Imagery in interfaith dialogue: Informed by the practices of art psychotherapy

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The art based project engaged Christian, Jewish and Muslim women who met monthly over 7 months. The participants were chosen through an invitation sent to congregants of progressive synagogues, churches and mosques in the city of Los Angeles. Each month, collaboratively selected texts from the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Quran and the Christian Gospels that explored interconnected stories were printed and handed out for reading and study. After comparing and discussing the texts the participants were invited to incorporate the printouts of the biblical passages into simple collages, reflecting their responses. Colored, textured papers and glue were provided. The participants met in triads (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) to share their art, using their imagery to explore connections and disconnections between traditional understandings. The findings of the analysis indicate that members of the groups reported decreased defensiveness, the expansion of dialogue, and the discovery of new ways of knowing about their spirituality and faith.

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Introduction

This work began when my practice as an art psychotherapist and my mid-life explorations within my religious tradition found a locus of compatibility. After thirty years working with children, adolescents and families struggling to communicate, I gravitated from clinical work to an area of exploration that I had been trained to compartmentalize and separate from psychotherapy practice. Over the past ten years I have explored image-making practices within the study of sacred text (Linesch, 2008, 2012), within traditional contemplative observances (Linesch, 2014) and most recently within interfaith dialogue. This sequence of inquiry moving from study to prayer to dialogue has sustained the commitment to imagery that I have always centralized in my clinical practice. I have come to believe even more strongly in the power of the creative process in the human experience, somewhat under-appreciated in traditional religious practices as a resource for the healing of the disconnected soul as well as the ruptured psyche.

The project described here involves the utilization of art therapy theory and practices in the development of interfaith dialogue. Throughout the history of art therapy theory building, practitioners have long known about the power of image making to lower defenses, open dialogue and facilitate communication (Huss, 2015; Landgarten, 1981). My art therapy informed work in my faith tradition sustained my belief that the art making process contributes to a sense of alignment and could be of value in the complicated challenges of creating understandings between faith traditions. I have been dismayed by the tendency of political rhetoric to rigidify, stereotype and misunderstand the expressions of our diverse religions. What could be more important than offering the tools of our work as art therapists to our society’s need for increased understanding and awareness of the other?

This project was motivated by my observation of a compelling cultural call for interfaith engagement. The endeavor was based on the incorporation of image making as inquiry and the focus was on the study of sacred text. Although initially established as a service project, the data that was collected during and after the group meetings was carefully analyzed through a variety of qualitative strategies to develop the findings that are summarized below.

Literature review

The literature reviewed in support of this endeavor spoke identified the challenges of interfaith dialogue, alluding to the entrenched biases and misunderstandings that often prevent the development of authentic communication and relationships. Brown’s (2013) and Cornille’s (2013) edited discussions of strategies to create safe spaces and find alternatives to redundant assumptions implicitly invited the kinds of interventions that art therapists often
make when communication patterns are stagnant and repetitive. Additionally I was moved by Moyaert’s (2013) encouragement for interfaith engagement through the study of text. She demonstrates how, in a process she calls ‘scriptural reasoning’, “…Jews, Christians and Muslims temporarily suspend their sibling rivalries to become guests in one another’s rich scriptural traditions” (p. 64). Kapikian’s (2006) book ignited my inspiration to engage in discussion of spiritual practices between faith traditions supported by the nonverbal potential of the art process. And finally I was grateful to access art therapy practitioners (Bell, 2011; Horovitz-Derby, 1994; Tobin, 1988) who supported the idea that religious explorations could be enriched by our own clinical practices. Bell (2011) states, “…art therapy practice is an approach that provides an interpretative stance that facilitates an understanding of meaning-making and spirituality” (p. 222).

Methodology

The project engaged seven Christian, seven Jewish and seven Muslim women for a total of twenty-one participants and met for seven monthly meetings. The participants were chosen through an invitational process sent to congregants of progressive synagogues, churches and mosques in the city of Los Angeles. Women who identified in their faith traditions and were interested in the study of sacred text were invited to gather. In the first meeting the idea of interfaith image-making was introduced and the invitees were encouraged to consider committing to the ongoing process. In the subsequent meetings carefully selected sacred texts from the three traditions were studied and art making was used as a technique to engage with the texts and reflect in triadic conversations (Christian, Jewish and Muslim).

Each month, collaboratively selected texts from the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Quran and the Christian Gospels that explored interconnected stories were printed and handed out for reading and study. After comparing and discussing the texts the participants were invited to incorporate the printouts of the biblical passages into simple collages, reflecting their responses. Colored, textured papers and glue were the only materials provided. Then, in perhaps the most crucial step in the process, the participants met in triads (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) to share their art, using their imagery to explore connections and disconnections between traditional understandings. After these intimate and organically encouraged conversations the participants returned to the art process and revised their art pieces to incorporate any changes or reflections that had been stimulated by the interfaith encounter and triadic discussion. In this way the art became an opportunity to experience and chronic transformation in addition to initially being a vehicle for expression and communication.

At the end of the seven-month project the focus on service shifted to a perspective of inquiry. The art was gathered and carefully reviewed and the participants were interviewed about their experiences. The imagery and the recorded observations became the data for an in-depth analysis of the experience. The artwork and commentary created a large data set that was reviewed and analyzed for themes. Qualitative content analysis protocols that examined the formal elements of the imagery and identified emergent themes in the interview narratives were utilized. The findings were summarized and linked to the foundational/historical ideas that make up the theory and practice of clinical art therapy (Landgarten, 1981).

Cognizant that the analysis of the data was potentially biased by the stance of the researcher who had also been the group organizer and facilitator, the process of reviewing the art and distilling the themes from the interview data was repeatedly and reiteratively explored in preliminary findings workshops with the participants, with students and with colleagues.

Analysis

The abbreviated analysis presented here focuses on the imagery created by three of the participants (identified by the pseudonyms Dina, Enisa and Grace). Dina is a Jewish writer and a serious student of Torah and contemporary Jewish practices. Enisa is a Muslim political affairs consultant and a devout practitioner of Islamic prayer. Grace is a newly ordained Episcopalian priest interested in interfaith dialogue as part of her commitment to her parish.

In addition to focusing on three (out of twenty-one) participants, this abbreviated analysis focuses on three (out of seven) text-based conversations, the discussion of the stories about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac.

Table 1 clarifies which texts were used to stimulate the study, the art and the consequent dialogue. The chart also summarizes the main points of the texts.

Table 2 presents the imagery created during three of the seven sessions, the ones in which we reviewed the texts (Table 2) and discussed the stories about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac.

Each image is a final product (i.e. after the revisions to its original construction were added as a reflection of the transformative interfaith dialogue). The observations of each participant are included below each image to explain the way that art had initially been created and the way it was revised after the triadic sharing (Christian, Jewish and Muslim).

Following the table are the comments that the three participants offered regarding the entire process of the group.

Comments from participants about the process

Dina:

“…The art kept me from using my habitual language, my less intuitive, more literal way of speaking.”

“The conversations caused me to encounter at the same time ideas that I did not hold and people I wanted to know.”

Enisa:

“I consider myself un-artistic and participating was a leap of faith. I made the leap because I wanted to experience my faith in an unfamiliar way… rejuvenate myself with art as a portal.”

“With the women I built another circle, the vulnerability was profound and helped me reach new ways of knowing.”

Grace:

“It was a beautiful example of the spirit at work surprising me with what I can create in such a space of open-heartedness.”

“I learned that it takes time to build relationships and that empathy can be built in a creative, safe, respectful & loving way.”

Participants’ experiences summarized

The summaries below emerged from the text and image analysis that illuminated the main ideas and overall understandings expressed by the participants.

Dina

Dina’s first image depicts a tentative attempt to represent (with torn fragments of text) the impact of the interfaith dialogue as
“soothing rain” falling over the flames that depict her enraged response to the sacrifice of Abraham. Her second piece is anchored by the important inclusion of the mountains described by her Muslim companion in the narrative of Hagar (Hajar). Her final piece depicts the inclusion and incorporation of multiple specific image fragments (mountains, heart, tears) from her Christian and Muslim study partners.

Dina’s experience can be understood as one of moving toward “expansion”. Initially Dina used the art process to explore the ways in which the ancient stories challenged her. Over the course of the meetings, she listened to her Muslim and Christian companions struggle alongside her and made empathic connections. At the conclusion of the process Dina used the art to represent multiple understandings of the text, integrating pieces of the other women’s stories and developing a less fraught relationship to the biblical narrative.

Enisa

Enisa’s first image depicts a separation between the layered representation of her own tradition (above) and the added intention (below) to include the interfaith sharing. Her second piece depicts a transitional step between the compartmentalization with which she started and the completion of her intention. Her third piece appears holistic and integrated with texts from all three traditions bracketing or framing the central idea.

Enisa’s experience can be understood as one of moving toward “inclusion”. Initially Enisa used the art process to separate her personal exploration of her own tradition’s text from her intended effort to integrate the faiths of all three traditions. Over the course of the meetings, she developed increasingly emotional and reciprocal communication with her Jewish and Christian companions and the art process allowed her to move away from compartmentalization towards unity.

Grace

Grace’s initial image illustrates the centrality of her Christian beliefs and her tentative inclusion of texts from other traditions on the perimeter. Her middle piece is a graphic depiction of the centrality of her own tradition used as a base on which rests a precariously balanced set of Muslim and Jewish text. She includes the tears initially introduced by her Muslim companion – two tears that seem to connect the base text to the slightly tilted unfamiliar texts. Grace’s final piece, admittedly a representation of the cross, is embellished with the Quran and Torah texts as outreaching arms, an image Grace related to the notion of ‘beloved son’, referencing a conversation that the group had about Isaac, Ishmael and Jesus (all ‘beloved sons’).

Grace’s experience can be understood as one of moving toward “wholeness”. Initially G. used the art process to centralize the texts from her own tradition and surround or embellish them with the less familiar scriptures. Over the course of the meetings she listened deeply to her Jewish and Muslim companions. Consequently her imagery reflected an increasing cohesion and an integration of the less familiar traditions into her own central organizing understanding.

Overall observations of the imagery

There are several things that are important to notice about the artwork as it evolves over time and as the participants became increasingly comfortable with the process and with each other. One of the observations has to do with the ways in which the women were able to develop a set of images that became a shared repertoire of symbols. For example the hearts and tears initially introduced by Enisa, found their way into the artwork of the other participants as the poignant communicative capacity of these symbols was noticed. Another of the observations has to do with the increasing fullness and integration of the imagery as the group grew more intimate and trusting. This is particularly evident in the work of Enisa whose collages shifted from vertically oriented bifurcated pieces (Abraham, Sarah & Hagar) to a horizontally oriented and more integrated whole (Ishmael & Isaac).

Findings

Three themes emerged from the final step in the data analysis, specifically from a comparison of the participants’ reflections about the images they had made. The three themes were Increased Vulnerability, Dialogue Expansion, and New Ways of Knowing.

Increased vulnerability

The women who participated in the project alluded to a lowering of defenses and resistances to the unknown, identified by Dina as keeping her “from her habitual language”, by Enisa as “experiencing the unfamiliar” and by Grace as “a space of open-heartedness”. This sense of safety facilitated by the art is well documented in the literature of art psychotherapy (Landgarten, 1981) and is testimony to the power of imagery to decrease the fear, anxiety, mistrust and struggle that often create obstacles to authentic interfaith dialogue.

Dialogue expansion

The women who participated in the process described how they had expanded their capacity to dialogue with others from unfamiliar traditions by utilizing the symbolic and metaphoric representations created in the imagery. Dina identified a “less literal way of speaking”, Enisa described a “rejuvenation” with art as a portal and Grace noticed the way that “empathy was built”. This facilitation of broader, deeper communication, too, is a central and historically identified tenet of clinical art therapy (Landgarten, 1981), as the pictorial representations of the participant become new (and often enhanced) ways of expressing previously inaccessible emotional or cognitive material.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagery created in response to texts about Abraham from the Torah, the Quran and the Gospels Participant’s discussion of imagery</th>
<th>Dina</th>
<th>Enisa</th>
<th>Grace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-initial image—locus of sacrifice requested of Abraham, obscuring the Hebrew text with smoke (cheese cloth) suggests the inaccessibility of the text, the challenge of the request to slay one’s child.</td>
<td>A-initial image—top half only-layered relationship to text, understanding of story informed by other traditions – Quranic text on top – “essence of Islam”</td>
<td>A-initial image—central text from Christian scripture organizing the paper, folded and structured</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-image after dialogue—addition of text fragments from other tradition as “quenching rains” suggests healing nature of dialogue.</td>
<td>B-image after dialogue—addition of bottom half, indicating separation of 3 traditions, highlighting Quran text that opened to others – “expansion of Islam”</td>
<td>B-image after dialogue—addition of texts from other tradition on edges of paper, changing perspectives and orientation, including D.’s fire and E.’s feather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-overall observation the complexity of one’s relationship to faith and challenges of engaging with the other</td>
<td>C-overall observation 2 stunningly separate sections</td>
<td>C-overall observation compartmentalized with discreet sections</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Imagery created in response to texts about Sarah/Hagar from the Torah, the Quran and the Gospels Participant’s discussion of imagery | | | |
|---|---|---|
| A-initial image—opening up of the story with different but potentially confusing understandings allows the “but also” in conversation | A-initial image—continuing to use only top half—“imploring hands of Hagar” and “tears of desperation” | A-initial image—focus on water in the desert, only using Galatians text as base |
| B-image changed after dialogue—addition of the mountains between which Hagar ran – “these other things are useful” for a full understanding | B-image changed after dialogue—addition of lower well of ZumZum—1st use of texts from other traditions as source of water for the well | B-image changed after dialogue—addition of scrap paper from which the Galatians text was cut – slanted pivoting on Christian foundation – addition of E.’s tears – moment of compassion “first time I sat with a Muslim and talked about faith” |
| C-overall observation fragmented and disjointed | C-overall observation 2 sections less separate | C-overall observation increasing cohesion |

| Imagery created in response to texts about Isaac/Ishmael from the Torah, the Quran and the Gospels Participant’s discussion of image | | | |
|---|---|---|
| A-initial image—return to locus of Abraham’s sacrifice now situated between the two mountains, Hebrew still under the gauze “always gauze between me & that text” | A-initial image—focus on “test”, red heart and text from Quran about the beloved son, “sacrifice” is rooted in love | A-initial image—vertical, cross like structure focusing on Jesus as beloved son, connecting to both Isaac and Ishmael |
| B-image after dialogue—incorporation of hearts, from E.’s imagery, negative, positive and red | B-image after dialogue—inclusion of Jewish and Christian texts as brackets and smaller hearts “creating a fullness to the story” | B-image after dialogue—addition of texts from other tradition as extending arms, and addition of red heart and two tears from E.’s piece |
| C-overall observation expansive and opened up | C-overall observation orientation of vertical separateness (in previous images) changed to horizontal tension. | C-overall observation sense of wholeness |
New ways of knowing

The women who participated in the process discussed how the project had provided them with ways of engaging and coming to know ‘the other’, referring to knowledge of people, ideas and texts. Dina described the experience as an “encounter”, Enisa experienced the process as a “leap of faith” and Grace summarized the endeavor as “the spirit at work”. Although it was not the art alone that had accomplished this, the theories of art therapy (Landgarten, 1981) explain how the imagery facilitated the intimacy and the sense of connection that allowed the participants to know each other with augmented honesty and authenticity.

Discussion

It is important to note that the time frame for this experience overlapped with the sequence of 2016 terrorist attacks in San Bernardino CA, Brussels and Paris. At almost every gathering the participants shared the feelings and fears that were consequent to the attacks, the public responses and the increasingly polarized public rhetoric. Repeatedly the participants expressed their gratitude for the group and the safe space to dialogue about their faith traditions without needing to defend them. It is significant that the group unanimously initiated an additional meeting after the Orlando attack to be able to utilize the intimacy and trust that had been created to process yet another moment of terror.

Conclusion

It has been moving to observe the ways in which my lifelong commitment to the art process as a meaning making opportunity was able to inform the spiritual practices to which I was migrating at the end of my career as an art therapist. It was clear to me that the ways in which the making of imagery to express, clarify and communicate difficult to access ideas and feelings were portable, relevant and powerful in places that had seemed distant from clinical practice. At the end of the project and the inquiry into its relevance I remain steadfast in my belief that engagement in art (trained and untrained) is a basic human experience that helps us all reach our potential and become as fully aware, connected and open to the world as possible. It is my intention to continue this work in support of my own deepening engagement in spiritual practice. More importantly I am committed to dialogue across religious traditions and eager to investigate how the theory and practices of art psychotherapy can contribute to increased success in our capacities to understand, include and have compassion for one other.

References