

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Who Am I? Reflections in a Broken Mirror

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Abstract

Who am I? Reflections in a Broken Mirror video, was a creative exploration into identity using the mirror as a tool for self-reflection. Through the creative process of deconstructing (breaking the mirror and removing the shards), and reconstructing (putting the shards back together again), the mirror became a tangible reflection of an existential crisis. Through this creative exploration I realized that the badge of honor 'survivor' was not enough, a conclusion consistent with other research into childhood abuse. This terminology does not recognize or incorporate other aspects of one's life and sense of self. While survivor identity has a place in the process of healing by celebrating personal strengths and community with others who have had similar traumatic experiences, it is a stigmatized identity that is constricting and closely associated with abuse. It is important to acknowledge the multiple roles we play and the rich diversity of life experiences, and to use traumatic life experiences as a potential catalyst for new insights and transformation.

Keywords: existential crisis, self-reflection, identity, art therapy, abuse, mirror

Introduction to the video

*The blow unseen shatters the figment of illusion,
Revealing the shards of a life,
Once happy, sometimes sad, but no longer,
It is now lost between the cracks of emptiness.*

*The world revolves but time stands still in silence,
Waiting,
Watching,
Alone,
Trapped in the blackness of despair,
And smothered in endless nothingness.*

*Words cannot describe the desperate terror
And the pain of a soul ripped,
Torn beyond recognition.
Innocence lost forever
In an alien landscape
That was once a home.*

*The deafening echo of silence,
Pierces the heart with a cry that has no voice,
Who would have thought that the soundless agony,
Would be so revealing?
Piece by piece the shards reveal,
Emptiness, loss, shattered hopes,
Until nothingness appears,
Who am I now?*

Slowly life returns in heighten fear,

*Cowering from the lightest touch,
Reminded sharply of the fragmented pain
That was life.
What did I do to deserve this?
Why? Why me?
The words cascade in a fountain
Of tears pleading for an answer.*

*Piece by piece the fragments rejoin,
Washed by the breath of time,
Piecing together a semblance,
Of what had been.
Hope for life renewed, but never the same,
As the scars heal between the cracks,
Bringing strength,
And the tension of frailty.*

*There is a world between the cracks,
Of shattered dreams and lives,
Sharp, biting edges that stab,
An open wound long forgotten.
Paper veneers crackling under pressure,
Of the unresolved,
Hidden strengths revealed,
Behind a torment of held emotions imprisoned.*

*Letting go, understanding,
Forgive, Forgive, Forgive!
Is the mantra that fights with
Hate, Hate, Hate!
The wound is covered with a badge of honor*

Bestowed on those who have fallen

And have risen from the ashes

Proclaiming to the world

I survived!

(Ridley, 2012, Reflections in a Broken Mirror)

Who am I? Reflections in a Broken Mirror video was presented at the 2013 International Art Therapy Conference in London and was a creative exploration in to identity using the mirror as a tool for self-reflection. This video was created during my doctoral studies in Expressive Therapies at Lesley University, USA, as part of an arts-based research course led by Dr. Shaun McNiff. The purpose behind the video was to participate in the process of self-reflection experienced by those participating in my dissertation intergenerational research study. The concept of a broken mirror was inspired by my interest in identity reformation after traumatic life experiences. In my case, that experience was a childhood of violence and abuse.

This reflective video was an authentic attempt to seek closure from any unresolved issues (from my childhood) and to move forward in this journey called life from a position of strength and transformation. For Palmer (1998) 'Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials' (p. 13). McNiff (2009) felt that traumatic life experiences held 'the greatest resources for expression and learning' (p. 47). A view shared by Levine (2002) who added that reflective knowledge provided the opportunity to integrate these experiences into a coherent form that provided meaning and continuity to ones life. La Torre (2005) believed this was the first step to self-awareness; a necessary component in individual and societal transformation (see Brookfield, 2001, 2005; Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1991).

Through the creative process of deconstructing (breaking the mirror and removing the shards), and reconstructing (putting the shards back together again), the mirror became a tangible reflection of an existential crisis. In existential philosophy and psychology, a crisis can be seen as a potential catalyst for new insights and transformation (for

examples see Frankl, 1959/2006; Kierkegaard, 1844; Nietzsche, 1973; May, 1996). Color, words, images and/or symbols were used to bind the shards together revealing the re-formation of self-identity; of being whole but with the cracks creating a tension of strength and vulnerability. The video narrative was written in response to the visual images that emerged from this creative exploration.

The mirror was set up in my office space and placed on a velvet black cloth. Because I was going to break the mirror I needed a space that was safe, contained and secured. Two video cameras were set-up on tripods to capture different angles of the mirror. I had chosen the Christmas holiday period to begin filming because of its significance in a traumatic event in my life (my mother died on December 25, 1989). Filming took place over a period of three weeks, and video editing and reflective narrative took place over a period of six weeks. The soundtrack *Maid with the Flaxen Hair* (Debussy, 1909/10) was the perfect accompaniment to this arts-based research because of its hauntingly beautiful music. Serendipitously, this music was free copyright and was made available as sample music on my video editing software, Cyberlink PowerDirector V8.

There was some trepidation in embarking on this reflective voyage but I found that holding the space and contemplating the arts-based research helped me to clarify my intent, prepared me for the process of involvement and helped me to integrate the experience. The underlying narratives of self-perception enabled the exploration of Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, a process Bar-On (2007) believed was integral to the creative process. Narrative research was useful in this type of qualitative inquiry because it was designed to investigate how people make sense out of the realities that are lived and perceived, and help to create meaning out of life experiences (Bell 2003; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993, 2007). By creating a narrative identity, the participant was placed 'meaningfully in their culture, providing unity to their past, present, and anticipated future' (Singer, 2004, p. 445) and gained insight into their 'own nature, values, and goals' (p. 442).

Using the mirror as a tool for self-reflection helped me to realize how far I have come in dealing with the effects of an abusive childhood. Although I recognize that I have a long way to go, this experience taught me that I have achieved a position of strength when

dealing with these traumatic memories. This reflective process helped to resolve some lingering issues, and provided insight in to my psyche, which brought me to the realization that surviving was not enough.

At the time, this badge of honor was sufficient. It represented an inner strength of will and success in the face of adversity. My childhood experiences taught me empathy, understanding and a desire to prove myself worthy of love. It also provided the impetus to turn from a path of violence and self-destruction, and to follow a path of healing and teaching. The tension of strength and vulnerability had opened my eyes (and heart) to creating meaning out of suffering (see Frankl, 1959/2006, 1967/85, 1969/88, 1978).

This realization that survival was not enough was recognition that this stigmatizing identity was too constricting and closely associated with abuse (Courtois, 1996; Draucker and Martsof, 1992/2006; Grossman *et al*, 1999; Herman, 1992/97). This conclusion was consistent with the experience of those interviewed by Crowley (2000), Grossman *et al*. (1999) and Phillips and Daniluk (2004). Survivor identity does not recognize or incorporate other aspects of life and sense of self but instead focuses on traumatic childhood experiences. While survivor identity has a place in the process of healing by helping to move the trauma from a “contaminated identity” (see Herman, 1992/97, p.93) to an identity that celebrates personal strengths and community with others who have had similar traumatic experiences. It is important to acknowledge the multiple roles we play and the rich diversity of life experiences.

My badge of honor now is as an artist, therapist and educator. I am a person with a thirst for knowledge and a desire to explore the world between the cracks and the tension of strength and vulnerability.

For further information please visit:

www.themirrorproject.com

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