

Can Imagination Heal Shame?

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

Once I was working with a woman who was feeling very lost in her life. She wasn't sure if she even wanted to start a new job or a new relationship. I asked her what her picture was when she imagined getting a new job, and all she could picture was what happened in her last job: her co-worker and even her supervisor putting her down. I asked her what picture she imagined when she thought about a new relationship and she couldn't even imagine that; she just kept saying over and over, "The last one wasn't very good, so there must be something wrong with me."

One day she came into the session with a dream. In her dream, she was seeing friends from long ago. I asked her how it was to see those friends from long ago.

She said, "There must be something wrong with me because they stopped being my friends." I said, "It sounds like when you want to move forward, you get these thoughts that there's something wrong with you." She said, "Yes," looking down.

I asked her to draw what it felt like inside when she had that thought. Instead of choosing any of the brightly colored chalk, pencils, or markers, she picked the blackest black and slowly covered the whole page with it. I said, "Wow.... That's really something. No wonder you can't move forward." I asked how it was to draw her picture like that and to have it so black and to fill the whole page. She seemed encouraged by my support and said, "There's more." So I asked her to draw the "more." And then there was a whole other level of black on top of the black.

It was very black, kinda take-your-breath-away black. So I wanted to acknowledge the darkness so she wasn't alone with it. Then I brought in play. We started playing with this picture of the blackest blackest black. First we positioned it right in front of her, then slowly I moved it until it was all the way on the other side of the room. We began a process of acknowledging this black from the different distances. When it was far away from her, at one point she started to feel a little bit of hope. Then she remembered a tree she used to climb back when she was a tomboy, before she started wearing skirts and having to act "right." I had her draw the image of the tree and then I had her feel the sensation inside of her of the tree supporting her, back when she was a tomboy. Slowly we began to work with this symbol of protection. The tree would protect her from the blackness. When she started to have thoughts that there was something wrong with her, she could imagine sitting in the arms of tree and the tree saying to her, "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

A while after that she had another dream that she brought in. This dream was about the boss who had put her down. We worked on symbolism and talked about the different roles in the dream and worked in the Imaginal Realm with the psychodrama technique of surplus reality and Jungian active imagination. Surplus reality is an extension of ordinary reality where we can use imagination to have a conversation with someone as we wish we could or to complete something we wish we had been able to complete. We can call on support from memories, TV, movies or dreams. With my client I suggested bringing in images that might protect and support her. She imagined the boss and then imagined a serpentine monster coming up and wrapping its tentacles around the boss, who was trying to run away. The monster was saying, "*Listen to her.*" Then we brought her into the picture. She was eventually able to say to her boss, "I wrote those reports but you put your name on them." And then we brought me into the picture. I named what was going on and said to the boss, "That shamed her." Then she said, "I felt discredited. I felt like I didn't exist." And so I said, "She felt like she didn't exist and that was shaming to her." Finally she got to say what she meant to say all the time! Eventually I had her go back into the scene. This time the boss said, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to shame you."

When later I asked her to do another drawing of how she felt, instead of the blackest blackest black of her original picture, she used all these different colors—orange, blue, yellow—and the image was kind of like a butterfly. I asked her what the butterfly was about and she said, "I'm feeling a lot better today. Lighter." I told her that the butterfly is a symbol of new direction and transformation and, some people believe, resurrection—coming back to life again. For her it was a powerful symbol because there was movement, color and lightness. Even though the real boss in real life had not apologized, even though the situation hadn't actually changed in reality, she felt very different inside. Instead of "There's something wrong with me" she was able to realize there was something *right* with her. As she healed from the constriction of all-pervasive shame, her life force energy came back to her. And she now was able to go out on job interviews and eventually get a job that she loved. Even though the work with her was just in my office, we were working with her imagination. We were able to work with the shame so that it wasn't holding her back anymore. She was able to be different in the world.

At one point she asked, "Do I need to call my ex-boss and tell him what an a**hole he was?" I asked her if she needed to do that or if she felt different enough from the work we had done that she didn't actually need to tell him anything. And she realized she was fine and didn't need to do it.

The Imaginal Realm is a place where I can gently guide the client if the shame is all-pervasive, when their thoughts or their body is stuck. By leading them through an expressive arts, creative drama therapy artistic process, I can help them find a different role they have inside. In the case

of this client, she was stuck with the automatic thought “There’s something wrong with me.” CBT seemed to work in our early sessions but would not correct her automatic thoughts “something’s wrong with me” and core belief about her worthlessness when she was out in the world. When we challenged her automatic thoughts she would try on the new belief of “There’s nothing wrong with me,” but then she’d feel embarrassed because she didn’t actually believe it and didn’t want to admit that. So she hid her shameful thoughts from me during the session—more shame to hide. By working in the Imaginal Realm, we were able to bypass that part of her that was judging her and keeping the shame so stuck. I was working with the introjects in the client’s imagination, which is more effective than working directly with her issues out in the world when there has been all pervasive shame.

Using imagination: This is Winnicott’s “play space,” this is Moreno’s “Tele,” it’s the Jungian Imaginal Realm, Psychodrama’s “surplus reality”... By guiding a client skillfully into it and then out of it back to their life, we can heal their shame in the Imaginal Realm and give them back roles to re-incorporate into their life, including roles that they’ve never had before. This woman eventually chose to become a big sister and mentor for kids (tomboys). She found her next job with delight and anticipation and enjoyed her new role of survivor rather than victim.

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