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The Arts in Psychotherapy



The enchanting forest and the healing sand—Nature therapy with people coping with psychiatric difficulties

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ABSTRACT

This article will introduce ways in which the connection with nature, and non-verbal and creative work in nature, can empower adults coping with emotional and psychiatric difficulties. Relating to two sessions from a short-term Nature Therapy intervention group program in Israel, it will present Nature Therapy's key elements and highlight possible connections with Drama and Art Therapy. The article will focus on creative and non-verbal processes and highlight their potential to support therapeutic processes originating in the right hemisphere – imagination, emotions and body.

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Introduction

Enosh – the Israeli Association for Mental Health – was established for individuals and families of individuals, dealing with a psychiatric disability. Enosh operates 52 centers all over Israel that promote mental health issues by providing rehabilitation services and support during the recovery process. The organization offers help in improving the functional skills needed to live as independently as possible in the community. Their services include weekly encounters in the client's houses and ongoing psychiatric follow-up. In addition to psychological encounters, using verbal and cognitive methods, the Tel-Aviv Enosh center decided to offer a support group taking place in nature, and using creative and non-verbal methods. This innovative approach, offered for the first time in Enosh, started from a search for new methods that would appeal to center members, and would be attractive enough for them to make an effort to attend. It is also related to the growing acknowledgment of the potential that creative therapies and Nature Therapy hold for such individuals (Berger, 2009a, 2009b). The short-term group program was facilitated by the second author of this article, within the framework of her practicum in Nature Therapy training, Tel-Aviv University. It included ten encounters, of two hours each, all of which took place in different natural environments in the Tel-Aviv area.

Nature Therapy – theoretical and practical framework

Nature Therapy is an innovative therapeutic framework that takes place in nature, uses creative methods, and relates to nature as a partner in the process (Berger & McLeod, 2006). It was conceptualized and developed during the first author's doctoral studies and he teaches others in using this framework. The framework integrates elements from Drama Therapy, Gestalt, Transpersonal Psychology, Ecopsychology, Shamanism and Rituals, and creates theory and methods that help the therapist assist the unique characteristics of nature and expand upon the process (Berger, 2009a, 2009b). Similar to other postmodern approaches that developed social theories to explain psychological and social misfortunes, such as depression, anxiety and trauma (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; McLeod, 1997; West, 2000) while relating to concepts from Ecopsychology and mind-body theories (Kellen-Taylor, 1998; Roszak, 2001), Nature Therapy developed a theory that observes these phenomena from a psycho-social-ecological perspective (Berger, 2009a, 2009b; Totton, 2003). It explores and relates to the connection between the process of separation and detachment from nature and from community and spiritual-religious ways of living, and the transition to capitalistic, individualistic and secular styles. Relating to this perspective and to concepts from postmodern theories, Nature Therapy claims that the intensity of postmodern life has reduced the individual's ability to connect to others and to the environment, as well as to various parts within (Berger, 2009a, 2009b; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Kellen-Taylor, 1998; Totton, 2003). This perspective believes that the ability to connect, integrate and feel complete are important "happiness factors"; their loss can damage overall well-being and can cause psychiatric and health difficulties.

According to this view, Nature Therapy expands upon the classical psychological and psychodynamic approaches by placing

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ecological, social and experiential concepts from “ritual” (Berger, 2009a, 2009b). In so doing, it offers an experiential framework that allows people to connect to themselves, others and the larger-than-self in direct and non-verbal ways. This ritualistic standpoint can also explain nature therapy’s strong connection to expressive art therapy and to drama and dance therapy in particular (Jennings, 1995, 1998; Grainer, 1995). Incorporating nature in such ritualistic and creative process and “doing art therapy outdoors – in nature” provides a platform for relating to and dealing with basic universal questions such as uncertainty and identity (Berger, 2009b; Berger & McLeod, 2006). It allows people to contact to the big circle: the change of seasons, the migration of birds and the sprouting of seeds, as well as to the coming of an unexpected storm, used in therapy to manifest the different coping’s that the personal cycle includes. This connection between “nature” and human can help the person to see oneself as part of the wider-universal matrix while widening his or her perspective (Berger, 2009a, 2009b; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Kellen-Taylor, 1998).

With reference to recent research that highlights the contribution of right-hemisphere processes to the development of coping resources, as well as to recovery from trauma (Berger & Lahad, 2010, 2011; Ross, 2008), like art therapies, Nature Therapy emphasizes the importance of the creative process and non-verbal ways of working in helping the individual strengthen connections with the imagination, the emotions and the body. The concept of “touching nature” claims that direct contact with nature can help people connect with healing elements present in nature and within oneself, and further expand their awareness and presence (Berger, 2006, 2009a,b). This perspective explains another connection between Nature Therapy and concepts and methods from Art therapy, such as Art as Therapy, BASICPH (Lahad, 2006) and EPR (Jennings, 1998, 2004). It also highlights the link to mind-body practices and Transpersonal Psychology (Berger, 2009a, 2009b; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Hartley, 2004). With reference to ritual’s framework, Gestalt’s cycle of experiment, and Drama Therapy’s “doing” state, Nature Therapy focuses on the concept of “turning interpretation into action” (Berger, 2008a, 2008b; Kepner, 1987; Zinker, 1977). It tries to remain within the embodied-emotional-spiritual and imaginative experience, allowing the individual to explore the issue from additional and non-verbal and non-cognitive dimensions, which will expand his/her overall perception and awareness. Relating to symbols, sensations and elements in nature, while separating this environment from the individual’s every-day life, helps breach defense mechanisms and enter more deeply into experience.

From theory to practice

To encourage center members to come and participate in the group, two spaces were chosen, either near the homes of potential participants, and with easy access on foot or by bus. Each encounter had a fixed structure that included an opening ritual, a changing activity, a closing talk and a separation ritual. The opening ritual was conducted in a circle in which everyone held hands and leaned backwards; supporting each other and bringing their attention to present sensations. It continued with warm-up games that helped engage creativity and the body, while interacting and contacting each other. The changing activity was based on various Nature Therapy models integrating play, movement, drama and art (Berger & Lahad, 2011). Despite the intermodal approach that Nature Therapy usually, encourages, some encounters included only one method, for example the ‘building a home in nature’ method, in the fourth encounter (Berger, 2009b). The methods were chosen according to the characteristics, needs and aims of the group, and in relationship to the characteristics of the natural environment. The closing

talk included sharing, relating to the experiences and learning that had been gained in the current encounter, with reference to both personal and interpersonal aspects. In some cases, it also included verbal processing, aimed at connecting the process and the learning that took place in the workshop with the individual’s every-day life. The closing and separation ritual was similar to the opening one: each participant could express, verbally and/or non-verbally the way he or she feels on ending the encounter.

Anecdotal examples

Two sessions from the whole program were chosen to highlight ways in which Nature Therapy can support therapeutic processes related to the right hemisphere, with adults coping with emotional and psychiatric difficulty. They are anecdotes that represent the whole.

The first example, relating to a session which took place on a rainy day in the park, demonstrates how nature’s independent dynamic and uncontrollable changes can be used to expand the therapeutic process. The second example, which took place on a Tel-Aviv beach, highlights the potential of creative and dramatic work, revealed in spontaneous sand play. These encounters show how the work in nature and the connection to nature can help to enter the fantastic and dramatic reality which can bypass defense mechanisms, and provide an empowering experience as well as meaningful insights. Both examples are written from the perspective of the counselor – the second writer of this article, in narrative style.

The enchanting forest

Anecdotes from Session 3 – a rainy day in the park

It’s cloudy and chilly today. The forest is green and blooming and the earth smells of rain. On my way to the bus stop – where we had arranged to meet, I’m worried that some of the group members may not come. . . shortly afterwards, I’m happy to see that all four of them have arrived.

Michal – a fifty year-old woman with schizophrenia, proudly declares that she has managed to find the way on her own, without her mentor. Yoav – a thirty seven year-old man with schizophrenia, anxiety and a sense of alienation, arrives right after Michal with a big smile on his face. Before the encounter, his social worker told me that Yoav had not left the house for the past two days due to anxiety. I welcome him warmly. David – a thirty one year-old man, with obsessive compulsive disorder (O.C.D.) arrives with Dafna, a fifty year-old woman with schizophrenia. They come in the same bus and arrive on time. As David sits down, he asks for a tissue, empties his bag and wipes all of its content, one by one.

I offer to drive to the forest in my car and they agree. The car doors close as the rain begins. The women, Dafna and Michal ask if there is any point in leaving the car. . . I park near the forest and wait with them. As it does not seem as if the rain is about to stop, they now announce that they do not want or intend to get out of the car and get wet. However, the boys say exactly the opposite. I listen to this surrealistic conversation and to questions regarding comfort zones, security and the changes it contains. Trying to calm down the atmosphere, I tell them that I have brought few umbrellas that we can all use, and if the rain gets heavier, we can return to the car immediately. In the mean time, the rain has let up, and after a short hesitation, they all agree to leave the car. Equipped with four umbrellas, a thermos with hot tea and a mat for sitting on, we start walking. In light of the situation, I’m not quite sure if I’m the group leader, a leader in the Scouts, or maybe a kindergarten teacher on a picnic with the children. . .

After five minutes of walking, we arrive at the spot I've chosen, on a broad expanse of grass, under huge eucalyptus trees. The rain stops and the sun comes out. The four of them look around and discover the beauty of the spot, with its fresh plants and the pleasant rays of sun in the pre-dusk hours.

Michal in high heels and wrapped in a long black coat, crouches under the umbrella (which remains open despite the fact that the rain has stopped). She smiles at me and tells me that the grove is magical. I ask them all to gather round, and then ask them to take a personal walk. I invite them to listen to the sounds, to smell the smells, and to look around. They all follow me in silence. We enter the thicket of the grove and are swallowed up by twisted trunks, burnt trees, green weeds, a can of cola strewn on the ground and a tangle of wood-sorrels and common mallow. We settle ourselves into the heart of the grove. It's wet all around, so I lay out the dry mat.

We gather in our traditional opening circle, holding hands and leaning backwards, holding and being held; a circle with power. I invite all of the participants to lie down or sit in a comfortable position on the grass, or on the mat. They all stare at me. . . and no one moves. . . I close my eyes and lie down on my back, breathing in and out. . . after a few minutes, they join in, and lie on their backs. I begin to lead a guided imagery and encourage them to relax and listen inwards. I lead them throughout the body, from toes to head. When I sit down, I note that all of them are relaxed, perhaps even a bit sleepy, lying on the mat. The quiet is magical, the birds are singing and the sweet smell of the grass is intoxicating.

I am aware of nature's influence leading them to a special inner space. I am about to take a step forwards and continue the work, when it begins to drizzle. . . when they open their eyes and look at me with amazement, it's my turn to take a deep breath. . . what do I do now? Dafna starts to laugh nervously and gets up; on the alert. I invite them all to sit near me. We open up our umbrellas and squeeze closely together, the four umbrellas shielding us from the rain. Knees touch knees, coats touch coats, and glances are exchanged; a moment of embarrassment. Dafna begins to laugh again, and we all join in, exploding into merriment. . .

In this unusual, surrealistic, situation, I ask them how they feel. Michal says that she feels pleasant. Yoav remembers a trip he took in England, when he was rescued from flooding rains. He tells the story in minute detail and we all listen. I ask him what feeling the story evokes, and he says it makes him feel secure. We talk about protection, exposure and vulnerability, and the ability of the group to either provide or deny them. Spontaneously, I invite them to tell a story about rain. Dafna cuts us off, saying that she is all wet and it's making her uncomfortable. I ask Yoav and Michal, who are sitting beside her, to cover her well with the umbrella and to squeeze closer – so she should be warm. Dafna confirms that she feels much better and relaxes.

The sounds of the rain on the umbrellas weaken, and the rain stops gradually. Nevertheless, we stay huddled close together, holding our umbrellas over us. Little by little, we close the umbrellas and take our distance from each other. As "nature" as well as the group dynamic feels safe enough I ask them once again to close their eyes and begin the guided imagery over again. I begin: "I'm walking in a magical grove, I'm looking all around, what do I see? What do I hear? I meet a figure who smiles at me. I feel safe and secure. I feel comfortable in her presence. I look at what she's wearing, what she looks like. The figure tells me her name and where she comes from. She tells me about her home, and maybe something about my home. . . we say good bye and she departs. . . ." I make my way back to the mat and see them sitting there, the wet grass, and the place where I've been sitting on it. . . the participants open their eyes. They look up at the sky and discover a heavy, gray cloud. We sit quietly for a few minutes, while the drizzle turns to rain. Once again, we open up our umbrellas, which now barely protect us. . .

Michal turns an attentive glance at me and asks: maybe we should go back to the car? I ask them all, and they all nod positively. We pack up and begin walking. While walking, I suggest collecting an item from the grove that perhaps the figure they met had left there for them. A conversation develops. Michal says that she is having fun; that's she's never done anything like this before. Dafna says that doesn't really like what's going on. Yoav is walking without an umbrella, with a smile on his face; he appears to be enjoying the drizzle. David asks: how is it that only humans seek shelter from the rain, while plants and animals seem to greet it so happily. A discussion ensues. . . we reach the car and sit down. The doors of the car close on us and a collective sigh of relief is heard. We all begin to laugh.

Dry – under the picnic table

We drive to the closest gas station and sit around a covered picnic table. I take out my thermos with the warm tea and cookies. The participants enjoy themselves with childlike pleasure. I ask them to tell me something about the figure they met in during the guided imagery, and what object they had taken away from the grove.

Dafna shows us a bouquet of flowers she collected; maybe she'd received it from the figure, it's not completely clear. I ask her how it feels to receive flowers. She says it is moving and makes her feel good and special. She laughs again. After the session, the social worker tells me that Dafna is very lonely and often talks about her desire for a partner and for love. This completes the picture I have formed of her, and helps me better understand her feelings.

Yoav says that he met Zelda, a nice old lady. She was very ugly, like a witch, but a good one. She was all bent, and had a stick. She invited Yoav to her house. The house was made of wood, and it had a roaring fire in the fireplace which made Yoav feel warm and very pleasant. She invited him to eat and served him a tasty soup. Yoav had taken Zelda's walking stick from the grove, and showed us how she uses it.

David says that he didn't meet a figure. Instead, he met the very wonder of creation. . . His face was radiant and relaxed.

Before parting, I ask them what they were taking with them from today's encounter. Michal says that it was the fun she experienced; the feeling of freedom; the togetherness they felt under the umbrellas, and the flowers. Yoav says that he's afraid to go home, because he's afraid of unpleasant thoughts he might have. I point to the stick and tell him that the stick can remind him of the good feelings he had in Zelda's house. He remembers that he had made vegetable soup that morning and that it was waiting for him at home. David says that he's taking with him the feeling of security he felt, even in a situation that was unpleasant or uncomfortable, like it had been today. We hold our traditional parting ceremony; and pack up our belongings. I remind them of the place for next weeks encounter. We part ways. They stride towards the bus stop and I go to my car.

On the way home, I wonder about the session. Where had I received the daring and the belief that I could carry it out in the rain; knowing the people involved? I think about the concept of the triangulated relationship – patient–therapist–nature (Berger & McLeod, 2006). I thought about the personal relationship between the group members, their relationship with me, and our collective contact with nature. I thought about the fact that I had changed my position and my attitude, with nature as my central reference point and the main thrust for the process – inviting participants to connect to inner stories, sensations, feelings and memories. At certain points, I had adopted a more marginal position, as the envelope, the background, the containing witness. At other points, I had taken the lead, with nature functioning as the container and the backdrop. I thought about the kind of intimacy, closeness and shared experience that had been created, which probably would never have come

into being in working in a closed room, or even on the same site, in agreeable weather. It was pleasing to observe the diametrical relationship between the discomfort and lack of control generated by nature and the resulting experience of security, intimacy and closeness – feelings that all the participants so yearn for in their lives. I thought about my encounter with Enosh staff – how would I explain what had taken place there? Would I be able to translate the simple, spontaneous encounter into acceptable psychological terms?

The healing sand

Anecdotes from Session 6 – The Tel Aviv Seashore

Two sessions after the encounter in the Park, we return to the seashore, Tel-Aviv promenade. The beach is full of people and the shaded booths are occupied. We go down the steps to the beach and settle ourselves under an empty umbrella. Lots of people all around us are tanning, and I wonder how we'll be able to create an intimate atmosphere. Dafna is worried that I haven't brought the mat and I tell her that today I've decided we'll work in the sand.

We open with our traditional opening ritual in a circle. I draw a circle in the sand around the group and ask each participant to make his/her own circle within the group circle; like small rings that are attached to the larger ring. I tell the group about "mandalas", and ask them to draw a mandala in his/her circle. In touching and playing with the sand, they discover that the sand has desires and rules of its own; that one drawing develops and changes into another, and that this creative process can actually continue on and on. I stop them and ask them to get up and observe the mandala they've created and give it a name. We go round the circle and each participant shares this information. I ask each one to move to the mandala on his/her right, and to name it. Then, I ask them to return to their own mandala and to listen to the story it is now telling them; maybe its changed in the meantime. . . A few minutes later, I ask them to pair off and to tell each other their stories. I state that at the end of this activity, each of them will tell their partner's story.

Yoav begins telling David's story: "Reality and imagination and the barrier between them". David tries to explain what he meant, begins to philosophize and gets quite entangled. Keeping in mind the concept of "turning interpretation into action" (Berger, 2008a, 2008b) and principles of distancing and dual realities from Drama Therapy (Jennings, 1998), I ask him if he would agree to dramatize the story. He agrees. I present the two main characters – **reality** and **imagination** – and ask David which character he would like to play. He says he'd like to be reality. I ask him to choose someone to represent imagination, and he chooses Yoav. After a ritual of "entering" the character, the both enter the mandala (space) and stand facing each other, on either side of the barrier. To get to know them, and to help the participants enter the character and dramatic, fantastic space (Jennings, 1998; Lahad, 2006) I ask **reality** (played by David) – "how old are you?" The character answers "thirty two". I ask "what do you like best?" and the character answers "truth and honesty". I ask "what's your favorite color?" "Transparent" says reality, and "how do you feel in the circle?" I ask and the character answers "a little crowded" . . .

We change direction and I address **imagination**. "How old are you", I ask and imagination says "five". "What do you like best?" "Freedom", says imagination. "What are your qualities?" I ask, and imagination says "I can do anything, invent things, fly, change shape, I can make things foggy or vague". What's your favorite color, I ask imagination, and it says "all colors. But mostly I like blurry colors, sort of grey". I repeat the story, add some dramatic tension, and say that today the barrier between **reality** and **imagination** will be removed, and they will be able to look

each other in the eye and converse. I say: "today we have a special occasion – **reality** can address **imagination** and ask him anything. **Reality** turns to **imagination** and asks: "What's so good about you?" **Imagination** answers "I'm free to do anything I choose. There is nothing to limit me or stop me". Hearing this, reality says assertively: "you just think you can, because after all, I exist. Eventually, you sober up and see the truth. I am the true and the right". The argument continues, until I stop them and ask **imagination** to step out of the circle. I tell **reality** that today we are telling its story. Therefore, after the barrier with **imagination** has been removed, it can re-define its limits within the circle. **Reality** says that it wants 90% of the circle. I ask it to position itself comfortably in the circle, and then ask **imagination** back into the circle. **Imagination** says that the circle is too crowded and uncomfortable. I remind **imagination** that it can change and design itself however it wishes, and find a comfortable position. Besides, the story now belongs to **reality**; therefore it is reality's position that predominates. I ask **reality** how it now feels and it says that now it feels comfortable. I then conduct an exiting ritual from the characters and restore David and Yoav to us. They exit the circle. I am very moved, because I understand that the conversation that developed from spontaneous play is the very core of the matter—creating an open dialogue between reality and imagination in the life of an individual, where this conversation is usually conducted behind the scenes, in a domineering and obsessive fashion. Can this experience of controlling the imagination, without trying to destroy it help this participant cope with his illness on an ongoing basis? I wonder whether to invite David to process the experience verbally and to explore with him cognitively, but ultimately decide to let the metaphor do its work and leave it in the experiential dimension. At sunset, after a summarizing conversation and our customary parting ritual, we part ways. On the way back from the beach, Yoav and David stroll together, in conversation. Yoav says to David: I've been in therapy groups at the hospital and in Enosh, but never one like this one. I really like it this way, its fun and not exhausting. I'm surprised to hear Yoav refer to the workshop as therapy. That's not how it was presented. . .

Discussion and closer . . .

Through a presentation of basic terms from Nature Therapy and examples from a group program, this article has presented an experiential framework that can support processes of rehabilitation, growth and development in adults suffering from emotional problems and psychiatric difficulties. It illustrated how the therapeutic process can focus on a non-verbal, creative, experience that can be augmented by nature. Hence, ways in which Nature Therapy can support processes of healing connected with the right hemisphere. Connecting concepts from Nature therapy with concepts from drama and art therapy the article also highlighted the option of relating to Nature Therapy as a "nature oriented form" of expressive art therapy, conducting the work in nature while relating to it as a partner in process. This innovative approach relates to the philosophy of Ecopsychology by which the reconnection of people to nature can help restoring the connection of self and other, while widening the sense of belonging. Doing so this article joins Kellen-Taylor thoughts who also claimed that via this connection to nature we can help people exit feelings of alienation, fragmentation and isolation that, unpleasant emotions that the population that this article relates to might be dealing with. Kellen-Taylor invites therapists to take their work into nature, saying "we can take art process out of the studio into nature with the intention of hearing and dancing with the soul of the world" (Kellen-Taylor, 1998, p. 308). Nature Therapy seeks to expend this approach as it offers to conduct all the process in nature (and not to work in nature

occasionally) while offering concepts and methods suitable for this unique setting (Berger, 2009a, 2009b).

We hope that in time, additional research will examine the significance and efficacy of non-verbal therapeutic work, and ways in which nature and the connection with nature can support and expand such process.

We hope that this article will encourage other professionals to open the door, and go out into nature to conduct therapeutic work.

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