NATURE THERAPY – HIGHLIGHTING STEPS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents three facets of the rapidly expanding field of environmental expressive therapies, nature therapy, in particular. The chapter starts by presenting the basic nature therapy theory, concepts and methods; specifically, *touching nature*, *the triangular relationship (therapist-client-nature)*, *choosing the right space and back to ritual*, followed by tow intervention methods; *art within nature* and *building a home in nature*. It continues with an example that illustrates its implementation in practice. The second section of the chapter relates to issues relating to its unique code of ethics and their application on practice. The chapter concludes with a unite that relates to nature therapy's development within the context of establishing environmental expressive therapies: the creation of a wide range of therapeutic programs and their official recognition, the development of academic training programs, the organization of conferences and the formation of a professional community. This chapter concludes with issues and questions dealing with the further development of this approach as a young field of expertise, as well as its academic and professional development and recognition.

NATURE THERAPY – A THEORETICAL AND APPLIED FRAMEWORK

Nature therapy is a therapy method which can be included in the spectrum of environmental expressive therapies and which takes place in nature, and perceives nature as a partner in constructing a therapeutic setting and process (Berger, 2009, 2016a,

2016b; Berger & Lahad, 2013; Berger & Tiry, 2012; Berger & McLeod, 2006). This integrative method was conceptualized and developed by the author of this article as part of his Ph.D. (Berger, 2009) and in subsequent work, and has been further developed by graduates of the nature therapy training and colleagues. The method integrates elements from creative and post-modern approaches such as ecopsychology and ecotherapy, play therapy, drama therapy, Gestalt and the narrative approach, along with elements from traditional rituals and shamanism. Like other post-modern approaches that have developed societal theories to explain the rise in psychological distress such as depression, anxiety and trauma (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Kopytin and Rugh 2016; McLeod, 1997; West, 2000).

Nature therapy views the process from a psycho-eco-social perspective. It is based on the assumption that people's estrangement from nature is linked to a broad spectrum of psycho-social disorders and manifestations such as loss of self-esteem and meaning, depression, anxiety, loneliness and alienation (Berger, 2009, 2016a; Berger & Lahad, 2013). Thus, its intervention approaches and methods are grounded in an environmental-social framework that aims to strengthen mind-body and interpersonal relationships, along with self-inclusion and normalization skills.

Nature therapy views the relationship with nature as the main axis in a process that involves the use of creative methods to explore the relationship with nature in a metaphorical and symbolic way. It is thus akin to the work of other arts therapists who have developed methods implemented in nature (Chown, 2014; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Kellen-Taylor, 1998; Kopytin & Rugh, 2016; Whitaker, 2010). A distinction should be made, however, between these arts-based approaches and adventure therapy or wilderness therapy that implement a more task-oriented perspective (Berger, 2009; Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001; Kaly & Heesacker, 2003).

TOUCHING NATURE

The core of nature therapy, consistent with the fundamental assumptions of ecopsychology and deep ecology, is the claim that by reconnecting with nature, people can be infused with healing forces that can lead to recovery (Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). *Touching nature* is a basic term suggesting that direct contact with nature can deepen a person's connection with his/her own nature. It can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity by enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities. It can help people strengthen the body-mind connection, reach higher levels of consciousness, and widen their spiritual connections and guidance (Berger, 2016; Berger and Tiry, 2012). This process is especially important given the intensity and rapid pace of modern life which may push people away from their center (Berger, 2009).

THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP: THERAPIST-CLIENT-NATURE

The *triangular therapist-client-nature relationship* is a central concept in nature therapy, which seeks to broaden the classical therapeutic relationship between therapist and client by introducing nature as a third factor. The concept of a triangular relationship prompts the therapist to relate to nature as an active partner in the process. It impacts the design of the therapeutic setting as well as the therapeutic process itself. In this way, it differs from the perception of the artistic product as a third medium in art therapy, because in nature therapy nature plays an active role and has a dynamic and a life of its own

This concept of a triangular relationship helps the therapist decide what role to take within the therapeutic relationship. Therapists can take a central, dominant role in the interaction with the client, such that nature is a backdrop and a supplier of materials, an approach that can also be regarded as therapy *in* nature. Alternatively, the therapist can

take a secondary position as a mediator between the client and nature by being a witness to a process occurring directly with nature, an approach that can be regarded as therapy *with* nature. In general, when the client or group is involved in investigating processes connected with relationships and interpersonal communication such as questions of trust and control, the therapist can focus on interpersonal interactions and relate to nature as a setting or as a supplier of material.

On the other hand, when the client is concerned with broader issues of identity and meaning, the therapist can invite the client to interact directly with nature, its cyclicality and its perennial sequences, and remains a witness whose function is to intensify the individual's encounter with nature. Clearly, in many cases, as the dynamics and the issues being examined evolve, the role of the therapist can also change. Changes in position and attitude, which can occur several times during the same session also enable the client to move along the axis between the interpersonal and the transpersonal, and thus extend the framework and perspectives on the issues at hand (Berger, 2008, 2016; Berger & Tiry, 2012).

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SPACE

The concept of *choosing the right space* highlights the importance of the issue of space in nature therapy in general and the choice of the specific space and time to work in particular (Berger & Lahad, 2013). The assumption that underlies this concept is that different natural locations, habitats and environments have a different impact upon different process and different people. A beach, a desert or a forest will have a different meaning for different clients and in different phases of therapy. An open environment like the beach can be experienced as a space that symbolizes freedom and relaxation for one person while causing anxiety and stress for another. The choice of the season and the time of day can also have an influence, and therefore should be taken into consideration in the

choice of the time of the session. At sunrise and sunset, the Israeli beach is a wonderful place to work in the summer because the temperature and setting are pleasant and the symbolism of the environment can connect a person with feeling and thoughts about the cycles of life, thus providing perspective, acceptance and hope (or sadness, loneliness and depression). However, the same beach at noon, with it's the high temperature and direct sunlight can be too intrusive for emotional work and therefore might be unsuitable for the therapeutic process. The concept of *choosing the right space* helps the therapist take these issues into consideration when selecting a suitable time and environment to work for the specific client and for the therapeutic goal.

BACK TO RITUAL

One of the unique features of nature therapy is its fundamental connection to the concept of ritual and its use in therapy. This applies both to collective ritualistic ideas, such as the connection between people and nature, mind-spirit-body within the community, as well as to the integration of performance and arts into the therapeutic process (Berger, 2014; 2015). It also relates to the concept of the sacred space, the idea of a rite of passage and the three phases comprise rituals (Berger, 2014; Marcow-Speiser, 1998; Van Gennup, 1960). By acknowledging people's basic need for rituals, for instance by helping them deal with uncertainty, loss, sickness and transitions in life, and the role modern therapy plays in the creation of secular rituals (Berger, 2014, Jennings, 2012; Marcow-Speiser, 1998).

Nature therapy incorporates and utilizes elements in nature to create rituals. It generally does not use existing rituals borrowed from various cultures, but creates them according to the culture of the group and connections to the here-and-now. It utilizes the dynamics and culture of the group, links them to collective and universal phenomena present in nature (such as the changing of the seasons, the transitions between high and

low tide, sunrise and sunset, birth and death) and uses natural elements (water, wind, fire, earth) to create rituals that are meaningful to the client and group. This approach allows clients to connect their personal to their cosmic stories by giving them a feeling of acceptance, normality and oneness. It can also help people assimilate painful stories, explore their significance in general, and when dealing with loss, trauma and stress in particular. The use of rituals can also help individuals to connect mind and body, establish a sense of connectedness and oneness within themselves, with others, and with things larger than the self.

METHODS AND INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES

Nature Therapy implements several unique methods and intervention techniques. These transform the concepts presented above and together with additional concepts from art based therapy into practical methods that can be used with different clients and settings. Two of these methods are presented here.

Art within Nature

Art within nature refers to selected concepts and techniques from creative arts therapy methods such as Drama therapy, Dance-Movement therapy, Visual art therapy and Music therapy as integrated into Nature Therapy. It encourages the therapist to transform psychological interpretations into a creative exploratory within nature (Berger & Lahad 2013, Berger & Tiry, 2012). This symbolic way of working is associated with art-based therapy concepts such as fantastic and dramatic realities (Lahad 2002; Pendzik 2006), distancing (Landy 2009) and the concept of ritual that is at the core of Nature Therapy practices (Berger 2015). In this approach, metaphors and physical-sensory experiences with nature are believed to help the individual experience the world through additional perspectives, undergo recovery processes, and create a preferred, alternative reality.

Unlike drama therapy and other expressive arts therapies, which are usually located indoors, art within nature relates to nature as a provider of creative materials or as a backdrop for dramatic happenings. It also views nature as an active partner in designing the stage, the story, and the process relating to its intrinsic value and the influence of its independent dynamics. Special attention is given to environmental phenomena and

changes that can be included in therapeutic references in general, and to coping with change and connecting with "the powers that be," in particular. Therefore, a story extracted from nature and the environment can merge with the recounting of a personal challenge and can be used as a healing metaphor or the basis for a spontaneous ritual; for example, burying a porcupine can help a child cope with a father dying of cancer (Berger 2007) and immersion in water can evoke processes of birth and renewal (Berger and McLeod 2006).

By linking the personal with the universal and eternal, an individual can normalize difficult experiences, put them in a wider context, and endow them with beneficial meaning (Berger 2009; Berger and McLoed 2006). Linking individual and natural or universal coping mechanisms as well as personal or psychological time with cosmic or eternal time has great therapeutic value. It connects the individual to a sense of the eternal and affords a sense of belonging and context. This is significant in therapeutic work in general, but even more so in therapy that focuses on coping with uncertainty and loss (Berger 2016a, Berger & Lahad 2013).

Building a Home in Nature

Building a home in nature draws on people's basic need to find or create a space where they   feel safe and protected from uncertainty, unfamiliarity and from the dangers of the world outside. Building a camp or a home is a well-known spontaneous activity amongst children who tend to create such spaces in their homes, neighborhoods or at school. This activity takes on even greater importance in a natural setting that is not privately owned and contains many uncertain elements. Delineating a physical site not only provides safety in terms of the powers of nature and general uncertainty, but also defines the place of the individual with reference to others and to the environment.

Working with this model includes a preparatory stage of choosing the location, followed by building the home, and planning its ongoing maintenance. The basic assumption of the model is that this active, concrete yet symbolic process facilitates observation and work on basic intra-personal and inter-personal issues, as well as on the relationship between the individual and the environment.

The story of a child whose home in nature is located in the center of the group village will differ from the story of a child whose home is on the outskirts of town, or from

someone who did not build a home, or a child whose home is invisible in terms of location and shape. The boundaries of the home will hint at the individual's inner boundaries and between this person and the environment. A home lacking boundaries will tell a different tale than a home with boundaries made of prickly bushes, or a home surrounded by a brick wall. This method of observation considers the building process, the image, shape, location and size of the home as metaphorical clues about the participant's real home. Aside from the diagnostic perspective inherent to the home in nature model (Berger 2009), it allows the individual and the group to view the home and subsequently receive feedback from the others in the group. In this case, the facilitator's intervention can induce a certain type of construction that promotes specific socialization and communication processes.

Another significant aspect of the model stems from the fact that the constructed space is larger than the individual or the group. It allows entry, offers containment, and can even host other participants, unlike other therapeutic techniques in which small models of homes are built and observed from the outside. In this model, the individual can enter the constructed home, feel the containment it provides, and even look outside from within.

Building a home from natural materials teaches the participants that they can create the reality of their lives in the immediate present from pre-existing materials, thus instilling hope and a sense of control over life and its renewed creation. Ordinary visits to the home, session after session, allow the individual to encounter basic issues of control, in light of independent changes in nature that change and redesign the home. Ongoing maintenance and confrontation with the changes caused by nature develop flexibility and creativity, as well as acceptance of imperfection and loss of control. The physical-creative-concrete construction of a home circumvents cognitive defense mechanisms, enables the observation of additional facets of the participants' life stories and helps expand coping resources.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE – AN EXAMPLE

It was the concluding encounter of a group participating in a training program for nature therapy. The meeting took place on the beach, in the light of the full moon, between sunset and sunrise, from the afternoon hours until the following morning. After

creative work in the sand, during which each participant created or sculpted a map or path marking the development she/he had experienced during the learning process, we sat around a campfire to share. David, a man in his late twenties, shared his complex feelings with the members of the group and thanked them for their support in his process of leaving his parents' home and moving to his new home with his partner.

The group members listened and told him how they viewed his developing maturity and the progress towards separation that he had made in the group. They also shared the sadness they were feeling at their own separation from the group and their fear of life after the end of training. When the sun came up a number of hours later, they would be asked to begin a personal journey, to imagine every step in the sand as a step in their lives, from the past to the present, and then to the future. Some of the participants walked away from the fire and some sat not far from it, looking at the sea. An hour later, after the sun had risen, they were asked to choose a place on the beach and to create a shape symbolizing their present status and feelings about leaving the training and their new independent way.

Using his whole body, David dug two funnel-shaped channels in the space between the sand and the water. The narrow part of the funnel pointed to the east, to the sunrise, and the wider part was oriented towards the sea. After the group members had walked through each of their peers' personal spaces and listened to the stories, David invited the group to gather around his creation. "First of all, when I moved and rolled around and played with the sand, I had no idea what I was doing and what I would create. Now, standing here with you and looking down on it from above, it seems to me that I have created a birth canal." I invited David to participate in a spontaneous ritual which we would invent for him then and there. David agreed, took off his shirt and sat down at the entry to his funnel, while the other group members created a tight-fitting human channel in both directions, towards the sunrise and towards the sea, continuing the

channel dug into the sand. A few minutes later, shouting, pushing and crawling, David made his way from the narrow channel to the open beach. Seconds later, while still lying, panting, on the sand, a great wave washed over him from behind. "I'm alive," he shouted. "I have been reborn." The participants gathered around him and wrapped him in blankets. There were prayers mixed with tears and laughter, stories about birth and death; participants spontaneously broke into hymns, melodies, and songs as the sea covered the drawings we had made in the sand, washed over them and cleared them away. The night took its leave and made way for a new day...

From practice to theory – A conceptualization:

The example illustrates how the theory, concepts and methods of nature therapy can support the therapist's work. It began with the concept of *choosing the right space,* which helps the therapist make the connection between the aim and issue to be dealt with in the session and the choice of place and time of the workshop. In this case, the aim of the workshop was to help participants in processes of closeness and separation, help them leave each other and the training program as well as to connect to a feeling of continuity and faith. The beach, and on a night with a full moon is a setting that contains and tells a story of change and cycle: the movement between day and night, high and low tide related to the group's story and process. It is also an open place when one can see the horizon. The sand is a dynamic medium and can tell a parallel story about the dynamics of life and its uncertainties. It is easy to make figures in the sand, but at the same time has its own dynamics. One can build a castle in the sand and a wave can easily wash it away. In this sense, the sand symbolizes the cyclic movement between creation and destruction life and death. This example shows how that the concept of *choosing the right space* can be used in action, by looking for a natural location and time that can support the specific journey.

The concept of *back to ritual* and the creation of rituals were also presented as well as the *art within nature* method. The example showed not only how the whole workshop was designed in a ritualistic and creative ways, but also how spontaneous and unique rituals were created. It shoes the symbolic orientation of nature therapy and its emphasis on the physical connection with nature. The presence of group work and group support was highlighted, as well as the implementation of the concepts *of touching nature and the triangular relationship: therapist-client-nature.* The unique therapeutic influence of nature when the wave washed over David was illustrated, as well as the position of the therapist within the triangular relationship. There were times when the therapist took a background position by letting the participants work mainly with nature and the creation process. This contrasted with other times such as the sharing around the fire when nature became the background for the conversation the therapist was leading. The example highlighted the "dance" of the creative process and the spiritual facet fostered by nature therapy that takes place in the facilitation between the therapist-client-group and nature.

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF NATURE THERAPY AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL, NATURE-ASSISTED EXPRESSIVE THERAPIES

The professional development of nature therapy and other nature-assisted environmental expressive therapies involves the creation of a wide range of recognized therapeutic and training programs, and the development of a professional community. This process has taken place parallel to the field's academic development, which included, in particular, Ph.D. study (Berger, 2002-2008), research, publications and the conferences.

A. <u>The development of wide-ranging therapeutic programs</u>**.** I conducted the first nature therapy work in Israel during my work as a drama therapist in schools for children

with learning disabilities in the north 2001-2003. I took children who did not feel comfortable doing therapy indoors into nature and conducted the sessions there (Berger & McLeod, 2006). My dissertation constituted the basis for the development of nature therapy as a theoretical framework for practice.

Based on the success of this pioneering work in schools, in 2004 I developed the first wide-ranging nature therapy program called *encounter in nature*, an official program under the auspices of the Department of Special Education of the Israel Ministry of Education. It included a 30-hour training program for arts therapists working in schools followed by weekly supervision. The therapists worked with a variety of children in different schools for children with learning disabilities including institutions that specialize in working with children psychiatric problems, PDD, behavioral problems and late development (Berger, 2006, 2008)

In 2006, following the second Lebanon war, I developed the "Safe Place" program together with Doron and Berger-Glick and under the supervision of Prof. Lahad to help traumatized children (Berger & Lahad, 2010 ;2013). This program was also recognized by the Ministry of Education and later by the Ministry of Social Affairs that expanded the program to families. The success of these programs, the ensuing conference presentations and research publications opened the door to the recognition of other, smaller programs such as Eytan Yogev's Yealim program that works with youth at risk under the Ministry of Education, Shulamit Horowitz's program dealing with kindergartens under the Ministry of Education, Maya Goldberg's program working with people with late development under the JDC foundation, and Ronit Shwartz's program that works with the elderly under auspices of the EMDA Association.

B. The development of training programs. As nature therapy is not yet formally recognized as an acknowledged form of therapy in Israel, the training programs are designed and delivered as nature therapy group counseling training. The diploma is

awarded for in-group counseling and not therapy. However now that the program has been expanded to two full years, which includes a year-long practicum, professionals who enroll as therapists can complete their practicum in clinical settings and work with individuals and then be awarded a nature therapist diploma.

Nature therapy is a postmodern discipline that integrates several approaches. For this reason the training syllabus includes courses that provide participants with the psychodynamic, group oriented, art based, spiritual and eco-psychological background they need for the facilitation of groups in nature therapy. It does not include courses dealing with clinical issues such as trauma, psychiatry, or the   therapist-client relationship. The program has two main courses: a course about group processes with a psychodynamic and artistic orientation, and a nature therapy course. The courses take place in 8 hour days throughout the academic year. In addition, two long workshops are held: a three day workshop in the desert focusing on the ritualistic aspects of nature therapy, and a whole-night workshop on the beach focusing on the process of closeness and separation. These workshops also show the impact and meaning of untrammeled nature upon processes (as opposed to 'man-made' nature near the campus). It also highlights issues concerning working for long periods (as opposed to two hour weekly sessions).

Participants are accepted for postgraduate training on the basis of a BA degree or higher, and previous experience in educational or therapeutic work. The courses are held on campuses near natural areas that enabled the nature therapy classes to take place in nature. The coursework combines theory and experiential work with a focus on personal and group process as a basis for conceptualization and learning.

The first nature therapy training program in Israel took place in 2004 at Tel-Hai College, as a one-year program lasting 180 hours. When it was realized that the learning process needed more time in 2006 the program was extended to 224 hours by adding a

second year for a practicum. The practicum includes facilitation of groups in different organizations and with different clients, followed by weekly, four-hour group supervision on campuses.

In 2009, a larger training program was developed and was inaugurated at Tel Aviv University. It consisted of a two year, 414 hour training course. It extended the two main existing courses in group process and nature therapy while adding courses in gestalt, and courses dealing with issues such as creativity, spirituality, and ethics in group counseling. This program was run until 2015, when I began teaching an MA drama therapy program and retired from running the nature therapy programs.

Since then, graduates of the program have opened a few smaller courses that focus on issues they developed. Tal Paner runs a course on the spiritual aspects of nature therapy, Eytan Yogev runs a course on the use of nature therapy with youth at risk, Ronit Schwartz runs a course on the use of nature therapy with the elderly through a mind-body perspective. Maya Goldberg runs a course about the use of nature therapy with late developers. These courses do not award a diploma.

Another development that takes place since 2012 is the integration of nature therapy courses within drama therapy and art therapy MA programs; The College of Arts and Social and Tel Hai Academic College.

C. Development of professional community. Alongside the development of therapeutic and training programs and publications on nature therapy, several conferences were held. The first took place at Tel-Hai College in 2004 in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. After that, annual conferences took place until 2015, in the institutions that hosted the trainings programs - Tel Hai College and Tel Aviv University. In addition, an experiential two-day conference took place in nature in 2013. Each conference focused on a different issue with presenters from within the nature therapy community and outside it. The conferences created a place for the members of the

community to meet and exchange and to kindle new collaborations. In addition, presentations, workshops and keynote lectures have been given in different conferences that have drawn attention to the contribution of nature therapy to different process and with different clients.

It is worth noting that although nature therapy is a therapeutic approach with clinical applications, it is not yet officially recognized as a clinical profession in Israel. This is because full clinical training in nature therapy probably requires a three-year MA program that would also be more expensive and demanding. Furthermore, the original program was designed as training in group counseling and not therapy. In addition, these courses are considered postgraduate programs and not MA programs that do not have academic accreditation. This creates a disparity between students' experience of training led by experienced therapists with deep personal and group processes and the development of their own skills, and the absence of recognition of the diploma they were awarded. This also affected career opportunities since it was unclear how nature therapy differed from group facilitation, group counselling or therapy. I believe that the development of full MA clinical training programs are essential for the further development of the field.

SUMMARY

This chapter presented nature therapy as a method within a growing professional field of environmental expressive therapies and outlined its theory, methods, training programs and professional development. It presented the basic concepts and methods of *touching nature*, *the triangular relationship: therapist-client-nature* and *choosing the right space* as well as the concept of *back to ritual and the methods; art within nature* and *building a home in nature*. It gave an example of their implementation in practice. It highlighted the issue of ethical standards and the need in the development of a full ethical

code. It continued by relating to issues concerning its development and establishment as a specialized professional field such as the wide range of recognized therapeutic programs, training programs, conferences and the growing efforts of an expanding professional community. It highlighted issues and questions regarding the further development of training programs as well as the recognition and future professional development of environmental, nature-assisted expressive therapies.

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