

Imagery as a Transformational Process

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"Imagination is more important than knowledge."
- Albert Einstein

People with eating disorders are frequently described as concrete, flat and difficult to make contact with. Often they report feeling empty inside. Disconnected from their inner worlds, they are isolated from themselves, other people and oftentimes even their therapists. A major aspect of the therapeutic journey involves helping them connect to other people as well as with their disowned thoughts and feelings.

In my clinical experience, I am impressed with the power of imagery to tap into parts of their inner world inaccessible by talk therapy. Join me in my office with Andrea (a pseudonym).

We have been meeting for several months, and she has arrived at our session feeling fat. "I know my weight is no different than it was last week," she confesses sheepishly, "But I've been feeling fat all day. This fat feeling – it just creeps over me. On my way to this appointment, I imagined you would ask me if something were bothering me, so I thought about it. But I don't have a clue."

I am pleased that she has become aware that "feeling fat" is not about being fat but is a signal that something deeper is amiss. I ask her to recall when it was that this fat "feeling" began. She shrugs, and looks at me blankly. Here is a moment, I think, when perhaps imagery may help us. "Are you willing to do an experiment?" I ask, and with her nod, we begin.

"Close your eyes," I say, shifting my voice to a lower and slower pace. "Take a breath, and let's see what happens if you breathe deeply – and as you breathe, go back, back into time, make contact with the moment when you began to feel fat. See if you can get a sense of where you were, what was happening, as this "fatness" began to creep over you." At this point I close my eyes, hoping that in joining her my silent participation will make it safer for her to go inside. By welcoming

the darkness into the room, I metaphorically invite her to welcome the darkness of her soul. She is silent for a moment and then speaks.

"It was last night. As soon as dinner was over, I found myself eating rye bread." She pauses. "Eating rye bread and feeling fat."

"Take another breath, and as you slow down, see yourself with the rye bread. Where are you?" I ask.

"I am in my kitchen."

"Let me be with you and the rye bread. What is it like, in your kitchen?"

"It is dark and I am crying," she says after a moment of silence, and a trickle of tears leaks out, as does her story. The night before, as dinner ended her live-in boyfriend Ben announced that he had gotten fired, again. For another month he would be unable to pay his share of the rent. For several minutes she goes on, describing her futile attempts to talk to Ben about their finances. Eventually she begins recalling other men, previous relational disappointments. Once again, she reminds me, she was "getting stuck." As she continues talking, I realize she appears detached from her words. A hollowness hangs in the air. I am feeling exhausted, and it seems the energy has drained from our session. I wonder if her energy is hidden in her body. Aiming to deepen her connection both to herself and to me, I intervene with body-based imagery.

"It seems you are stuck – and we are stuck, too," I say. Is she willing to do another experiment? She nods.

"So check in with your body – where is it in your body you feel stuck?"

"Right here," she says, putting her hand over her left shoulder blade.

"Be with your shoulder blade," I say. "Stay with it a moment. Sense it. What is it like?"

"It's like a lava rock."

"What is it like to be with your lava rock?"

"I can't really get anyplace. I'm stuck. It weighs me down."

"Can you say that to your shoulder blade?"

To shoulder, "You weigh me down."

"What does the shoulder blade say?" I ask.

"Too bad – you are stuck."

"So perhaps we will just sit here, with the lava rock, stuck."

Andrea remains silent.

"What's this like – sitting here with the lava rock?" I ask.

"I want to get the rock off me, but I can't."

"About the wanting – Where in your body is that feeling?"

"It's in my heart."

"Can you talk to your heart?"

"Help me," Andrea whispers

"Can you say it again?"

(Louder) "HELP ME!"

"What does your heart say?" I ask.

"You are too heavy."

"How long has your heart known the lava rock?" I ask.

"Since high school."

"So can we go back to your high school days, to the time when your heart met the lava rock?" I ask. Andrea begins to sob as she recalls an unhappy ending to her first love affair with a man, many years older, who jilted her and left her "stuck with a broken heart."

"What happened next? After he left?"

"I felt so lonely and sad – I wanted someone to be there for me, someone who could hug me. But there was no one."

I ask her if anyone comforted her. At first she says no, but eventually recalls being with her mother who was stroking her hair.

"Can you take a moment and be with that memory of your mother stroking your hair?" I ask and Andrea begins to cry again.

"I haven't seen my mom in months," she says, and begins discussing how hard it is for her to be so far apart from her family, who now lives across the country.

"So perhaps you can take a minute to be with her, now," I suggest. "See yourself with her, as she is stroking your hair. What are you feeling?"

Andrea smiles, "I'm feeling warm and mushy."

"Know that this feeling, the one you have now, inside of you is yours, it is something you can come back to whenever you want." I say.

Immediately following this session, Andrea returned a telephone call to a cousin who had been attempting to contact her. At a dinner date that followed, she confided her bulimia. We returned to this piece of work repeatedly as we explored her difficulties reaching out to others and acknowledging her need for food, comfort and human connection. Months later, she made plans to go home for the Christmas holidays.

Many psychological and spiritual traditions teach that deepening our connection to our own inner experience as well as expanding our connections to others are at the core of the process of healing. I believe that imagery facilitated these goals in my work with Andrea. While our relationship started with words, the purpose of the talking was to create a context for deep healing that moved beyond the words alone. (In Winnicottian terms, I created a safe holding environment.) In inviting her to "experiment" with me, I presented myself as a learner rather than an expert. I empowered her by creating a collaborative relationship. Using her imagery further underscored the notion that the power to heal resided within her.

Following her imagery enabled us to access the trigger of "feeling fat," a failure to feel loved and important. Subsequent imagery allowed her to vividly relive earlier memories of disappointment, abandonment and shame. Finally, recalling her mother's soothing touch allowed her to honor her need for connection and offered her a transitional object that could nourish and sustain her in other difficult times.

By slowing down her pace she connected with her mind-body and wound up in her heart, the interface of the emotional and physical world. Once grounded in her own heart, a rich inner world of memories emerged.

In Herman Hesse's novel *SIDDHARTHA*, the seeker of enlightenment, Siddhartha, ends up beside a raging river in India. A voice whispers, "Love the river, stay by it, learn from it." Like the river of life, by staying with our images we and our clients have endless opportunities for learning, growth and transformation.