Healing and Imagination

by

GERALD EPSTEIN, M.D.

The etymology of the word "healing" comes from the root that also means holy. We define ourselves as members of the healing arts if we are engaged in the work of therapy. Yet, in the realm of our traditional therapeutic approaches, scant reference, if any, is made to the inclusion of what is holy into the process. Psychology, as it is generally organized within our cultural context, derives its guiding principles from the natural scientific application of what originally was discovered to be the principles underlying the operation of machines and of the material world in general. When philosophical materialism dominates the value system of a society, there tends to be a diminishing emphasis on the holy. This situation might occur as a consequence of the elevation of the material thing to a revered status, while feelings about religion or spiritual life are relegated to the realm of the aberrant and the pathological, or not taken seriously at all. This trend has been followed in the field of psychology and in the dominant modes of Western therapy that have developed thus far in this century—namely, behaviorism and dynamic (e.g. psychoanalytic) psychology. The term "behaviorism" speaks for itself; it has increasingly been demonstrated to be a dehumanizing form of therapy, contemptuous of the finer nuances of human existence. Dynamic psychology has represented an attempt to break out of destructive life patterns and to provide a method which would help individuals to achieve some measure of psychological freedom. Here was a way of counteracting the crushing influence imposed by industrial and technological society, with its concomitant movement toward mediocrity and conformity. However, by opting to work within the framework of the technological culture and the tenets of natural science, dynamic psychology has severely restricted itself. Defining its goals according to the prejudices of contemporary culture, dynamic psychology has come to regard the expression of religious feeling and experience—the latter necessarily non-material.
and often beyond verbal explanation—as unreal and aberrant. With regard to the “holy,” it appears that the movement of psychology has paralleled that of the culture. If healing is intimately related to the holy, then our current approaches to therapy are inadequate. Any psychology that aligns itself with a purely materialistic view of the world and erects theoretical structures on purely empirical foundations, cannot, by its own tenets, allow for the admittance of what is non-material and qualitative. Such psychology is inherently prejudiced against that which stands outside of concrete reality.

The Importance of Imagination

What would provide a link between healing, the holy, therapeutics and science? At the outset we could say that the attributes of this link would have to include its accessibility to man’s living in everyday life, while at the same time, permitting him to experience that which is transcendental. This link must not be fraught with an aura of mystification or cultism, and it must allow human beings to grow by finding possibilities for change that can be fulfilled experientially.

In my opinion, such a link is to be found in the revitalization and application of the creative imagination in our everyday existence. For centuries the imaginal has been held in disrepute in Western life simply because the growth of natural science and technology would not permit the “visionary” element into common life. The rise of capitalism and industrial society, rationalism, and formalized religion in the post-Renaissance period all tended to exploit the natural wealth of the Western world in order to satisfy economic and power needs. The power-brokers, therefore, developed the conglomerate of organized church, industry, and the military, which has continued to consolidate its grip on Western society. One overriding aim of these groups was to stamp out whatever appeared to run counter to their attempts to restrict imaginative and spiritual freedom; another was to assimilate all discoveries of the new science within a utilitarian framework. With the levelling of culture and the promulgation of an orderly mediocrity came the sacrifice of those idealists and seers who posed a threat to the established order of material “reality.” Empirical philosophy became the rationale for investing the world of gross matter with exaggerated significance; only that which was graspable by the five senses was “real.” All other experience incapable of quantitative measurement or calculation was, therefore, consigned to the realm of the “unreal.” Imagination, fantasy, and intuition became members of that unreal fraternity.

Prior to the removal of the imaginal from the province of “reality,” this faculty was so acceptable in daily life that it was an essential part of medical care. In the late medieval and early Renaissance period, the human imagination flourished in movements like Alchemy, Christian mysticism, and Kabbalah, all of which emphasized an active connection between man and God through exercising the vehicle of imagination. The organ of imagination was thought to be located in the ventricles of the heart, serving as a regulator of visual phenomena like dreams and hallucinations. Individuals were encouraged to enter the imaginal realm where they would often discover some object that seemed to have healing properties. The patient was then told to obtain an amulet or talisman that corresponded to that which he had found in his imagination, as a reminder of what he discovered about himself in the imaginal realm and which he was to carry out in his everyday life. In this way an attempt was made to establish a unity of experience between interior and exterior life.

Immaterial Reality

The imaginal realm is an accepted reality in traditions like Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, Kabbalah, and in American Indian lore. While the imaginal is accepted as a genuine realm of existence, the physical body is not accepted as the exclusive locus of what constitutes the essential “I” or mind. The body is the vehicle for the manifestation of mind in the world of concrete reality. But, the world of concrete reality is not the only one available to human beings; it is rather that which happens as in linear time. In the imaginal reality—as in the creative process—events are lived outside of linear time. The inaugurators of the disciplines alluded to above were well aware that this process of attaining such “timelessness” initiated the event of healing, for it is only outside of linear time, in a field of totality, that the fragmentation which is characteristic of linear thought disappears. At this moment of insight, the verbal, actional, and imaginal modes of existence are harmonized.

A common occurrence in connection with practices involving extension into the immaterial reality is an immediate sense of connection with a spiritual dimension. One often experiences a feeling that is described as holy, and this experienced connection is part of the healing process which eliminates the fragmentation brought about by identification with the objects of our perception. Since linear thinking constantly manages to deceive us in this way, healing can only occur when we abandon the habit of linear thinking, even if momentarily. Paradoxically, psychological healing takes place outside the intellectual process.

In order for meaningful healing to take place within the context of our current therapeutic procedures, psychology must develop tolerance toward all experience, including the holy; indeed, it must pave the way for opening human beings to this dimension within themselves. It is doubtful that the purely materialistic philosophy implied in the theories underlying the technique of free association can permit an individual to find those spiritual sources that are necessary for total fulfillment. Free association, as performed and interpreted by the patient and conceived of by the therapist, is derivative of the intellectual and intellectualizing function of the mind. Free association is geared to addressing not what pre-
s own itself immediately to us in the openness of our perception, but rather toward discerning what lies “behind” what appears to our perception.

**Fantasy**

A fundamental problem that has pervaded the psychological field has been that of fantasy as part of the mental life of the individual. With the rise of the materialist position, fantasy also fell into the domain of the unreal. Fantasies are not quantifiable nor graspable within measurable limits. As a result, most psychology (explicitly) and all natural science (implicitly) have come to regard fantasy as “unreal,” products of a person’s psyche (itself a never-proven speculation). Even more tolerant psychotherapists who will be quick to point out that they accept fantasies as realities will invariably interpret fantasies in line with a dynamically oriented point of view or weltanschauung. To put it simply, fantasies will be seen by therapists and patients alike as either causing some difficulty or conflict or caused by some difficulty or conflict. The result is always the same — a deterministic picture must be appended to fantasy life. It can be no other way if one’s world image is preconceivedly brought to bear, by therapist and patient alike, to the phenomenon (in this case fantasy) that stands before them.

What would the situation be without applying the deterministic world view? The immediate effect would be a distinct experience of openness and acceptance of the event called fantasy. Once the event is accepted, without having to fit it into an explanatory framework, it can be allowed to stand on its own ground without having to be immediately devalued by translation into linear-logical thought. Once this habit of translation is stopped, then the person is automatically given permission, for the first time, to play in the event, to explore it, to treat it as a reality that can reveal information, albeit in its own language and not necessarily linear-logical. No longer does one have to disown an important content in the chain of mental life but instead can take a less critical and more tolerant view of one’s own experience.

**Fantasy and Imagination Differentiated**

Fantasy can be seen as the first step on the road to imagination. These two events differ in many important ways. Although the terms “fantasy” and “imagination” are used interchangeably, they, in fact, are different and should not be lumped together. The grouping of the two probably came about as a result of empirical influence which caused all nonmaterial events to be viewed as unreal and so came under one heading. Fantasy can be understood as perhaps the raw material for the imaginative process. This latter process utilizes an organ of perception, the imagination, to apprehend a nonmaterial reality behind sensory reality which has noetic value. These imaginal realms of existence are ever-changing, not controlled by an individual’s personal bidding as in the case of fantasy. Whereas fantasy is easily identifiable in relation to the concerns in everyday life which one is trying to master, imaginal experience transcends the conflictual by permitting a new action to take place within the framework of a usually unique encounter that could never be ordinarily drummed up by a person’s waking thoughts. Let me give an example to concretize these points.

A subject experiencing imagery work reported that she is “in a garden. I see a tree and it and the garden are white. I see a chrysanthemum that is white and has ancient Aramaic letters on it. The center is red and gold. The stem is long and green. I look at the flower’s reddish-gold center and I go down into it finding myself in a cave or a series of caves by the sea. I hear a murmuring of music — like ooooo, echoing through the caves. Beyond, through the openings I can see and smell the blue sea. I listen to the music and I hear the words, ‘Where are you going?’ I notice that there are lovely sea nymphs in white, hair streaming, singing and dancing barefoot on the rocks. I realize that the nymphs are sirens. I crouch beneath a rock and watch them. I am a small, dark child — barefoot, but keen and brave. Suddenly, the sirens take small boats and, standing up in their boats, paddle out to sea with their long paddles, through the cave opening. I wish to follow them but have no boat. Suddenly a white feather falls down and serves as a boat for me. I float out to sea after them but can’t really hear what they are saying. I return from this trip through the stem of the flower and as I gaze at the chrysanthemum after emerging I see the letters DHRV in the center.”

---

**In order for healing to take place, psychology must develop tolerance toward all experiences.**

One can note several distinctions between this event and the fantasy activity which we ordinarily engage in. Fantasies, as constructs of the linear thought process, always have logical threads running through them that help to tie up the various events. They also pertain, in the overwhelming majority of instances, to what one feels to be deficient in one’s life and conversely what one would like to get — often supplied in the fantasy. As can be noted by the above imaginal experience, one enters a new world where transformations take place and where laws other than those governed by linear logic are operative. These laws are nondeterministic and acausal and are those that essentially inform the world of imagination — the world of non-concrete, immaterial reality. Imagination is a process occurring as an analogical function which operates as a process that sees the whole of something. It tends toward binding or bringing to unity rather than toward breaking apart, as is the case with linear logic. Imagination is a realm of reality, as well as an organ of perception. This realm lies behind that ordinarily perceived by our senses and is a world as real as the one we usually refer to as objective reality. It is here that one can see the whole, since in the act of apprehending imaginal
reality, linear logic is suspended and gestaltic perception is opened up. Also, rather than creating images, as is the case in linear thinking, the brain duplicates images that are apperceived in imaginal reality. In other words, here what is received is a real event, a direct, concrete experience, the information of which is sent back to the brain and is processed there, i.e., given name and meaning by the linear thought process.

So, we come to see that there are two types of images that must be distinguished: the created one and the duplicated one. The latter belongs to an experience of wholeness that when experienced by one does carry with it a recognition of one’s unity or wholeness. The effect of such an experience is to give one a sense, not only of one’s wholeness but also of one’s connection with that of which he’s a part – other people, nature, the creatures and environment of this world in general. Once such a recognition occurs, it is likely that one’s self-absorption and self-preoccupation will diminish considerably and will be replaced by a more selfless concern for the creatures and environment of this world. In my clinical work with imagination, utilizing a particular form called Waking Dream, as illustrated in the example presented earlier, I have found this to be so: That in wholeness, healing is to be formed and fragmentation is to be replaced (never eliminated) to the extent that one’s life becomes richer and more full of hope and joy with the development of sharing with and caring for others.

One final note: It is my contention that without the presence of the dimension of imagination in human existence, one cannot grasp the presence of the holy – that which is transcendent and immanent. The holy is related to the wholeness of experience and cannot be comprehended by a process that fragments. The holy is an experience, not a logical proposition. Many people who open their imaginations experience some connection with holiness and somehow, and we have seen this to be true etymologically as I stated at the outset, there is an organic connection between holy and healing. Imagination is the catalyst.

References


GERALD EPSTEIN, M.D., is a wholistic psychiatrist and physician practicing in New York City. He is the director of the Center for Non-Deterministic Studies in New York and is the editor of a forthcoming book *Studies in Non-Deterministic Psychology* (NY: Human Sciences Press, 1980), from which this article was abridged.