

Peach Blossom Spring

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Hearth Studio

Stories pass down wisdom from generation to generation and are almost always about human nature rather than outer physical reality. Greek mythology is just one example of things not being true on the outside but very true on the inside. You may be familiar with King Midas, for example. Of course, he was not able to physically turn everything to gold, but the story tells us that when we value money over all else, we lose what is most precious to us – the daughter, which represents his inner young feminine energy.

To get an understanding of the deeper meanings in stories, we should try to see the characters as characterizations of potential energies within ourselves. We can read the story and see it as an image, meaning that every part of it, every detail, is a metaphor hinting at a deeper truth. Ghibli's Zeniba and Yubaba, for example, are the positive and negative sides to the Great Mothering power within us all. Isn't it fascinating, to see stories in this manner?

Last year I was delighted to present one of my favorite stories at the Creating Connections conference, called Peach Blossom Spring. In this story, a fisherman happens upon a curious forest, full of peach blossoms, and squeezes through a narrow cave into a beautiful land. There the people are happy and helpful, and have no contact with outsiders. They live in total peace, even though hundreds of years have passed with wars and fighting on the outside. As the fisherman begins his journey back home, they tell him that it will be meaningless to tell others about this land, but he is so eager to share the joy and beauty that he rushes home and does tell others. But no matter how many times he and the others try, they can never find Peach Blossom Spring again.

Can you imagine the inner meaning of this story? A fisherman is someone who searches for life underneath the water—it is a passive type of search, sending a hook out and waiting for a response. The fisherman accidentally dozes off and realizes he has come to a new place. He does not get to this new discovery consciously - it is not like “row, row, row, your boat”! The story tells us that dozing or meditating is the necessary means to find this place within ourselves, going with the flow of the river. Then, the fisherman takes a risk and squeezes through a narrow passage. It isn't easy, but he is in a new land, with new friends and peaceful curiosity. This is almost like a birthing process, finding a new you, a new way to be in the world.

This inner utopia is very personal and cannot be understood by others. It is separate from outsiders. It may even be meaningless to them. So the important message of this story is to find our own inner utopia, and don't worry if others don't understand. Not being able to find the same place may mean that we can never go back to what we once were—our inner utopia may shift and change as we age, but the method for finding it is the same: search for deeper meaning under the surface, and go into the dark narrow cave-like mindset, through to the other side. It is a breakthrough of sorts, into our deepest selves. We are changed after such a visit, and it is a vital place to feel refreshed and restored to a peaceful way of life.

Stories can be about personal life and individual challenges in this world, but they can also speak to humanity collectively. A myth which speaks to our current environmental crisis today is Erysichthon. If you do not know this story yet, please read about it here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erysichthon_of_Thessaly

I'm sure that you'll be able to see the correlations between that story, King Midas, and our current state of affairs in the world in regards to the environment and the economy.

An interview with Cheryl Okubo

What is art therapy?

It is a mode of psychotherapy which includes the possibility of using a wide variety of art materials in addition to verbal communication. An art therapist supports and assists the client's image-making process as mode of self-discovery and acceptance.

How did you become interested in becoming an art therapist?

I decided to become an art *teacher* when I was in high school, because I knew I wasn't "talented" or driven enough to be an artist. Ever since I was a young child, I loved making things and playing with paints or colors. I thought that as a teacher, I could do what I love for my career and have the summers off to travel. But right after I got my degree in art ed., I traveled around the world and happened to hear about art therapy while in Germany. I knew immediately this was the job for me, because not only during my own high school years, but as an art educator intern at a high school, I saw firsthand how making art could impact people in very positive ways.

What type of training and education is necessary to become an art therapist?

One must first have a bachelor's degree in either art, art education, or psychology, then a master's degree in art therapy. The master's degree involves an internship, and after graduating from college one must have 1,000 hours of supervised practice to earn an ATR (Art Therapy Registration) from the American Art Therapy Association (AATA). There is also an Art Therapy Certification Board (ATCB) which offers a test, and those who pass it add a -BC to their title. (art therapist, ATR-BC (Board Certified)). But in Japan, there is no place to earn a degree in art therapy (yet). I hope to begin a master's program at the University of Tsukuba in the future.

Could you give us some examples of what you do as an art therapist?

It is similar to counseling or therapy, but with additional tools for expression than words alone. An art therapist must be familiar with a wide variety of art media firsthand in order to understand what each material brings to the therapy setting. I sometimes choose materials or themes specific to the client's needs, other times the client may choose media to explore or play with.

Before coming to Japan I worked on the children's ward of a private psychiatric hospital, and facilitated bi-weekly art therapy sessions in groups as well as some private sessions. Here in Japan I have a small studio, and a person might come to me to talk about something that is bothering them, or maybe just to discover more about themselves. I listen to them, and facilitate an art experience so that they can see and hear themselves from a different angle. The imagery created gives us a deeper perspective, and my job is not only to just be there with them as they explore their deeper self, but to teach them how to listen to their inner voice via the image (art work) that emerged.

I sometimes travel to various places to offer workshops for various groups, such as school counselors or nurses.

What do you find do be challenging or difficult in your work as an art therapist?

As an empath, it is sometimes very painful to bear witness to clients' stories of trauma and abuse, especially when it involves children whose parents did not or could not protect them. It's called secondary trauma, and therapists and counselors must learn how to be there and stay with a client in their pain and also take care of ourselves afterwards. Having artwork to hold our emotions is very helpful in this regard, because the art itself acts as a sort of container, and it holds the feelings we have inside. That is why it is important for the art therapist as well as the client to really put a lot of time, care, and energy into their art making.

What do you find most rewarding or enjoyable about being an art therapist?

The most rewarding thing about studying art therapy was undergoing my own therapy, as part of the requirements to earn a master's degree. Without those years of art, music, dance and dream therapy, I would not know myself deeply enough to do this work or be who I am today.

The most enjoyable thing about my work is that I get to continue making things and learning how to bring forth my inner world. It's even more joyous when I can see others enjoying their creative process, too.

Can people who are not art therapists incorporate aspects of art therapy into their lives, such into their teaching or parenting? If so, can you give some specific examples?

That is a good question, because I think 'art therapy' has become a trendy catch phrase recently in Japan, and most people don't know the difference between recreational art, therapeutic art, and art therapy.

Only those who have studied and practiced art therapy with a supervisor can conduct real art psychotherapy sessions. Art therapy involves a professional relationship between client and therapist. However, recreational art or therapeutic art can be done by anyone, alone or in a group. Art classes can be therapeutic because they lift our mood or make us feel better.

Coloring books or Mandala making has become a trend in recent years, even for adults, for example. It is sometimes called meditative coloring or mindfulness coloring. These activities are soothing, fun, and they feel refreshing because they are recreational. But so many things can be recreational for us, depending on our personalities: any hobby or sport will have a therapeutic affect because recreation is therapeutic; one is re-creating oneself through play (re-create = recreation). Recreational art cannot be called "art therapy" because it is a self-soothing or self-satisfying activity. Recreational art does not involve a professionally trained therapist alongside you, who can invite you into a much deeper awareness of yourself.

Art therapy also shares this refreshing feeling, but it is much broader and deeper than that alone.

Therapy, by the way, comes from the Greek word *therapeia*, meaning to treat medically, to heal or cure, and "therapeutic" means "to attend, do service, or take care of". So instead of curing our ills or woes, art therapists seek to care for them, to be of service to the image, and attend or witness the client in their process of caring for their soul.