiosity as a predictor of pathology. In the second case, the BATA was employed toward the end of treatment and reinforced the art therapist’s approach to treatment. I was particularly impressed with chapter 7, an extensive case summary, covering eight years of treatment with a suicidal, bulimic, anorectic woman using the spiritual art therapy approach. The author briefly concludes in chapter 8.

The tone of the book is at once savvy and humble, a quality I like very much. The author is obviously very bright and competent yet simultaneously is comfortable acknowledging there is much to be learned in the spiritual arena. She admits that the spiritual art therapy approach is not a neutral subject and one in which she will likely alienate some people with her beliefs. In light of the debate over the appropriateness of a spiritual approach to art therapy noted by Malchiodi (1994), the sophisticated tenor of this book

makes it a very respectable addition to the literature in favor of a spiritual emphasis in art therapy.

From its title I expected that the book would be a sort of comprehensive work covering the spiritual end of the approaches-to-art therapy spectrum. It is not. Rather, the title refers to a particular way of working in art therapy that considers a patient’s belief system, losses and familial coping patterns. *Spiritual Art Therapy: An Alternate Path* is just that—an alternate path. The path is not to be traversed by all, but those who choose to travel that direction may find it a route “for exploration, ministry and perhaps health” (p. 8). Ellen Horovitz-Darby presents a strong case to suggest that the spiritual care of a patient is a legitimate part of health care.

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