

Presence and process in expressive arts works: at the edge of wonder, Herbert Eberhart and Sally Atkins, foreword by Paolo J. Knill, London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley, 2014, 184 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781849059572

Presence and Process in Expressive Arts Work is the outcome of a long collaborative association between the authors. First published in 2014, the format of the book impressed the reader as dynamically important subject matter. It is best described as a unique distillation of Eberhart and Atkins' individually accrued expertise and it imparts their personal experiences as educators and clinicians. Conversations between them and other contributors took place over many summers in the Swiss Alps and the American Appalachian Mountains, a suitable setting for the process for distillation of this material, resulting in a multi-toned and layered exposition of the subject.

Essentially, their purpose is to convey values, attitudes and best practice for effective outcomes when working with the expressive arts. Their definition of presence and process is "presence is a quality of being in an experiential process of encounter" (p.129). Two key elements within these basic concepts are the "facilitative relationship" in the context of a "relational holding space". At the core of the fusion of wisdom and experience underpinning the fabric of the book, the "uniqueness of the individual" is honoured. This is reflected in the theoretical stance whereby "meaning is contextual, subjective and multiple in a co-constructed relationship" (p.24). Care and respect for others is sustained in a lifelong process of cultivating a way of being by the "change agent". Here the "change agent" is an encompassing term to denote healing professionals. The book can be described as a concise phenomenology of the subject. It contains five chapters, a foreword, a preface, appendices and a bibliography all in 184 pages. There is no jargon; words are carefully considered and applied, and thus language becomes an apparatus to sustain clarity of vision, purpose and interpretation.

In the introduction, Atkins seeks a reorientation of focus in society toward the arts for healing and education, including a call for arts based research as a main mode for inquiry. Both presence and process are regarded as fundamental concepts underlying work in the wider contexts of all healing professions, education and social change. Therefore, a crucial task for the authors is to make clear the complexity and application of both concepts in the most accessible terms in a non-reductive way. This writing partnership has produced a detailed panorama of the subject, whilst at the same time the breadth of the authors' challenge remains invisible to the uninitiated reader. In my view, this demonstrates the *presence* of affective "multi-levelled awareness" (p.70) in a *process* of "invitational presence" (p.69) for learning.

Chapter Two, "Embracing Surprise: The Importance of the Arts in Expressive Arts Work", is co-authored. It calls for our aesthetic responsibility to discern European cultural dogma from the fundamental right we have as imaginative beings to be creative. Beauty is an embodied and reflective experience, not an assemblage of inherited rules on aesthetics. The ramifications of this cultural legacy are highlighted in Chapter Four, where Eberhart says he avoids speaking about art or using the word "creative" because so many early experiences associated with creativity are negative. For me, this speaks volumes about the challenges creative arts therapists face when the very words we use to classify our mode of healing trigger fear and so become obstacles. As an art therapist and therefore witness to the healing power of creativity it is difficult to contend with this notion. The scope of potential for such healing is reaffirmed for me throughout the book with quotes and insights from archetypal psychologists such as James Hillman, anthropologist Ellen Dsyanke and many other creative arts therapists, artists and poets. As a global community we are in crisis; it seems mind boggling how or why profound treatise of the arts and imagination (and by extension love) can be dismissed, in favour of time-constrained, prescriptive approaches to healing. Atkins and Eberhart believe "that one way to think about constraints, conflicts, and suffering is that these problems are to

some extent, limitations of the imagination” (p42.). Undervaluing the faculty of imagination denies us access to a rich inner terrain of knowledge. Our imagination is a vital resource for affective healing that will provide a resonating and meaningful understanding of our place in the world.

As we move through the chapters, presence and process are separated into the sum of their parts; Atkins serves us presence and Eberhart delivers process. Eberhart aligns the efficacy of the expressive arts for awareness and healing with the evidence based disposition of science. He begins Chapter Four with an account of an inversion of processes in biological “phase transition” and an equal but opposite account of transitions in the psyche. In biology, changes are usually material and observable. In a type of autopoiesis, energy comes from inside the bio system and serves to activate phases of transition. Transition in psyche states refers to new awareness and can be imperceptible. To sustain psyche development, sensitive input of information by the change agent will “enlarge the play space” (p.92). Here, an exchange of processes emphasises similarities rather than differences in a continuum of development within biological and psychical spheres. Eberhart delivers process orientated work in a methodological way; the intention is to engender differentiation to support a continued development of knowledge and professional application of these concepts. Regarding states of being, oscillations and energy exchange are best articulated in the inevitable intersection of presence and process. A good example of this is in Chapter Three, “Presence as Process of Encounter”, in which Atkins writes, “our interior responding wonder is an aspect of relational nature of reality” (p.75). In these intersecting moments, “spacelessness and timelessness of the aesthetic realm” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, cited in Eberhart and Atkins, p.95) can be encountered, bringing the uniqueness of the individual in tune with the anima mundi.

Through the creative process, I encounter experience first, and it is afterwards that a book finds me which will serve to amplify my experience; I received this book under such circumstances. Presence and process are inherent in my work as an art therapist and as an imaginative being in the world. Indeed, *Presence and Process in Expressive Arts Work* has ordered and therefore differentiated aspects of my own innate awareness, and so this book is a touchstone. Through the lens of the creative arts, Atkins and Eberhart have presented a spectrum of ideas, concepts, philosophy, psychology, efficacy of application and outcome. In this context, the expressive arts become a container. Without doubt, the style and quality of professional practice, knowledge and experience the authors bring to the table makes this dynamic container nothing less than a crucible. The arrangement of the book contributes to its effectiveness; as an object it embodies its own intention. In this way, it is a timely evolution of format which has the potential to penetrate the wider community, and contribute to a better understanding of the true role the expressive arts have in society.

Notes on Contributor

Una Walsh is a registered art therapist and artist based in Waterford. Una runs her private practice from her art studios (Una Walsh, Art Therapy Studios). She also works as the art therapist in the Solas Cancer Support Centre in Waterford. Una21.mwalsh@gmail.com