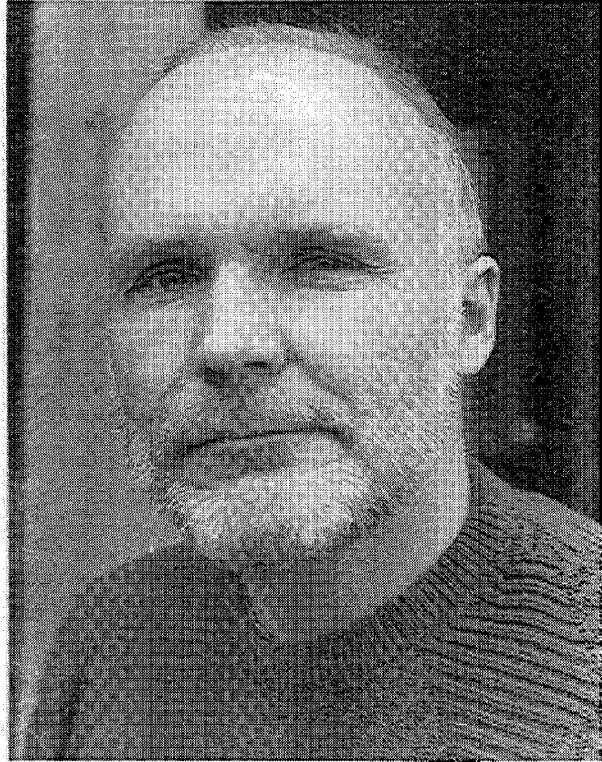


**EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY**  
**The Canvas Mirror**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce L. Moon is Co-Director of the Harding Clinical Internship in Art Therapy in Worthington, Ohio. His clinical work has focused on the treatment of severely emotionally and mentally disturbed children, adolescents and adults. He has been an instructor at the Columbus College of Art and Design, president of the Buckeye Art Therapy Association and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Art Therapy Association. Bruce has presented workshops, papers and art studios throughout the United States.

He is an active painter and poet songwriter. He has exhibited artwork in Ohio galleries and in the Ohio State Exhibition. He and his wife, Cathy, built their log home in the country outside of Columbus, Ohio where they live with their children, Jesse and Brea.

Bruce brings to the profession a rich tradition of combined training in art education, theology and art therapy. The integration of these with his twenty years of clinical experience and his interest in existentialism provides an intriguing, poetic and theoretical approach to art therapy in a psychiatric setting.

SECOND EDITION

**EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY**  
**The Canvas Mirror**

*By*

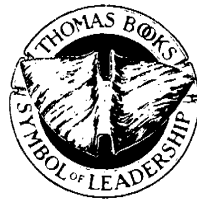
BRUCE L. MOON, M.A.C.E., M.Div., A.T.R.

*With Forewords by*

Pat B. Allen, Ph.D., A.T.R.

*and*

Don L. Jones, A.T.R., H.L.M.



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## FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

Nietzsche decried the laziness of humankind who would hide like sheep in a herd, never daring to own their uniqueness. He said:

Only artists hate this slovenly life in borrowed manners and loosely fitting opinions and unveil the secret, everybody's bad conscience, the principle that every human being is a unique wonder; they dare to show us the human being as he is, down to the last muscle, himself and himself alone—even more, that in this rigorous consistency of his uniqueness he is beautiful and worth contemplating, as novel and incredible as every work of nature, and by no means dull.<sup>1</sup> (p. 101)

Bruce Moon is an artist who has contemplated his uniqueness through making art. Only through such a personal commitment is the art therapist really fit to endure, along with the client, the anguish of emptiness, the chaos of freedom, and the terror of loss of meaning. Without this personal tempering in the fire of human suffering, the art therapist must rely on technique and strategy in working with others. Technique alone is insufficient and hollow in the face of the ultimate life concerns brought to the therapist in this day and age. Can the therapist dare to suggest that the mother dying of AIDS “draw her pain” if that same therapist has not plumbed her own despair as deeply as possible?

As Bruce demonstrates, the purpose of embracing the meaning of life through our own art is not to become an expert who can then advise the patient but rather to become a humble fellow traveler who can be fully present alongside the suffering of an individual. Through this authentic presence, struggling in the studio in full view of others, the art therapist silently says that the struggle is worth it, that dropping the numbing cocoon that separates us from our pain is worthwhile, necessary, even joyful at times if we are to be fully alive. Our own anguish is part of this process. It is, after all, through our brokenness that we are able to connect with others. Making that connection is the way meaning in life is created. *The Canvas Mirror* is the story of connections—Bruce's connec-

tions with his patients, their connections with each other, and, ultimately, Bruce's connection with the reader.

He shows us that it is possible to speak in plain language about the difficulties of our patients—to use words like suffering, love, boredom, joy—if we also speak to ourselves in that same language. Otherwise, we are tempted to take desperate refuge in the cold disguise of clinical language more as a means of self-preservation than any effort to serve the patient. Is it the making and doing of art, the mixing of color and the priming of canvas that helps us stay real? I think so. These tasks are grounding; they remind us that we must create limits and boundaries for our expression, a surface on which to exist, an apt metaphor for creating our life. There is a comforting reality, a mundaneness, to many art tasks that contains our urges and emotions; doing these tasks mindfully confers a dignity upon our struggle.

The current state of mental health care, with short stays and a problem-focused approach, makes *The Canvas Mirror* even more relevant today than when it was first published in 1990. Even with lobbying our officials and becoming vocal in the work place, even with certification and licensure, we have no guarantees of what the mental health care system will look like in the foreseeable future nor what our place in it will be. Ultimately, how and who we are, how we think about what we do, the depth of our own compassion—these are the only aspects of the therapeutic equation under our control.

We are provided in this book with a philosophy of how to be rather than a manual of what to do. Yet, in his showing of himself, rather than only safely telling, Bruce has also given us plenty to do. He wonders out loud whether the reader will find him narcissistic or self-indulgent for sharing his own artwork, he takes the risk and shows himself. Nietzsche said, “I care for a philosopher only to the extent that he is able to be an example . . .” (p. 106). Me too, me too.

Pat B. Allen, Ph.D., A.T.R.

## REFERENCE

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich (1956). The challenge of every philosophy. In W. Kaufman (Ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (p. 101). Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books.

## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

**B**ruce Moon has written more than a textbook. What he gives us is more like a medieval illuminated map, usable for navigation, but populated by dragons. In my view he translates the first of Buddha's four Noble Truths, "Suffering is universal" into "Life is permanent white water" and invites the reader to plunge in.

It is made clear in this work that the existential process of art therapy, though often unpredictable, is not a wild turbulence. There is a history, a sequence: exposure—premise—practice—theory. Bruce builds on the foundations of art therapy that have evolved over the past half-century. The establishment of the Clinical Internship in Art Therapy at Harding Hospital has been an innovative, unique contribution to the field of art therapy education.

There is support from Freud and precedent for promoting arts as a primary mode of treatment. He emphasized the importance of unconscious imagery. If dreams provided the "royal road to be traveled by night from the unconscious," then graphic metaphors might well be expressways to convey feelings when ordinary routes are impassable. Jung suggested, "There must not only be talk, but doing something about it." Years of art therapy practice have confirmed that affects can surface directly into consciousness without traveling the circuitous route of word associations.

The process Freud labeled "hypercathexis," which included an enabling space, acute focus of attention, guided imagery, a relationship and sensitive coaching, is a supportive treatment context for the art therapist as well as the patient. It is the raft on the white water.

Some who read this book may conclude that the man is the message, implying that events portrayed in the case studies are personality-centered and therefore unteachable. There is truth in the cliché, but both the man and the message are also a blend of history, talent, training, experience and team practice. Glimpses of creative practitioners at work in the mainstream are vital for students, colleagues of other disciplines and

others who strive to understand the classical tutorial methods that are the model for clinical training in art therapy.

Bruce has taken personal risks in sharing revealing encounters with patients and with himself. One hopes he is appreciated for having highlighted the importance of existential aspects of art therapy in treatment and training.

Don L. Jones, A.T.R., H.L.M.



## PREFACE

*By means of image and parable one can persuade, but prove nothing. That is why the world of science and learning is so wary of image and parable.*

Friedriche Nietzsche

The title of this book is an expression of my desire to link the practice of art psychotherapy to the core issues of life as presented in existentialism. In this decade the health care systems in America seem to have drifted away from focus on quality of life and relationships towards preoccupation with observable, quantifiable and verifiable data regarding functional behaviors of the patient. They have exchanged the language of psychotherapy—a journey into the deep inner self—for a more pragmatic and cost-efficient language of DRG, DSM-III-R, DSM IV and empirical evidence. In so doing they have banished from discussion much of the wisdom of centuries of our collective struggle to understand ourselves, what we mean to one another and our place in the universe. The poetry of clinical communication has been discolored, disinfected and at times altogether removed.

Art therapy has not been immune to this trend. At conferences and symposia I find myself wondering what happened to the depth and richness of my field. This may explain my need to write at this time. My colleague and friend, John Reece, says I have written in order “to find a stage large enough for my ego.” Perhaps.

Existentialism implies an interest in the human struggle with deep issues of life in the face of death. Anxiety, conscience, relationships, concern, guilt and love all receive significant attention from prominent existential writers. Existentialists often choose to present their thoughts through story and metaphor rather than the classic dialogue form of Plato. They seem less interested in intellectual discourse than in wholistic, provocative imagining. In linking art psychotherapy to existentialism I make no claim to represent the perspective of all art therapists. The

reader who seeks formulas for interpretation or outlines of specific technical exercises will be disappointed. There are occasional references to experiences or structures, but these are tucked safely in the deeper discussion of illustrative cases. I have no desire to write a clinical cookbook; rather, I intend to frame a manner of thinking about what I do as an art psychotherapist. My colleagues in the *quality assurance* field will no doubt find this work inefficient and vague, even non-intentional. So be it.

I consider all intentionally helping professions to be forms of art. Therefore, all therapists are essentially artists. In spite of the increasing interest, research and speculation about the biological and chemical roots of behavior and personality, the process of treating the patient continues to be more akin to art than science. In my experience as a clinician I have engaged patients in music, sports, poetry and work, but it is in the visual image that I am most at home. The consistent theme of my writings and teachings over the past fifteen years has been an insistence on honoring the graphic metaphors of my patients. I am perturbed that some of my colleagues in art therapy and related disciplines appear to have lost their identity as artists. Their vision of creativity, growth and meaning has been traded in for a perception of self as scientist or modifier of behavior. This book is about the depths of our profession as I see it, integral to the depths of art and artists and of human existence.

A foremost art historian, H.W. Janson, uses the metaphor of birth to describe the process of creating art. I like this metaphor and wish I had thought of it first. I will refer to it often. Birth is a basic life event. It involves an initial act of love followed by patience, preparation and surprise. My wife Cathy assures me that labor is an apt description of the process. "It's awfully hard work." I can attest to the intensity that birthing involves, having been an eyewitness and coach on two occasions. Art therapy as a discipline is still being born.

This book is about the life of our field. Just as when my children were born I could only try to imagine what they might grow up into, so we can only glimpse the future of our profession. As children grow they gradually master tasks and form their identity. We cheer their successes, encourage their struggles and applaud their accomplishments. Sometimes they make mistakes and take a wrong direction. In those times we redirect, challenge and point out other roads to travel. As a participant in the birthing of art psychotherapy I look with loving, critical and hopeful

eyes at our discipline. There are questions to be raised, directions to be challenged and praises to be sung.

*The Canvas Mirror*, subtitle of this book, is poetic self-indulgence. Over the past twenty years I have often experienced my paintings as a great comfort in the midst of anxiety or pain. Sometimes, feeling comfortable and self-satisfied, I have been jabbed and torn by my own art. That is the intent of this book. It is what I am committed to. As you read on, may you share the soothing and the affliction I have felt. May we all connect with the joy, pain and *awfully hard work* of being born.

*If a man loses anything and goes back and looks carefully for it, he will find it.*

Tatanka Yotanka (Sitting Bull)



## INTRODUCTION

*I have come back to show you something. Let us look carefully.*

B.L.M. '94

Sometime in the late eighties, Shaun McNiff, Sr. Kathleen Burke and I sat in a small pub in Cleveland, Ohio. It was after midnight when conversation turned to my writing project, this book. Sr. Kathleen asked, "What's the title going to be?"

"Well," I replied, "the working title is Existential Art Therapy."

Shaun sighed. "Bruce, don't be redundant. All art is existential."

As I have worked on this second edition of *The Canvas Mirror*, I have thought often of Shaun's admonition. He is right, all art is existential. Perhaps that is why the concepts laid out in this book have held up as the world of health care has been revolutionized in the last five years. All art is existential, i.e., all art has to do with the basic human experience of life as it is.

When I entered the art therapy profession it was not uncommon for mentally ill people to be hospitalized for years. In the summer of 1994, as I write this, it is uncommon for people to be hospitalized for more than two weeks. Things change. So much of the world around me has been radically altered in the past few years. Still, the essential elements of existential art therapy as I exercise them at Harding and in my private practice have not altered. Clearly the time frame has quickened but the core has not been moved.

Whenever illness and emotional distress are connected to loss of meaning, *existential emptiness*, the arts and the therapeutic use of imagery rise instinctively as medicament. Joining art therapy and existential philosophy activates the creation of a profession that encourages imagination to fill the vacuum and re-invent meaning in life.

My approach to emotional and mental disturbance is artistic. The purpose of this book was (and is) to propose a way of thinking about art and its place in the therapeutic community. This work makes no attempt

to explain the images that emerge as individuals are confronted with the ultimate concerns of their lives.

The philosophy and method in this book are based on principles of honorable dialogue and engagement. Making art is a process and all of its aspects are the agents of meaningful engagement.

*Existential Art Therapy* does not confine itself to the imaginings of the individual self. Meaning, it will be argued, is a self-transcendent phenomenon. Existential emptiness cannot be filled through solo effort. Only in relationship to others can purpose be realized. One of the *others* that must be attended to in the existential art therapy process is the *image* itself. "Concentration on the 'other' ensouls the world, and paintings are ensouled objects or beings who guide, watch, and accompany their makers and the people who live with them" (McNiff, 1992).

I have come to regard this book as a very pragmatic work. It was born out of clinical art therapy encounters and personal/professional life experiences. It has grown as a tribute to the *mystery* of life. Although I make no effort to tell anyone what to do in these pages, I do suggest a way to think about what one does.

The story that unfolds amongst an artist, her images and the art therapist is not a restricted conversation. The art therapist is a part of the communication as are all the pieces of the image and the artist. It is my intent in this book to propose and illustrate an approach to art therapy—a theoretical structure and a sequence of tenets that emerge from the structure. These will provide a frame for what I consider to be the essentials of art therapy.

The designation for this approach, *existential art therapy*, resists concise definition. The foundation of existential philosophy is not quantifiable or empirical but is profoundly intuitive. I will begin by sharing a definition of existential art therapy. The rest of the book is essentially illustrative of this definition: *Existential art therapy is a dynamic approach to the use of imagery and creative processes which focuses on the ultimate concerns of an individual's existence.*

I believe that most therapists, certainly most art therapists, regardless of their theoretical camp, apply the three tenets of existential art therapy that I will propose. Still, I doubt that most art therapists would embrace describing themselves as existential art therapists. The reason for this is that the language of existentialism has always been (and continues to be) imprecise and poetically unverifiable. I will often use such language in this text. Words like authentic, intense, anguish, struggle, love, play,

prayer, work, mastery and meaning are not the road signs of behaviorism and short-term focal therapy. Yet, they are not antithetical to brief therapy or focused attention to problematic behaviors.

I've been asked many times in the past few years if the ideas presented in this book have any clinical relevance for treatment settings where the average length of stay is three days or less. My answer is a resounding, *YES!* Most of the additions to the original text have come in an effort to illustrate the pertinence of existential art therapy even when the duration of treatment is one 50-minute session.

Every art therapist I've met believes in the power of imagery and creative process to deepen communication and extend insight that is beyond the field of the logical self. There are pointed discriminations however that become apparent in how we act toward the images that emerge. These sensibilities extend from viewing them as concrete clues in a pathological mystery, to welcoming them as messengers who come to soothe, afflict, comfort and disturb.

I regard the creation of images as a remedy that moves through stages of making and contemplation. Therapists and peers engaged in this method certainly make their contributions as beholders, pathfinders and assistants, but the therapeutic instrument is the art itself. The balm offered by reflection on images is the pouring-in of imagination. Resolution of particular conflicts or alleviation of stresses is considerably less important than involvement with the imagination. Existential art therapy does not encourage the artist to *understand* the meaning of his images; rather, it advocates a willingness to embrace meaning of life, as presented in images, even though they are often mysterious, unclear and perplexing.

Images invite us to look closely at them and to think deeply about their kind. Existential art therapy does not advocate labeling or interpreting the message of images. Rather it suggests that we approach them with a sense of wonder and awe, that we establish a respectful conversation with them, create stories about them, talk with them and invite them to talk with us. When such methods are used, the truly therapeutic benefit of the arts is manifested. The making of verbal constructs regarding images has its stipend to add to the process but it is not the primary contributor.

Inasmuch as every attribute of art adds to its therapeutic power it is impossible to suggest that some images heal while others injure. I have often come face to face with pictures that I found repugnant and disturbing,

only to be reassured that illness and antidote often have much in common. The therapeutic nature of the arts is found in the faith that what needs to be expressed will be expressed. In this sense, disturbing imagery may be regarded as the provocateur who appears as life enhancing rather than life threatening.

I will not make-believe that existential art therapy presents a radical new view of psychotherapeutic encounter. It does not describe a theory of pathology. I would prefer to offer this work as a metaphoric paradigm, a therapeutic construct that offers art therapists a system of understanding what we do. It is my hope that this allows us to make sense out of a huge array of clinical information and to design a coherent strategy of art psychotherapy. It is, I believe, a paradigm that has potent illustrative power. It is a humanistic metaphor which is attuned to the deeply human quality of the therapeutic process.

Existential art therapy is only a metaphoric paradigm. It is not *the only way*. Existence is doggedly unfettered and unpredictable. The sophisticated art therapist must be willing to endure the fundamental undetermined and mysterious nature of our work. They must have faith in the process and in the medicinal essence of creation.

B.L.M.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people who have, in their ways, contributed to the writing of this book. Special thanks go to Ellie Jones, my editor and colleague. She took a rough stone and polished it beautifully. Thanks to those who read, criticized and encouraged along the way—Cathy Moon, Deb DeBrular, John Reece and others. Thanks to Don Jones, my mentor, who believed in me in those times of my greatest doubts.

I've been blessed, these past fifteen years, to work with a creative, conflictual, painful and fun staff of the Adjunctive Therapy Department. In many ways this book is about the lessons they've taught me. I thank the administration of the Harding Hospital who supported this effort with time, encouragement and considerable typing and retyping hours. Doctor Richard Griffin, past Medical Director, offered help in a variety of ways from the earliest stages of the work. I must also extend my gratitude to Shaun McNiff for his support of this project.

Finally, I want to thank the patients I've come to know over the years. It is they who've taught me most of what I know. It is their stories, their anguish that bonded together art psychotherapy and existentialism so tightly within me.

To all these . . . thank you!



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The clinical accounts in this book are in spirit true. In all instances, however, names have been changed and biographical information has been so obscured as to totally insure the privacy and confidentiality of the persons with whom I have worked.

In most instances the illustrations are amalgamations of many specific cases, again with factual data fictionalized to protect individual identities.

The drawings and paintings discussed in case illustrations are based on patient artwork. The original works are the property of the individuals who made them. The descriptions have been sufficiently altered as to guard the integrity and privacy of their creators. In no case have I used the actual art product of my patient. I believe that to do so would not add significantly to the content or intent of this book.



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**EXISTENTIAL ART THERAPY**  
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## Chapter I

### PERSPECTIVE: WHERE IT BEGINS . . .

Some time ago I was in the art studio at Harding Hospital in Worthington, Ohio. I was working with an adolescent girl on the fundamentals of drawing one- and two-point perspective. She just wasn't getting it and I was frustrated with her seeming inability to grasp the concept of vanishing points. She would ask questions like "Are they real?" and "Who put them there?" The more she questioned, the more exasperated I became. Finally I suggested we take a break from this formal process and that she just sketch for a while. I moved to an adjoining room to work on a painting I had in progress.

After a few minutes, the girl entered the painting studio looking relaxed and pleased with herself. She held up a piece of drawing paper on which were several small drawings of cubes, utilizing one- and two-point perspective techniques. I smiled and asked how she'd figured it out. She laughed and told me that I'd been presenting things all wrong. She said, "They aren't *vanishing* points, they are *beginning* points, and I can put them wherever I want." I may never again be comfortable in referring to those imaginary points as vanishing points. They will always be beginning points.

The notion that the beginnings of things are on the distant horizon appeals to me. It implies a close relationship of foreground to background and of object to environment. This view holds a sense of breadth and depth which shifts focus away from the specific object right in front of our faces and connects us with a much wider spectrum of possibilities. When we add to this the proposition that beginning points are wherever we want them to be, we immediately sense the paradoxical nature of our work. As we think of art and treatment, growth and expression, the polarities are endless. A few examples are the continuums of temporal to infinite, specific to universal, shallows to depths, profane to sacred, and so on.

Where to begin this exploration of existential art psychotherapy? The

possible points of departure are many. For instance, I could start with the primitive cave paintings in France, or Michelangelo's idea of freeing the form from the marble block, or from the confessional cell of Catholicism, or the library of Sigmund Freud, or the writing desk of Jean Paul Sartre, or . . . , or . . . , or . . .

In the song "Crossroads,"<sup>1</sup> the poet-songwriter Don McLean offers useful reflections about beginnings. Listen:

*You know I've heard about people like me  
but I never made the connection  
they walk one road to set them free  
and find they've gone the wrong direction  
But there's no need for turning back  
'cause all roads lead to where I stand  
and I believe I'll walk them all  
no matter what I may have planned.*

Don McLean

Regardless of where I start, all roads will take me to where I am. Let's go for a walk.

## Chapter II

### EXISTENTIAL VALUES/ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

Existentialism has often been misinterpreted as a philosophy of despair. Readers of existentialistic literature occasionally find themselves so burdened by the existentialist's rejection of traditional values that they fail to hear the subtle, yet constant undertone of hope. It is easy to hear the themes of doubt. The existentialists' skepticism that humanity can find self-fulfilment through wealth, fame or pleasure is often perceived as cold, bitter and impersonal. Their recognition that all life is marked by suffering and loss mocks the ordinary person's attempt at achieving somehow a full and happy life. The existentialist position that pain, frustration, guilt and anxiety are the unavoidable lot of human beings is disquieting to say the least, particularly in this era which so adores the material manifestations of success and achievement.

Those who see the existentialist's embrace of these life realities too often fail to see the accompanying belief that painful striving is what generates values that go beyond the materialistic—the only values, in the end, that may genuinely be realized and felt to be truly worthy of human searching.

The existentialist literature is unpopular with many because of its insistence that humankind's struggle for worldly goods is a misperception of the human condition, that it leads people to petty, shallow lives and away from what could be a noble struggle. At the same time, the existential rejection of the *ivory tower* detachment of traditional philosophers is based on the belief that such distant objectivity impoverishes the human spirit by causing it to lose its uniquely human dimensions. So it is that the existentialists declare their values to be distinct from those of ordinary materialists and hedonists and distinct from those of traditional philosophers. Existentialism charges both with inhumanity, since the underlying motivation of both is the desire for a condition of well-being that is impossible and devalues humans.

One difficulty many readers have with existential literature is that