SELF-DISCOVERY FOR WELLNESS

EXPRESSIVE ARTS PART ONE

SDFW VIDEO SESSION 4

WHAT ARE EXPRESSIVE ARTS?

Expressive arts are the utilization of artistic modalities to express the things – feelings, trauma, deep emotions, memories, experiences – that one cannot easily or adequately express in words.

The arts are strong communicators that engage our innate creativity to express forces and things that have impacted us for good or ill. Their power lies in their ability to bypass the cognitive and verbal functions and access the irrational aspects of any phenomenon or event that we have perceived and/or experienced.

The function of expressive arts is to create a representation of the unspeakable, illustrate the un-knowable, and give an outlet to the outside, sensory world to those things that are simply too huge for words, and with potential meanings and aspects far deeper than our rational functions can comprehend. They are an outlet for the mystery of ourselves.

Expressive arts are the medium through which our deepest feelings, fears, hopes, ecstasies and despair can achieve a form and be presented into the material world. In this way they are a means of release, so that these things gain shape and form. The release of the art releases us from the power they have over us if they are locked within us with no means of escape.

The purpose of expressive arts is to express, not to create a photographic likeness or something of beauty. In expressive arts, there is no goal or preconceived idea of what you want to create. You simply think about something – an experience, a phenomenon, an emotion, an idea, the numinous – and let it guide you.

THE MODALITIES OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS

Visual Arts

Visual arts include painting, drawing, sculpture, collage and film. You can use anything from finger paints and Play Doh to fabric, chalk, watercolors, crayons, pencils, photography – literally anything that will make a mark on a surface or create a visual representation of what you are

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trying to express. It can be as simple as drawing a design on a piece of paper or as complicated as a short video. Remember that the emphasis is on expressive.

Some of the greatest artists have achieved new heights by allowing their art to be expressive rather than representative. We are taught in school that art has to be a representation of something – the sky cannot be pink, the grass cannot be purple. But (with some exceptions) art did not break out of its representational and aesthetic fetters until the cusp of the 20th Century and beyond with artists such as Picasso, Mondrian, Matisse, Jackson Pollack and Munch. What can be more expressive than Munch's 1893 painting "The Scream", or Jackson Pollack's 1952 masterpiece "Convergence?" How many layers of meaning are there in the stills showing the montage elements from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible, Part One*? Have you ever looked at the stars the same way after seeing Van Gogh's "Starry Night"? Although these are examples of expressive arts in the hands of masters, they are primarily expressive in nature. Art does not have to be objective or beautiful to be meaningful. In fact, it is most powerful when it shows truth rather than aesthetic posturing.

And you can do this. Children are wonderful expressive artists because they show the world the way they perceive it without developed artistic aptitude and skill. If you approach a form of visual art with a child's honesty and lack of conformity to societally mandated aesthetics – just let go and have fun – you will be slightly astonished by the results.

Music

Music is a powerful means of expression, and it is something that is used globally in all kinds of expressive and healing rituals and protocols. Simple drumming is the very heartbeat of life and of the Earth itself. You can drum simply by clapping your hands or beating on a desk or table. You can twang a rubber band, blow air through a comb, or create a makeshift guitar with pieces of string stretched over a surface with a hollow inside. (These are the instruments that were used by the earliest blues musicians in the Delta – it was all they had. And the blues is one of the finest examples of expressive arts ever.) Do you remember in school how the teacher would hand out simple instruments, blocks, bells, sand paper blocks, tambourines and maracas and how the class would create a joyous rhythmic cacophony? That is expressive arts in the musical modality. One does not have to be a master of an instrument, or composition or voice to express oneself musically. If you happen to be proficient in some aspect of music, then by all means use it, but remember to let everything you know fall away so that the expressive sound might emerge. A good example of this is "The Rite of Spring" by Igor Stravinsky (1908). This work was the

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background for disturbing expressive choreography by the dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky, which represented a ritual virgin sacrifice in tribal Russia. The ballet was so alien and powerful to its Paris audience on the occasion of its premier that they rioted, trashed the theater, threw things at the dancers and orchestra and shut down the performance. Stravinsky and Nijinsky in their respective modalities created something so primal that it acted as an epigenetic trigger to many in the audience, blasting them out of their comfort zone and into a response of answering violence and chaos. Sixty years later, the rock group, The Doors would create expressive performances that would similarly drive their audiences to the brink of madness and forever alter their experience of the world.

Movement

Dance and movement are a simple and direct way to allow the body to express what you are feeling. Movement can be one of the most profound albeit one of the simplest of the expressive arts. A simple exercise that you can do is to dance your memories. Think of a remembered incident that brought you great joy. Hold that memory in your mind and allow your body to move in response to the imagery in your mind's eye. Later, you can refer to your list of images from your dream one by one and let your body respond to how each one makes you feel. The great thing about movement is that its motivation comes directly from your core – your gut, your cells – based on a stimulus provided by your brain. There is no room for rationalization or obfuscation or judgmental consideration. The reflexive movement tells you everything you need to know, and in so doing provides you with valuable information about your true feelings – loves, hates and fears. Our bodies never lie, so that you might be surprised by the response your body gives you to a mental stimulus. Is that response different from what you were expecting? Or perhaps what you thought it ought to be? If so, your body has just expressed a truth of which you were unaware with your rational senses. Believe it. Explore it. Follow it. Allow it to lead you to insights and answers.

Poetry

Poetry is prose writing; what dance is to basketball. Poetry has the ability to create images and feelings through its use of language and subtext that are suitable to expressing phenomena and feelings, insights and emotions, too large for the rational mind of literary structure to encompass. For an example, this is something I wrote during a poetry workshop in Wales in 2018.

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Close your eyes, listen, and allow yourself to be engulfed in the imagery and mysticism:

Mysterious truth shining, knowing, awesome, eternal.

Soaring clarity. Wondrous light.

Soul free in fields of wonder. Essence of land. Spirits of nature.

Trees and light and earth – Watchers of eternity.

I connect to all through birdsong, wind and spider's web.

Voices of the Ancient Ones sing in the wind:

This is the now.

This is eternal.

This is the One.

This is the truth.

There is no greater vision on our journey of becoming, for the moment bears amazing fruit.

(Karel James Bouse, Sept. 2018, Newport, Wales)

What images does this passage invoke for you? What are the feelings that you experience as you listen? Does it give you a sense of something beyond the perimeter of your normal consciousness? Do you find yourself momentarily standing on the threshold of wakefulness and dreams, temporarily suspended outside of time and space? This is the power of poetry to express that which our normal prose-speech is incapable of representing. In poetry we use language to cross the divide between the rational and the mystical. You can demonstrate this difference to yourself by taking an image or portion of narrative from one of your dreams. On one side of the page, describe the dream element in regular prose. On the other side, describe it in poetry. What is the difference? Did the poetry evoke a different type of feeling or comprehension of the dream element's meaning that prose alone could not express? There is a freedom in poetry because of its lack of form and subjugation to the laws of grammar.

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Storytelling

Storytelling is a universal means of bringing an experience to life. Storytelling exists in all cultures. When we tell a partner or group of our dream experience, we are telling a story – recounting a narrative complete with images and dialog. When we recount a dream or memory to someone else, we are participating in storytelling. The myths and legends that are passed down in families and in societies is a key way in which the story of the social group is kept alive. Storytelling is a way to transmit not only experiences but wisdom, culture and beliefs about the material world and the numinous. When you write out your narrative, you are telling a story. The trick is to just let your pen or pencil (and it is recommended that you do this using a pen and paper rather than the computer) begin to talk. Keep your rational mind out of it as much as you can. If you start over-thinking, it's a good idea to back off and take a short break so that you can resume the flow of the story as it comes from the heart and body.

Drama

The expressive arts were used by our ancestors – and are still used by indigenous and traditional societies today – to give material form to the phenomena and narratives perceived beyond normal material consciousness. Of all of the expressive arts, drama – or theater – is the most powerful because it alone combines all of the artistic modalities and presents all in a form that is life-sized and multi-dimensional. Ritualized theater is at the center of tribal healing, hunting, harvest, war, evocation, and rites of passage. With the use of masks and costumes, performers can represent the gods, mythological characters, and spirits of nature, and animals. Frequently in these theatrical rituals – for they are ritualistic in that they have a specific purpose and a pre-determined evocation of the numinous – the entire community participates through dance, chanting, and music. Frequently the shaman(s) of the communities would be at the center of the stage and the entire production was designed to enhance their mission on behalf of the community.

By using the theatrical arts – even the simple act of representing a dream, memory, wish or vision as a play (the way we did when we were children, remember?) – we bring another dimension to what we are trying to express. In the simple exercise of writing a short play based on a dream or incident in our own lives, we are allowing the subtext of the event a chance to express itself through the words.

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The psychologist Fritz Perls made dream theater the center piece of his therapy. Perls was frequently brutal in his workshops, but the workshop dramas always carried with them the seeds of intensified self-knowledge and insight, and revelation. Although Perls used improvisation in his workshops – and this is a highly effective technique – the solo act of writing a dream or memory down in the form of a play has the potential to reveal strong feelings and new understanding.

SUMMARY

Play is at the core of expressive arts. By giving artistic form to the experiences, we have in our dreams, memories, journeys, and visions we are enabling ourselves to blast through the constraints of our rational minds and look at something that is not based on what we perceive in the material world with our physical senses. The fallacy in much of psychology is that it is based on the tenets of positivism, which are the foundational criteria of science: these are, something has to be (1) observable, (2) measurable, and (3) predictable to be real. It also has to be replicable in order to be a viable subject for scientific research. Expressive arts allow us to explore our dreams and beliefs in ways that are not limited by positivism or cultural reality constructs.

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