

***Ripening Seeds:  
The Star of Identity through Imagery Interplay  
by Wendy Miller, Ph.D., A.T.R., REAT, LPC  
Former Executive and Governance Committee Co-chair***

**The Soil for Wendy's Ripening Seed**

I grew up near a lake in Maine. My dad's Ashkenaz Lithuanian family ran a family mens' clothing business. In the hidden "studios" of the store, I found my first "art" -- the printing press where I arranged metal letters on a grid, making price signs for shirts and pants. The more exotic aspects of art/music were brought to me through my Sephardic French Algerian mother. This melange is the ground of my being. Forming my identity had something to do with figuring out how to hold these two very different worlds within me. Identity did not seem to me to be a given; it required an integration process.

When I was eleven, I spent three months at The Children's Hospital in Boston, recovering from a complicated leg break from a ski accident. Frightened and lonely like the other girls in my room, we were taken to the activity room, where a woman created ways for each of us to feel better through making art (Could she have been a pioneer in expressive arts therapy?). I made my first sculpture there, one I still have. It has been a reminder and a touchstone of my discovery of my life's work.

Years later, I returned to Boston, going to Simmons College. I wanted to become that woman of the activity room, which of course involved many identities. My BA was in Psychology, and over the next thirty years I pursued what could be called a non-traditional approach to the arts and medicine. It seemed that I was pursuing two parallel professional paths, one as an artist and one as a therapist/counselor/educator. I worked in a variety of settings, trained with many mentors in the arts and in psychology, creating my own marriages with my two loves. My Master's is in interdisciplinary and experimental art from San Francisco State University. This background in interdisciplinary arts has been a perfect foundation for intermodal expressive arts therapy.

My artwork grew out of writings and sculptures that led to my reputation in the Bay Area as a feminist installation artist and environmental sculptor. My Masters' thesis/project was the only collaborative/interdisciplinary one allowed at San Francisco State. I brought to my artist/therapist work in social institutions a feminist model of empowerment along with a raw curiosity for non-traditional arts materials, influenced by Art Brut/Outsider Art. It was Joan Erikson who helped me bring my work into arenas dominated by institutional and power/powerless dynamics.

In the late 1980's, healing from a bout with a chronic immune system illness, I relocated to Washington DC and pursued my doctorate. My Ph.D is from The Union

Institute in Health Psychology and Expressive Arts Therapy, studying the psychophysical aspects of imagery and mind-body communication.

## **My Ripening Seed Approach**

What interests me in both art and health is the layering of experience. I search for patterns and associations between what stands out and what recedes, ultimately aligning what is necessary to contain the whole. My ripening seed can be visualized as a symbol in the form of a Star Model—The Star of Identity—reflecting inner ripening into an integrative image constituting identity and holistic health. It was during my university teaching years (SF State, JFK, CIIS, and GW) that I first developed diagrams as models to help art, psychology, and expressive arts therapy students be able to use both linear and circular approaches to art making and imagery thinking. My diagrams helped people understand the many facets of their creativity—pitfalls and potentials alike. Using both types of creative focusing, the linear perspective in the triangular forms and the circular panoramic expanse, one remembered to return to center with new information. Later, during my doctoral work with medically ill clients, the diagrams evolved into an integrative star used as an assessment tool to understand what was needed for an individual's holistic approach to health. It is the same model we used in founding IEATA and structuring the board.

During this time period, the ripening seed was reflected in the ripening interplay of my roles as art therapist and artist. Consider these sequences reflecting how I follow an image:

Image -->>> Metaphor -->>> Myth -->>> Ritual

Image: object making following image as the language of sensation

Metaphor: use of the object as a vehicle for change/transformation

Myth: allowing the metaphor to claim its creation as story/narrative

Ritual: physical enactment of the myth for remembrance, witnessing, and exchange

My seed really ripened in the quest to integrate, and my recognition of that quest in others. These others ranged from medically ill clients living life under different conditions (CREATE, 1997), to internationally adoptive families facing identity issues at every turn (Betts, 2003, pp. 214-260), to the students, trainees, and clinicians seeking experiential supervision (Poiesis, 2002, pp.80-89).

My approach is about imagery interplay. I follow an image that is spoken, sung, drawn, sculpted, danced, or mythopoetized, allowing it to guide us into its own spaces. I listen. My ability to transfer in and out of different communication modalities has been well served by years of exchanges with the pioneer of our approach, Paolo Knill. Teaching me

to serve the arrival of the third, we attend to the imagery into a kinesthetic release of integrative energy. The question in my practice: How to do this with the many who are not interested in “making”, or with parents who come in for the consults on their children, or the medically ill who sometimes can’t make it into the office? Still, my task is to follow the imagery and have it interact with those taking place in me.

It is a three-dimensional relationship. The relationship between us and our own image, between our interacting images, and between our interacting selves. A communication arises among all of these planes. It is the image of integration potential. Our travel into creative endeavors is how we gather information, and shape it into its own psychic environment. My artist works well with my psychic historian. It makes sense that the use of sand tray is such a prominent part of my work, as it is how I recognize significance in the relationships among others’ images as they evolve into stars of identity.

### **The Ripening Seeds of My Work**

My use of diagrams and models in reflecting on my own client-focused work has greatly matured. This is particularly apparent in my long-term work with artist and art therapist clients. Typically, their presenting issues have resolved and the work has evolved into not only other aspects of their identities, but in the creative process of integrating their professional selves into their relationships with their own artist selves. The expressive arts process I describe here is the clinical work with one of these women artists/art therapists.

Consider Natasha’s story and the issues that arise around identity. Natasha is a young American artist of Eastern European Jewish descent. She came to me at age 25, one and a half years after her 54 year old father died from pancreatic cancer. Although she had been with her family during the year of her father’s passing, she was struggling with her residual grief and panic attacks (manifested as tragedy anxiety). All of this stirred within an upbeat, happy image of herself. And yet there it was, the worry for everything outside her control. These were her internal polarities. In her outer life, she decided she wanted to do more with her artistic skills than what was required of her as a graphic artist in advertising. During therapy, in which she painted images of her inner crazy girl reflected by swirls of anxiety (see Natasha’s Image I below), she experienced many outer world changes. She graduated from a prominent Masters program in art therapy, ran groups in a residential treatment facility for adolescents, got married, left her job, painted murals on the walls of the treatment facility, opened her own painting business, bought a house, and became a make-up artist for a renowned cosmetic company. Her inner world struggle was how to hold such existential grief within the construct of a young beautiful happy girl. Her outer world struggle was how to hold the visions and skills of the artist with those of her profession, which seemed to keep changing, making her feel unprofessional, fragmented, and irresponsible.

Usually when we speak of following an image, it is the client's imagery -- her imagery and the therapist's words; or her imagery and the therapist's response. What is sometimes not addressed are the phenomena surrounding the interplay of images—the dialectic of images between client and therapist. The healing comes through the evolution of that interplay. Both follow their own images. In my work, imagery is an interactive process, a communication between psyches where our images intermingle and co-create.

Natasha's images while grieving her dad's passing were like spinning cones, representing anxiety and tragedy fears. These were not only uncomfortable to her dominant happy girl self-concept, but they overwhelmed her at a time in her life when she was struggling with grief.

Over time, her images needed not only transformation within her, but also in her outer spheres of involvement. They were like an image not in search of meaning but in search of belonging. My Star of Identity image became a guiding light image for Natasha. Each time her therapist or artistic direction isolated her out on one of the triangles within the star, she experienced the negative energy and associated angst (the spirals and cones), and she felt disconnected from other parts of herself and community. She started to get lost in a partial sense of identity associated with one path, disconnected from the whole. As our images began to interact, she experienced a touchstone of belonging; she was able to take risks to develop herself, drawing upon the Star Model to forge a new personal sense of wholeness and integration. Our interacting stars set up potential, with room to dance with the unknowns. They became both the play and oeuvre space making artlinks for health. (See our images below)

As Natasha matured, evolving into her career of choice, she struggled with other professionals' opinions of her choices. Was she still an artist? Was she still an art therapist? Could an art therapist's murals be therapy? Could healing occur in the retail world of cosmetics? Had she sold out? Each time, she felt stranded in a single triangle as reflected in my Star image, or in a single coil in her image, her anxiety would stir. Over time, her body as a container of this energy got stronger and more aware of its creative potential rather than only its obstacles. At the time of this writing, Natasha is painting an image of her own star, with spirals dancing inward towards the center, just as she has experienced with her own body/psyche. (Her image is much more elaborate and beautiful than this mere diagram showing only its shape/movement). I await her next session so I can share with her something I found from the work of Stephen Hawking, which speaks not only to/about our images, but addresses metaphorically the existential issues she carries about her father and where death has taken him:

In order to understand what you would see if you were watching a star collapse to form a black hole, one has to remember that in the theory of relativity there is no absolute

time. Each observer has his own measure of time. The time for someone on a star will be different from that of someone at a distance, because of the gravitational field of the star.....As the star contracts, the gravitational field at its surface gets stronger and the light cones get bent inward more. This makes it more difficult for light from the star to escape, and the light appears dimmer and redder to an observer at a distance.

As client images and my images influence one another, the movement towards health contains us both. The work is very rewarding to me, as the polarity of identity finds the arrival of its third, and, in so doing, the Self rejoices in being met esthetically. My own identity as both artist and therapist, working upstairs in my office and downstairs in my studio, is also being met in a common room within my psyche.

## References

Hawkings, Stephen (2003). *The Illustrated Theory of Everything*. Beverly Hills, CA. New Millennium Press.

Miller, W., (2003) Metaphors of Identity and Motifs of Expression: Clinical Observations on International Adoption and the Use of the Sand Tray Process in Art Therapy with Internationally Adopted Children. In Betts, D (Ed.) *Creative Arts Therapies Approaches in Adoption and Foster Care*. Springfield, Ill. Charles C Thomas Pub.

Miller, W. (1997). Imagery, Art & Health: Excerpts from a Series of Presentations on Art as Complementary Medicine. *C.R.E.A.T.E.* vol. 6: 41-46.

Milliken, R. & Miller, W. (2002). Pushing the Experiential Edge in Therapy, Training and Supervision: A Case Study of Create Therapy Institute's Experiential Supervision Program. *Poiesis*, vol. 4, 80-89.