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The Quality Art Therapist

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ART THERAPY: EXPANDING HORIZONS

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THE QUALITY ART THERAPIST

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Let me first define for you those special abilities which I consider to be essential for the practice of "high quality" art therapy.

I see the art therapist as a communication expert — trained to understand and respond to all forms of communication, and, in particular, to non-verbal forms. The art therapist must be able to provide an environment in which a person feels free to express feelings, creatively explore art media and symbolically communicate with the therapist. The art therapist must be able to interact actively or simply receive this communication. The action which the art therapist chooses to take, the degree of active or passive participation, the degree of structure or the extent of the limits which he chooses to set, are decisions which are made based upon a deep understanding of what the patient is experiencing at that moment, in conjunction with what the therapist is experiencing — fantasies, images, feelings or specific emotional reactions.

This kind of response requires a high degree of training. For the therapist to be able to use his own fantasies and feelings as a tool for understanding his patient and respond empathically, he must first become well acquainted with his own liabilities; understand how they limit, distort or in some way influence his experience of the patient. Next he must undergo rigorous clinical training where he learns to combine his theoretical knowledge with practical skills such as handling transference, counter-transference and induced reactions. This quality art therapist is quite competent to function as either part of a team or independently in private practice.

Obstacles to Quality Performance

In my experience as an art therapist, psychoanalyst in training, art therapy supervisor and instructor, I have observed certain inherent problems which

one must overcome in order to attain this level of "quality" performance. Let us first examine several innate problems which art therapists in training face in most graduate training programs.

Arbitrary Length of Stay in Program

Students entering graduate training programs follow clearly defined curricula and often, due to excessive financial pressure, try to finish their coursework as quickly as possible. Therefore, the length of time which they remain in this training is often unrelated to their own personal need for integrating the concepts to which they are exposed. These concepts, briefly outlined above, are quite complex and require a delicate synthesis of diverse experiences including one's own personal insight, academic knowledge and clinical experience. The time-table for such synthesis and integration is often not synchronized with the student's academic calendar. Students are therefore left with feelings of being "incomplete" or "lost" — they often describe themselves as being only at the "tip of the iceberg," as they are ushered out the door and handed their diplomas.

Social and Economic Pressures

We live in a time of tremendous economic and social pressure. Good jobs have become rare and many young students graduating from college have begun to avoid the unpleasant reality of "no work" by jumping back into the "academic water" in hope of better preparing themselves for higher paying professional jobs upon completion of their Master's degree. The result of this phenomenon has serious consequences for all of us who are concerned with quality performance. The drop in average age of Master's degree candidates means the introduction of students into our programs who have very limited life experi-

ience, often coming to us while still living at home, or, now, for the very first time, just out on their own. The nature of the work with which they are faced and concepts which they are required to understand are often experienced as overwhelming. The resulting feelings of inadequacy often find temporary relief through the mobilization of defenses such as over-intellectualization, rigidity, denial, projection or competitive acting-out.

To further complicate things, students are later disillusioned when they:

- (1) Realize that art therapy training requires a greater emotional commitment than they were prepared to make; and
- (2) Realize that upon completion of their degree they are often no better off in terms of employment potential than before!

How, then, might a serious student overcome these obstacles? Well, most importantly, he must possess certain personal qualities. The person must be open and honest, seeking answers to problems or questions without fear or embarrassment. He must be curious and express a drive to learn and grow. He must be receptive to feedback without the mobilization of rigid defense mechanisms. He must be creative and pursue his own area of artistic work in order to neutralize potentially destructive or overwhelming feelings stirred up by an intensive training experience. He must have courage to stand up for what he believes, in spite of external pressure.

Beyond these personal attributes, the "quality" art therapist must also be open to pursue extended training through such alternative resources as private supervision, apprenticeships with practicing art therapists, attend workshops, pursue independent reading or finally, enroll in non-academic, private training institutes. These training institutes should be in tune with the changing needs and inner growth cycles of the student and combine academic, personal and clinical components.

What role can AATA take in the pursuit of quality practitioners? First we must all realize that quality performance in the art therapy field, as with any mental health profession, requires a personal commitment to excellence in training. We must therefore support post graduate programs which will help art therapists better prepare themselves to practice on a higher "quality" level. This should include preparation for private practice. Next we must support each art therapist effort to upgrade his own abilities, whether this pursuit leads him further into, or further out of the formal art therapy field itself. We must respect these alternate routes to "quality" wherever they are found.

For if we look around here for a moment at those among us now who are the "quality" people in the field today — trainers, writers and scholars — we see many people who have trained in allied professions as well as in art therapy. They have brought to our field a richness of experience that strengthens our heritage, gives us vitality and makes us unique. Let us not turn our back on the route of our own evolution by narrowing our horizons and discouraging growth, in whatever form it may be pursued.