Art and Music Therapy: the Expression of Healing

At the Acute Care Unit on the Carrier campus, Unit Director and Registered Nurse Jacqueline Bienenstock remarks upon the demonstrable effectiveness of arts-based therapies that have served to ease reliance upon medication, seclusion and restraint...a “calming influence” found in music sessions, drum circles and even karaoke, an activity about which she says, “I’ve seen people jump up and start dancing; people who wouldn’t participate in anything else.”

From digital photography to watercolor painting; dance and movement to traditional crafts, the use of art and music in treating people with addiction or behavioral disorders has transitioned from the realm of “busy time” activities and “alternative” therapies...establishing itself as a serious component of the treatment program, practiced by highly trained and fully certified professionals.

The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) — an organization that conducts conferences, maintains registries of qualified professionals, and oversees 40 regional chapters in the United States — defines art therapy as “a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem.”

As a recognized discipline, art therapy has made significant strides within a relatively short time — drawing from the art education curriculum and mid-20th century currents in developmental psychology, to establish itself as a practice that combines elements of modern psychotherapy ranging from Behaviorism, Cognitive (language, memory, problem solving), Family Systems and Narrative therapies, to Person-centered (PCT) approaches.

Art therapists can be credentialed at any of three levels:

- **Art Therapist Registered (ATR):**
  Requires completion of both a graduate-level program in art therapy and an internship, as well as proof of supervised post-graduate clinical experience.

- **ATR, Board Certified (ATR-BC):**
  Requires successful completion of a national exam, administered by the ATCB.

- **Art Therapy Certified Supervisor (ATCS):**
  Requires achievement of the Board Certified level of credentialing, and is an additional level of training designed for professionals who seek to supervise other art therapists.

Researchers have long held that music can exert a very real and measurable healing influence on the human mind. Dopamine, the chemical associated with the body’s response to pleasurable experiences, has been found to be released by the brain’s “reward center” when stimulated by music — and recent studies at Montreal’s McGill University linked the experience of listening to music with anti-anxiety factors, as well as with higher levels of the antibody immunoglobin A.

Like art therapy, the discipline of music therapy took root in the middle decades of the 20th century, picking up steam with the practice of playing music for wounded and “shell-shocked” veterans of the Second World War. According to the Maryland-based American Music Therapy Association (AMTA), there are approximately 5,000 board-certified music therapists active in United States,
with membership in the group (as well as interest in music therapy as a career) continuing to grow. The organization also identifies the implementation of music therapy programs as vehicles for promoting wellness, managing stress, alleviating pain, enhancing memory, improving communication, and promoting physical rehabilitation.

To practice their chosen profession, a fully accredited art or music therapist must have college credits, an earned degree and an internship requirement — and, unlike any other type of counselor, a certain level of aptitude and proficiency in visual media or musicianship is a must. Beyond the formal accreditation, however, the therapist who endeavors to reach people through the very human processes of art and music should possess a number of qualities that aren’t necessarily gleaned from textbooks — compassion and sensitivity, certainly; as well as patience and people skills, the ability to listen, and the even more important ability to recognize and nurture what could be a newfound talent for many of the people under their supervision.

In a feature story that appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of Carrier Connections, Shauna Moses — herself an administrator with the New Jersey Association of Mental Health Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA), and a client who undertook a program of treatment for depression at Carrier Clinic in 2012 — praised the supervised art sessions and drum circles for being “a pleasant surprise... I really did learn a lot about these different forms of therapy, and the diverse viewpoints of the different people who take part in them.”

The role of that human quality — so difficult to measure, but so much a part of the healing process — is reinforced by Robin, a 15-year veteran of the art therapy field, and co-author of a handbook for teaching artists.

“The abiding thing...something that can’t be conferred through a piece of paper, is compassion,” she says. “It’s important to create a space that people feel safe in...and if you don’t have that compassion, people, particularly children, will see right through you.”