

Working with Children in Jerusalem

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In these times of such political turmoil and violence it has been interesting to observe how the external frightening reality has affected children, their artwork and what comes into the art therapy room. There have been times I have been amazed at the fact that the children and young adolescents have not mentioned a particular attack or suicide bombing. At other times they have mentioned it but when I have tried to invite them into sharing their feelings and thoughts, or express them in their art, they have brushed it all away saying, "oh, it's nothing, I'm not afraid, I'm used to it". I would like to share with you some examples, thoughts, observations, and experiences concerning the use of art as a means to attempt to heal, restore, repair the traumatic reality we are living. In situations of political violence it is often not possible to see a boundary between the inner and external reality, reality seeps into the therapy room constantly and then mixes with inner life processes. Moreover, the present mood the client is in or the unconscious energy at work may be actually related to the external reality. Sometimes reality invades our space and as a therapist it has been difficult to decide whether to comment on it and what to say or leave it up to the client if they want to choose to say something. The intrusions I speak of are, for example, the sound of a helicopter flying above us, the sound of many sirens that could indicate that a bomb exploded and many ambulances are on their way to attend to the wounded or it could indicate that important political figures are passing by on their way to negotiations. Another type of invasion of our privacy is related to the fact that in some work places the art therapy room is the bomb shelter. When an especially tense time comes, as has been lately, especially with the threat of Iraq's possible retaliation for being attacked, drills to go down to the shelter have been done often. At times I have been advised in advance so that I could leave the room prepared for the invasion.

At other times I was not told, or I did not even know this room would function as a shelter and materials were stolen. The paradox and double edged symbolic meaning of practicing art therapy in a refuge, a space that is both a safehaven that will ensure your survival, but at quiet times also a reminder of life threatening situations is in itself a complex matter. In a way it is good to work down there, away from classrooms in a space that does not have any associations with educational matters. By now it is very much into the system that shelters are used for the arts in general and the arts therapies, it is part of a normality which is abnormal anywhere else in the world, but in Israel, every neighbourhood has a Shelter which is not used regularly, it therefore became a space to be used by the arts. On the other hand it is a cold, ugly space that has no natural light, has Neon white lighting and has the connotations that it has. The safe space an art therapy room is supposed to be becomes the complete opposite for me as a therapist and for my clients once all the children are crammed into our space. Up to now I have been very lucky. Most drills have occurred on days I do not work there. I think I would find it worst to actually see the invasion, as opposed to only see the signs afterwards, especially if I've been notified in advance and I have been able to ensure the safety of materials and artwork. One of the themes that comes up regarding the issue of working in shelters which is also a theme that is intimately connected to situations of political violence and therefore surfaces in many ways, is that of blurring of boundaries and that of constant uncertainty. Just like the inner and outer reality may become undifferentiated, so is the sense of feeling unsafe or protected. A boy brought up the sense of threat and the sense of protection when we heard a helicopter flying above us. His first thought was: "perhaps there was another bomb" and the second: "perhaps the helicopter is there to protect us". The need for protection comes, like it often does, with the sense of threat.

The need for protection seems to come together with the need for repair and restoration that I see time and time again. The boy mentioned above, for example, made a clay sculpture of the Twin Towers in which there is no

indication whatsoever of their destruction. He built them whole, he went back to the times before the destruction. This is true for many children who drew, sculpted or played out this theme, I have come across only one drawing in which the airplane is shown, the moment of impact and smoke are depicted, but not the destruction. Usually the Twin Towers, were not re-constructed after their destruction, children chose to build them again as if they had not been destroyed. This use of art to restore the past or re-construct the present can be seen also in other works with other themes. I do not know what kind of coverage was received in England regarding the Columbia space shuttle launch, in Israel it was a matter of great importance which received a vast amount of attention. The fact that an Israeli astronaut was a crewmember was the main reason for this. Ilan Ramon carried with him great hope, pride, a sense of purpose and worthiness, which this nation is in desperate need to have and has lost. The need for the archetypal Hero manifested itself in this astronaut and they even made astronautical costumes for the Holiday in which all the Jewish children wear costumes. Ilan Ramon's death and the spatial accident had an especially potent effect in Israeli society as he was carrying so much national pride and hope for a better life. The way Israelis took the space shuttle accident was as if all the crewmembers were their relatives, this explosion which took place in outer space somehow carried the current national trauma and perhaps also the personal traumas of some. This unfortunate incident that happened far away in outer space somehow became a vessel through which other calamities were expressed. The investigation of outer space, in general, seems to be a need for control and a preoccupation with the future.

There were discussions whether he should have a stately military burial as if he would be a Hero who was killed in battle serving his country which in fact was done. The fact that in the accident everything exploded and the body members of the crew were scattered all over had a chilling resonance with the suicide bombings in which the search and collection of body members are televised or witnessed by people present in the situation.

With regard to this accident I again saw how art comes in to help a child both express her sadness and shattered hopes as well as a means to mend and restore reality. For her 12th birthday I had cut 13 balloon shaped pieces of cartridge paper which were hung on a panel, ready to be drawn on, or written on if she wanted to use them to give shape to dreams, hopes, requests for this new year of her life. She drew on two of them and wrote on two others. The relevant drawing for this discussion is the drawing of the space shuttle. She drew the space shuttle whole, before the explosion, it is flying in the air and the 7 crewmembers jump out with their parachutes. The following week the balloons were waiting for her as she entered the room, the space shuttle drawing got an addition; she wrote what can be translated as "We survived"! So here again we see how art contains sadness and anxiety and comes to the rescue by giving an opportunity to re-make a situation and make it more bearable or repair reality and its effects on the soul. I often think of Jung's thoughts about the Unconscious finding ways to repair itself, to heal the wounds, to find a balance. In order to survive the trauma of the day to day experience children are using art to protect themselves and to regain control and stability. The fact that reality is full of uncertainty, lack of control and is plagued by explosion and destruction is a very shattering experience for a young soul as well as for the adults who cannot provide all the protection or comfort they would like to be able to provide.

Everything is so volatile that it is of most importance to be in touch with the news on a daily basis. Not knowing what has happened in the country may affect in that a client may bring up a theme that is connected to the daily news and the therapist would be unaware of the subject. Several months ago a campaign of protection, against the possible attack from Iraq was organised. The alarming announcements and calls for people to come to renew their masks or receive one if they didn't have one have been frightening for children. The preparations that the government and local councils are doing, the general atmosphere, the drills in schools, the announcements on TV are affecting children and these effects sometimes appear in the therapy

room. The same boy who sculpted the Twin Towers started a session by saying that he went with his mother to get a mask, and a conversation developed in which he was able to say that he is scared. The girl who works with me together with this boy said she is not scared, but the following week she reported that her mother explained what war is, and now, she is scared. I find it interesting to notice their use of different coping mechanisms. The boy has been busy making a castle with plenty of spiky sticks to hurt the enemy in case they approach the castle; he also gives dance- fight performances of Capoeira before he starts working on the castle. The girl is solely interested in a Latin-American children's soap opera. She is making a box with notes related to the actors, speaks of the story, sings the songs, craves to meet the actors who may come on a visit and shows off to me how much Spanish she has learnt by watching it. Imagination and distancing seem to be very successful coping mechanisms for her, she is immersing herself in an imaginary life far way from the reality we are living.

When the "protection campaign" started I was unable to be in touch with the national news for a couple of days. I was perplexed when a client sculpted a clay syringe, she did not mention anything about the possible war, or having gone with her mother to get the mask which has the nerve gas antidote in it. It was only after the session that my supervisor told me of the new preparations that the government was doing. The syringe is symbolic both of the grave danger in front of us as well as a protection device, so perhaps her art here is both a containment of her anxiety and fear as well as her hope for protection and need for control. She made a series of different objects that day, an ashtray, a heart-shaped container decorated with beads and the syringe. I believe that sculpting in clay that day had the function of releasing nervous tension, it had a soothing effect as well as containing her anxiety, fear and need for control.

Within Jewish culture and history there are many images for the Hero and the Evil One archetypes. The Holiday mentioned earlier in which children dress

up in costumes, for example, is related to the Bible story of Queen Esther, in which Haman, the Evil One, has a plan to massacre all the Jews, the Holiday is to celebrate the survival of the Jewish people. The archetypal Hero has had its manifestation in Ilan Ramon, whereas the archetype of the Evil One or the Wicked finds a strong image in Saddam Hussein. The intermingling of inner and outer reality mentioned before can be seen in the next example. A boy I work with who is almost 7 told me one day of his imaginary world. He has a group of imaginary friends whom he calls 'The Invisibles', they are souls of people who have died, and they are a gang. The Invisibles are preparing themselves for battle as the Bad Angel or Satan wants to make war, his name is Saddam Hussein. As he drew them he explained that they change form on a constant basis, in that particular moment some of them took the form of objects, others letters and others animals. I wonder if this constant transformation is symbolic of the constant and unpredictable situation that we live in concerning our personal and national security as well as the unstable and unpredictable life that this boy has at home with his parents. His grandmother's religious, mystical and superstitious concerns, his parents' lack of containment, instability and inappropriate behaviour mixed together with the reality we live in Jerusalem all make up a lethal combination that leads to this flooding of the unconscious. Perhaps here we also see the use of imagination and distancing as a coping mechanism.

In the examples I gave earlier I have also wondered what is the particular connection between the personal history and personal situation of the child and the way he or she is taking the collective experience. The boy who commented on the helicopter, sculpted the Twin Towers and is presently doing Capoeira performances as well as making a Defended Castle is a very insecure and weak child who has learning difficulties and social inadequacies. He has become much stronger and is beginning to be able to play with the boys from his class. He lives with his mother and grandmother, he has never met his father who suddenly phoned last year wanting to see him. His mother does not trust him and demanded that they meet at Social Services, the

father then did not phone again and this boy stayed with the anticipation without a real explanation. I wonder if it was his personal weakness and insecurity that brought the need to restore the destroyed towers, perhaps for him it was especially threatening that strong upright buildings collapse in such a way and his soul could not bear this? I wonder if the need to re-construct the towers is also connected to his absent father? The other children in his class that I work with did not re-create the towers, other examples that I know of were not done by children that I work with.

A few drawings that I have seen were done by children in El Salvador in a project called: "Lets live in Peace" in a campaign against violence, it was done 3 months after the September 11 attacks. I have the newspaper print of a few drawings to show you. Here again it is interesting to see that the towers are upright and standing, even in the one that has smoke. As a country ridden by violence that still has the trauma of the 10 year civil war, the distanced, far way violence is what captured Salvadorian children's imagination, they did not draw the violence that occurs in their vicinity. The images produced by children during the civil war are poignant pictures of soldiers, airplanes and helicopters firing as well as houses on fire and bodies lying on the ground. Those children are now in their 20s but perhaps the children of today are carrying unconsciously the past trauma of the civil war of the 80s. There is plenty of violence and crime now, but they chose the Twin Towers and Bin Laden in their images. It would be interesting to know what observations have been done in other places of political violence like Kosovo and other places.

If I look at the personal circumstances of the girl who drew the space shuttle and sculpted the syringe I wonder how these have affected the way she has taken the collective experience? She has learning difficulties, her parents are divorced, her father lives in Canada, the day she made the syringe her father had come from Canada and we met for the first time, she showed him her artwork. Her father did not realize that the syringe was related to the possible

imminent war and she feels unprotected by him given that he lives far away and is not taking her with him. He puts many conditions regarding her traveling to see him or his coming to see her, the conditions being that she does well in school. She is not doing very well in school, she cannot control her performance like her father expects and he refuses to see, accept or understand her limits. The syringe symbolizes and carries both the threat of an uncontrollable situation- chemical weapons- and the control and protection that can be provided by her or her mother by injecting the Atropine as protection against nerve gas. She has little real control of her life is dissatisfied and frustrated but seeks control in whatever means are possible. Moreover, she has a nervous tick, has obsessive behaviour and a lot of tension with her mother. Her need for control can be seen in her relationship with her mother, in her obsessive behaviour and in her artwork. Her artwork both embodies her existential anxiety and it also contains and restores destruction to appease the emotional turmoil caused both by her personal situation and the collective national one.

For a therapist reality based fears are unlike those that are solely intrapsychic, mostly because often the therapist shares the same fears as the clients, both therapist and client share an equal exposure to danger. The protection parents and therapists can offer are often quite inadequate. The only real help we can give is that of being aware of the different coping mechanisms available and assisting both parents and children to find the ones that are appropriate for them. We can also encourage parents to diminish the quantity of exposure to the images presented by the media. As an art therapist I can also offer the space to create which is a means by which clients may express their feelings and find refuge in images that they themselves make and can contain and restore them emotionally. Moreover, art making is also a coping mechanism which brings people in touch with their strengths and energy. At times a few of my clients have chosen drama or movement as a means to express their preoccupations. I have wondered if at times the dramatic events we have been living through find a more adequate

refuge in the slightly less distanced art forms, the more physical way of being. Perhaps the 3 children who at times chose drama and movement have found the physical coping mechanisms more appropriate for them. Although I trained as an art therapist I find it important to give space to other art forms, as any art provides containment, the opportunity for repair and can be a coping mechanism.