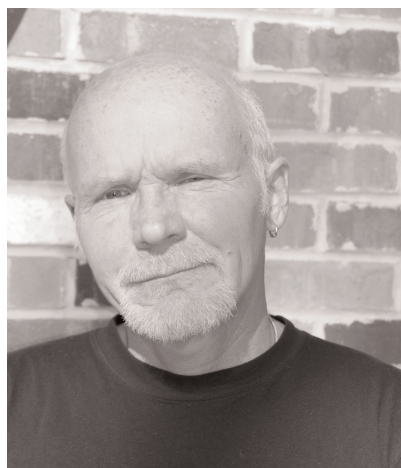


ART-BASED GROUP THERAPY



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce L. Moon, Ph.D., ATR-BC, HLM, is a professor of art therapy, chair of the art therapy department, and director of the graduate art therapy program at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He received the 2009 Honorary Life Member Award from the Buckeye Art Therapy Association and the 2007 Honorary Life Member Award from the American Art Therapy Association. Formerly the director of the graduate art therapy program at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the Harding Graduate Clinical Art Therapy Program in Worthington, Ohio, he has extensive clinical, administrative, and teaching experience. He holds a doctorate in creative arts with specialization in art therapy from Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio. Moon's current clinical practice is focused on the treatment of emotionally disturbed adolescents. He has lectured and led workshops at many colleges, universities, conferences, and symposia in the United States and Canada.

Moon is author of *Existential Art Therapy; Essentials of Art Therapy Training and Practice; Introduction to Art Therapy; Art and Soul; The Dynamics of Art as Therapy with Adolescents; Ethical Issues in Art Therapy*; and *The Role of Metaphor in Art Therapy*. He is editor of *Working with Images: The Art of Art Therapists* and coeditor of *Word Pictures: The Poetry and Art of Art Therapists*. Moon's many years of experience in clinical and educational settings, coupled with his interdisciplinary training in art education, art therapy, theology, and creative arts, inspire his provocative theoretical and practical approach to art-based group therapy.

Author's Note

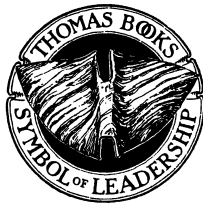
The clinical vignettes in this book are, in spirit, true. In all instances, details have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of persons with whom I have worked. The case illustrations and artworks presented are amalgamations of many specific situations. My intention is to provide realistic accounts of an art therapist's work with client groups while also protecting the privacy of individuals.

ART-BASED GROUP THERAPY

Theory and Practice

By

BRUCE L. MOON, PH.D., ATR-BC, HLM



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FOREWORD

They swaggered down the steps into the basement, making their way to the studio and looking more like a football team than a gathering of students at a therapeutic day school. Their saggy jeans and baggy jerseys accentuated their size; several had to duck to fit through the doorway. They thudded in along with their jackets, baseball hats, and portable CD players and slid into the chairs around the table.

Only three months out of graduate school, I started my career as an art therapist at a school program for troubled kids. As a graduate of an excellent art therapy program, I thought I was well prepared to lead groups, but nothing could have fully prepared me for my first experience. As I watched them take their places and swat at one another with their caps, I was beset by thoughts and questions: Remember to hold the space. How am I going to keep this environment safe? I hope they like me. What are we going to be doing today, again? These guys are really big, and they look very unhappy. I don't think they want to be here. Maybe I should have some music playing. Maybe I should have gotten a bigger table.

"So what are we going to make today?" one of the boys asked.

Before I could answer, another folded his arms, slouched into his chair, and exclaimed, "I hate this &!#%&*# art @\$%!%."

And so it began.

Leading art therapy groups is often a challenge, but as Bruce Moon so eloquently describes in the following pages, making art in the context of others is an incredibly and almost inexplicably powerful experience. He writes, "Things happen for people in art therapy groups that really are almost magical." The author's approach is to simultaneously explore how this *magic* occurs while still honoring the mystery and power of interpersonal art making.

No human being is immune to the influence of other human beings. While we may choose to live in isolation, we are all social creatures, fundamentally linked and defined by our interactions with others (Siegel, 1999). Neuroscientists may argue that it is chemical, anthropologists that it is evolutionarily beneficial, but in any rationale, the power of the group is undeniable. Like most things that are powerful, group experiences entail multiple paradoxes. Within group dynamics lie opportunities for harm as well as healing. Moon argues that therapeutic opportunities reside in the fear, tension, and vulnerability inherent in the process of making art alongside others. While some art therapists may feel ambivalent about leading groups, the emotions and reactions the group experience evokes for both the leader and the client are often anything but neutral.

In addition to being powerful, art therapy group experiences are typically dynamic and complex, inspiring a multitude of questions and issues for the group leader. Group leaders must wrestle with such questions as: Should I have a directive? How structured should the group be and how open-ended? Do all the group members have to work on the same task or should they work individually? *What* do I say, *when* do I say it, and *how* should I say it? Do I have to use language at all? How is this particular project therapeutic?

The art therapy profession is in a time of promise and great potential. As the field continues to evolve and the work of art therapy enters into diverse milieus, foundations and supports that emphasize our “indigenous” resources are essential. As art therapy continues to grow, it also continues to learn how to support, advocate, and take care of itself. Moon encourages the art therapist to not look outside for validation, but rather to look from within. By placing the art at the center of practice, *Art-Based Group Therapy* creates an explanatory model and rationale for group practice that is rooted in art therapy theory and identity.

While indebted to the classic texts of Corey, Corey, and Corey (2008) and Yalom (2005), the author has not disposed of the more verbal-based explanations of group therapy, but rather has built an organic framework that is fundamentally rooted in art making. Moon suggests, “The main course of the therapeutic meal takes place among clients, media, process, and product. The essence of art therapy group work is beyond the expressive capacity of spoken words.” Thus this book does not present a model of how art can be used alongside verbal processing within group situations to promote therapeutic change. It argues that *art* is the agent of change. *Art-Based Group Therapy* is not

an adjunct guide. As Moon explains, “It is the unique qualities of art-based group work that I want to examine in this text, in an effort to describe theories and methods that are indigenous to art therapy, rather than adaptations from other helping disciplines.”

The following pages will undoubtedly benefit students, practitioners, and educators alike. With this book as a guide, art therapy students may be more empowered to enter into the uncertain terrains of their practica grounded in a theory soundly based in their area of study. Practitioners will no doubt be encouraged, validated, and inspired to continue their work. Educators can employ the twelve principles, as they teach the basic theories and applications of group dynamics and processes. *Art-Based Group Therapy* not only aids in the direct applications of the classroom-learning environment, but does so in a way that underscores the message that art therapy is valued, independent, and self-sustaining.

While this text offers practical advice and provides tools for group art therapy leaders, it is much more than a list of stages, steps, or directives. This book explains, describes, and evokes the *experience* of group art therapy practice. Through the author’s effective use of storytelling, the reader encounters the group art therapy experience, transcending the case vignette and didactic instruction. A recipient of the Honorary Life Member Award of the American Art Therapy Association and author of a number of books on art therapy, Moon shares his wisdom and experience in a direct, personal, and authentic manner. He is a passionate advocate for the field and a believer in the power of images. Through his personal disclosures and vivid descriptions of amalgamated clinical situations, the reader is invited into art therapy sessions and given access to the mind, the heart, and the soul of the therapist.

That Moon is able to shape a highly theoretical model into such a personal narrative is an art in and of itself. His invitation to observe both the successes and the struggles of his work (to both show and to tell) models his statement that “Personal meaning can only be found in the context of relationships with others.” Reading *Art-Based Group Therapy*, as with all of Moon’s works, is an act of engaging in a relationship. Via the shared experience of working with others, readers will find an increased sense of value and meaning in both their current and previous group work. While there is pain, hardship, and uncertainty outlined in these pages, there is also a reassuring comfort in the eloquent explanations and examples of how art heals.

As art therapy continues to work toward gaining recognition and establishing its identity, advocates and practitioners must continually

explain, evaluate, and communicate what they do. Moon succeeds in establishing a framework that allows art therapists to communicate the value of their work in a language that is unique to art therapy. Within you will find a specific way of thinking about the diverse gifts of art making applied in the context of creating with others. Bruce Moon has provided the two-by-fours; may this book inspire and empower you to design and build. Like the aforementioned adolescent art therapy group, as the profession of art therapy expands, we are going to need a bigger table and a solid structure within which to house it.

Chris Belkofer, ATR, LCPC

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INTRODUCTION

At 10 a.m. in the morning, on September 16th, 1974, I entered the creative arts building at Harding Psychiatric Hospital in Worthington, Ohio, to participate in my first art-based therapy group. In the ensuing 22 years I led, or co-led, between 10 and 15 art therapy groups per week at the hospital. There were inpatient groups of adults suffering from a wide range of psychiatric disorders. There were groups consisting of hospitalized adolescents, some exclusively boys' groups, some girls' groups, and others that were mixed-gender groups. There were groups of clients from the hospital's outpatient programs, and groups comprised of private practice clients. Finally, there was an ongoing group of ever-changing art therapy graduate students that met once a week for over 20 years.

In all of these groups, I have been equally concerned with the processes of making images and objects and responding to them in the company of others. The separation of process and product, a common phenomenon in art therapy that I have addressed in other writings, is for me a theoretical, methodological, and artistic impossibility. In art-based group work processes and products are inextricably connected—two sides of the same coin—and both are necessary partners in self-expression.

The methods of interacting with group members and the artworks they create that are described throughout this book have helped me to realize the unique qualities of art-based therapy experiences. I respond to clients' visual artworks with conversation, painting, bodily gestures, sounds, spontaneous performances, and other forms of creative expression that encourage clients to create in response to my responses. In this text I want to examine the unique qualities of art-based group work in an effort to describe theories and methods that are indigenous to art therapy, rather than adaptations from other helping disciplines.

In 1996 I left Harding Hospital to assume the position of director of the graduate art therapy program at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In that setting I taught and led art therapy group process classes for five years. In 2001 I became the director of the graduate art therapy program at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where again I teach art-based group process courses. Over the last few years I have co-led art therapy groups in a residential treatment facility with adolescent males who have committed a sexual offense.

All of these experiences add up to somewhere in the neighborhood of 30,000 hours spent creating art in the company of clients and students in art therapy groups. This book has been a long time coming. The ideas presented herein have developed slowly, subtly, and gently over the past 35 years. They have whispered to me in the voices of clients and students I have worked with, and for a long time I tried to ignore their voices. I did not want to hear them, nor did I want to commit myself to articulating these ideas for fear of the difficulties I might encounter in attempting to express in words the concepts and experiences that have so often left me speechless. Things happen with and for people in art therapy groups that really are almost magical. It is hard to capture such profound experiences in words alone.

In the aforementioned hours in art therapy groups I have worked with people suffering emotional, behavioral, and mental maladies. Together we have drawn pictures, pushed paint, sculpted, assembled found objects, written poetry, performed dramatic enactments, and made music that expressed feelings and ideas that were beyond words.

Writing this book has been a daunting task. There are, after all, a number of art therapy books that focus on group work (Hanes, 1982; Liebmann, 1998; McNeilly, 2006; Riley, 2001; Skaife & Huet, 1998; Steinbach, 1997; Waller, 1993), and of course there are the classic group therapy texts (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2008; Rutan, Stone, & Shay, 2007; Yalom, 2005). It is a fair question to ask, "What do I have to offer to the literature of art therapy group work that is different, unique, or needed?" Perhaps an answer to this question is foreshadowed by the title *Art-Based Group Therapy: Theory and Practice*, which expresses my desire to explore the central role that art can play, and I will argue should play, in art therapists' group work. Hence, although this book makes reference to the previously mentioned works, I will offer ideas that have evolved over the years in the hope that my dis-

cussions will encourage readers to reconsider the importance of art processes and products in art therapy groups.

The heart and soul of art therapists' work is beyond the scope of precise verbal description, and I am convinced that the greatest validation of art therapy comes in the form of anecdotal testimony from clients. Such evidence is best conveyed in creative narratives that are primarily artistic expressions. I believe that in order to effectively lead art therapy groups one must have faith in the healing and transformative qualities of art processes and products, especially those made in the company of others. I am not opposed to narrative and verbal descriptions—the stories associated with clients' artworks—but I have found that client-artist's understandings of their images can be greatly enhanced by imaginative responses that enable artists to establish deeper emotional and physical relationships to their work, albeit less intellectualized. To paraphrase Paul Simon, "Maybe we think too much." When clients engage all of the senses in cooperation with the mind, they often experience restoration and healing that cannot easily be put into words accessed alone.

Beginnings

Much has written about art therapy groups from the perspective of group therapy and group psychotherapy theory. An example of this is seen in Riley's (2001) conclusion to the first chapter of her book *Group Process Made Visible*:

Earlier in this chapter 10 themes were quoted from Corey (1990). These 10 themes can serve as the underlying foundation of the art directives. Each emergent theme can translate into a tangible product and provide a record for the growth of the group. (p. 31)

In my view, basing art directives on psychological constructs approaches an understanding of art therapy group work from the wrong direction. I am convinced that too little attention has been given to the essential healing power of art-based approaches to group work, and I hope that this book will remedy that deficiency. I do not intend to disparage other approaches to art therapy group work, but rather hope to add my voice to an evolving dialogue regarding the therapeutic value of art created in community.

The history of art-based group therapy, as discussed in art therapy literature (Riley, 2001; Skaife & Huet, 1998; Waller, 1993), has traditionally been linked to the development of verbal group psychotherapy. As is the case with all art therapy theory, however, there are two primary roots that deserve attention: *psychotherapy* and *art*. Unfortunately, the *art* root has garnered very little attention in relation to the history of art-based group therapy. I would argue that artists have been working in groups considerably longer than psychotherapists have. For example, the earliest known European cave paintings date to 32,000 years ago. Although the purpose of the Paleolithic cave paintings cannot be precisely known, evidence suggests that they were not merely adornments of living areas because the caves in which they have been found show no signs of ongoing human habitation. Some theorists have suggested that they may have been a way of communicating, whereas others ascribe to them ritual or ceremonial purposes. It is not a great leap to imagine that the process of painting held some innate therapeutic benefit for the paintings' creators. Thus one can argue that the history of art-based group work significantly predates the evolution of group psychotherapy.

Another prominent example of artists working together can be seen in the career of Vincent van Gogh (Meier-Graefe, 1987). In 1886 in Paris, van Gogh studied at Fernand Cormon's studio. He participated in the circle of the British-Australian artist John Peter Russell, and met fellow students Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The group used to meet at the paint store run by Julien "Père" Tanguy, which was also frequented by Paul Cézanne. No doubt these group meetings provided much needed support, challenge, and inspiration to van Gogh and his contemporaries.

Another example of artists working together in groups is the Art Students League. Founded by and for artists over 130 years ago, the underlying principles of the league have remained basically unchanged. The beliefs that artistic and creativity activity is important, that artists who devote their lives to art are worthy of deep respect, and that there is profound value in educating students in the process of making art, remain the heart of the league's mission. The league was dedicated to encouraging a spirit of unselfishness among its members, and "sympathy and practical assistance (if need be) in time of sickness and trouble" (Steiner, 1999, p. 30).

Of course, cave painters, expressionists, and founders of the Art Students League would not have described their endeavors as being

therapeutic in nature, but it is arguable that these, and many other examples of artists sharing space, working collaboratively, and providing support and nurturance to one another, are as much the ancestors of art-based therapy groups as are the early pioneers of group psychotherapy.

Group therapy in the United States can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when millions of people immigrated to America. Most of these immigrants became residents of large cities, and organizations such as Hull House in Chicago were founded to assist them in adjusting to life in the United States. Known as settlement houses, these agencies helped immigrant groups apply pressure for better housing, working conditions, and recreational facilities. These early social work groups valued group participation, the democratic process, and personal growth.

The originators of group psychotherapy in the United States were Joseph H. Pratt, Trigant Burrow, and Paul Schilder, all of whom were active and working in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, in 1905, Pratt formed groups made up of underprivileged patients suffering from a common illness—tuberculosis. Pratt believed that these patients could provide mutual support and assistance to one another. Like settlement houses, his early groups were another forerunner of group therapy.

After World War II, Jacob Moreno, Samuel Slavson, Hyman Spotnitz, Irvin Yalom, and Lou Ormont further developed approaches to group psychotherapy and principles of practice. In particular, Yalom's (2005) approach to group therapy has been very influential in the United States and across the world, as a result of his classic text, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*.

Group psychotherapy in Britain initially developed when pioneers S. H. Foulkes and Wilfred Bion used group therapy as an approach to treating soldiers' combat fatigue in World War II. Foulkes and Bion, both psychoanalysts, incorporated analytic principles into group therapy by recognizing that transference can arise not only between group members and the therapist but also among group members. In addition, the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious was extended through a theory of a group unconscious, in which the unconscious processes of group members could be acted out in the form of irrational processes in group sessions. Foulkes developed the model known as *group analysis*, whereas Bion was instrumental in the development of group therapy at the Tavistock Clinic in London.

Some early psychoanalysts, especially Alfred Adler, a student of Sigmund Freud, believed that many individual problems were social in origin. In the 1930s Adler encouraged his patients to meet in groups to provide mutual support. At around the same time, social work groups began forming in mental hospitals, child guidance clinics, prisons, and public assistance agencies. A contemporary descendant of these groups is today's support group, in which people with a common problem come together, without a leader or therapist, to help each other solve a common problem. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous are examples of such groups.

Contemporary Practices

Perhaps more than ever before, today's art therapists are being encouraged to apply their knowledge base to the development of strategies for community building, and art-based approaches to preventing and treating emotional problems. In many settings, individual counseling or psychotherapy is no longer financially feasible. Art-based group therapy allows art therapists to work with many more clients than would be possible in individual sessions. Moreover, art-based group process also has unique qualities that can often serve as the treatment of choice for many clients.

Art-based group processes can be used to enhance participants' sense of community, augment educational endeavors, promote wellness, prevent emotional difficulties, and treat psychological problems. Some art therapy groups may be used to foster coping skills, whereas other groups are intended to promote changes in the ways group members behave and express feelings. Art-based groups may be used in any setting where human well-being is the focus. Art-based approaches may be used with a variety of clients for a host of purposes. In a residential treatment facility for adolescents with behavioral problems, for example, groups can be designed to help clients express feelings appropriately, enhance self-esteem, and develop healthy interpersonal relating skills.

In a psychiatric hospital, art-based groups may focus on helping members clarify and express feelings about problematic issues, aiding in diagnosis, or preparing participants for discharge. Recreational art

groups and art groups focused on particular psychological issues such as addictions, trauma, or family conflicts are often found in such settings. In community arts agencies, art-based groups may focus on participants' personal growth or the enrichment of their interpersonal relationships.

In summary, art-based group therapy can help group members achieve nearly any desired outcome. Art-based groups are particularly effective because they allow members to express feelings and relate to others in ways that are not dependent upon the capacity to articulate. Groups also encourage members to practice expressive and interpersonal skills within the group and in their everyday interactions outside of the group. Furthermore, group members benefit from the responses, feedback, and insights they receive regarding their artworks, and from their interactions with peers and the art group leader. Art-based groups offer therapists multiple opportunities for modeling appropriate artistic and interpersonal expression, as well as opportunities for helping clients learn new ways to cope with problems through artistic expression and by observing and interacting with others.

Leaders of art-based therapy groups use nonverbal and verbal techniques along with structured and unstructured artistic exercises. The fundamental roles of the leader are to promote artistic self-expression, facilitate artistic responses, promote interaction among the members of the group, help members to take creative and expressive risks and grow with one another, help them explore and "own" their images, and help them relate to the art therapist.

Ultimately, group members must decide what their goals are and how best to pursue them. The following are some underlying goals that frequently are shared by members of art-based groups:

- Use artistic activity as a means of self-expression
- Recognize the things they have in common with one another and develop awareness of the universal aspects of their difficulties
- Use artistic activity as a way of dealing with emotional issues and as a means to resolve interpersonal conflicts
- Increase self-worth and alter self-concepts
- Use artistic activity as a way of responding to others and expressing compassion for others
- Use art making as a way to clarify feelings and values

Art-based therapy groups have a number of advantages over approaches that rely entirely on verbal interaction. One advantage is that art making is *metaverbal*; that is to say, creative processes and the images that emerge from them are beyond words. Of course, art products can be talked about, but verbalization is not regarded as the primary mode of communication; rather, it serves to validate the messages conveyed in art processes and products. Another advantage is that artistic expression is an inherently healthy process that naturally promotes a sense of satisfaction and improves self-esteem. Art making also provides a means for group members to create symbolic portraits of significant people and events in their lives and to make objects that represent important feelings and thoughts. Art products form a visible record of individual and group process. Whereas words are spoken and then they are gone, artworks remain and can be returned to time and again. Finally, making art in the company of others creates a sense of community and positive energy that is conducive to healing.

I want to emphasize that art-based group therapy is not simply a process of inserting art media and techniques into a verbal therapy group experience. The discipline of leading art-based groups is one of staying with the artistic expressions, trusting that they carry wisdom that cannot always—and perhaps should not—be reduced to the confines of language. I do not discourage spontaneous verbal associations to artworks created in the groups I lead, but when these occur, I recognize them as projections and subjective expressions of feelings and do not dwell upon them exclusively. In my experience, interpretive discussions of images inevitably lead groups away from the artworks themselves and into a more intellectualized form of verbal group therapy. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1989) urged practitioners to stick with the image, but I emphasize sticking with the whole range of visual, poetic, physical, and performance expressions that group members create.

Writing *Art-Based Group Therapy: Theory and Practice* was an act of love. The dual loves of art and of my fellow human beings were the sirens that first called me into the art therapy profession. Love has sustained me as the work proceeded. I hope that this book will be an important contribution to group leaders, art therapy students, and the clients they serve.

Bruce L. Moon
Mundelein, Illinois

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I am indebted to many people who have contributed to the writing of this book. Thanks go to Bonnie Herbert and Alyssa Miller, graduate assistants at Mount Mary College, for their help in researching the extant art therapy group literature. I am also grateful to those who read, criticized, and encouraged me along the way, especially my editor, Alex Kapitan.

I've been blessed these past 36 years to work with a good number of creative and compassionate colleagues and students at Harding Hospital, Lesley University, Marywood University, Mount Mary College, the Alternative Behavioral Treatment Center, and other colleges and clinical programs. This book would not have been possible without their support.

As always, I am especially indebted to the many members of the art therapy groups I have worked with. Their courage, generosity, resilience, and creativity have been sources of great inspiration and I am thankful to have known them. Their emotional, behavioral, and artistic struggles have motivated me to write and I trust that this book honors them. In many ways *Art-Based Group Therapy* is documentation of the countless lessons clients have taught me.

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ART-BASED GROUP THERAPY

Chapter I

THERAPEUTIC ESSENTIALS OF ART-BASED THERAPY GROUPS

*Everything is shaped from something else and in cooperation
with agencies other than ourselves.*

–Shaun McNiff (2003, p. 2)

Why Make Art With Others?

A pervasive image associated with artists is that of the lonely and angst-ridden painter toiling in isolation in the studio. An allusion to this image is found in Moon (2009):

Although I often make art in the company of clients and colleagues, I still regard the experience of looking into the canvas mirror as a solitary process. Since all art is existential, I cannot stand before a blank canvas without experiencing my ultimate aloneness. (p. 224)

As I was thinking about the prevalence of the notion that artists work in isolation I did an Internet search using the keywords “lonely artist.” To my surprise there were 13,700,000 results listed. I want to offer a vision of art making in the context of groups that is in contrast to the traditional view of creativity as a singular phenomenon. Given the pervasiveness of the perception that making art is a solitary process, it is reasonable to ask why one should even consider the possibility that making art in the company of others might be therapeutic.

All through human history relationships among individuals have been paramount. Indeed, none of us would survive were it not for the nurturance and support of others. Hence, the capacity to be in relationship to a group—family, friends, or coworkers—is of central impor-

tance to mental and emotional well-being. Goldschmidt (as cited in Hamburg, 1963) posited that every person longs for responses from the human environment. This longing may be expressed as a desire for connection, acknowledgment, acceptance, support, positive regard, or mastery.

Perhaps the longing for human connection and response, at least partially, explains why prehistoric humans stained the walls of the caves at Lascaux (Curtis, 2007), and why the Rapa Nui inhabitants of Easter Island (Pelta, 2001) sculpted their monumental statues, and why Frieda Kahlo painted (Herrera, 2002), and why present-day singer-songwriters make music, and why modern dancers move. Acts of creating are invitations to relate. By making things artists take images from within and give them visible form in the world. In profound ways, art making is an act of acknowledgment of the *others* beyond the boundaries of the self. The others are the beholders, members of the audience, the community, and the group.

Few conditions are more distressing to people than loneliness. The foundation of nearly every major approach to psychotherapy is anchored in theories that involve interpersonal relationships. Yalom (2005) stated: “People need people—for initial and continued survival, for socialization, for the pursuit of satisfaction. No one—neither the dying, nor the outcast, nor the mighty—transcends the need for human contact” (p. 24).

Personal meaning can be found only in the context of relationships with others. People create meaning in their lives by being open to another. Creating meaning is not an isolative process. Frankl (1955) pointed out that meaning is found in self-transcendence, not self-actualization. He went so far as to assert, “self-actualization is possible only as a side effect of self-transcendence” (p. 133). Art-based therapy groups provide members with opportunities to form meaningful relationships. Without such relationships there may be little hope for growth or change on the part of the individual client.

The individual self must be transcended for meaning and purpose to be present. “Creating is a participation mystique of many things.... The fertile creator is the one who is sensitive to the expressions and suggestive spirits of environments, things, gestures, relationships, and events” (McNiff, 2001, p. 134). Art is inspired in the territory of interpersonal connection and artists’ works are best acknowledged in the domain of relationships. “If we look through something other than

ourselves, the object of our contemplation becomes a partner” (p. 134). In art-based therapy groups, clients are able to explore themselves and their relationships by looking through the lens of their partners–peers, art processes, and products.

By creating artworks artists offer views of the world and their unique responses to the world. The community (audience/group) responds to the products of an artist’s efforts by attempting to comprehend the uniqueness of the artist. The artist creates, the community responds, the artist makes again, the community attends, and so on. In a broad sense, art making may be considered to always be a group enterprise. “Life is always created from interplay among different participants who make contact, influence one another, exchange their essential natures, merge, and generate new forms” (McNiff, 2003, p. 2). Creating art is a self-transcendent process. The vast majority of artists are very interested in the reactions their work inspires in others. This interest is motivated by the desire for human contact. A central healing quality of art therapy is the capacity to promote the development of relationships. Although some artists state that they must be left alone to do their work, still most intend that someday others will acknowledge their creative work.

Solitude has a crucial place in creative practice but it is only part of a larger exchange among people, places, and things. Even in our most solitary moments creativity is a group process of interacting forces, images, ideas, and possibilities, all gathering together to make something that is shaped from the unique qualities of their relationship to one another. (McNiff, 2003, p. 2).

Making art is intimately concerned with community and relationship building.

The art therapy groups I’ve led have invested in me a level of trust to work with the difficulties that group members bring to therapy. Clients draw and paint their images upon the walls of the studio, and through rituals of shared creation we engage in a process of acknowledging the realities of our lives. An almost palpable group energy, artistic contagion, and spirit of support among members draws clients and therapists alike into creative action and social interaction. This is why it is beneficial to people to make art in groups.

In present-day Western society there is a tendency to overvalue immediacy (pleasure now) and undervalue delayed gratification and