

Art Works In Therapy Podcast Interview

Hosted by Jon Ehinger LCAT, ATR-BC

Jon: I'm here with Dr. Arthur Robbins on February 22, 2021.

Art: You have asked me to speak about my life's work and career in Art Therapy. If I take a large overview, my whole life has been dedicated to putting together art and psychology. It is no coincidence that I insist on everyone calling me Art rather than Arthur. Art has been so central to me in my perspective in working with people as well as creative expression.

In understanding this duality, some reflection may offer an understanding of my roots and history. My mother and sister were interior decorators and spent long hours in the family discussing their newest ideas of design. My father was a manufacturer of artificial flowers, something that is out of date today. He was always excited to show his newest creation. For myself, I played in the sandbox. I built tunnels and fortresses and places to hang out. My mother was the matriarch of the family and kept a tight rein on me. From her point of view it was better that I play in the backyard away from the world. From her perspective, the outside was such a dangerous place. My mother was an orphan, deserted by her family, and shipped from one family relative to another. There is minimum stability in her own family. Her distrust permeated her approach to motherhood. Watch out, you can either be deserted, betrayed or even killed.

So, the world was my sandbox; and yet unconsciously I tried to break out of this imprisonment. Ultimately, I did break out and as a young adult started to find my own way. I had little to do with my father. Interestingly, I discovered four relatives who were psychoanalysts on my father's side. I met most of them on my wedding day and felt excited that I had such an important family lineage. Later on in my career one of my uncles

became a fundamental teacher in my work as an analyst. His roots go back all the way to Theater Reik.

During adolescence the world of Freud opened up the language of the unconscious as a source of fascination. I became interested in the theory of dreams and the meaning of symbolism. I knew that someday I wanted to learn more about psychoanalysis and secretly hoped that someday I could enter the field. The world of academic psychology held very little interest for me.

In my personal treatment I discovered that it was very important to go back to the sandbox. This was my bridge; The whole fascinating expression of sculpting. Ultimately I became a junk sculptor, putting discarded pieces discovered in a junkyard together. I loved going into the junkyard, finding discarded parts and immersing myself in the filth and dirt of the debris; finding new shapes and forms for them. I love to see metal dance under my blow torch. I learned a good deal about flow. I also learned a good deal about therapeutic art though working with stone, having to feel the essence of the stone and finding its language before I could work with it. Art expression became my bridge to the unknown.

Jon: In 1987, you wrote *The Artist as Therapist* and part of your artwork is on the cover. Embracing clients' junk parts helped them see their own synthesis and regeneration. Do you see that as part of the humanity of art therapy?

Art: Certainly our culture is now fragmented and we live at a very important turning point. We either can sink into chaos and disorganization or find out of this mess a new form and regeneration of wholeness. I believe that we are on the edge of finding new discoveries with new form and shape that is emanating from this chaos. We also are frightened that we may be heading down into an abyss and never recover.

Jon: In your early years as a teacher and therapist, you have been described as someone who is very provocative. How has that served you over the years? Is there anything you would like to have changed about it in your relationship to students and patients?

Art: Like anything else in one's personality, provocativeness can open up new areas of perceptions. It breaks in the stillness and brings in the unexpected into one's interactions. It also can be used as a form of cruelty and power. I have watched both of these myself and at this ripe old age I am rather careful that my provocativeness is used in the service of opening up the space in the interaction. My questions and provocations emanate from a deep sense of my unconscious. They are not socially appropriate but indeed pick up the irrational and timelessness of our deeper perceptions.

As I look over the span of over 60 years of working with patients, I recognize my approach as evolved. How I worked ten years ago is quite different from how I am as a therapist today. When I was younger I relied on the concepts of psychoanalysis such as resistance, ID and superego. Today, the whole notion of defenses is really not part of my nomenclature. I see people needing protection from being overwhelmed, something that for them has been a lifesaver and helped them survive in the world.

A number of years ago I saw myself basically as a psychotherapist. Today I see that there is an underlying continuum between psychotherapy and healing. In many instances, some people need healing more than psychotherapy. In a psychotherapeutic framework there is a search for meaning. In the healing experience, there is an integration of many levels of consciousness leading to an experience of universality.

Today, I find many people hungry for some form of healing. They search for groups that they can share their experience with. The community becomes transcendent in nature when there is a deep form of sharing. Feeling oneness with the universe, feeling one's deep presence and discovering that we are part of something bigger than our individual existence. Art can serve as a bridge to me but also can stand in and of itself and the expression becomes healing in nature.

I know that there is a large group of art therapists who rely on the framework of sublimation. It is a useful concept and it works for them. For myself, sublimation does not quite do it in terms of what the experience of art is all about. Sublimation and the theory is based on a notion of drives and organizing them into a more socially acceptable form. In my perspective, we need something that incorporates the idea of energy. Energy from my point of view is the motion of electronic particles moving from different polarities and vectors. It is a dynamic concept and incorporates more than just sexual progressive drives. Energy can be life itself.

Let me enlarge upon the notion of the use of energy in the work as an artist and therapist. I believe there are electric particles that go on neurologically that come out of someone's body. When we make sensory motor contact, when we can put our body in the space of the other and still be separate, an electric circuit is formed. That energy, that chemistry is what I believe therapists work with. Many of our patients are flat and need to discover energy, sometimes through art others through other forms of creative endeavor. Many use the relationship to regenerate an energetic connection. Here there is aliveness and a rhythm of more form and less form. A breathing in and out. When there are problems, we do tend to hold our breath and indeed the energy of our life form becomes flat and undynamic.

Jon: You articulated these notions in 1984 when you wrote about your approach to art therapy...

Art: I think different people need different strokes. Often we find in instances of trauma, having a structure creates a repair of a broken boundary that occurred in a trauma situation. With others, offering them a sense of openness without control, of making contact without demands, is also a part of an important choice in treatment. Many need a community group process to heal and grow. Others search for meaning. In all these instances I believe we must stumble and experiment in finding our way through a multitude of conflicting forces. Ultimately as we feel the nonverbal language of our patients we resonate and become intune with the very essence of their life force. I don't make a distinction of what role belongs to who. It is all part of joining and coming together of different forms of energy to provide a new gestalt of wholeness.

Jon: You often ask clients to get into an imaginative space. Can they do that without materials?

Art: Certainly, I believe it is quite possible. I allow myself to be grounded and let my imagination take hold without judgement or criticism. Sometimes, I remember meeting one patient in Vienna, not really, but this is where my imagination took me. It is like going back and forth with the therapist's biography, the mutual histories of patient and therapist, which all become a mix of the flow of treatment processing.

Jon: How does improvisation come into play with your work?

Art: Often I don't know where I'm going until I get there. I don't have any prearranged idea of what the problem is or what I'm going to fix. I give up the notion of being helpful, I am there to be present and I allow myself to go wherever the flow of energy takes me. I believe this goes on from the first day of meeting. I no longer believe that the initial interview is an attempt to put the history and parts together. I think the first interview is making energetic contact with your patient. If it is alive you have someone in therapy. If you use history as a way of avoiding this kind of contact, sooner or later, the work will lose vitality. In the flow of energy, sometimes I hold and other times I intrude. In the art of play, I often switch themes, representations and even affects. Ultimately, a powerful rhythm starts directing both participants in a dialogue and a mirroring connection takes place.

Jon: A major thing that I took away from being part of your class was the last session you taught at Pratt. You told us that you do not use the syllabus but stand there and find out what information is not consciousness and work with that. You build from there. You construct your own syllabus in each and every class rather than having a structure that is already worked out that you follow.

Art: Most likely, learning to find my own way first came from playing in the sandbox and being left to find my own expression and creation.

I have also learned not to make art so precious that it is fragile and must be handled gingerly. I am not afraid of my aggression and will often proceed to break up the organization of a piece so that I find a new way of putting things together.

I was fortunate in having important teachers who supported this way of being. Some of my mentors were very classical and traditional yet the underlying touch of both of them with me gave me the courage to find my own way, even though they represented a certain structure and way of looking at life. I recall Ruth Cohen who was a major teacher in understanding how countertransference could impact our patients and how she used it in the interaction. My uncle was a major teacher in working interpersonally with patients. His own roots came from being a union organizer. And then of course, there is my wife who is a healer and a dancer and certainly is very comfortable in working with energy and meditation. She has her own particular way of giving an authentic stamp and somewhere by osmosis I learned from this. My son has spent a good deal of energy concentrating on Eastern psychology. His ability to use Eastern psychology and Buddhist principles has been a major influence on my own work. With my other children often I share my ideas and they respond accordingly with a critical eye. It is my whole family that I enjoy sharing a piece of myself with and they are quite receptive to it.

Jon: I'm big on names and their origins and the way you've been talking about artmaking and facilitating mediums as an art therapist and using the root word Art as your name, do you have a story about why your parents selected Arthur as your name? Why was it always Art instead of Arthur?

Art: The word Art touched who I was, Arthur felt more formal and part of my family whereas Art seemed to be liberated and had its roots in expression. Ironically it also connected me to the creativity of my family and yet connected me to being less formal and traditional.

I was always an outsider and art was a way of connecting me to other artists who had similar values and expressions. I struggled throughout my life with the feeling that men were a failure and couldn't be trusted. I recall a turning point in my life.

I still recall giving my Bar Mitzvah speech and saw my mother in the audience holding her hand over her head and I knew what she was thinking. "Oh, is he gonna make a fool out of me." Well I didn't. Something snapped in me and I became free and apart from her perception that I was a failure. It was a long road for me finding success and self-affirmation.

In 1970, we started the Art Therapy program. There was no such thing as art therapy. Three other programs in the country started at the exact same time and no one knew what the other was doing. Each one felt they were discovering something special and indeed if you go to different programs you can observe different ways of teaching and understanding art therapy. Since there was no book or syllabus at that time we made art therapy as we went along. Students would go into the field and bring back their experience and we would slowly build a way of looking at what art therapy could do. We were creating a new field from scratch and yet we were relying on the long history of art and psychology that could help us. I recall there were no textbooks in art therapy and we used Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power* as our textbook. This was of a mystic from the southwest who had a tremendous amount of insight into working with the unconscious. I doubt the AATA would approve of this book today. Fortunately because there was no organization or institution we were able to experiment and develop our own framework and go our own way. Like any other developing profession, soon there was a tradition and standards and a way of working and indeed under that development was a loss of professional freedom. At the time, it was exciting.

Throughout the years when different mediums have become important with my working as an artist and sculptor. Today because my muscles are no longer the same, I no longer weld. I now put together tissue paper, acrylic paint, cray pas powder and do various forms of sculptures that are two dimensional and make a bridge between sculpting and art. Art has been a way to put different polarities together. I started teaching analytic students in 1976. I was a young teacher but already was working and demonstrating how one could use countertransference. I now have a very long list of students all who have themselves become teachers or leaders in the field.

[Announcement break]

Jon: So we are back with Dr. Arthur Robbins, and I was just so curious, and don't want to leave off one of the most important books which came out in 1998, *Therapeutic Presence*. I say this because in all the work I have been doing, digital, video, greenscreen, I hold dear the work and writing that you did and just that one aspect of being able to hold the space for both yourself and the client but also to just be aware and to be present.

Art: In my study of psychoanalysis, play should not be confused with having fun. It is opening up and imaginative contact with the world. Winnicott has been most important and instructive. The definition of therapy as play or the attempt to get his patients to play has been most inspiring. I have used this framework as an important way of getting into the energy field of my patients.

Jon: Well, you've got Maslow, who says at the top of the pyramid is awareness, spirituality, awakening...

Art: I believe that the framework works for some and not for others. In many ways I think it's important that we don't become a part of a tribe but are willing to identify with many ways of organizing our experience. This organization becomes our own theory that we discover in the process. I believe that all these teachers are important and yet we must be authentic and find our own tune in putting them all together that fits us and not some prearranged framework.

Jon: Well that's the difference between Creative Arts Therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy, right? There is an openness...

Art: In Creative Arts Therapy there is a bridge between two people as the art form. In Expressive Arts Therapy we go past the arts and find anything that can create some form of a bridge and expression of the inside and outside. I still recall a patient who was sharing their interest in pizza as a way of sharing their hunger and delight in getting fed and yet being on the run.

Today I think we are dealing with a good deal of narcissism where being hurt becomes a horrendous experience and people withdraw from anyone who disappoints or could possibly hurt them. Being able to hold onto our hurt and go past it and not destroy the relationship I think is the challenge of our time. To hear differences to understand how we can be hurtful to one another inadvertently or consciously and yet not trying to kill the other because they differ with us.

One of the things I have learned in the 60 years of work is that nothing remains the same. Everything changes. Excitement of Pratt when it first began of breaking new barriers finding new definitions is no longer there. Students today come to get a degree and a license so they can work. When we first started people wanted just the experience that was different and creative and meaningful. Nothing remains the same. I still recall having students come together to form the institute of expressive analysis, an organization dedicated to the arts and psychoanalytic training. Today it is quite different, and an organization run by different people and I no longer really have a place in it. Again, nothing remains the same. Everything changes no matter what you do in an attempt to hold onto power.

Since my time is limited, at least in this form, and I'm not quite sure what happens next since I'm not there, time is very important to me. I am more impatient to get down to what is real and important. I don't want my time wasted. As I get older, I have a number of different experiences that give me an overview of life that contributes to some degree of

reflective wisdom. I also have a respect more than any other time for people's differences, for people to have a right to be who they are. I also understand that there are destructive forces as well that we must deal with if we are to survive. Even though I struggle with real physical loss, in terms of mobility going outside of my home and sharing with people today, I do have the luxury of having my own internal universe expanded. This doesn't mean that it happens to all older people. Many are so governed by loss that it overcomes them with trauma and depression and death. For many others, they are able to find some solace. Though I have lost the power of my body, here and now, or the body that gives me boundaries, I have gained access to something bigger and larger than myself. I believe this is a gift of getting older in spite of all of the losses that inevitably come. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to organize some of my thoughts which I have certainly put down in books and video tapes. That goes a long way in terms of giving meaning to myself, my history and how I have become who I am today.

Jon: I will close out to say thank you to Dr. Arthur Robbins. I'd also like to thank Sandy Robbins, who I have talked to many times on the phone to get in touch with Art. I'd also like to thank Alice from NPAP, Jessica Kingsley Publishers for putting out many of Arthur's ideas over the years, and Melissa Diaz for coming up with the name for Art Works. I just wanted to thank you and hope that Dr. Robbins offered you some valuable insight into therapy, analysis, and the world at large. Thanks for listening!

Transcribed by Amy Barr