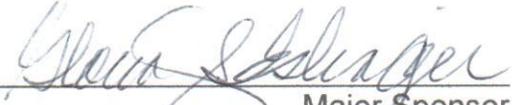
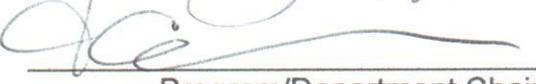


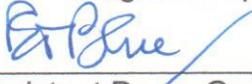
A Personal Perspective: The Art of Imaging Revelation, Inspiration, and Healing.

By Grady O'Neill

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A large part of my journey through life has involved me in both addiction and art therapy. I have gone from believing art therapy doesn't work at all to devoting myself to it as a career. There have been many times I have doubted not only art therapy but myself as well. I have learned so much throughout this journey and continue to learn more. For the last few years I have interned at rehabilitation centers conducting art therapy groups. I have learned a lot from these experiences along with my own life experiences. I dealt with addiction at an early age. I, among many others, began using drugs in the seventh grade.

It can be difficult for people in recovery to open up and talk about their experiences. A lot of clients have manipulated and have broken trust with some of the closest people in their lives. My addictive, destructive behavior gave me no alternatives. I had betrayed everyone that loved me or cared for me. Nothing mattered except for my next fix, and there were a lot of them. The doctors, therapists, psychiatrists, parents, friends, or anyone else who was there to "help me" didn't matter. I had not only lost their trust, but I also had manifested a wary

relationship with them—mostly doctors or people who were involved in the institutions. When getting checked into rehab, I had no plan to open up to anyone. I never really did; the insurance I was on quit paying for services after about fourteen days. It would have been seven hundred dollars a day for me to stay at the center I was at. I decided to leave and take what I could out of it. It was enough for a time. One thing I remember was arts and crafts time. They had us in a group of about forty people, all just painting bird houses. There seemed to be no reason for doing it, and most of us just left and went to smoke cigarettes. This was my first experience with art in a recovery center. I thought it was completely useless. I had no idea what they were trying to accomplish. I even made fun of it with the rest of the group. When in inpatient settings we find our clicks and roll with them, almost like high school. As Gilroy points out, it is important that art therapy is conducted in a professional manner:

Mahory's survey of the use of art activities in the alcohol services of a large health region found a marked lack of art-therapy services and real confusion about what art therapy was. She identified a widespread use of art activities for educative, healing or psychotherapeutic purposes by various members of multi-disciplinary teams, usually as a leisure or craft activity, but offered by

staff in the belief that they were doing 'art therapy' Mahory concluded that clients are misled about the art therapy service they receive and not have equitable access to effective services from trained professionals. (124)

In my group setting, no one said anything about the activity being relaxing. It seemed as if there was one overwhelmed director trying to run this huge group and nobody cared. There was little participation, because there was no direction or explanation for what we were doing. Later I would find out why this was and how important art is in the recovery process. This was the top-rated rehabilitation center in the United States. After only seven days in their program, they already started to repeat movies and modules they were going through. This troubles me, and I can only imagine who owns these centers.

One of the first things that they instilled in me was the rate of relapse within addicts: more than likely before we died of an overdose we would relapse and be back. Right away it gave me a feeling of futility: What is the point of all this? Society already had labeled me a failure. Even if I slipped the slightest, it would be a predicted outcome, one that most saw coming: You are an addict and there is no hope for you. That is the general feeling that I received in rehab and

one that is generated throughout many institutions. I have seen it throughout many of my experiences being on the other side of the table.

My brother went for his master's degree in Art therapy, and I was amazed. I had no idea what he was doing. I just couldn't wrap my head around it. At the time I was still using on and off. I had a lot of questions flying around in my head and doubted that it even worked. I kept trying to relate to his paintings: I would try to explain my life through his painting. It would work, for a good story, and I felt like I was mostly being dishonest just to complete the story somehow. Looking back on the experience, I found every metaphor and explanation was truer than I was able to confront. It would feel good, being able to use my imagination. It was a way for me to let go and live my life through a painting, even if just for moments. It was a powerful experience, and one that would change my life.

The painting in fig. 1 was one that my brother Bill gave me after he discovered that I found healing, meaning, and inspiration in it. At the time, I was coming off of a drug and alcohol bender. It was easy to connect to the piece. I immediately was able to express what was happening in my own life and connecting it to the images in the painting and what they revealed to me. Even as I was connecting to this painting, I still had no idea what art therapy was. Bill let

me find that out for myself, and I'm glad he did. A method I found to be most important for enabling art therapy to take hold is to let the clients make their own connections. I learned not to force anything. Clients in recovery have allowed people to attempt to force them to believe enough things. There is no need to sell art therapy, at least not to the clients. The staff you work with will usually need validation for how art therapy works before they accept it.

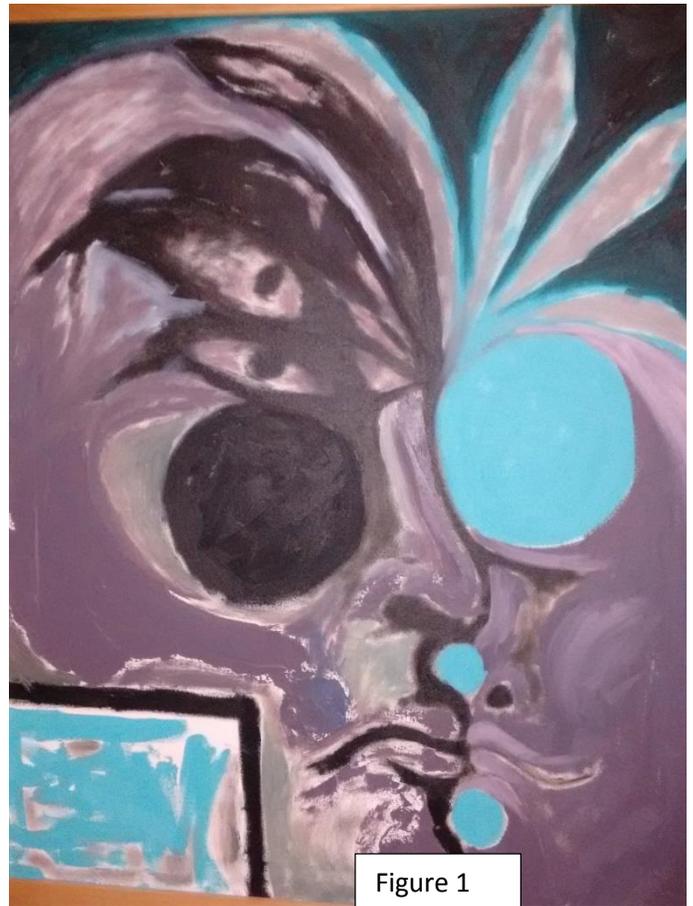


Figure 1

I connected to the faces in the painting immediately. Without hesitation, I told Bill that all the eyes represented my addictions and the black hole underneath those eyes were my lost feelings. The smaller face, with the turquoise color, represented my family, me, and who I really was. I connected to the box of color in the lower right hand corner as all my worth boxed up—everything that I just couldn't use at the moment. It was a dark time in my life. I still was able to understand that I wasn't this monster that society thought I was. I did have the

energy and desire to win, against all odds. It empowered me and meant more than I knew at the time. This was a big part of my healing, even though I made a lot of mistakes afterwards.

After a rough couple years with a lot help from my parents, I completed my Associates degree and went on to complete my Bachelor's degree in Video Production. All three of my films required for graduation were based on my addiction and examples of art therapy. I couldn't help but make films about my life. To help me process everything, I used art. As McNiff states, art can heal parts of our soul that nothing else can touch:

Whenever illness is associated with loss of soul, the arts emerge spontaneously as remedies, soul medicine. Paring imagination treats itself and recycles its vitality back to daily living. (1)

*Inspired Symplicity* was an experimental film about a lot of different issues I was still dealing with—mostly my addiction to pills and how anger overcame me and caused me to lash out at the doctors and cultural institutions like churches, schools, and rehabilitation centers that instead of helping me solve my problem they reinforced what was causing it. (Upload film at <https://youtu.be/N4K0mllQBok>>). *Gone*, my second film was for a close friend I

lost due to a bad drug and alcohol combination. It was a loss that was hard for me to process; she left behind a son. I thought a lot about what his future would be and how he would grow up. Being able to write a script and to film this was a way for me to process these emotions. It was not a happy film, but one that told a story that happens all too often and needs an audience. (Upload film at <https://youtu.be/rfVgvaNYL0s>).

The last film I made *Still Sideways* was the one that most directly addresses my addiction. It was the first one that had dialogue. I had my brother play the role of me, and I focused on experiences that were key in my several years of addiction and recovery. It followed my life from when I was a child getting diagnosed with ADHD, my teenage years of abusing drugs, and the aftermath. It was a healing experience for me, and I cannot express in words its powerful revelation and inspiration. Seeing those scenes of my life unfold in front of me intensified what I'd gone through. (Upload film at <https://youtu.be/pPKJd6F1pKk>).

Only after looking back on the experience, I can appreciate the healing that it did for me. This is one of the main reasons I decided to help people with art therapy who have been through similar experiences with drugs. Finally, I was able to understand how healing it was for me to express myself and process what I had

done to learn how to deal with all those emotions that come with recovery—guilt, shame, rejection, anxiety, and the list goes on. Being able to use vehicles to deliver images that reveal the realities of our behavior is healing. The vehicles can be writing, video, drawing, painting, talking, dancing, yoga, etc. We connect to different things, but the key is to get clients to understand that they can exploit those connections to other mediums and receive the same benefits. Adamson covers a lot of different situations where art therapy has helped heal people:

With the help of this remedial creativity, many of us may be able to find our way through the darker passages in our lives which might otherwise have led to illness and suffering. (10)

Running art therapy groups in recovery centers is what I have mostly done during my internships. The first group I ever ran was something that freaked me out. I had a lot of anxiety; but when I sat down, I felt like what I had to share was valid. I felt like there was this powerful secret that they probably wouldn't understand—Art. There was a lot of resistance and people saying things like, "I am not in the third grade; this is stupid." This attitude is one that I encountered often. It bothered me a bit, but, at the same time, I had been where they were sitting. It was nothing I hadn't been through. With that, it gave me confidence, and I was able to suck it up and go through with my directive. The first time I ran a

group, it went rough; but I had one or two people connect to what they were doing. After that first group, I have thought of ways that I could make the experience more therapeutic for everyone. After those first two group members connected, it was like a domino effect. Once a group sees that it is worth doing, the more participation happens. Corey, Corey, discusses many different group situations that may arise. *Groups: Process and Practice* shows many different solutions to problems that may happen while running groups:

It is not important that members be chastised for their silence but instead be invited to participate. (198)

There has been more than one occasion when I have been running an art therapy group and there are a couple group members who just don't want to participate. As attending staff notice this, they try to push these group members to participate in the activity. Almost every time this has happened it has failed to produce anything of substance. Sometimes just letting those in a group who are not participating come to their own conclusions works best. Encouragement is often necessary; but if it doesn't work the first two times—let it go.

Larry was in the out-patient group at Life Renewal. I had him in group for roughly four months. He never participated in anything for the first three or so sessions. Larry would always just feed off of those that would call the whole

process stupid. One day, before I left the group I asked if there was any kind of medium the group may be more comfortable working with. Larry mentioned clay would be nice. I ended up buying some before the next session. At this point there was participation within the group, especially involving the in-patient group. Even new



Figure 2

members would hear about the art therapy exercises we did the week before, and they knew the group had accepted it. This helped a lot with the whole process of running a group for the first semester. I came in the next week and gave the group a directive to create a safe place for them or a strength of theirs. Larry, for the first time, grabbed a clump of clay and went to work. The rest of the group participated as usual, but I could tell that they were interested in what Larry was doing. Larry never had anything to say in group, and it was his last group before he graduated. He shared for the first time and talked about how his clay sculpture, an eagle, represented what he wanted to do: fly proud and move away from all those labels (see fig. 2). He pointed out how hard it was to change his direction in life when he was shackled to same thing: same family and patterns. He said he occasionally felt pride, but it was short lived. Before leaving

the treatment center, Larry already felt defeated. I identified with how he felt and was compelled to ask what he could do differently. It was the first time that I challenged a client to go farther, but I felt comfortable doing so. Larry immediately got the support of the group also. He talked about a few different options, and the group gave the best advice they could. After the session Larry came and shook my hand and said, "I understand what art therapy is, thank you." Yalom explains how this can work. It doesn't mean that we have to participate in the group every time, even with observation there is healing:

Therapy groups effectively instill hope in patients who are demoralized and pessimistic about therapy. Group members are at different points along a collapse/coping continuum and can give hope for observing others, especially others with similar problems, who have profited from therapy. (18)

In Larry's case he found the benefits at the end; but the process of seeing others benefit from it helped him connect to it in his own way. It was a wall that Larry had trouble climbing over. One reason art therapy works so well in recovery is that it changes the way you think. That is something that every addict struggles with. We have difficulty changing instilled thought processes and thinking for ourselves. There are so many walls that have been reinforced throughout our

experiences in life. It can be overwhelming to just start talking about these feelings, but art gives us a stepping stone. A way to express these feelings and communicate—especially in a group setting. Jennings reinforces this idea with her own experiences:

Many of the people that I have worked with throughout the years find it difficult to find words for their inner feelings, fears, and experiences. The art-work becomes a symbolic language for their inner feelings and helps them to make a bridge between the inner and outer reality. For instance, in working with drug-abusers, I often use this method of distancing in order to move closer. If a young person is asked to sit down and say something about themselves, they often feel very afraid and say that that is stupid; but when using metaphors which allow distancing, they feel safer and more able to expose their fears and feelings. (49)

This is a great example of why art therapy works. Many people in recovery don't trust many institutions. They have either at one point taken advantage of them, or they have failed them from past times. When drug counselors ask clients to tell them what their triggers are, what they may want to do differently, or why they did what they did, the questions go on and on. These questions are

necessary for a variety of reasons during the recovery process. The clients are not going to be able to open up about these things (in most cases). People have asked these questions to them for too long. They either have refused to answer them or lie. When they experience art therapy, there is no direct question, but a challenge for clients to connect to something on their own terms, not questions forcing them to create, but to want to. In most cases, I have found that the clients that resist art therapy the most eventually get the most out of it. Here is another example of how well art therapy works:

The directive was to use plaster bandages and have group members mold their faces (or hands if not comfortable with faces), then decorate and portray them in self portraits, thinking about their own growth. We talked about this directive a few days before doing it. When I came in with the materials for this activity, clients started to get nervous, for this was one that required a lot of trust. I thought a lot about some of the boundaries that would challenge them. It went smoothly: some decided to use their hands instead of their faces. It was whatever they were comfortable doing, for we have to be careful about certain boundaries to cross. When one client was covering the other's face, they were verbal about every move they made. To ensure trust with the person whose faces they were covering was a huge step for them. To allow someone to cover his or her whole

face with plaster requires trust. After that, the clients with their faces covered sat with only their nostrils open while the mask dried on their faces for about ten minutes (see fig. 3).



It was a great experience for everyone in the group. There were even a couple of clients in group who did not get along but paired together for the exercise. This was a great way to get them to connect. It went smoothly. The next week, as a group, we worked on decorating the masks any way they wanted to, just so it was a reflection of their inner selves.

Steve made his hand into a middle finger initially. He omitted the middle finger when it was drying (see fig. 4). As he was letting his hand dry, he asked if it was ok for him to mold his hand with a middle finger. I said that as long as it was

something he could connect to and make positive. Steve just nodded his head and looked around the room. He made his mold over his hand and omitted the middle finger. When it was his turn to share, he explained how it was a good thing. He said that it was still a powerful expression, one of flowers instead of the middle finger. It makes you think “fuck you” but has a positive connotation. When he shared, Steve said he felt good about the whole experience. It was an expression, and it felt good to express it.



Figure 4

Another one was Stacy who made a mask (see fig. 5). When I asked how it felt to have the mask created on her face, she described it as almost having an anxiety attack at first. Then she breathed deeply and just tried to relax. After the gauze covered her eyes, she felt completely relaxed. She mentioned how the relaxing music helped her get to that point. It helped a lot having her other group member communicating what she was doing while covering her face. When Stacy shared, she talked about that just letting the world know what she felt

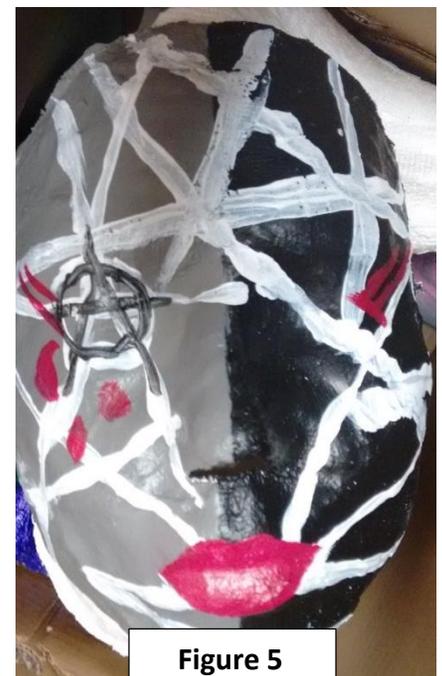


Figure 5

was huge. Expressing herself was something that didn't happen often. She had been in an abusive relationship and never really was able to. Stacy was excited about the mask and felt proud to have it.

Another successful directive is to have the clients create their own object out of clay. Before starting this project, I gave each client a list of questions that helped them identify with their piece. Like any group session I run, the main point is to connect to what you are doing.

John was excited to work with the clay. He resisted any of the other art directives I would bring but was ready to connect to this one. He made a stamp that read "addict" on the bottom (see fig. 6). He began to explain how, no matter what, people label him an addict. There is nothing that will change that. If he



Figure 6

drinks one beer or takes one pill he is doomed. Society will not budge on that—there is no coming back from that one drink or pill. John explained how he feels like he is just labeled an addict and will never break free from that label. He expressed how he just wishes society would see him as a normal human being.

After sharing with the group, a lively meaningful discussion sprang to life. All the people in the room were able to connect to what John was saying. They supported him and also made the point that we need to work for that status. The group also stated how unfair it can be, like climbing out of a hole. Society is not fair, but it is what it is. This was what the group as a whole agreed on throughout the session. It is not easy, but something that we are all working for—sobriety.

For every directive I bring to groups, I stress that there is no way to ever do it wrong. As long as you are making something that you can somehow connect to, it works: heals, energizes, inspires, and motivates. Every group I start with new members, I explain how we don't have to be artists to do art therapy. Many people have a misconception about art therapy being a method of therapy only for artists. Sometimes I've had talented artists in groups. He/she may make a great piece, and there may be other group members or staff that over compliment the work of art. This can get in the way of the whole process of art therapy, especially when it gets passed around. Making people who do not feel comfortable expressing themselves through art feel even more intimidated.

McNiff describes how this can be difficult:

Beginning artists, seasoned professionals, and anxious adults who have not touched paint since childhood all need help in learning how

to become agents of sincere expression. Artists with radically different degrees of technical expertise are afflicted by an inability to value the image for what it is. (62)

All too often art therapy groups are interrupted with this idea that if you aren't an aspiring artist this won't work for you. If a group starts to focus on one person's work, as to how good the art is, the rest of the group will suffer. We are not creating works of art for hanging on walls or selling in art galleries. Art therapy is all about the process of creating art work to reveal, share, and heal. Establishing this early in the group helps reduce the feeling that since they aren't active in the mainstream of producing art they aren't qualified to apply their art therapeutically.

Art therapy has helped me through many years of difficult times. Without it, I wouldn't be here writing this paper. Not only has it been healing for me to create art and use it to express my feelings, but it has helped in other ways also. When I run an art therapy group in recovery and even just get half the group to connect to their art in a healing way, I feel energetic and inspired. A poem that my father wrote about me, after I left rehab, has been something that has helped keep me from relapsing. Words paint pictures that, that like visual art, we can use to image revelation, inspiration, and healing:

November Laugh

My youngest son--  
hiding, cowering in a canopy  
of drugs the last few years--  
walks with me into a late  
November woods--  
where the deciduous trees  
stand bare, vivid against  
the snow and green conifers--  
unashamed of their nakedness.  
He talks candidly  
about his semester at UWS,  
where he's excited  
about his classes, career.  
He laughs easily at himself.  
He's clean, focused--  
like the deciduous trees,  
talking, laughing  
with bare-ass honesty--

unashamed of his essence--

his branches, bark.

We're carrying a hand saw,

looking for a special tree.

About a half mile in,

we remember it's deer season

and we forgot blaze-orange vests.

We laugh, shrug--keep looking.

Soon, I spot it--a young maple,

half dead; it's the top we're after.

We take turns sawing,

knock it down, saw off the top,

trim it, grin. We head back.

I carry the saw ; he swings

the tree over his shoulder.

I look at him. A cluster

of seven curling branches

poke above his head. I say,

Hey, kid, you look  
like a seven pointer.  
He laughs--a laugh I enjoyed  
before drugs. He takes it  
off his shoulder, carries it  
in one hand at his side.  
It's a coat tree for my apartment  
I'll put up instead of a Xmas tree  
and use for the rest of my life.  
And every time I use it, It'll laugh  
that November woods laugh--  
telling me that my kids  
struggled, fought--survived  
having me for a father.

Just as I have used my battles with addictions along with art therapy to help other people overcome their addiction and heal, I have used their healing to help heal lingering wounds from my own addictions. And just as I have used words from my dad's poem to image agents of my recovery, I feel certain he used my

art—its therapy and integrated achievements that imaged my recovery to heal wounds he suffered during our long and nightmarish battle with my addiction.

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