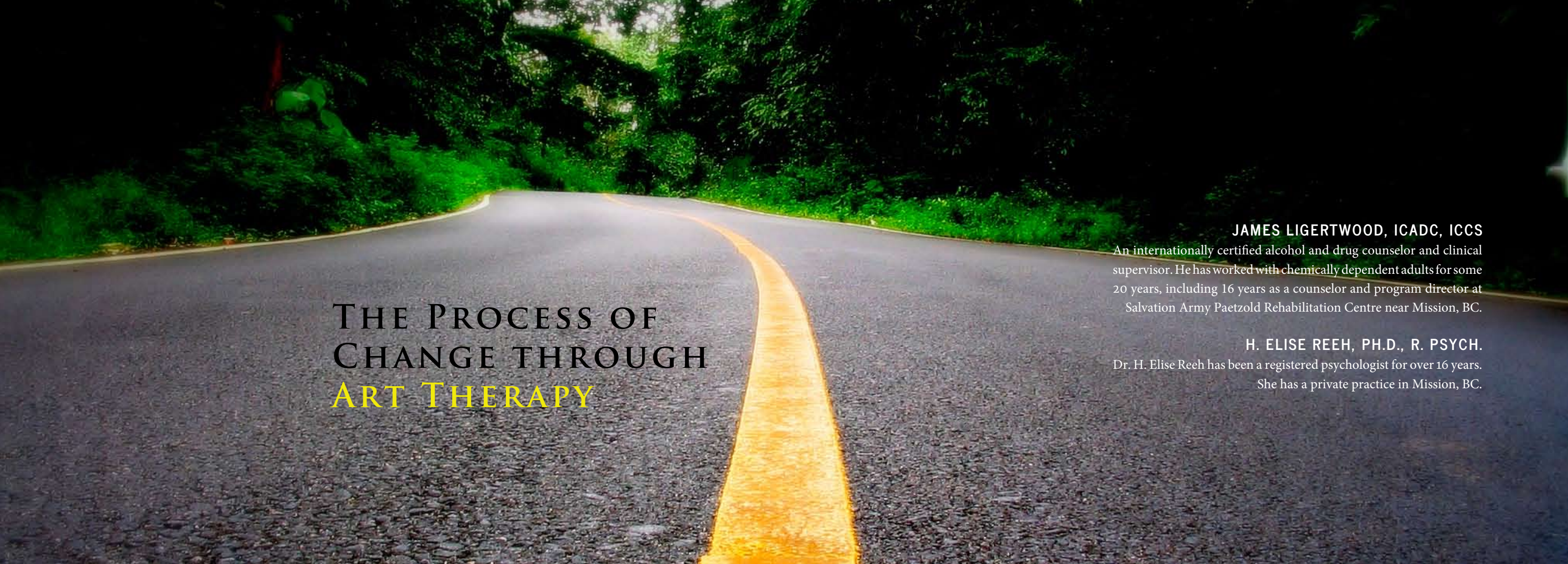




THE PROCESS OF CHANGE THROUGH ART THERAPY

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For clients struggling with severe issues, the change process can be conceptualized as a journey. Clients embarking on this journey can be guided by the use of “hero myths” that serve as metaphors for the struggle to find identity, make transitions, and to find their individual place in the world.

Art therapy can assist clients in this journey by conceptualizing the stages of the journey, making it seem more real, and providing clients with verbal and nonverbal tools to express their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. Healing occurs as a function of the creativity and the thematic conceptualization of the adventure. This article outlines a twelve-session art therapy program developed by the first author based on Campbell’s (1949) “hero myth.”

The program begins with discussion of the value of mythology, identification of personal mythologies, and the nature of the hero. Using mythology in therapy can be valuable as it serves to provide good examples of struggles that people often go through, how they resolve them, and what they learn from them. Personal mythologies are beliefs and images that people have about themselves. For example, a client who was abused envisioned himself as a big bad hairy monster that was rejected wherever he went. In this session, clients create images of personal or cultural heroes. As in all sessions, clients describe their artwork together with associated emotions and memories.

The second session addresses the mythical “call to adventure,” which is the often accidental circumstances

that result in significant life changes. Therapists tell the story of *The Frog Prince* as it serves as a good example. In this fable, a frog is asked to retrieve a ball accidentally dropped into a pond by a princess. This simple accident sets into motion a series of events neither expected nor planned by the characters, resulting in pervasive changes in attitude and circumstance (including transformation from frog to handsome prince).

People struggling with severe issues usually arrive at a point of despair that often occurs due to seemingly “accidental” events that lead them to a condition that demands significant change. One client who completed this program represented this experience with a painting of a boat with a slack white sail, suggesting a feeling of impotence. As he described his point of

despair, or “bottom”, the boat became a metaphor for both a dangerously hopeless time and a vehicle for change.

The third theme surrounds the “refusal of the call” or resistance to change. Mythological examples of this theme lie in the stagnation that befell the castle in *Sleeping Beauty* or the turning to salt of Lot’s wife for looking back. Clients create art reflecting their ambivalence about embarking on their journey. One client created an image of a sunken ship which suggested stagnation and hopelessness within the unconscious (universally symbolized by deep water.)

The fourth theme introduces the concept of helpers and protectors. Previous clients responded to this

theme with images depicting figures that inspired them to feel safe during their journeys. They were asked to be aware of bodily sensations regarding what it felt like to be protected. Empowered and energized, they generally produced lighter images that included sources of energy such as the sun and sky, which are metaphors for new beginnings.

The fifth theme addresses crossing the threshold between the old and the new world. Beyond the threshold lies the world of adventure and the mythical guardians that protect that realm. Emphasis is placed on the perception of opposites (such as good and evil) that often make clients feel a need to defend themselves. Clients created art reflecting the threshold between addiction and a new life in recovery. They expressed fear of crossing this threshold, as the transition can be painful. One client created an image of a rocky beach between a body of water and a jungle. He described a dangerous transition from water to a lonely beach that reflected a “forbidden” land. He communicated a sense of foreboding as he continued his mythological journey. His image and narrative reflected loneliness that he said he had struggled with since childhood and to which he attributed the origin of his addictions.

The sixth theme, “Belly of the Whale,” examines existential questions such as “Who am I?, What am I when I die? and What part of me needs to die?” Mythology abounds with tales of being swallowed by whales or other animals such as *Little Red Riding Hood’s* grandmother being swallowed by the wolf. Past clients created art that symbolized their experience of transformation. Illustrations depicted “rebirth” and a sense of hope that transformation was imminent.

“Road of Trials,” the seventh theme, examines the difficult tasks one needs to perform in order to facilitate a rebirth or transformation to wellness. Client images tended to be expressions of hope and fear. One client’s image included a snake; he described his task (to facilitate recovery) as crawling through an unfamiliar and dangerous jungle assisted by a serpent, which he described as both dangerous and helpful. This image and narrative suggested a new-found tolerance for

opposites and acceptance of ambivalence.

The eighth theme involves “Meeting the Goddess.” The remembered image of the mother is represented by the sleeping goddess, Briar Rose or Brynhild. She is the incarnation of the promise of perfection, assurance that the bliss of the comforting, nourishing, ‘good’ mother, young and beautiful, is still available. Clients created art depicting the protective goddess within themselves.

The ninth theme concerns atonement with a father figure. Many clients responded to this subject with trepidation, creating stark and painful illustrations of childhood experiences.

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In the tenth session, the “ultimate boon,” representing achievement of the goal of wellness or recovery is examined. In mythology, the hero often miscalculated the reward for his efforts; King Midas thought he wanted gold but found that his power to create it robbed him of everything important to him, including his daughter who turned to a golden statue when he embraced her. Many clients created images that were spiritual in nature, reflecting positive changes and improved ego strength.

The eleventh theme warned of the “return threshold.” Clients created images of the perils of return and the value of the boon to their community. Images reflected hopefulness and willingness to share the benefit of their journey with others. They portrayed a sense of purpose and strength that had not been present at the beginning of therapy. One client produced an image of a moon reflecting on blue water against a black sky; he verbalized an awareness of the dangers of dualism and expressed a sense of peace present in his image.

The twelfth and final theme is “master of two worlds,” concerning balance between material and spiritual worlds. Mastery of these two worlds leads to freedom from the fear of death and, in turn, the freedom to live a full life. Clients created art reflecting happiness, hope, and recovery. Some expressed a sense of having their “feet on the ground.” There was a general awareness of having completed a rite of passage and a mood of pride and achievement for having completed the project. Clients became pensive as they reflected on the process and transformation they went through.

In general, clients reported that they found this program helpful in realizing, conceptualizing and expressing the arduous journey of change. They stated that illustrating their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours made it easier to express them. The mythical heroes helped clients to realize that they were not alone in their struggles and that people have been struggling with similar issues through the ages. Clients expressed their joy in creativity together with a sense of hope, pride, and achievement.

REFERENCES

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd. Aylesbury, Bucks, UK. ■