

ART PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH ACTING-OUT ADOLESCENTS: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION*

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THE Henry Street School, a division of the Henry Street Settlement on the lower east side of Manhattan, is a non-profit junior high school which serves fifty youngsters from all over the city. Chartered in the fall of 1972 by the Regents of the State of New York as a secondary school for boys and girls in Grades 7-9 who are not succeeding in public schools and whose families cannot afford other alternatives, the school provides highly individualized services for handicapped youngsters. The school offers a full day program of study in academic, pre-vocational, physical education and creative arts activities, utilizing its headquarters at 40 Montgomery Street and other Settlement buildings for special activities.

Every student accepted by the Henry Street School has been referred by a city junior high school or other social service agency as not benefitting from a regular classroom setting. These other schools have stated that there is no other suitable alternative in the public schools. Most of the children have been described by the referring agencies as children with emotional handicaps; some, in addition, have learning disabilities connected with minimal brain dysfunction or borderline retardation. The school has been approved for state aid to schools serving handicapped children.

From the very first stages of planning, art therapy has been an integral part of the school

program. The school is used by Pratt Institute as a field placement setting for art therapy interns who receive on the job supervision at Henry Street as well as weekly supervision at Pratt. The therapy is conducted individually and in small groups. Children are exposed to a variety of art material and, together with their therapist, explore many diverse creative activities.

Insight into each child's behavior problem is fed back into the therapeutic school community during weekly staff conferences. At these conferences the teaching staff, social workers, therapists and staff psychiatrist work together to design appropriate programs to stimulate both the educational and emotional growth of the individual students.

The following is a description of an individual art therapy experience which evolved over a period of six months. The case illustrates how, through artwork, a therapist can engage a child in a relationship which is psychotherapeutic when traditional techniques have not succeeded.

Frank is a fifteen-year-old, frail-looking Puerto Rican boy of pale complexion and generally deheveled appearance. His real parents separated when he was quite young and he was then placed in his first foster home. He received good care but when his foster father took ill he was transferred to a second foster family where he never adjusted properly. After Frank had set two fires in the home and one fire in his school, he was referred back to

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the Catholic Home Bureau for residential placement. He was then referred to a Group Home for boys where he made a superficial adjustment. He wanted to be accepted by the other boys and was willing to engage in a variety of antisocial activities to gain their 'respect.' He refused to attend a regular junior high school and was finally referred and admitted into the Henry Street School as a final attempt to reach him, before a more closed placement would become necessary.

After admission into our school in September 1973, Frank began to make a slow adjustment. He was quiet and withdrawn most of the time but occasionally had violent outbursts, throwing chairs across his classroom. During this period he ran away from his Group Home for several days. Upon his return he was uncooperative and moody. His need for acceptance by peers became so great that he allowed himself to be scapegoated and physically exploited by both the other boys in his residence and classmates in school.

After reviewing the case with our psychiatrist and the social worker in charge of the Group Home, I decided to try to reach Frank through individual art therapy sessions. We all agreed to meet periodically and monitor Frank's progress.

I was initially anticipating a great deal of resistance. Frank had been very uncooperative with the psychiatrist who had administered a diagnostic evaluation interview and had firmly refused to draw any pictures for the DAP or HTP projective drawing portion of the evaluation. Although the psychiatrist expressed doubt concerning Frank's receptiveness and motivation, psychotherapy was strongly recommended. I intended to develop a therapeutic relationship through the stimulation of Frank's artistic and creative ability.

I planned to schedule one weekly session first, to see how Frank would respond. This was later expanded into two weekly sessions, each for fifty minutes.

Our art therapy program at the Henry Street School is quite unique. It is designed into the total school program as an integral part, and not as a separate entity. Individual and group art therapy sessions are programmed into the student's weekly schedule, just as any regular class would appear on a student's program card. Individual art therapy sessions appear as 'Individual Art Class' and art therapy groups appear as regular classes in ceramics, drawing, painting, photography, crafts or other

creative classes, rather than emphasizing the term 'therapy.'

We feel that because most of our children come from low income families, many have had bad experiences with our bureaucratic social welfare systems. This has left them with strong feelings about the role of social workers, or anyone for that matter, who does 'therapy.' Furthermore, the very idea of therapy is threatening to our youngsters. All of our students have been referred to us because they weren't able to adjust to their previous schools. They sense this as a failure and often feel themselves to be, at the very least, inadequate. Traditional 'therapy' sessions conducted in clinical settings tend to often compound the youngster's fear that he is 'crazy' and therefore hopelessly doomed. We therefore integrate our therapeutic program into our regular school program in such a way that it is acceptable to the children whom we are treating. A more humanistic approach to therapy is our main focus. Art therapists are introduced to our students as 'art teachers,' and, more importantly, as someone with whom to work, confide in and trust.

I discussed the idea of an individual art class with Frank and he agreed to try it. I wasn't surprised when he didn't show up for our first appointment. I went upstairs to our classroom area, found him and personally escorted him down to my office. I viewed this as the first sign of his ambivalence toward developing a close relationship.

Once in my office, and after an initial period of cautious waiting, Frank loosened up and began to draw. Without any encouragement he drew Fig. 1, a farm scene similar to the painting 'American Gothic.'

I noticed that he was having some difficulty drawing the hands on the figures, so I offered some technical assistance. He responded well to my intervention.

Hands, a symbol of ability to manipulate one's environment and outwardly channel one's feelings, had been difficult for Frank to master. By encouraging him to focus on this skill, I also became an adult figure who enjoyed and encouraged his autonomous growth. As if we had opened a door, Frank began to talk about his foster home on Long Island. He told me that he had been in the city for only one year.

I felt we had made contact. He remained in my office beyond his scheduled time to finish the

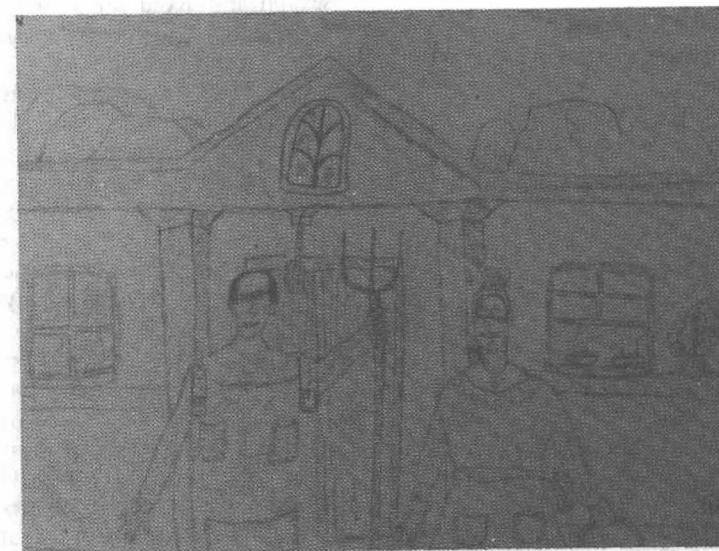


Figure 1.

details on his drawing.

The next day I found him sculpting hands out of clay in his ceramics class. I commented how pleased I was that he had carried through the theme of our previous session and explored the form of hands within a different medium. He said, "Doing artwork is almost like being God, you can create things yourself." I sensed the importance of this discovery for him. He was beginning to find creative work to be a way to challenge internalized feelings of helplessness.

Having little or no control over his past traumatic situations in early life had left Frank with a deeply ingrained sense of futility. The development of his creative ability would contribute a great deal to his feelings of self-worth and present alternatives to an internal world of hopelessness.

Our next session began with a discussion of his first drawing. I wanted to see how much he would be able to absorb. But when I asked him why the figures were drawn only from the waist up, he immediately became defensive and said, "They're supposed to be like that." He then stared at his drawing for almost ten minutes without saying a word. I sensed an internal struggle.

He began to suck on a chap-stick, like an infant sucking on a mother's breast. Finally, after much deliberation he said, "I don't want to look at my mistakes." This statement led us into a discussion

on how we all need to learn to honestly assess our own strengths and weaknesses in order to learn about ourselves and grow.

We further discussed that this doesn't mean that we should be afraid to make mistakes, but rather be honest enough with ourselves to learn from our past experiences. Making mistakes doesn't imply personal failure. Frank seemed to be greatly relieved by this remark.

He then began to draw Fig. 2. Neptune was going to destroy the Romans who were attacking Greece. He said, "He looks like you." The theme of God, omnipotent power, had reappeared along with the beginning of identification with me. Our relationship was becoming, for Frank, a source of gratification. He was beginning to live out many of his fantasies through his artwork.

I again noted that he denied the sexuality of the figure by avoiding details on the lower portion which was submerged underwater. The partial visibility of the lower body, along with the repetition of the seagulls, suggested a compulsive quality in Frank's defense processes. The reappearance of the pitchfork with three points also points to sexual preoccupation.

I held off from any direct interpretation because of his defensive response to my previous attempt to have him verbalize this conflict.

Frank eagerly presented himself for our third

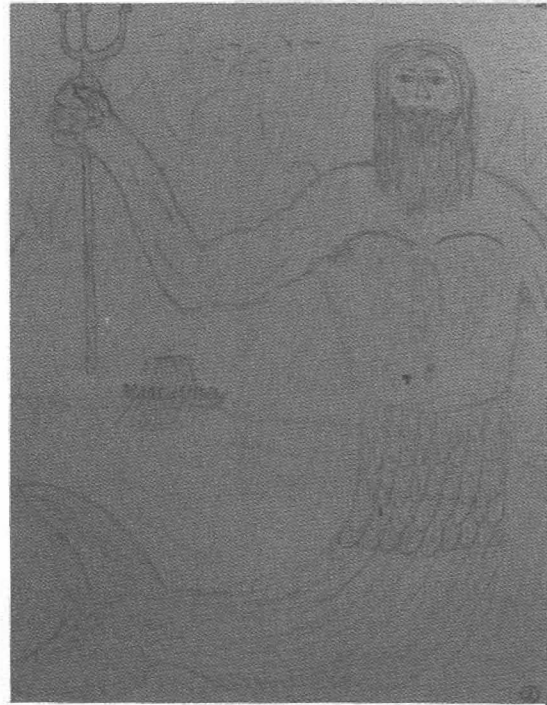


Figure 2.

session and asked for a cup of coffee. I seized this informal moment to suggest that we scribble together to get more ideas for drawings.

In Fig. 3 we see the result of my suggestion. He drew a lady from my scribble and at his suggestion I drew a gun from his. He then requested that I draw a cartoon snake, which I did. He copied it and then made up a story, associating to all the elements of the drawing. He said, "The lady is on a beach and the snake frightened her away." He then drew a cane and said jokingly, "I'd draw something else if a kid was here with me." Before I had a chance to respond to what he had said, he began to draw again, Fig. 4, a prehistoric scene with dinosaurs standing in a pool of water and a volcano erupting. He wouldn't say much about the picture. It was obvious that the eruption was related to his fire-setting and violent outbursts. Denial of his feelings tended to build up anxiety until there was no recourse but to explode.

He returned for his next session eager to draw. He immediately drew Fig. 5, a cave man in a cave holding a spear. He suddenly stopped, as though some other image had entered his mind and needed immediate expression. Frank then tore the incomplete drawing off the pad and began Fig. 6, saying, "You're gonna like this one." This turned out to be a scene where a man was about to be hanged for murder. He is smiling. Next, again as though some

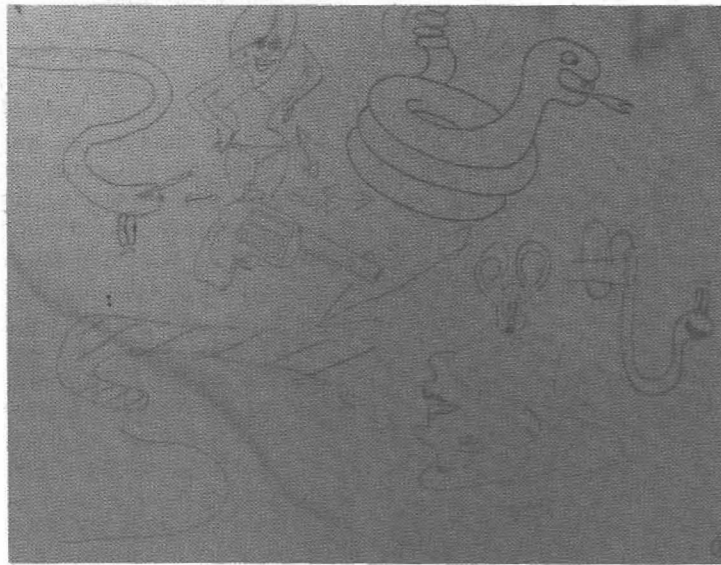


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

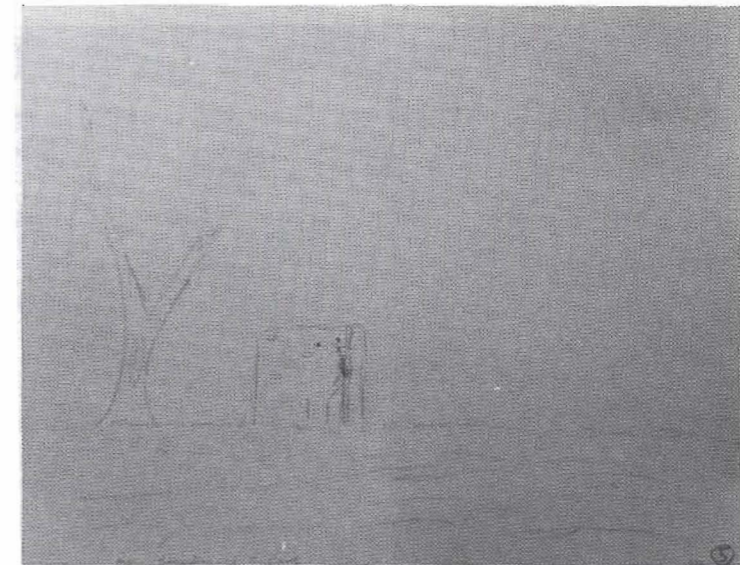


Figure 5.

thought needed immediate expression, he drew Fig. 7. Here we see someone has had his head cut off. A man on a balcony looks on with great enthusiasm. Frank described this as "The man on the balcony is crazy. (Frank laughed) He's killing that man for no reason. He was just murdered for the fun of it."

Frank was opening up. Many feelings stirred within me in response to these drawings. I felt I

should say something but I didn't want to make him defensive. So I decided to verbalize some of my feelings as statements for Frank to hear and just hope that something would make a connection for him. I said:

"There are some people who do get pleasure out of hurting other people

"At times everyone feels angry and many people

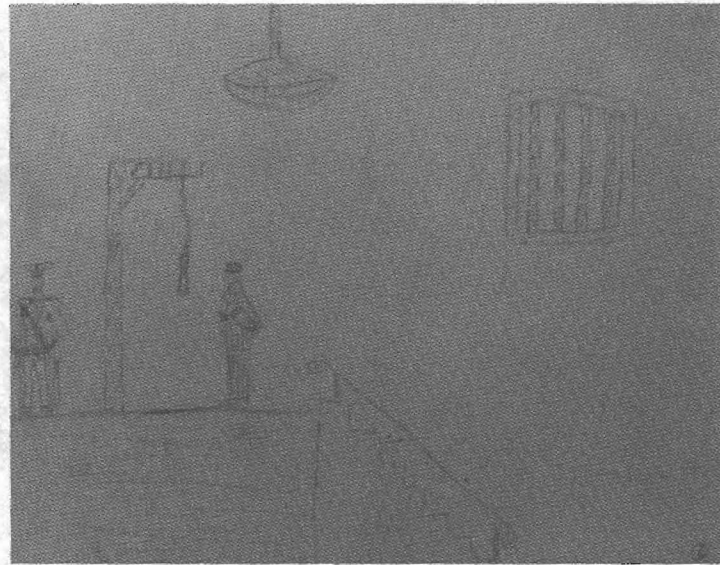


Figure 6.

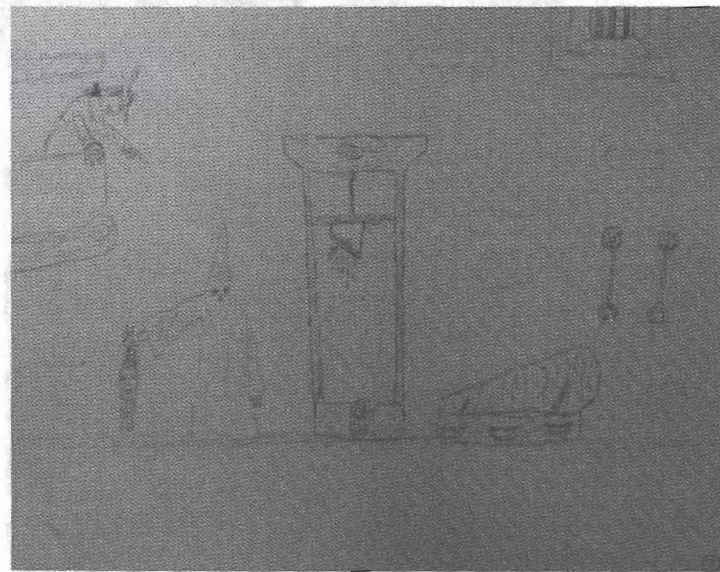


Figure 7.

do have fantasies or dreams about killing people but we are only responsible for things which we actually do, and not what goes on within us

"Sometimes we are tortured inside and no one can tell just by looking at us. Our feelings get blocked and don't find any way out."

To all of this he listened but made no comment. He gave no external sign that anything had made

sense to him. This was his way of taking distance from the outer world. It was very frustrating for me. I was proceeding along without much feedback to validate my theoretical assumptions.

For our next session Frank stated that he wanted to draw some cartoons. He seemed happier than at the last session. I felt he might be more able to approach his conflicts by taking distance through

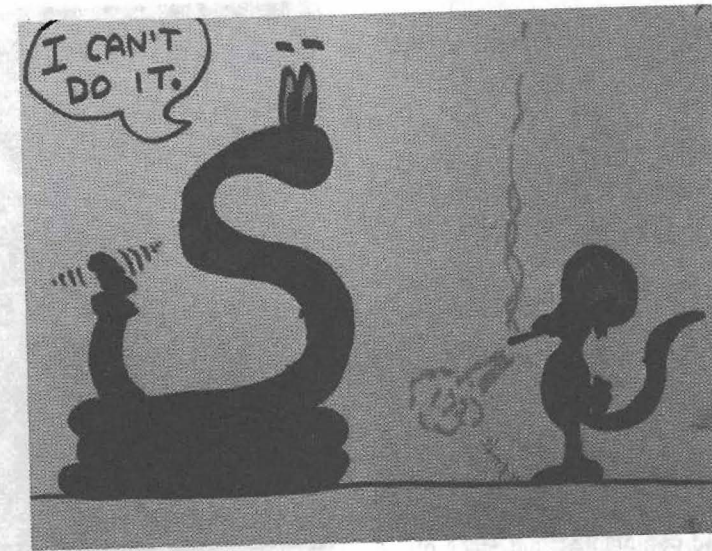


Figure 8.

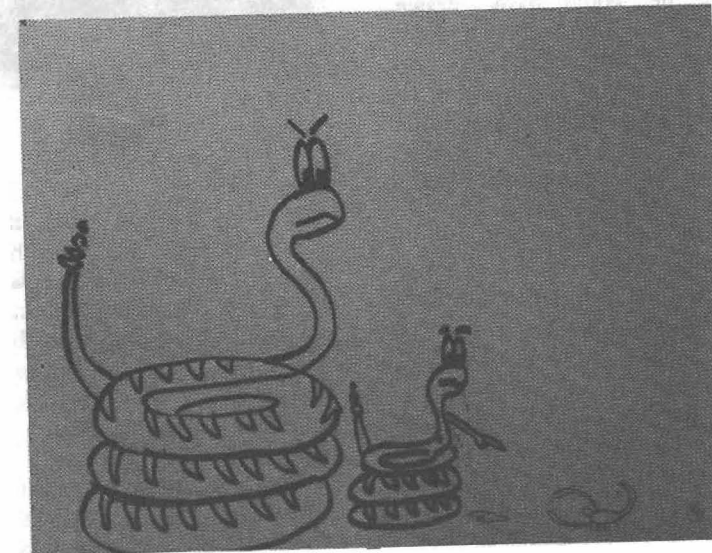


Figure 9.

the playfulness of cartoons.

He drew Fig. 8, a snake about to kill a blindfolded, handcuffed mouse who nervously smoked a cigarette. The snake is saying "I can't do it." Here again we begin to see a theme of conflict emerging. He is again afraid of his impulses. He fears the consequences of following and yielding to his instinctual wishes. He is both the snake, unable to

follow through, and the mouse, passively accepting defeat or destruction. He produced in this drawing a graphic representation of a sado-masochistic conflict.

Frank refused to make any verbal remarks about this drawing. He immediately drew Fig. 9, a father and son snake and a scorpion. He later told me that the son was asking his father to stop the scorpion

from bothering him. I view this as an important point in our relationship.

In this drawing Frank was going back to the point in his past where his need for parental protection had been frustrated.

He was symbolically expressing how our relationship had begun to fulfill this need. It seemed as though he was beginning to accept the atmosphere of our sessions as protective, supportive and nurturative.

Sensing that Frank would benefit from more consistent sessions, I asked him if he would like to meet twice weekly instead of only once. He eagerly said that he would.

For our next session, Frank entered my office with a cheerful "Hello." He seemed much more relaxed than last time.

Unexpectedly, Adam, another boy who had been working individually with an art therapy intern walked into the office and complained that since his teacher (therapist) was absent, he wanted to stay with me for his usual appointment. I thought for a moment about this unique situation, recalling Frank's statement that he would have "drawn something else (in response to my phallic scribble), if another kid was present." Here was an ideal opportunity to test out his statement. I decided to take a chance and asked Frank if he would mind if Adam joined us for the hour. He seemed delighted with the idea and invited Adam to remain. Adam walked to the other side of the room and began to draw.

Frank began the session by drawing Fig. 10, an apple tree with all but one huge apple eaten. The one surviving apple looked nervous and was sweating profusely. He seemed to think that the meaning of this drawing was very obvious. When I said that I didn't understand, he added an old man saying "Who dares to eat an old man's apples?"

The big apple had eaten all the others and now expected to be punished by the old man.

Once again Frank anticipated dangerous retaliation to the expression of an instinctual need (hunger).

I began to feel how this young man as a child had been pushed around from one family to another and how he had incorporated a feeling that he had caused this. He was bad. No one had wanted him. His needs, both physical and emotional, were too much for the parental figures of his past. He anticipated that the expression of his needs,

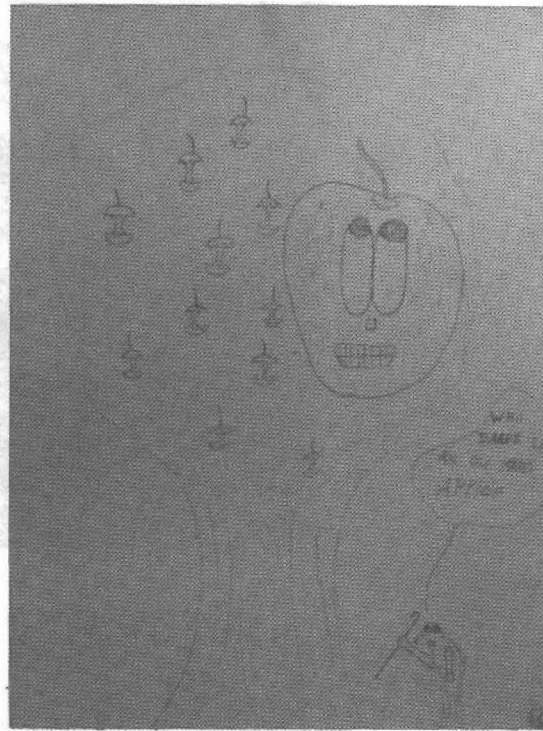


Figure 10.

impulses and desires would only cause people to reject him.

In this drawing I was the old man. Our last session had touched upon his deeply rooted need for parental care, and now he feared rejection. Rejection for needing so much, for having impulses and desires which he felt to be unacceptable.

At this point, Adam, who had been silently working alone, suddenly came over and showed us his drawing of a hand holding a penis. He had titled this drawing "Jerking-Off."

This was a good opportunity. I decided to discuss the subject of masturbation with Adam, in front of Frank, so Frank would not become too anxious and defensive. Adam and I had an 'anxiety relieving' discussion on how masturbation was very common among boys and girls of his age. Frank listened at a safe distance and drew Fig. 11. He described it as a snake going to a 'Ball.'

Adam was impressed. Frank said humbly, "It's only a sketch" as he glowed with pride. He added a stick in the snake's hand and said, "That's his dick." I commented very matter-of-factly that



Figure 11.

masturbation seemed to be on everyone's mind today, connecting Frank with the significance of his comment.

Masturbation, following one's own sexual impulse for gratification, must have been very difficult for Frank to experience. By observing the discussion which Adam and I had had, Frank had been able to approach the subject on his own. I saw this as a very significant step for Frank.

I took this opportunity to give Frank a periodical evaluation of his work for the past term. I was very positive, pointing to his talent and growing desire to develop his creativity. I showed him that I still respected him a great deal. I did this in a direct attempt to counter the 'rejection' which I sensed he anticipated. He left feeling elated.

At our next session I showed Frank the special drawing pens and magic markers which I had purchased for his use. We decided to begin a long-term project for him to add to his portfolio.

We had discussed the possibility of applying for admission into the High School of Art and Design.

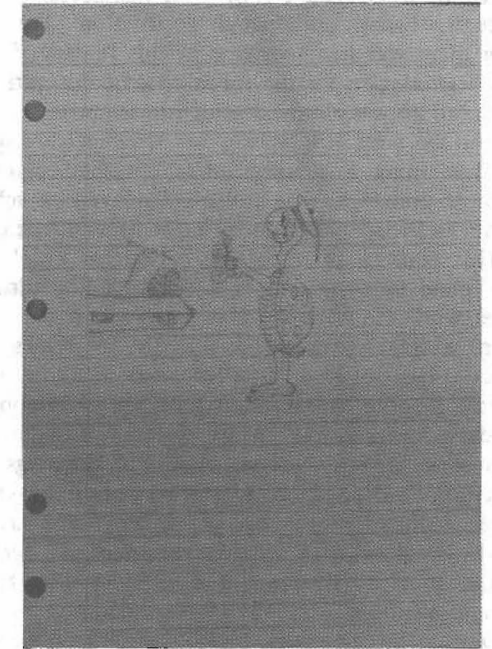


Figure 12.

He seemed determined to work constructively towards developing a good portfolio with this as an ultimate goal.

Frank had barged into my office unexpectedly the day before, to show me a drawing which he had made in a class. Figure 12 we see is a sketch of a turtle toasting the death of Frank who is already in his coffin. He wouldn't say anything else about this drawing, but he seemed very pleased with it.

I had a sense that he was saying goodbye to an old friend, like letting go of the old to make way for the new. I was impressed with his unconscious selection of the image of a turtle. In many ways he was like a turtle. He was slow, lazy and often hid (within a shell) from unpleasant situations in reality. But there was also another side to this turtle. He was slow and methodical, carefully working towards a better way of life.

During this, our next regular session, Frank again brought up the image of turtles and created an imaginary story:

Two turtles go for a walk through a meadow. They meet a snake who tempts them into a trap by offering an attractive female turtle to them as bait. The two turtles are finally tricked into a pot of hot water.

Again, when you follow your instinctual desires (sexual), Frank anticipated destruction. But this time there was less heaviness in this fantasy. Frank was beginning to see the foolishness of this anticipation, and he was almost teasing himself with it.

For the next few weeks, our sessions were spent on developing this story into a finished series of cartoon drawings, which were displayed at school events and for which Frank received much praise.

This marked an important period for Frank. He had found new meaning in and satisfaction through his artwork. He began to draw everywhere.

In classes he would doodle in notebooks and papers. His internal conflicts and feelings were seeking graphic expression. I gave him a sketchbook to draw in at home. While walking through our classroom area I'd often find his drawings on desktops, scattered on papers or taped to walls. Other students began to recognize Frank as an artist. He developed a sense of pride and accomplishment which then began to strengthen his badly scarred self-image.

During this period he often came into my office to work on his project at times other than his regularly scheduled hours. Our relationship became more informal. We joked around and enjoyed each other's company.

In his classes Frank began to develop closer friendships with his classmates and tutorial teacher. He became more open, more able to express his feelings, and was generally more likable. His temper tantrums had disappeared and have since never returned. He became more able to concentrate in class, focusing his attention more consistently on his academic work. His grades improved noticeably during this period.

Frank began to take better care of himself during this time. His clothing was neater and always clean. He began to wear cologne. He seemed less sleepy and more alert. He was beginning to see himself as a person 'worthy' of good things. He developed a strong identification with me.

One day when Frank was finally about to complete his cartoon project, he entered my office ten minutes before his scheduled appointment. This was the first time he had ever come early. He mentioned that this project had taken a long time to complete. I asked him if he'd ever worked on anything for such a long time? "No," he replied. "So this is a new feeling for you?" "Yes."

We spoke about how important it was that Frank

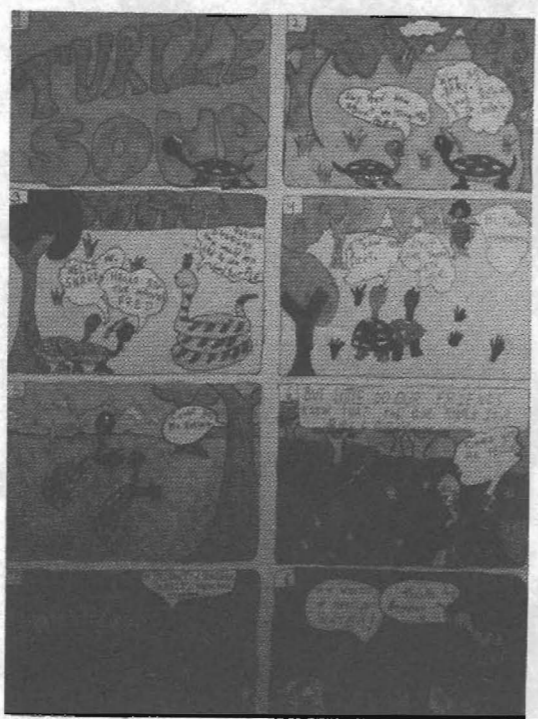


Figure 13.

could now work constructively on one thing for such a long time. He was able to direct his creative energy and maintain a high level of motivation and interest for longer than he ever had been able to before. I felt it was important for him to recognize this and therefore become connected with a new area of strength.

By the end of this session Frank had completed his project, Fig. 13.

In our next session Frank was prepared with another idea for a new project. He drew a big rat who was very innocent looking, but was described by Frank as "Really tough and mean inside. He sometimes gets real mad."

He then drew, on another paper, a picture of himself. This was the first time he had ever attempted a self-portrait, the first time he seemed able to really take an honest look at who he was. When finished, he finally stapled the two drawings together and added the words:

"Hello, I'm Frank. I'll be working with you for a while." (Figure 14)

The rat replies, "The names's Tony." I later

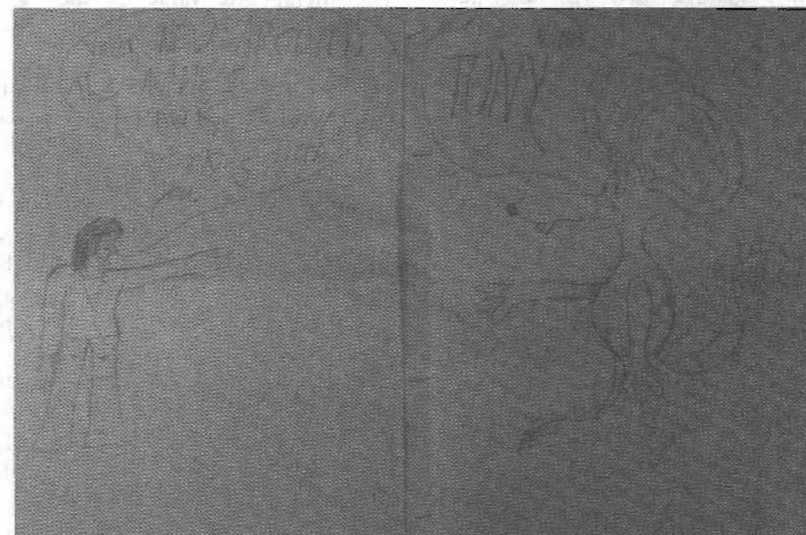


Figure 14.

learned just how significant this statement was. I learned from the Group Home social worker that Tony was the name of another boy in the residence, a young man tom by internal rage.

Frank was now able to see in his friend the very same qualities which he, as a result of our therapeutic relationship, recognized within himself. He now expressed a desire to help his friend in much the same way that he had been helped, by working through his conflicted feelings.

We had arrived at a new plateau. Frank had acknowledged my role in helping him become aware of himself and had identified with me in this drawing. He now wanted to work with the rat, an image of how he viewed himself upon first entering therapy: timid and shy outside, with anger building up inside. By internalizing the role which I had taken with him, Frank was now at a point where he would be able to begin to help himself.

It was time for another evaluation. Frank received an excellent grade in individual art class. We decided that it was an appropriate time to look over some of his earlier drawings. I sensed that he was ready to look at his drawings and at himself objectively without becoming anxious and defensive.

We spoke openly about his drawings and their relationship to him and his feelings about himself. We discussed the anger which he kept inside and built up until he had to explode like a volcano. We

talked about his fear of what will happen when he follows his impulses: hunger — the old man's anger for someone eating his apples, sexual — the trap which the turtles fell into when they pursued their sexual interests. We discussed his guilt for the fantasies which had tormented him in response to his internal rage.

This was our most intense session. Frank listened and made many comments which assured me that he was absorbing everything we had spoken about. He finally said to me, "You know, I never realized how much my drawings showed what I was feeling inside."

This was quite a statement coming from a child who, several months earlier, had provoked his guardians to consider a closed placement for him out of fear that he was becoming dangerously self-destructive. At that time in his life, Frank had been all alone within his internal world of conflicted feelings and growing rage. For him to now be able to share his inner fears with me was a remarkable tribute to the success of our therapeutic relationship.

Reality became the main focus of our last few sessions of the school year. I learned from the social worker that Frank had, on his own, contacted his first foster parents and made plans to visit with them and renew their relationship. The reality that they could not take him back was difficult for

Frank to accept. He cried during a meeting with the social worker when this was discussed. This was the first time he had been free enough to cry. Once this reality had been accepted by Frank, he was free to meet with them occasionally. This was important for Frank because these people had not rejected him, but rather had been forced to transfer him into another home because of illness. They had been good to Frank and he felt a need to reopen contact with them and reown that part of his past.

During this 'reality' period we often talked and planned concretely for Frank's future. He made plans to get a learner's permit for a driver's license, plans for applying to the High School of Art and Design and plans for working over the summer vacation.

In a sense it seemed that Frank was free now to pursue things for himself. He was much more in touch with his feelings, seemed much more confident and demonstrated his newly discovered freedom by directing his energy towards constructive future goals.

CONCLUSION

In spite of his early history of transient family figures, Frank showed, even in his initial drawing, a great deal of ego strength. The drawing was well balanced and displayed a great deal of sensitivity as well as artistic ability. Frank appeared to be a basically well-put together young man, with several emotional conflicts which were interfering with his functioning both in school and in his residence.

Had he not found a constructive way to ventilate and explore his conflicts, Frank likely would have sought more antisocial ways of expressing these feelings.

He had already been involved in several 'fire-setting' incidents before entering treatment and was given to violent outbursts and periods of severe depression or withdrawal.

The significant point to be made here is that a creative art therapy experience should not be seen

as appropriate only for severely disturbed persons. The therapeutic value of such an experience can foster growth in persons with various degrees of ego strength.

What makes art therapy different from more traditional approaches is that it can provide more flexibility within the therapeutic relationship. Although the goals may be quite similar, an individual art experience becomes less threatening than a more traditional psychotherapy session. Much of the 'art' of art therapy can also be viewed as the sensitivity with which the therapist guides the person towards self-revelation through the interpretation of fantasy productions.

When Frank's resistance produced anxiety, I was able to back off and turn to the more playful aspect of our work together. I believe that it is this careful blending of creative excitement and personal insight which lends art therapy to be used so successfully with adolescents who are quite naturally going through a period of tremendous mood swings and ambivalence.

Only when we were able to establish a therapeutic milieu which would bend with his natural movement, focus in and out with Frank, offer insight whenever appropriate, yet permit him to run away, play and hide when he needed to, could we truly address ourselves to his needs and engage him in a meaningful therapeutic relationship.

Before entering treatment, Frank had dealt with internal conflicts by either denying his feelings until he violently exploded, or literally running away from the unpleasant precipitating factors.

The goal of our work together was to help Frank find other alternatives. We focused upon opening up his internal dialogues, expressing these feelings creatively through his artwork so they need not be either unrealistically distorted or totally denied.

As emotional conflicts emerged from unconscious levels and were brought into conscious or pre-conscious awareness, Frank experienced a reduction in his need to act-out these conflicts in destructive ways.