

Creating a Framework: Art Therapy Elicits the Narrative

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Abstract

A case study illustrates how art therapy was used to elicit the narrative of an adolescent male student in transition from incarceration to a transfer school setting. Childhood trauma was addressed in individual sessions and within a literacy group co-lead by a reading specialist. The art therapist responded to the client's needs by broadening the scope of art therapy with both art and writing. From careful observation and listening to the adolescent's verbal clues about past trauma, the therapist developed familiar, structured worksheets that helped the student focus and safely explore his feelings. The art therapeutic process created a framework from which to understand patterns of attachment and past trauma on the resulting narrative.

Introduction

United by their common experiences with incarceration, teenagers who attend a transitional public school in the greater New York, NY, area accumulate credits while making their way back to the people and places of their lives prior to incarceration. They wear their carefully constructed identities and attire like shields, shifting attention away from their often impoverished and traumatic backgrounds. They, like all of us, have stories to tell. Art therapy is a valuable tool for eliciting their narratives, as was case for Rob (pseudonym), the focus of this article.

Some of us are privileged with memories that take us back to early childhood when a parent would read with us before bedtime. Rob, however, likely did not have such experiences. He struggled to read and was often reluctant to express himself. As his art therapist, I listened and observed the ways in which Rob gradually began to reflect on the story of his own life, noting that the emergence of his narrative style was influenced by his particular attachment pattern, his adolescent journey, and the trauma he had endured as a child.

Rob experienced trauma at a crucial stage of his early development that not only affected his capacity for healthy emotional relationships but also influenced how his story was told. My goal was to use art, poetry, and writing to increase Rob's ability to communicate, to develop his social skills, and to create a supportive therapeutic alliance where

he could safely explore his identity and integrate his emotions in constructive ways. The key strategy that proved effective were the worksheets I made for Rob to elicit his narrative and to foster self-expression. As his story developed into a more coherent form, he was able to strengthen his ego and to function with greater autonomy in a world he found overwhelming.

Literature Review

Adolescent boys can develop a shield that masks their feelings (Pollock, 1999). In their struggle to deal with their emotional lives, youth experience contradictory feelings between desires for connection and for self-sufficiency (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). With troubled adolescents whose significant early life relationships were compromised by trauma or maladaptive patterns, there may be some resistance to therapy; the formation of the therapeutic alliance can be slow and tentative, with displays of ambivalent and unpredictable behavior. These behavioral patterns can be understood within a contextual framework of object relations, attachment, and trauma theories. The form that the therapeutic alliance takes will reflect such behaviors as were formed in early childhood in relation to primary caregivers and became a template for adolescent interactions with others (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). The discussion of rapprochement offered by Mahler et al. (1975) is particularly useful for recognizing behaviors from early childhood that may recur when the adolescent begins to struggle with conflicting feelings of autonomy and dependency.

The relational framework of attachment theory looks at how attachment patterns influence the regulation of emotion. Bowlby (1969) was concerned with the impact of a primary caregiver's healthy or negligent behavior on the child's abilities to form different types of attachments. The qualities of such attachments have enormous implications for subsequent patterns of relationships later in life and for understanding the nature of the transference in therapy. Main (as cited in Fonagy, 2001) developed the Adult Attachment Interview to assess the unique and differing ways that individuals form attachments. Her study established a link between attachment and narrative. Main found that when individuals were asked about their personal histories, how they chose to tell their stories was profoundly influenced by their early attachment patterns. Individuals with a history of secure attachment told cohesive stories, whereas adults who had damaged and insecure attachments told fragmented and very short stories. Some adults were caught up in telling long stories and others' stories were entangled. Storytelling appears to reflect ways in which adults regulate their emotions.

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Fonagy (2001), Holmes (2005), and Straus (2007) focused their work on the relationship between attachment theory and narrative. Holmes asserted that narrative has “psychobiological origins in the marking and contingency of maternal mirroring” (2005, p. 94). Thus, a therapist who encourages a client to construct and then deconstruct a life narrative will gain insight into the client’s early infant attachments. The therapist may assist the client in shaping the story, looking for layers of meaning, questioning clichés, and developing a more nuanced story that has greater depth. By filling in the gaps in the story and finding connections, the client can come to understand and experience another type of attachment. Holmes (1995) observed:

Breaks, gaps, losses are as intrinsic to the rhythm of life as are attachment and connectedness. Narrative bridges these inevitable discontinuities in experience, the capacity to survive major losses in later life being built in the overcoming of the minor fissures that appear in the course of normal development. (p. 34)

Holmes (1995) described the importance of dealing with the “cracks in the pavement” (p. 34) by helping a client build a secure base and a capacity for intimacy. As clients analyze and deconstruct their various stories, they may become aware of distinct qualities ranging from rigidity to as yet unarticulated experiences (Holmes, 1995). Stories that refer to traumatic moments in life often are fractured and painful; the client may have to take time to find the right words. Clients may avoid telling certain stories or may even feel “potentially trapped” by their stories (p. 92). The role of the therapist then is as a witness who proceeds with caution and distance. Narrative therapy helps a more coherent story develop as well as providing an opportunity to change or redirect one’s narrative.

In her work with trauma, Herman (1992) noted that retelling stories is a way to regulate emotion; by revisiting the trauma in story form the storyteller creates emotional distance and with it the possibility for shifting entrenched behavior. According to van der Kolk (2006), trauma can form imprints on the brain where memories are stored as feeling states rather than organized thoughts. He also has written extensively on how personal narratives carry the effects of traumatic stress on memory.

Resonance and repair can be integrated into the therapeutic encounter through narrative as well as through art (Robbins, 2001). Rubin (2001) observed that paying attention to all the subtleties and clues found in every detail of the client’s art making not only contributes to an understanding of the therapeutic process but also helps the clinician shift from being supportive to interpretive in accordance with the client’s needs. Art serves as a container or safe holding environment for feelings while also acting as a mirror for the therapeutic relationship (Robbins, 2001).

As described in the case that follows, the therapeutic process of eliciting the narrative is a measured one. According to Rogers (2006), a psychoanalyst who works with adolescent girls, a client’s narrative often is not a linear story with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it may emerge as fragments of many stories, in words or phrases alone, or

in disconnected images and scribbles on a page. Therefore it is especially important to listen to the silences, the repeated words, the images made, the gaps between the words, and the often empty spaces themselves to find the underlying layers to the stories that a client tells.

Description of the Case

Rob was a 17-year-old who identified himself as a member of a violent gang. Like many of his peers, he was always immaculately dressed; he also presented with a flat affect and monosyllabic responses when interacting with adults. Although other students were often truant, Rob consistently came to school every day. In contrast with the other boisterous teens, he always appeared to be isolated. He had impoverished reading and writing skills, was uncommunicative in class, and offered little social interaction. A profound sadness seemed to permeate his whole body. His advisor, concerned about his loneliness, referred Rob to art therapy.

I met with Rob individually once a week for 40 minutes over a period of 5 months. I also worked with Rob in a group that met twice weekly and was co-led with a reading specialist to encourage and develop the students’ literacy skills. It was in this latter context that I was able to interact with Rob publicly with others and offer him an alternative to the intimacy of a therapeutic dyad. I discovered that Rob would respond to poems that he could relate to as well as art directives that were concrete and therefore unthreatening. At his own request, I made him worksheets to write and draw on in relation to specific themes. Through the process of answering questions and developing his thoughts, these worksheets gave him a foundation from which he could begin to name his emotions and gradually disclose and connect the pieces of his story.

As his therapist, I had to constantly seek out ways to elicit Rob’s narrative from an often resistant demeanor. I used art therapy as a modality yet always looked for other creative options to help him expand his responses. The materials we used were adapted according to his needs and took into consideration his abilities, interests, and attachment style.

Therapeutic Process and Results

Rob was defensive and resistant to our first meeting in the cafeteria, presenting a flat affect. Although this behavior was disconcerting, I asked him to tell me about his favorite music. He responded by talking about the rap artist Tupac Shakur. He told me a little about his family, saying that he had never had a father and lived with his mother and two brothers. He described a turning point in his life when one day on a train he saw a woman begging. As he gave her some money, he looked at her and thought, “I do not want to be poor.” When I thanked him for sharing this story, he replied, “That’s not a ‘story,’ that’s for real.”

Rob brought music to the next session; in the privacy of a tiny office, he sat close to me as we listened to the lyrics together. I asked him if the song related to his own life. Rob replied that the words reminded him that he was alone with

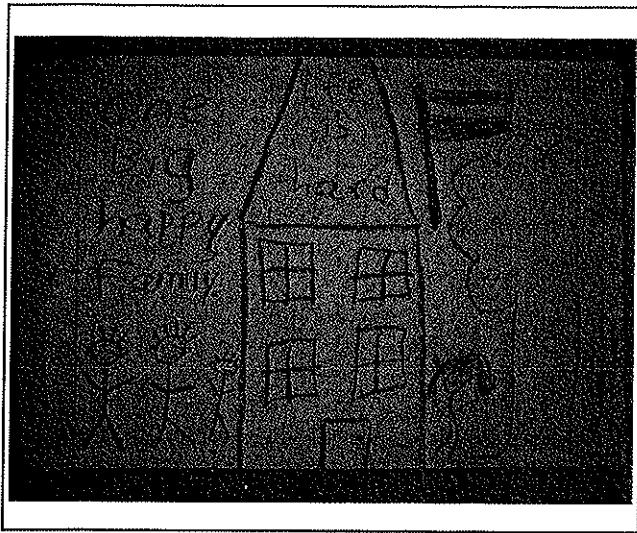


Figure 1 Rob's First Drawing

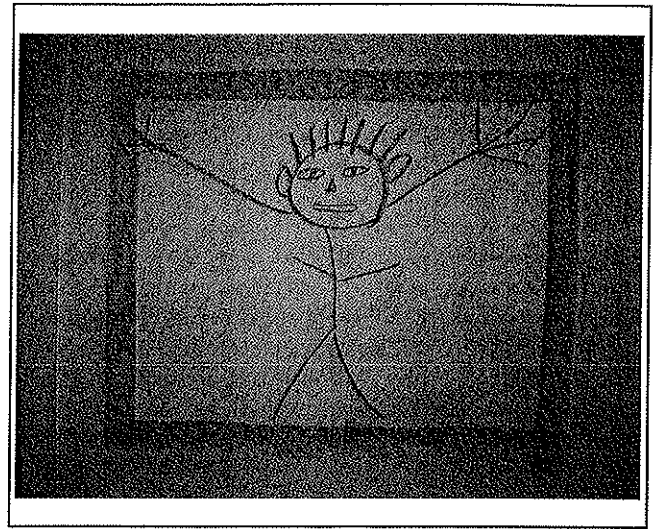


Figure 2 Rob's Third Drawing

no one to look out for him. He asked me to find him reading material written by Stanley Tookie Williams, the leader of the notorious Crips gang who wrote books while he was incarcerated that renounced his violent past and exhorted youth to resist gang membership. In another session, Rob picked up a book of poetry by Shakur (1999) from my desk. Remembering his disclosure of feeling alone, I chose a poem about loneliness to read together. Afterwards, Rob took the poetry book home.

When Rob next walked into my office, he noticed the biography of Williams (Williams, Smiley, & Bechtel, 2007) that he had requested. He revealed that he and Williams both belonged to the same gang and therefore were "family." Rob still refused to make any art in our sessions. After several frustrating sessions, I asked if he would like to help me out with a graduate study that would require him to create three drawings. I gave him the opportunity to say no but instead he chose to participate.

We met in the cafeteria to create the drawings. Drawn using only a blue crayon, Rob's first drawing included the image of a house with five figures (Figure 1). In the second drawing he drew an apple tree with a hole in the trunk. In the third and final drawing Rob depicted a male figure with outstretched arms, surrounded by a rectangle (Figure 2). Rob later described the first drawing as the family he wished he had. He returned the poetry book and requested something else to read. Rob still refused to make art when asked, but revealed a desire to write a poem. We listened to Tupac Shakur's music again but then he asked to return to class.

I began to see Rob more often, now twice weekly in the group that I co-led with a reading specialist. In my first meeting with them, I read aloud a poem by Tupac Shakur (1999) entitled "The Rose That Grew From Concrete." After some discussion about the poem, I asked the group members to make a collage. Rob said very little but proceeded to make a collage (Figure 3).

When I arrived for the next group session, Rob was engaged in conversation with another student. He agreed to

reflect on his collage with me and he described the images, although this required some prompting because his response was monosyllabic. I suggested that he compose a list of descriptive words and use 10 of them to write a poem. Rob wrote his poem in about 10 minutes. Later that day he asked

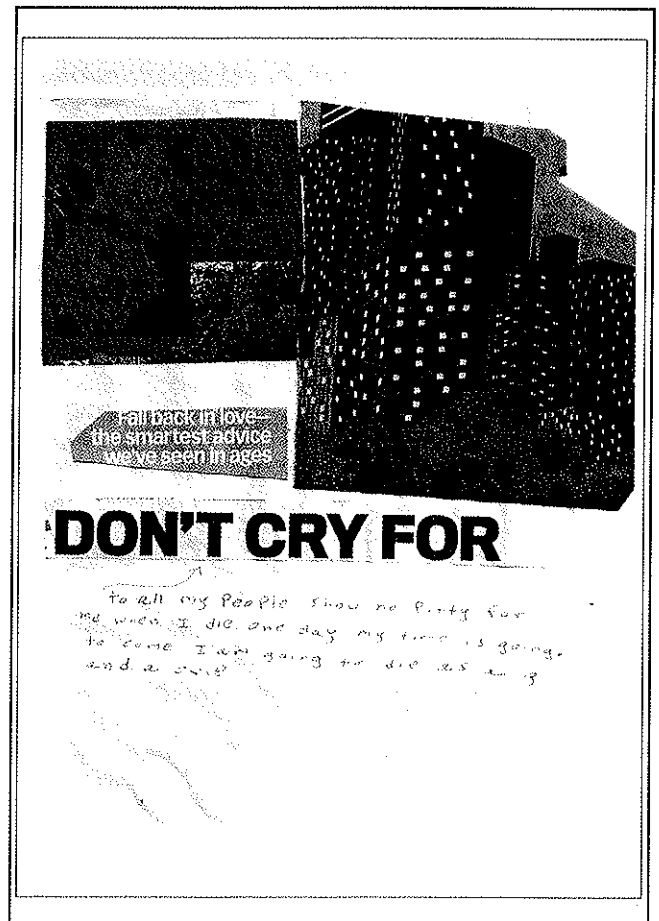


Figure 3 Collage in Response to Poem

to stay in class instead of coming to his art therapy session but he also told me, after some discussion, that he liked to do worksheets.

For the next group session, I prepared a worksheet about graffiti art that I had planned with Rob in mind. Because of the reading focus in the group, we examined a book on Basquiat, a graffiti artist who became internationally known before his untimely death. I gave Rob a worksheet to elicit some degree of insight and disclosure. This worksheet required him to answer questions about graffiti and to create drawings on this topic. In one of his answers he made reference to his father and imagined drawing his father holding him. Rob created three drawings as requested, one of which depicted a wall covered with graffiti. I saw that he responded well to this format and was able to focus on a concrete task.

That same day after lunch in our individual session, Rob sat down, looked in the mirror in front of him, and began to fix his hair. Noticing this focus of attention, I asked him if he would like to paint a self-portrait. He responded positively to this suggestion. In the meantime he completed his graffiti worksheet and, when we looked at it together, I read his answers aloud. When I got to the part about his father, I paused to draw attention to it. He looked up and said, "My father was very mean to me." He said that his father would beat his mother. He did not elaborate further other than to say that his mother had thrown his father out of the house when Rob was 5 years old.

Having observed Rob's repeated use of certain words, I designed another worksheet for the next session that focused on his word "respect." I asked Rob to draw and to write short responses to worksheet questions that explored his feelings. Following the worksheet's written instructions, Rob used a pencil to draw an outline of his hand on the page. Then on his own he chose a magazine picture of a father and child and glued it onto the drawing (Figure 4). It took Rob two sessions to finish the worksheet. Now when I entered the classroom Rob jumped up to find me a chair. He continued working on his worksheet and wrote two more stories. I took the worksheet to read and, when asked, retold Rob's story about how he had gotten into a fight with another teen but, being equal in strength, they shook hands and became friends. Rob made a passing reference to having a girlfriend and chattered with the other students for the rest of the session.

I was sitting beside Rob in the next group session when one of the other students provoked him and for the first time I saw him seethe with anger. I broached the subject with Rob, who spoke briefly about his previous experiences with anger. He acknowledged that this anger had resulted in his being incarcerated three times. After this disclosure, Rob quietly painted a broad smile and clenched teeth on his self-portrait using only one color (Figure 5).

A few days later in the classroom, Rob worked briefly on his worksheet and then came to sit next to me, bringing me Tupac Shakur's poem about loneliness that we had read previously. I read it aloud to him and we talked about it for a while despite the fact that there were other people in the room. I turned back to the class to read aloud

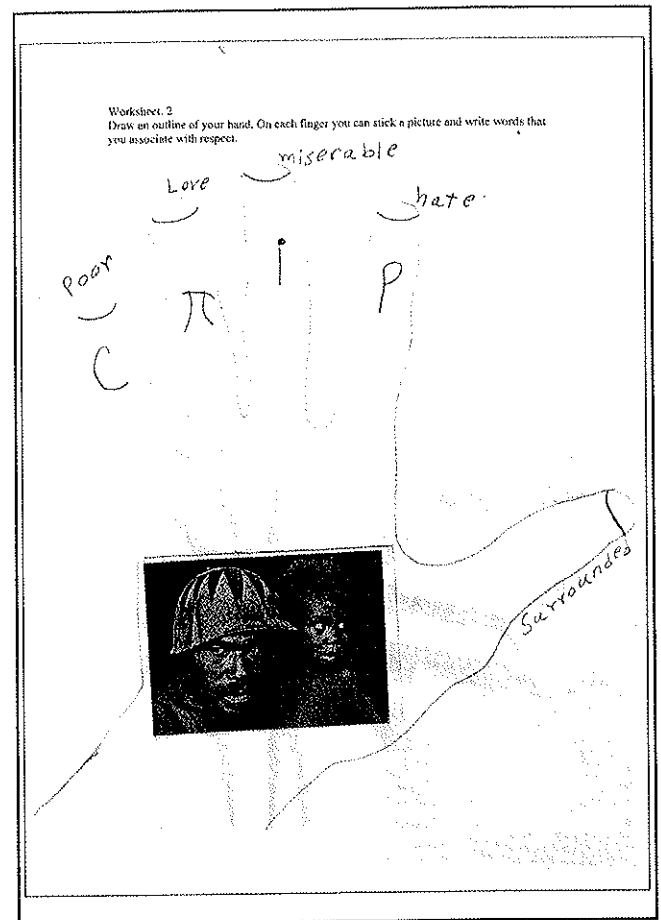


Figure 4 Worksheet: Respect

from the biography of Stanley Tookie Williams. Rob, still sitting next to me, listened intently. When I read about the beatings Williams had received from his mother as a child, Rob suddenly interrupted and said vehemently that he supported the use of physical punishment. While the boys talked amongst themselves, Rob softly told me that his parents used to beat him. I asked him how that felt and he said quietly, "Not good." Later that day Rob came to see me for our individual session and after chatting for a while about his hair style, he chose to return to class instead of working on his self-portrait.

I did not see Rob again until after the school holidays, two or three weeks later. In class, I suggested that he select from a pile of words clipped from magazines, which denoted a range of feelings and emotions, and glue his choices onto a mandala. He worked slowly and methodically, carefully arranging his words in two distinct areas: one row of words in the center of the circle and another surrounding the outer rim (Figure 6).

In the following class, Rob was enthusiastic and communicative. He greeted me, took my basket of art supplies, and placed it on the table. I sat with him again and together we looked at his mandala, reflecting on the placement of his words. Afterward he wrote two full pages of a story using these same words to say he has no family. Belonging to a

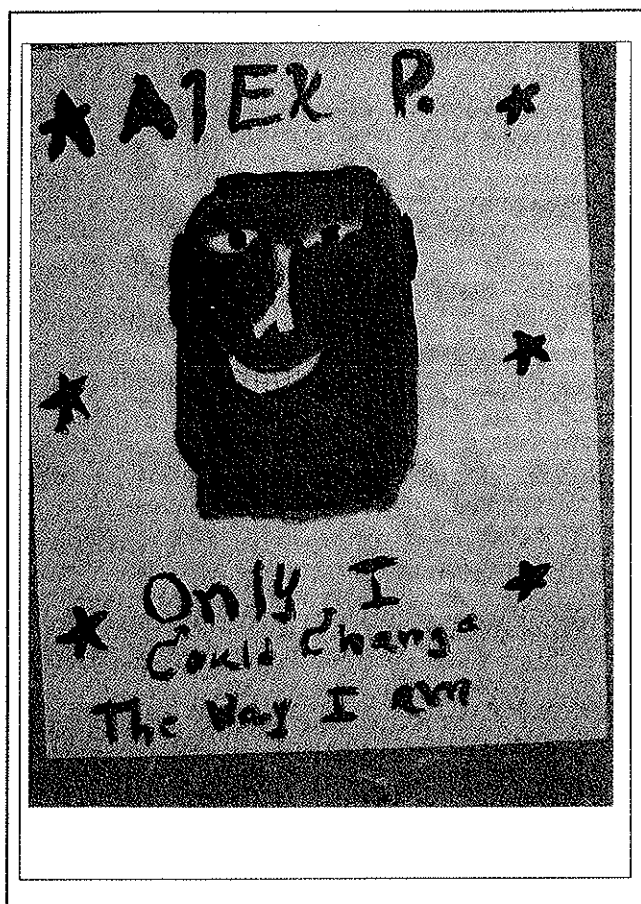


Figure 5 Self Portrait (12" x 18", acrylic paint on canvas)

gang made him feel as if he had a family. He talked to his girlfriend about how he was abused by his father. He described his hope and passion and how he is trying to make something out of his life, influenced by his brother who is in the navy. On completion he gave it to me to read and then picked up the book by Williams. This evoked a discussion about Rob's time in prison and the books he read while there.

Our last sessions were very productive. Rob made several drawings and wrote more short pieces about his family and his abusive father. However, after he turned 18 and failed to pass his exam in order to receive a diploma, he decided to leave school and did so without saying a formal goodbye.

Discussion

At first Rob appeared to me to be a typical adolescent, appropriately disinterested and mistrusting. When I showed interest in his music, he gave me an immediate response that bridged this hurdle and allowed him to focus on Tupac Shakur's story. As Rob's feelings of mistrust dissipated, he began to draw analogies between himself and the rap artist that revealed details about Rob's family life. Our

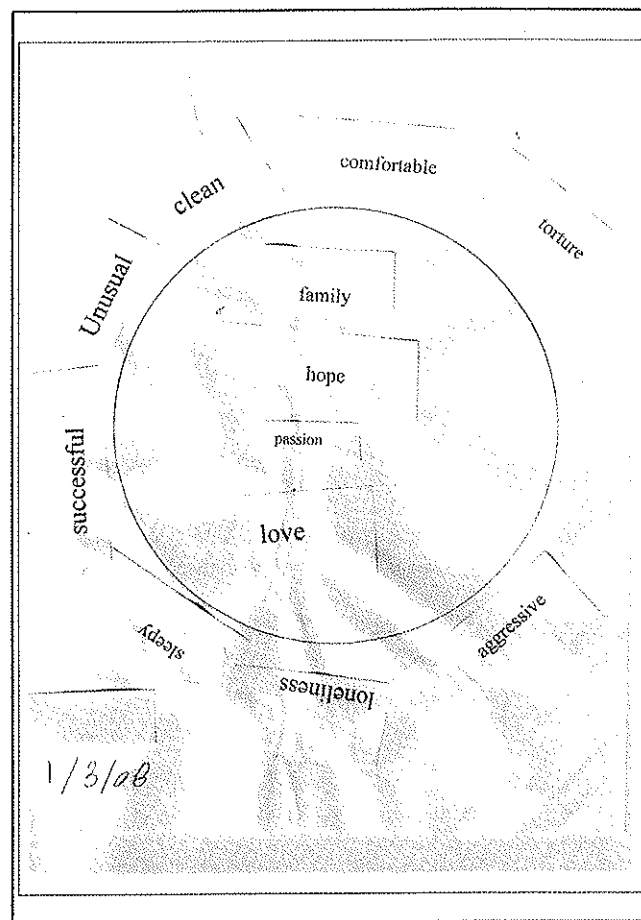


Figure 6 Mandala Collage

experience of sharing created a relational pattern that was similar to a young child interacting with his primary caregiver. The therapeutic alliance was complicated, however, by Rob's back-and-forth behavior—at times he showed resistance, and other times found him wanting to return to class while simultaneously displaying interest in coming to art therapy. Reminiscent of the rapprochement phase described by Mahler et al. (1975), Rob was willing to have this interaction despite his discomfort. As I established my role as a consistent and safe presence, it felt crucial to work with Rob's resistance so that he could use his self-protective defenses to assert his autonomy.

During our sessions, I was attentive to Rob's use of language and related to him by listening to his music, reading books with him, and responding to his requests. When he asked for worksheets, I used his own words to form a containing structure for his narrative, always taking cues from him and mirroring them back. This process was a significant turning point in the therapeutic alliance, perhaps because it allowed him to feel his needs being met. As a result, he felt safe and comfortable enough to begin to write and draw. The size and the layout of the worksheets looked like schoolwork; they were familiar to him. This process implicitly gave him a sense of control in the therapeutic relationship, thereby strengthening his ego.

Rob's story was filled with silences, gaps, and intermittent disclosures; it developed slowly and hesitantly over many sessions. The early reciprocal exchange between Rob and me was crucial in challenging attachment patterns, entering into a transference relationship, and allowing the narrative to emerge. The formation of the attachment was itself a narrative, reflected in the various configurations of our seating arrangements that offered a metaphor for the changing nature of the relationship's physical and emotional proximity. These patterns coincided with Rob's increasing desire to disclose, acknowledge, and share with me on a personal level. Whenever I brought books for Rob, he responded by supplying small snippets of personal information that let me know that he felt lonely. As I read aloud, he sat next to me, looking directly into my face and listening carefully to the words. Due to the development of an intimacy that mirrored a parent reading to a child, Rob was gradually able to tell me about his father's abusive behaviors.

Rob's ability to relate to me indicated his longing for a relationship. The significance of his slowly developing responses can be measured by the fact that despite his discomfort, Rob was secure enough to reciprocate. He agreed to participate in my graduate project and made the three drawings I requested despite his preferred resistance to art making.

In the first of these drawings (Figure 1), Rob cued me in to his story and feelings about his family. He provided a tangible clue that he was thinking about his father when he drew a male figure that he would not identify. When asked to tell a story about the picture, he simply stated his wish for a family. Here was the first gap in the narrative: He brought the male figure into the room, evoking his earlier denial of his father's existence, but he would not tell me more. The lack of detail and silence around the father figure was pertinent. The image of this male figure is also isolated, cut off from the rest of the family, and far away from the three boys placed on the other side of the house.

Interacting with Rob in a group setting had a positive effect on his therapeutic progress. He became a little more communicative and he drew and wrote more often, despite the fact that his drawings were meager and his words were fragmented or sparse with information. When Rob made a collage, for example (Figure 3), the disparate and somewhat disconnected images with poignant empty white spaces between them were meaningful clues that suggested a lack of cohesion and difficulties with self-expression. I explored each image with him, lending him words to fill in the empty spaces. Rob used these words to create a poem and his writing, though confused, was poetic and suggestive.

The worksheets brought forth artwork and encouraged Rob to reveal more about himself in small increments. Rob's image of a brick wall that was covered with scribbled graffiti seemed to me to be a metaphor, as if he too was covered with marks that stained his body. In answer to one of the questions, he expressed his desire to be held by his father. With this fragment of information, he brought his father into the room once again. The word "father" began to appear

at every opportunity; its presence alerted me to his longing for a father—a desire that seemed to permeate every aspect of Rob's existence.

Among Rob's words that kept recurring was "respect," which I heard and mirrored back to him. Perhaps this focus on respect enabled him to disclose a little more, especially as it evoked a sense of loss from the lack of respect from his father and brought into awareness his longing for deference, value, and worth. He incorporated this longing into his work by finding a tender and idealized collage image of a father respectfully holding his son, which he glued to his drawing. Once again he brought the idea of a father back into the session, but now when he added evocative words to the image, they provided insight into his feelings. One of these words was "miserable." Did he feel miserable because he could not change his life? Another word, "surrounded," was reminiscent of his drawing of a boy trapped in a rectangle (Figure 2). All these signifiers pieced together a narrative with many layers of the unsayable: his grief, his hurt, the disrespect he had experienced, and a multitude of feelings created by the trauma of abuse, absence, and loss.

There are many ways to elicit the narrative in art therapy, and in this case, a series of school worksheets was most successful. As a concrete support, the worksheets were not simply cognitive behavioral interventions but rather functioned to contain and promote the free flow of Rob's internal and unconscious world, allowing him to access and tolerate his feelings as he integrated them into his narrative. I created the worksheets for Rob in response to certain cues and issues that arose in each session. Like the internal world it mirrored, the direction of Rob's storytelling was unpredictable and depended largely on the therapeutic relationship as it developed over 5 months in both individual and group sessions.

Initially Rob was unable to perceive his life as a story or a narrative. Early in therapy he described a memory that he named as a turning point in his life—that of a woman on a train. When I identified it as a story, he was taken aback and felt it necessary to correct me and tell me that it was not a story but real life. Over time the fragments of Rob's story started to fit together, but remained incomplete. Even his sense of time was not linear or consistent. I realized that the capacity to perceive one's life with some objectivity could not be taken for granted. Childhood trauma to some extent could explain his story's lack of cohesion or emotional integration, his memory lapses and silences, as well as his gritted teeth and his expressions of sadness, misery, and loss. Rob's being was deeply marked by trauma at a crucial age in his relational development.

Art therapy helped Rob integrate his feelings both non-verbally and verbally as I repeated his words to acknowledge his feelings and to help him feel emotionally connected and understood. This simple method of hearing me name and reflect words back to him resulted in his being able to sit quietly on his own and write a longer, relatively cohesive story that connected his past, the present, and his hopes for the future in one unified tale. By writing this piece Rob filled the gaps and silences with words, telling a story

about the important relationships in his life. His thoughtful, logical prose articulated things about himself, as if to define his identity. Rob's narrative was childlike, naïve, and optimistic, yet also devastating in its concrete reference to his father's abuse.

The reasons for the repeatedly intrusive thoughts about his father became clearer. Perhaps Rob was stuck in a particular place in his story, as if trapped and surrounded by memories of his traumatic past. Through writing he began to cohesively integrate his experiences, making them part of his life, filling in the empty white spaces with words. Rob used art therapy to map out his narrative, whether dealing with his grief from the loss of a father, reassessing his relationship with his gang, or affirming some genuine connections. Rob gradually became more communicative and social. His face still retained its flat composure but in art therapy he had begun to explore his internal world while grappling with his narrative.

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