

## Towards an expressive arts practice

By Dennis MacDermot

What is an Expressive Arts practice and is it possible to develop one? I don't mean 'practice' in the sense of the individual and group sessions that may be offered by an Expressive Arts practitioner but the kind of practice he or she might do at home. To some that may sound like an odd question. We would expect a Buddhist or a Yoga or a piano teacher to have a personal practice and to encourage their students to practice at home. But in my experience, psychotherapists (including EA therapists) generally don't assign home-work at the end of a session. Nor, if they have their own personal practice (in the sense of something done regularly in their own lives), do they share this. Have they reached a level of mastery where formal practice is no longer necessary? Or do they believe that therapy must be interactive, needing either a one-on-one relationship or a held group experience to be effective. If this is so it seems to me a limitation – the client becomes dependent on the therapist since he or she can only progress in the therapy session. It is like taking piano lessons but having no piano or keyboard at home to practice on. It is also, possibly, self-perpetuating: the therapist reaches qualification over a period of years through hours and hours of therapy and supervision and this then becomes the path the student or client must follow. That is all very well for people who want to make therapy their profession. But what about those who want to lead a fuller and more creative life without this degree of commitment. It seems to me that therapists in general and EA therapists in particular would be serving their clients better if they focused more on what can be done at home between sessions in the studio – both to reinforce therapeutic experience and to provide a bridge between that experience and 'ordinary' life.

As a Tamalpa practitioner (I graduated from Tamalpa Institute in 2005), I have been trying to develop my own personal expressive arts practice or practices. Without a model to follow, this is very much a work in progress but I feel I am getting closer to something that is effective for me and might also in time be formulated to be helpful to others with far less EA experience. I will describe one or two scores below but first I would like to take a step back and establish a context for Expressive Arts practice and consider how such a practice might sit alongside Spiritual practice.

Jung famously said he would rather be whole than good. Spiritual practice seems to be more concerned with goodness and therapy more with wholeness. James Hillman in "Peaks and Vales" and "Soul and Spirit" shows how metaphorically the thrust of spiritual practice (whether sitting on a cushion or raising the eyes in prayer) is always upward - higher, lighter, purer, clearer. Retreatants in search of *enlightenment* head for uplands, for caves in the snow, not down into the valleys – the vale of soul-making (to quote Keats).<sup>2</sup> We need at times to climb Apollonian mountains in search of clarity and perspective but much of the action of our lives takes place lower down, in the mud, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. While spiritual aspiration is an essential part of our humanity, it is possible for spiritual practice to be used as a way to escape from the confusions of embodiment. In reality most of our lives are actually lived in motion, in dynamic relation to other people and the environment and spiritual practice does not always prepare us for this; there are many stories of people coming back from lengthy retreats and finding they are no better at dealing with the 'stuff' of ordinary life. To me the purpose of an Expressive Arts practice (and of psychotherapy) is to help us to deal with this stuff.

To me there is a close similarity between the workings of the body and the Unconscious. I experience my body as having its own autonomous life, not just in the way it carries out a million housekeeping tasks (regulating temperature, prompting me to eat, drink, excrete, sleep, wake etc) but also in the way it reacts to the outside world. I have “gut instincts”. Things (sometimes) don’t “smell” quite right. The Unconscious also works autonomously, often driving us to act and react to the outside world without our conscious selves really knowing why. There is a quality of obscurity, of muddiness, in these workings. If we are not careful, applying the conceptual mind in search of their meaning is a bit like trying to pick out the pattern of shadows by shining a bright light on them. The challenge is similar to that of remembering dreams; and once we have remembered them of sensing their meaning without stripping them of all resonance by dissection - as if they were coded messages to the intellect. Perhaps a better way to deal with mud is to soften the focus of our knowing eyes and feel it in our hands – being open to the shapes that want to emerge. The expressive arts offer a language or methodology for this kind of working with the mud. But a kind of sidelong cunning seems to me to be necessary to avoid slipping into known and habitual thought patterns. The painter, Francis Bacon described what he did as “setting a snare for reality using artificial images”. In the same way we can use the artifice of a *score* to put a finger on that vague something under the radar. A score establishes intention, a defined time-space and activities, a kind of framework within which the unexpected can happen. Here’s an example.

In February, I went with a friend to Spain, to the Alpujarra. When we arrived, tired from our journey, the almond blossom was out, the sun was shining. It seemed we had stepped from winter into spring. I felt a call to expand, to go outside. I felt a contradictory desire to stay in: “too early, the air is cold”. On another level I was curious to explore the nearby town, the shops, the people. But with my rudimentary Spanish I felt afraid of engagement. So – curiosity and fear, an outward-going impulse and a closing in impulse. I set aside an hour and 20 minutes to explore this in movement and art. Here is my score, a fairly typical Tamalpa life-art score, with explanatory notes in italics:

Intention: Explore curiosity/fear, opening/closing. *I struck out “curiosity/fear” because these terms seemed too loaded and narrow, too knowing.*

Activities:

20 minutes: warm-up *(using various stretches and routines to sink awareness into the body)*

20 minutes: explore “opening and closing” in movement, *(using both body sense and physical location (in the warm sitting room, through the kitchen and outside onto the veranda))*

15 minutes: drawing *(whatever comes out of the movement experience)*

15 minutes: explore drawing in movement

10 minutes: (creative) journal writing *(this phase is integrative allowing a return from artistic to conceptual mind)*

This is what I experienced – mostly reproduced raw from my journal:

Moving indoors, slow, warm, muted... imagining opening, arms raised and lowered, chest expands, contracts... gradually, circular movements repeating.. petals, an image of a flower coming out bravely in the sun. Then ... MY FRIEND OPENED THE FRENCH DOORS!!! OUTRAGEOUS!! The warm cocoon destroyed. Triggered into a tantrum, I

beat cushions then stomp downstairs to saw wood... repetitive angry movement warms body and calms outrage.

Here is my drawing:



I explored my drawing in movement (focusing on different elements of the drawing and allowing my body to respond) then wrote in my journal:

“Splattering blows aimlessly out in all directions, a tantrum without power.. and opens up the delicate round flower petals to daggers and lightnings in. Oh cold blast of wind from outside, this hothouse plant cannot sustain but galvanized to harden before its ready time, pushed out, pushed out.”

then a dialogue:

Petals: “I swell roundness out, yellow, sunny, childish pleasure. Jittering, a flimsy enthusiasm, naïve, trusting”

Sky: “This is no place for babies! Go back inside. Or toughen up. Don’t be silly!”

Petals: “Pushed out, not allowed back in to the warm cocoon. But I am not very brave though I put a brave face out.”

Sky: “What do you want? Open air or closed safe space, the hollow warmth?”

Petals: “Open air seems vast and empty and cold. I want to light it up but my bright delight needs protection. My sunny rays do not go far.”

Stalk: “I am the link, a sinuous corridor for sap, my feet in the stolid lumpy ground, I hold you up, I feed you, I make earth nourishing. I am the secret alchemist, slow and patient.”

Re-reading this, I am struck by the muddled syntax (I have to resist the desire to correct it) and by the way the metaphors overlap with each other in a most untidy way – the flower is both flower and sun, it wants to blossom in childish pleasure but also feels victimized, pushed out. There are echoes of childhood ‘stuff’. I could switch into analytical mind and say what I think it all means ... but in fact it means lots of things on lots of different levels.

I am also struck by some metaphorical resonances between the drawing (spirit/sky earth/mud, the secret alchemical stalk) and the themes of this article.

The drawing is art-expression but does not claim the status of Art. Like my raw and naïve writing, I find it a little embarrassing to show it here. But my intention in this session was to explore not to communicate. Expression was at the service of exploration. Part of me goes – “ah, what is this, this pattern, this feeling, what is it like, where does it lead?” – shape is found, created in the moment of expression and becomes content. The process feels very organic; I blossom out my own unique inner world in the patterns of my movement and in the colours and words that spill out on to the page. What I express in this way becomes a resource and a mirror. I know myself through my expression.

And here I disagree with some EAT practitioners who believe that the intensity with which a piece of artwork is created guarantees its success as art. Great art may need intensity but to communicate successfully to others (whether through artwork, poem, dance or theatrical performance) a different kind of attention and skill is needed. I have an improvisation practice which is aimed precisely at this – developing my ability to communicate my own inner world in movement sound and voice.

The score described above had a strong therapeutic intent – I wanted to get to grips with my own ‘stuff’. The flower I drew bore no relation to anything in the countryside around. On other days during my holiday in Spain I set myself scores which had a much more external focus: explore environment using movement and drawing. These were also expressive arts based but without any therapeutic intent – perhaps EA not EAT (I was looking outwards rather than inwards). Nevertheless, there was an emotive content in my physical responses to the outside world. ... that mountain on the skyline, a crook like my elbow, the gnarled shape of the almond boughs, the finger-tip blossoms, those budded branches reaching up towards the sun, a cold wind, contracting “brrr!” – echoes in my body everywhere. My drawings on those other days were more representational.

By the end of the week, I found my outer world and inner world coming together – what I saw and felt around me offered perfect images and metaphors for my inner process.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus wants to hear the singing of the sirens whose voices are so beautiful they often draw mariners who hear them onto the rocks. So he has himself tied to the mast and tells the oarsmen to block their ears with wax. Thus he experiences that terrible beauty but survives without disaster. Dealing with our own unconscious

material, our internal demons is also dangerous – we need to be held and carried safely through to the other side. In a therapy session we rely on the therapist to hold us, individually or in a group, and this allows us to reach a depth and intensity of experience we would not be able to achieve alone. Continuing the analogy, we normally expect our therapists to be strong enough not to need the wax – to feel that they have been to the deep places we may find ourselves in and that they know the way out. However it is possible to establish structures and rules by which we can hold ourselves through experiences of greater than normal intensity. Time-keeping can be supported by an alarm clock or electronic timer or by music of known length. We can even practice alongside or near to another person (as I did in Spain) who has no direct involvement in what we are doing.

To me the purpose of therapeutic practice is mainly to enhance the quality of my experience, to build bridges (or stalks) between different parts of myself, between my muddy dream body and my waking conscious world, to put me more in touch with my emotions and with my environment. In short to help me feel more *alive*, more *whole* and more *me*. In the words of Martha Graham:

*There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how it compares with other expression. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.*

An expressive arts practice can help keep the channels open.

## References

1. I am as always indebted to Jung esp “Four Archetypes – The Phenomenology of the Spirit”
2. James Hillman – “Peaks and Vales” and “Soul and Spirit” from A Blue Fire
3. My practice is based on the work of the Tamalpa Institute ([www.tamalpa.org](http://www.tamalpa.org)) but I have also been influenced by a number of other movement based practices.