



ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

Toward an Understanding of
Embodied Empathy 2ND EDITION

Mitchell Kossak

**ATTUNEMENT IN
EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mitchell Kossak, Ph.D., LMHC, REAT, is a professor in the Expressive Therapies department at Lesley University. Previously he was the Division Director, 2006–2013 and academic coordinator for the Lesley University Israel extension campus 1999–2006. He was the Executive Co-Chair/President of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) 2010–2016. He has been a licensed mental health counselor, since 1994, and a Registered Expressive Arts Therapist (REAT) since 2009. He is the Associate Editor of the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* and co-chair of the Institute for Arts and Health at Lesley University. His clinical work combines Expressive Arts Therapy and body-centered approaches. Dr. Kossak has trained in a variety of mind body modalities and has studied and practiced energy-based healing forms such as Tai Chi, Chi Gong, Vipassana meditation, and Iyengar yoga for over 30 years. He earned his doctorate from the Union Institute and University in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in Expressive Arts Therapy and Transpersonal Psychology. He has written about and presented his research on rhythmic attunement, improvisation, psychospiritual and community-based approaches to working with trauma and embodied states of consciousness at conferences nationally and internationally. Dr. Kossak is also a professional musician, performing for the past 35 years in the Boston area.

Author's Note

The clinical vignettes in this book are all based on real cases from the past 35 years of work as an Expressive Arts Therapist and Clinical Counselor. In order to protect individual confidentiality, the details in most of the vignettes are an amalgam of various cases and/or cases where details have been altered. The intention is to provide a realistic accounting of the work encountered while protecting the privacy of individuals.

Second Edition

**ATTUNEMENT IN EXPRESSIVE ARTS
THERAPY**

Toward an Understanding of Embodied Empathy

By

MITCHELL KOSSAK, PhD, LMHC, REAT

*With Forewords by
Laury Rappaport and Shaun McNiff*



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FOREWORD

The words in the title, *Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy: Toward an Embodied Empathy*, highlight that the book is about a way of being—attuned, empathic, compassionate, and relational—within a context of expressive arts. It is the foundation for Mitchell’s profound book that includes the theories, practices, research and varied examples of expressive arts, as well as the more subtle aspects of presence and embodied knowing that foster “magic moments” of healing and transformation. The book demonstrates how the arts can enhance attunement with self, others, and a larger universal life energy that leads to greater connection, compassion and positive change. In today’s understanding of the neurobiology underlying experience, Mitchell’s model of attunement and embodied empathy fosters safety, self-regulation, co-regulation and social engagement that activates our inherent resilience, imagination and deep healing.

The expressive arts are rooted in early cultures where we can see how art, dance, music, and story are used in rituals, rites of passage, and integrated into daily life. In addition to the cultural context of the arts in healing, the therapeutic use of art, dance, poetry, music and drama in medical and psychiatric hospitals is well documented in the 1700–1800s. It took until the 1920s–1940s for these applications to begin to be named—art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, and psychodrama. Professional associations within the singular arts modalities (art therapy, dance therapy, etc.) began to develop in the 1930s through the 1960s.

In the early 1970s Shaun McNiff, an art therapist, artist and educator, had the revolutionary vision that the arts in healing included all of the arts—“Total Expression” (McNiff, 1981). Shaun maintained that all of the arts are inherent within each other. When we paint, we move (like a dance). When we move, we feel the rhythm and sense the music or sound. When we play music, images may arise—which can unfold into artmaking, dance or writing. He maintained that we cannot separate the arts. Shaun founded the Institute for the Arts and Human Development at Lesley College (now Lesley University) in Cambridge, Massachusetts and offered the first graduate education program in the world including all forms of artistic expression

in therapy. He engaged Paolo Knill, a musician, scientist and educator, as a core faculty member. Paolo developed a theory and practice of “inter-modal expressive arts”—meaning that we can move or transfer from one arts modality into the next (Knill, 2004). In the 1980s, Natalie Rogers (1993), developed Person-Centered Expressive Arts and coined the term, “creative connection[®]” to convey a similar process of moving from one arts modality into another. The program at Lesley was fertile ground to birth this new profession that is widely known and practiced throughout the world today.

I had the good fortune to attend the Expressive Therapies program in 1977 and became a faculty member in 1980. While I was the Academic Coordinator of the International Expressive Arts program, in 1995, I proposed that we hire Mitchell Kossak to teach. Mitchell is a true master of intermodal expressive arts. Every page in this book transmits the understanding and ease of how Mitchell works intermodally. I would like to share something that would be challenging for Mitchell to describe himself, which comes from witnessing him while leading groups, facilitating workshops, teaching and facilitating meetings.

It’s difficult to describe one’s own *presence*—but it is an essential ingredient for any expressive arts therapist, psychotherapist or educator. Mitchell consistently exudes a calm presence, inner quiet and receptive, listening stance. He has a gentle way of meeting a group—allowing people to settle into where they are. He has a variety of ways for beginning, depending on the group and context. It may begin with a quiet moment, a drum or piano. He listens and attunes—listening to help create a safe container. He knows how to wait and to listen—waiting for the right moment to introduce an arts experience, reflection, inquiry or intervention.

The reason I described Mitchell is because the essence of this book is rooted in a therapist’s embodiment of mindful awareness, grounded presence and compassion. This is the starting point for Mitchell’s model of attunement in the expressive arts. I would like to highlight several themes that span the chapters in this book that resonated deeply with me.

Tuning the Self as Instrument

In expressive arts and psychotherapy, the *self* of the therapist is an instrument in the therapeutic process. Mitchell shows us that a commitment to self-care, personal growth and artistic practice are necessary actions for tuning up. We hear how meditation, chigong, yoga, music, body-centered psychotherapy and expressive arts practices that help Mitchell to be present and attuned to artistic, psychological and energetic processes. We must be calm and centered to create a field of safety. We need to have a certain quality of emptiness and compassion to receive a client and their sharing. We must be

able to be aware of our own issues and know how to set them aside for the moment. When we are “tuned up” or clear, then we can shift our attention to the client, listen deeply to the words, energies and nonverbal communication. This is the necessary preparation for attunement—or “tuning in” to the client.

Enhancing Safety through Attunement and Embodied Empathy

As we tune in, there is an interaction between listening to the client or group—and then listening within to the therapist’s self to hear the wisdom that is emerging in the intersubjective field. Only when the therapist’s instrument is clear will they be able to sense into an empathic understanding of the client—and also hear an inner message that inspires an intervention or response.

Throughout the book, Mitchell reinforces the paramount significance of safety. It must come first before any interventions. He demonstrates how to use the arts as a warm-up—promoting relaxation and nonjudgment—that leads to experimentation, play and an unfolding of the creative process. Mitchell helps clients and students engage in the arts so that they can go beyond the critical mind, one of the largest impediments to creative expression. As this safe space is created, we see examples of how people with autism, anxiety, depression, trauma and more find a way toward their innate creative energy. We see how the arts enhance connection, through group music playing, mirroring movements through dance, making marks with colors, and other methods. This rhythmic synchronization or entrainment that is explained from a neuroscience perspective described freshly in this second edition adds a new understanding of these core expressive arts methods that enhance safety.

Working with Creative Intelligence and the Body’s Wisdom

As Shaun McNiff (2016) writes, “. . . artistic expression happens and heals through the transformation of creative energy” (p. 1). Training programs rarely teach how to see and “work with the energy” but this is an essential skill to cultivate. Mitchell’s background in music, improvisation, theater, mindfulness, body-centered psychotherapy and energy practices lead him to be attuned to working on this more subtle energetic level. He knows how to “read the group” or individual—to change the tempo of a drumbeat, movement or sound to slow a process down to bring a soothing energy, speed it up to energize a group, play background music to promote inward focus or outward connection, and so forth.

In addition to working with the artistic energies, expressive arts thera-

pists address the client's conscious and unconscious psychological issues. The many case examples and "notes from the field" provide insight into how Mitchell attunes to each person or group that he is with. It is especially poignant to read when Mitchell encounters one of those common moments in the therapy process when it is not clear what to do . . . or what to say. Moments like these are of great challenge to therapists and clients—the unknown. This is where we see the healing power of how Mitchell's attunement approach to expressive arts opens a door to a new possibility. Mitchell becomes quiet yet fully present with the client or group. As he stays in embodied, empathic attunement with the client, he remains open—listening within for what to do. In one example, an image of a boxer comes to him that guides his intervention. While working with another client, Mitchell has an inner felt sense of knowing he needs to change the direction of the therapy. Within the energetic field of safety and attunement with the client and within himself, Mitchell is able to access a creative intelligence and embodied knowing that leads him to the next steps with the client. He trusts this creative bodily wisdom. The examples also show how Mitchell's approach helps empower clients to access this creative intelligence and embodied knowing within themselves. This is a similar process to Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts (Rappaport, 2014). Gendlin (1981) states, "Your body knows the direction of healing and life . . . If you take time to listen to it, it will give you steps in the right direction" (p. 78). The arts access and unfold this bodily knowing.

Mitchell describes how clients can carry this creative medicine with them—such as hanging their art expression on a wall at home. I encourage clients to make a screensaver of their art on their phone or create a "tag" to carry a message that they want to remember from the session. The concretization of the arts can capture and carry forward these unfolding healing steps.

In addition to the arts being able to "hold" difficult, painful, stressful or traumatic experiences, they also help to release the body and mind from holding them. As those difficult experiences are externalized, a fresh space opens up for something new to come. Many times expressive arts therapists invite clients to imagine what something would be like if . . . for example, if it felt safe or peaceful or healed. Mitchell includes examples and we see how this helps the body and mind bring forth exactly what is needed. Research has shown for decades that when the imagination is activated, the body responds as if it were real. We now know the neurobiology can change with the power of imagination and artistic expression. As Mitchell says, "If you can imagine it, you can live it."

Hope and Compassion

As someone who was around when the expressive arts began in one small community in the United States, I am deeply inspired and hopeful to see the expansion of the field—especially while reading the engaging stories, case examples, methods, research and applications in a variety of settings from around the world in this second edition. As the current neuroscience and polyvagal theories continue to teach us the importance of safety, social connection and regulating the nervous system for healing, this book is a significant resource for the relational, sensory arts-based approaches to achieve that. Most of all, this book reveals the magic of creativity, the power of attunement and compassion and shows us tools to access our embodied wisdom that is ever-present. It is a guiding light to health, wellbeing and transformation!

Laury Rappaport, Ph.D, MFT, REAT, ATR-BC

Author: *Focusing-oriented art therapy: Accessing the body's wisdom and creative intelligence*

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

As a close colleague of Mitchell Kossak for over 30 years I have witnessed his practice of therapeutic attunement through artistic expression emerging from the ongoing refinement and testing of methods and concepts with people worldwide. This book is itself a realization of attunement principles, first striving to get as close as possible to the source of art healing and how it happens in his own life and in therapeutic environments he creates for others, and then communicating the discoveries in a way that looks and feels like the experience, that is attuned to it.

Attunement is described as an immersion in the present moment and a sensory awareness of ourselves, others, and the spaces we inhabit. An idea derived from the acoustical realm of art is applied to relationships with other people and establishes a new and complete theory of therapeutic practice. Just as the musician responds to the vibrational qualities of sound to realize a more effective and harmonious expression, we do the same in sensing the pitch and tone of pulsations and feelings with other people. Empathy starts with being attuned to our own sensory presence and internal pulse.

As an advocate of art-based psychology and research, Mitchell demonstrates how a principle and mode of practice emerges from experimentation with empirical artistic processes that inform broader life experience. In keeping with James Hillman's belief that callings are present in childhood (1996) he describes how a sensitivity to attunement originated in early experiences playing and listening to music and continued through the various phases of his artistic career. He illustrates how his most personal experience generated an understanding of universal principles. Insights formed in response to music were applied to all of the arts where total sensory expression furthers more complete states of physical and spiritual attunement.

I have been thinking about the attunement process, exploring Mitchell's writings with my students, and discussing it with him for many years since serving on his doctoral committee and through this book he himself fully "tunes in" to how "the arts touch something deep inside me . . . the deep groove . . . coming through viscerally from the sensory receptors found mostly in the muscles . . . and informing the conscious mind." As someone in dia-

logue with Mitchell on a daily basis, this book gives me an even more comprehensive and focused view of the vision he has singularly introduced to the arts and therapies. It presents a new depth psychology of art and furthers the emerging focus on the arts therapies as contemplative practice (Rappaport, 2013) whereby immersion in the present moment and being attuned to oneself, others, and the environment is a foundation of well-being.

One of the most important features of the book for me is the demonstration of the constructive and necessary role of what is described as “misattunement” in creative expression. Those of us who serve others through the arts have a natural tendency to provide positive experiences within optimum conditions, doing our best to eliminate setbacks and obstacles. We do not always realize how in spite of our efforts to instill the good, the deepest and most satisfying creations may require engagement of troublesome conditions and emotions.

Boredom, going too fast, doing too many things, periods of confusion, and distraction play key roles in helping us practice tuning-in to the present moment. Dissonance may direct how we respond and adjust, offering a sense of what is needed to get on the same frequency with our selves, another person, a group, or an environment; and if accommodation maintains unhealthy conditions, problems may promote change.

Rather than always trying to avoid, fix, or eliminate difficulties, there are times to embrace them as necessary conditions within the overall intelligence of artistic expression, making us aware of what we need to do to get re-attuned and in touch with the present moment. These mistuned moments spur on a new and more complete integration of experience “bringing a more profound sense of alignment and awakening to each moment.” As I have discovered, we create with our tensions; they fuel artistic transformations which in keeping with world traditions of indigenous healing restore the soul to the body. I like to say, the soul has to be lost in order to be recovered, like breathing out and breathing in.

Misattunement “to one’s true sense of expression in the world” and being out of sync with our environments is also presented as a source of our ills and discontents. In every section of the book, varied examples are given as to how achieving attunement to the here and now through the arts furthers spontaneity, the ability to improvise, and an overall satisfaction. For example, introducing recorded music with lyrics is described as potentially being overly suggestive, eliciting associations taking us away from the present moment as contrasted to a simple beat opening imagination through access to a rhythmic pulse which corresponds to concentration on the breath in contemplative traditions. As a skilled musician and master expressive arts therapist Mitchell knows that the sustained rhythm evokes the sacred base of the work we do, a greater sensitivity to the sources of healing in nature,

and letting our hearts, as Henry Miller described in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, “beat in unison with the great heart of the world” (1941, p. 70).

Building on experience with his teacher and colleague Paolo Knill, Mitchell uses artistic play in various media to demonstrate how the state of attunement is a moving condition, never realized nor controlled as a stabile entity. We practice moving with it, losing contact and regaining it like water running through our fingers and learning how to relax with it all. Paolo describes Mitchell’s work as “a brilliant testimony to engaging the fullness of the arts with a concept based in music. He is attuning expressive arts therapy like musicians tune their instruments preparing for a transforming new creation” (personal communication, November 3, 2014).

This is an inspired and full-bodied book offering a comprehensive tune-up to those of us who believe that art healing is all about the circulation of creative energy versus blocked and “frozen states.” *Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy* will find its way to be one of the classics of the ever-emerging literature on art and healing.

Shaun McNiff

University Professor, Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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PREFACE

Since writing this book a lot has happened in the world in general and in the world of expressive arts. Currently the world has been confronted with the deadly coronavirus, Covid-19 that as of this writing has taken more than two million lives. It has been a time of quarantine as well as social and political unrest and economic challenges that has not been seen in at least a century. There are widespread effects of all this uncertainty, upheaval and disruption. On the one hand, there is a kind of collective attunement to a traumatic state of resonance. Because we are living with a lack of predictability and safety, this can lead to a kind of psychological immobility, mirroring a kind of numbness or freeze that happens in trauma states. There is also a loss of embodied connection with others, which leads to loss of embodied rhythmic affective states, and a general feeling of overwhelm. There is also anger, antagonism, bitterness and hostility. I have witnessed a lot of these primal responses to the current situation in my clinical practice as well as in my teaching. I have also seen how the arts have played a major role in addressing and affecting this collective attunement, from emotional songs sung from windows and rooftops and the many social media postings of concerts, dance performances, poetry readings as well as online art-based workshops and webinars.

This is the current state of affairs that I am sure will continue to unfold and inform how we live our lives. As I write in this update to this book, how we stay attuned to what brings deeper meaning and significance to ourselves, our families, and our communities can have great influence in how we feel each day. The complexities that individuals and communities are facing call for creative and soul filled experiences that elicit hope and healing and the arts have always been a vehicle to inspire and bring a sense of meaning and power, penetrating the powerless, chaotic and overwhelming feelings. Art can make visible what is invisible and make us stop and notice and feel something deeply. A great example of this was in the recent presidential inauguration and celebration that was held in person and virtually. The arts played a major role in delivering a message that reflected and resonated the current state of collective attunement many are feeling. The many uplifting songs and especially the stunningly poignant poem, *'The Hill We Climb'* by

Amanda Gorman were powerful reminders of how the arts can quickly affect our sensibilities and touch us so deeply.

In this new reality, we have had to pivot to an online delivery and connectivity. This online reality has both been a great challenge and a great opportunity. I have personally been able to reach out to many more people than I normally would. I have taught workshops online from my home studio for institutions in Florida, India and Japan as well as online classes for Lesley University where I teach. I have also been involved in several other webinars where people from all over the world have participated. In my clinical practice going online has meant finding new ways to connect and attune through the arts and deepen the interpersonal connections. In many cases being online has brought a new sense of intimacy. In other ways, it has been difficult to share, especially when it comes to playing music together.

In this second edition of this book, I try to write about how this current state has affected me and those I work with. Toward this goal you will find a special section in Chapter Five, “Attunement to Individual, Group and Community Trauma,” and the work that I helped to organize in the last year with other expressive artists and therapists to work with asylum seekers in Juarez Mexico. This work has been challenging and rewarding. As you will read, it started in July 2019 with an idea to address the humanitarian crisis on the border of the US and Mexico, especially the policy of separating children from their parents. After quickly mobilizing a small group of expressive artists and expressive arts therapists and creating a group called *Voces Arts and Healing* (www.vocesartsandhealing.org), we managed to work in more than 11 shelters in Juarez Ciudad for several months before the Covid-19 virus hit. Once we were no longer able to travel, we started to deliver online trainings to social workers, psychologists and artists in Juarez through the Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DiF), the equivalent of the National Association for the Protection of Children. We are also offering online supervision and will continue to do what we can to attune, address and deliver services to those who are suffering and those that work with those that are suffering.

Over the past six years since this book was first published there has been much written in application and research that point toward the efficacy of the arts to be a significant factor toward health and well-being. I have added several sections of ‘Research’ throughout the book that address how the application of the arts in practice and therapy can help to bring about states of embodied attunement. As you will read, current research is emerging that shows the power of the arts to change the frequency or resonance in the neurobiology of the person or communities who have experienced a traumatic event, whether that is in utilizing drawings and paintings, drumming or singing, movement, dramatic enactments, or in using creative writing to change the resonant field. When we engage in the arts and particularly with

an intention and focus on the rhythmic resonance inherent in all arts, we have the opportunity to re-engage with this deep inner sense of connection or ‘psycho-biological attunement’. The recent research on trauma indicates that engagement in rhythmic activity specifically helps to address and re-regulate the underlying patterns embedded in the nervous system. According to this new research, the only way to move from anxiety states that overwhelm the nervous system is through rhythmic embodied activity like dancing, singing, drumming, and repetitive meditative breathing. The application of expressive arts used in trauma treatment demonstrates that the arts have the capacity to bring about changes in outlook, mood, attitudes and emotions.

I have also added important additions to the section of the book on entrainment as it relates to expressive arts as well as an addition section on research related to interpersonal rhythmic attunement. And in this second edition, I have also added a whole new section on “Embodied Empathy” which I realized was missing from the first edition. In this section you will read about the connections between, resonance, entrainment, the mirror neuron system and interpersonal neurobiology as it relates to embodied empathy. You will also read in this section about how the roots of the word empathy connects to a process where the mind creates an imagistic replication of what it sees, hears or senses, that has an effect in the body called ‘sympathetic empathy’. You will also read about research studies that demonstrate this phenomenon, leading to a felt sense of intimacy with not only other people but with the resonance of art materials and between those participating in expressive arts experiences.

There is also one reference to a research study by Katherine Biddle at the Virginia Polytech Institute and University that basically replicates and extends the research I had done in 2008 on attunement. I met Katherine at a conference a few years back where I was presenting my research on attunement and she came up afterwards and introduced herself. She told me about her study done 10 years after mine. She explained that she had access to a research lab equipped with a 24 camera Qualisys motion capture system as well as heart monitors that she used to replicate, capture on camera and compare heart rhythms. While I used a free form of improvised sound making with professional musicians and expressive arts therapists, she used only drumming and worked with counselors in training. Despite the differences, I think reading about her study and her outcomes adds another dimension to the work of understanding the phenomenon of attunement.

It is my hope that this second edition expands and adds to the overall understanding of the model of attunement that I am emphasizing as well as how to utilize these concepts to address overall health and well-being.

Mitchell Kossak

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book started a long time ago when I was just a small child learning to play the piano. At the time I had no idea that this early training would lead to writing a book about attunement. I had no idea at the time what was happening, although I suspect I have felt the qualities of attunement all of my life. These qualities include embodied rhythmic experiences that can be individual as well as communal, leading to a more awakened state of consciousness similar to peak or unitive experiences spoken about in spiritual, mystical, or transpersonal experiences. Artists often use the word attunement to explain experiences when they feel a continuous and unbroken flow of heightened sensitivity to each passing moment or a feeling of being so involved in their work that time seems to cease and shift their awareness. While I had no idea that sitting and playing the piano for hours on end would lead to writing about attunement, I did know what it was I was feeling. I knew that the sounds that came out of the piano fascinated me and moved me in an embodied and stimulating way.

It was not just the piano that made me feel this way. My early life was about a large extended family that valued and participated in the arts. On my mother's side of the family my grandmother had six brothers and sisters and they all had multiple children, so by the time I came on the scene we were a very large community. Three of my grandmother's brothers owned a nightclub together in the Bronx, NY and the tribe would gather there on holidays, birthdays, and any occasion there was to celebrate something. These gatherings would always include, singing and dancing and they would bring in some of the acts from the nightclub such as magicians, comedians, singers, or other performers. I had lots of cousins who would play guitar and sing, dance, or act out short plays. I was immersed in art in all of its forms, taking in the essence of artistic creativity on many levels.

From these early beginnings I have always been most interested in how the arts touch something deep inside me, how I feel moved, and how my heart and soul are affected. I remember as a young teenager listening to Motown hits and just feeling this deep groove inside me, something so soulful and alive, it was just such an embodied ecstatic experience. Later on in college I listened to Joni Mitchell for hours on end, just to get that feeling

deep inside, sad, melancholy and pensive. Then I would put on Jimi Hendrix and it made me feel defiant and rebellious. These were my heroes, who guided my way through the tumultuous teenage years, until I heard my first jazz album. The feeling of the multi-layered sounds and grooves affected me so deeply and profoundly. I started to study jazz like there was nothing else that mattered in the world. When I played now it was with the intention of listening deeply and tuning in to what the sounds were communicating on a deep visceral level. I heard in the music something transcendent and alive, something that took me deeper into my unconscious. I began to realize how playing music was an embodied experience that created a feeling of flow, or the sensation of being completely absorbed in the moment, with a sense of spontaneity, and feeling more connected to myself and the people I was playing with.

At this time in my life I was also very involved in both traditional and experimental theater. After college, I started a small children's theater company with a close friend. We spent our time writing and performing original scripts complete with original musical scores. My interests in theater and music were becoming more acutely focused on improvisation and this interest led me to The State University of New York at New Paltz where I began to study music therapy, psychodrama and Playback Theater. After New Paltz I spent two years at Lesley University (then Lesley College) immersed in both creative and clinical pursuits, guided by some of the founding pioneers in the field of Expressive Arts Therapy such as Shaun McNiff, Paolo Knill, and Norma Canner. What initially drew me to this program was the opportunity to be involved in a multi-arts community focused on a poly-aesthetic approach to working therapeutically.

At the same time that I was pursuing my master's degree in Expressive Therapies, a parallel process was occurring. For years I had been an avid athlete having played sports in high school and college. However, a series of injuries began to limit my abilities to compete. These unfortunate circumstances however led me to study Yoga, and I found that the physical aspects began to relieve my symptoms and that the practice itself began to arouse my growing interest in subtle energy. I found myself engaged in an individual therapy that incorporated expressive arts and a body-centered approach. My interests in body-oriented psychotherapy began to expand and led to further training in Polarity, Reflexology, Craniosacral Therapy, and Bioenergetics. In the years that followed, my interest in energetic and specifically vibrational-based healing systems began to grow and I dove deeper into a practice of Yoga, Chi-Kung and Vipassana meditation and began to understand how attunement is the embodiment of what the Buddhists call Samadhi, a state of complete absorption in the moment, leading to transcendent moments of insight, awareness and wakefulness.

In 1995 I returned to Lesley University as an adjunct faculty member in the Expressive Therapies program that later led to a full-time position. My work has continued to evolve from my interests in Expressive Art Therapy and holistic embodied approaches to health and wellness. I believe that the integration of the expressive arts and a body-centered approach are key ingredients in learning how to live a more engaged and healthier life. Teaching these past years has deepened my commitment to the importance that creativity plays in helping to reveal and understand the symbolic messages contained in the body and in the unconscious. I have joined my interests in improvisation and expressive arts to look at developing a deeper understanding of how artistic experience can help create a sense of attunement to self, other and group by increasing spontaneity and strengthening sensory awareness leading to what might be called a spiritual realignment.

These theoretical perspectives have led to an understanding of dis-ease as a dis-rhythmic misalignment or misattunement to one's true sense of expression in the world. When we are out of alignment with our true self then there is a dis-rhythmic attunement. This book will look at the ways that the arts restore a sense of balance through affective sensory states, bringing a more profound sense of alignment and awakening to each moment. Deep play in the form of artistic process can help to facilitate this tuning in to energies that are personal, interpersonal and transpersonal by awakening an embodied creative intelligence. When I am creating through visual image, movement, poetic language or musical form, I am sympathetically resonating with the embodied creative intelligence as a way to bring about greater awareness, integration, and a sense of feeling more deeply connected to myself, others and a universal, mysterious and mystical presence. I hope this book will stimulate your creative embodied intelligence and help to spread the seeds of attunement in your life and to those you love.

Mitchell Kossak
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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**ATTUNEMENT IN
EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY**

INTRODUCTION

There are two aspects of life; the first is that man is tuned by his surroundings and the second is that man can tune himself in spite of his surroundings.

—Hazrat Inayat Khan

This book will address how the arts in practice and in therapeutic contexts offer expanded ways of being attuned to emotional states and life conditions with individuals, relationships, groups, and communities. The art of being with another person and listening to what is said and what is implied becomes an act of ‘tuning in.’ Visual artists, musicians, dancers, poets, and actors are all trained to tune in and open their senses toward an original, genuine and authentic expression of the human condition. Therapists are also trained to ‘tune into’ the human condition. As artists enter into the intimate world of material, space, sound and a deep connection with other participants, a therapist enters into the intimate world of the client. When an individual is trained to use the arts for therapeutic purposes, they must understand how to tune into both artistic material and empathically tune into the people they are working with. Most art-based therapists enter the field with some experience as a visual artist, actor, dancer, poet or musician, laying the foundation for understanding how to tune in to color, shape, sound, rhythm and space for creative expression. However, tuning in as an artist and learning how to use those skills therapeutically with individuals, groups and communities is a more complex multidimensional process that takes time to learn, understand and have a theoretical grounding in.

Attunement to artistic material and to emotional states and life conditions follows a similar process that is found in mindfulness practice. I have practiced mindfulness techniques for 35 years, in the form

of meditation, yoga and chi-kung. I also approach art making in the same contemplative way, by paying close attention to my breath, body and thoughts. When practiced consistently over time, mindfulness gives the embodied sense of being attuned to self, other and a greater universal presence. Mindfulness practice has also given me a greater sense of embodied empathy or what psychoanalyst Hans Kohut has described as two people in relationship experiencing an embodied psychological and emotional interpersonal connection. I also believe that there are ways to teach and utilize art-based practice as a mindfulness experience.

Mindfulness and attunement are synonymous in many ways. For example, the phenomenon of attunement has been defined in various disciplines as a sense of bringing into harmony or a feeling of being at one with another being, the environment and a greater universal presence. Attunement is also defined as a sensorial felt embodied experience that can be individual as well as communal, that includes a psychological, emotional, and somatic state of consciousness often reported in spiritual, mystical, or transpersonal experiences most closely referred to in the psychological literature as a unitive or peak experience. Psychologist Richard Erskine (1998) says that attunement is, “a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others—knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness by providing a reciprocal affect and/or resonating response” (p. 236). Additionally, philosophical and musical language often draw parallels to the phenomenon of attunement referring to an intimacy that involves shared moments of transcendence or what is known as spiritual intimacy where there is a feeling of merging with the universe or a primordial unity. Attunement has also been referred to as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), or the sensation of being completely absorbed in the moment, with a sense of spontaneity, resulting in feelings of joy or euphoria. Artists often use the word attunement to explain similar peak experiences described as a continuous and unbroken flow of heightened sensitivity to each passing moment. All of these definitions convey characteristics that are similar to feeling states that occur through mindfulness practice.

As an expressive arts therapist and as an improvisational artist, I have experienced profound shifts in sensory and perceptual awareness while engaging in various artistic modalities such as music, move-

ment, visual arts, and dramatic enactment, as well as in moments of using multiple modalities sequentially, (for example shifting from movement to painting to music, to poetry etc.). These experiences have led to a deeper curiosity about how these energetic and embodied shifts in consciousness can be taught to others in the interest of using the arts for therapeutic and healing purposes.

Many artists talk about feeling fully absorbed in their work when engaged in their art form. They often say things like, “I don’t know where the time went” or “I feel completely different now than when I started.” As an improvisational musician I have experienced many moments of shifts in awareness and consciousness. When I play music together with others, I have often felt a shared intimacy or closeness. Artists who ‘play’ or create together understand this kind of shared communal camaraderie and often talk about this kind of experience as transcendent, sacred or spiritual. This kind of transcendent experience can also feel overwhelming and lead to feeling disconnected outside of the art making process. There are many times when an artist might feel very connected and tuned in when they are making art in their studio or creating together in a band or ensemble but cannot translate this to other parts of their life. For many artists there is a disconnect or a misattunement between their art making and their relationships. Performing artists might get very high or extremely energized when performing in front of an audience. Visual artists and writers might get completely engrossed in their work in their studios and not know how to translate that intensity to intimate relationships or how to channel that energy internally in order to feel more centered and connected to themselves and others.

In general, artists are not trained to integrate the kinds of highs or lows that occur when creating alone or when creating together into other aspects of their lives. Many artists turn to drugs or destructive behaviors because the energies produced through their individual or shared creative experiences are just too overwhelming or they just want another way to keep the high going in their lives. Engagement in art can be a tremendous elixir and can be overpowering if not channeled in useful and healing ways. This is why mindfulness or attunement practices can be such a powerful tool to stabilize and ground artists and art-based therapists. These ways of teaching and facilitating art-based experiences that can lead to a more integrative experiences are so important and can draw upon how the arts have been used

throughout history to maintain healthy physical, emotional and spiritual well-being individually and in communities.

There are many ways to direct the intense energies that can emerge as a result of engaging in art-based practice and many ways to use the arts to help overcome individual and community malaise. Throughout this book I will give examples from my years as an artist and my years as an expressive arts therapist to illustrate ways that the arts can be used with individuals, groups and larger communities to bring about greater integration, awareness and a sense of feeling more deeply connected to self, others and a universal or spiritual presence.

An important aspect of attunement that will be explored in more depth throughout this book will be the concept of play. The word play is used when talking about engaging the arts. We play music and we act out plays. Play is emphasized here because part of what happens when we engage in expressive arts is that we begin to regain a lost sense of childhood spontaneity and freedom. This kind of playing with material, space, or sounds allows us to feel more alive and engaged with life, and restores a sense of vitality and *joie de vivre*. Through play the arts can become a medicinal salve for the soul.

Play is also improvisational, where action, reaction, and interaction are employed with the possibility of forming and reforming the way we interact with ourselves, other people or larger community. Improvisation also necessitates exploration, experimentation and risk taking, all aspects of how play is used in childhood for learning and growth. Because improvisation implies being in the moment and responding in the moment, improvisational arts can help with approaching and tolerating the uncertainties that presents itself in life. Engagement in improvisational art making can help integrate in our minds and bodies how to approach each moment with a greater sense of being fully present and with the ability to react in productive and creative ways. Improvisation as a way of understanding uncertainty and embracing the unknown will be explored in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Four the concepts of rhythm, entrainment, and resonance as they relate to the arts and to interpersonal attunement will be discussed. These concepts are important in order to understand how resonant fields rhythmically synchronize together such as brain waves, breathing cycles, circulation, the nervous system and rhythms found in our environments to bring about feelings of personal and intersubjective embodied empathy. Rhythm also occurs within per-

sonal relationships, families and in communities and is talked about extensively in the literature of developmental psychologists using the term affect attunement, or what neuropsychologists call intentional attunement referring to the mirror neuron system and its role in interpersonal embodied empathy. Artistic endeavors such as dancing, singing, or playing music together also create a field of interchange or rhythmic resonance that has an effect on the active participants, as well as those listening and observing. Similar resonance occurs interpersonally when viewing artwork in a gallery or museum and when reading a poem or piece of prose. These concepts are important in order to further the understanding of attunement in the arts.

Interwoven throughout this book will be the concept of misattunement which is equally if not even more important to understand than attunement. Misattunement is when things get messy, when there is a feeling that everything is falling apart or not connecting in ways that we want them to. In art making, misattunement is when the tuning in process feels overwhelming and disconnected. In music these moments are called dissonant or cacophonous. But one person's dissonance can be another person's harmony. There is an old story that sound healer and naturopath John Beaulieu once told me of kicking a can down the street. In the story there is a boy who finds a can lying in the street and starts to kick it, over and over again and again. The boy is really into the feeling of kicking the can and also the sound it is making. For the boy, the sound is quite pleasing and the more he kicks, the more he likes what he is hearing. However, there is a man sitting on his porch trying to read his newspaper. The man gets up and shouts, "Stop that noise!" For the boy the sounds produced by kicking the can down the street was music and to his neighbor it was just noise (personal communication, J. Beaulieu). Or as the musicians in a research study I conducted on attunement said, "It sounds like noise when we're not listening to each other," and the expressive arts therapists in the study said, "Those were the most interesting moments, when it sounded like we were searching for each other and something new could happen." So, dissonance to one person can be harmony to another and so called mistuned moments can be useful if looked at with a certain perspective.

Misattunement in the arts also relates to doubts, fears, uncertainties, and hesitations. The critical voice plays such a large role in not only the technical aspects of art making but also in our beliefs that making



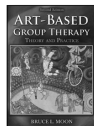
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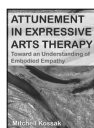
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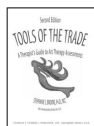
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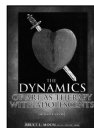
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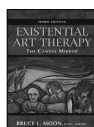
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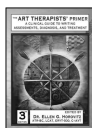
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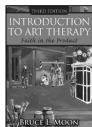
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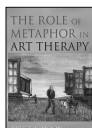
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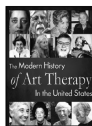
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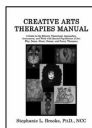
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