



Research Article

Imagery in interfaith dialogue: Informed by the practices of art psychotherapy



Debra Linesch

Graduate Department of Marital and Family Therapy, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, University Hall Suite 2517, Los Angeles, CA, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 August 2016

Accepted 25 January 2017

Available online 4 February 2017

ABSTRACT

The art based project engaged Christian, Jewish and Muslim women who met monthly over 7 months. The participants were chosen through an invitation sent to congregants of progressive synagogues, churches and mosques in the city of Los Angeles. Each month, collaboratively selected texts from the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Quran and the Christian Gospels that explored interconnected stories were printed and handed out for reading and study. After comparing and discussing the texts the participants were invited to incorporate the printouts of the biblical passages into simple collages, reflecting their responses. Colored, textured papers and glue were provided. The participants met in triads (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) to share their art, using their imagery to explore connections and disconnections between traditional understandings. The findings of the analysis indicate that members of the groups reported decreased defensiveness, the expansion of dialogue, and the discovery of new ways of knowing about their spirituality and faith.

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Introduction

This work began when my practice as an art psychotherapist and my mid-life explorations within my religious tradition found a locus of compatibility. After thirty years working with children, adolescents and families struggling to communicate, I gravitated from clinical work to an area of exploration that I had been trained to compartmentalize and separate from psychotherapy practice. Over the past ten years I have explored image-making practices within the study of sacred text (Linesch, 2008, 2012), within traditional contemplative observances (Linesch, 2014) and most recently within interfaith dialogue. This sequence of inquiry moving from study to prayer to dialogue has sustained the commitment to imagery that I have always centralized in my clinical practice. I have come to believe even more strongly in the power of the creative process in the human experience, somewhat underappreciated in traditional religious practices as a resource for the healing of the disconnected soul as well as the ruptured psyche.

The project described here involves the utilization of art therapy theory and practices in the development of interfaith dialogue. Throughout the history of art therapy theory building, practitioners have long known about the power of image making to lower defenses, open dialogue and facilitate communication (Huss, 2015;

Landgarten, 1981). My art therapy informed work in my faith tradition sustained my belief that the art making process contributes to a sense of alignment and could be of value in the complicated challenges of creating understandings between faith traditions. I have been dismayed by the tendency of political rhetoric to rigidify, stereotype and misunderstand the expressions of our diverse religions. What could be more important than offering the tools of our work as art therapists to our society's need for increased understanding and awareness of the other?

This project was motivated by my observation of a compelling cultural call for interfaith engagement. The endeavor was based on the incorporation of image making as inquiry and the focus was on the study of sacred text. Although initially established as a service project, the data that was collected during and after the group meetings was carefully analyzed through a variety of qualitative strategies to develop the findings that are summarized below.

Literature review

The literature reviewed in support of this endeavor spoke identified the challenges of interfaith dialogue, alluding to the entrenched biases and misunderstandings that often prevent the development of authentic communication and relationships. Brown's (2013) and Cornille's (2013) edited discussions of strategies to create safe spaces and find alternatives to redundant assumptions implicitly invited the kinds of interventions that art therapists often

E-mail address: dlinesch@lmu.edu

make when communication patterns are stagnant and repetitive. Additionally I was moved by Moyaert's (2013) encouragement for interfaith engagement through the study of text. She demonstrates how, in a process she calls 'scriptural reasoning', "... Jews, Christians and Muslims temporarily suspend their sibling rivalries to become guests in one another's rich scriptural traditions" (p. 64). Kapikian's (2006) book ignited my inspiration to engage in discussion of spiritual practices between faith traditions supported by the nonverbal potential of the art process. And finally I was grateful to access art therapy practitioners (Bell, 2011; Horovitz-Derby, 1994; Tobin, 1988) who supported the idea that religious explorations could be enriched by our own clinical practices. Bell (2011) states, "... art therapy practice is an approach that provides an interpretative stance that facilitates an understanding of meaning-making and spirituality" (p. 222).

Methodology

The project engaged seven Christian, seven Jewish and seven Muslim women for a total of twenty-one participants and met for seven monthly meetings. The participants were chosen through an invitational process sent to congregants of progressive synagogues, churches and mosques in the city of Los Angeles. Women who identified in their faith traditions and were interested in the study of sacred text were invited to gather. In the first meeting the idea of interfaith image-making was introduced and the invitees were encouraged to consider committing to the ongoing process. In the subsequent meetings carefully selected sacred texts from the three traditions were studied and art making was used as a technique to engage with the texts and reflect in triadic conversations (Christian, Jewish and Muslim).

Each month, collaboratively selected texts from the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Quran and the Christian Gospels that explored interconnected stories were printed and handed out for reading and study. After comparing and discussing the texts the participants were invited to incorporate the printouts of the biblical passages into simple collages, reflecting their responses. Colored, textured papers and glue were the only materials provided. Then, in perhaps the most crucial step in the process, the participants met in triads (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) to share their art, using their imagery to explore connections and disconnections between traditional understandings. After these intimate and organically encouraged conversations the participants returned to the art process and revised their art pieces to incorporate any changes or reflections that had been stimulated by the interfaith encounter and triadic discussion. In this way the art became an opportunity to experience and chronicle transformation in addition to initially being a vehicle for expression and communication.

At the end of the seven-month project the focus on service shifted to a perspective of inquiry. The art was gathered and carefully reviewed and the participants were interviewed about their experiences. The imagery and the recorded observations became the data for an in-depth analysis of the experience. The artwork and commentary created a large data set that was reviewed and analyzed for themes. Qualitative content analysis protocols that examined the formal elements of the imagery and identified emergent themes in the interview narratives were utilized. The findings were summarized and linked to the foundational/historical ideas that make up the theory and practice of clinical art therapy (Landgarten, 1981).

Cognizant that the analysis of the data was potentially biased by the stance of the researcher who had also been the group organizer and facilitator, the process of reviewing the art and distilling the themes from the interview data was repeatedly and reiteratively

explored in preliminary findings workshops with the participants, with students and with colleagues.

Analysis

The abbreviated analysis presented here focuses on the imagery created by three of the participants (identified by the pseudonyms Dina, Enisa and Grace). Dina is a Jewish writer and a serious student of Torah and contemporary Jewish practices. Enisa is a Muslim political affairs consultant and a devout practitioner of Islamic prayer. Grace is a newly ordained Episcopalian priest interested in interfaith dialogue as part of her commitment to her parish.

In addition to focusing on three (out of twenty-one) participants, this abbreviated analysis focuses on three (out of seven) text-based conversations, the discussion of the stories about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac.

Table 1 clarifies which texts were used to stimulate the study, the art and the consequent dialogue. The chart also summarizes the main points of the texts.

Table 2 presents the imagery created during three of the seven sessions, the ones in which we reviewed the texts (Table 2) and discussed the stories about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac.

Each image is a final product (i.e. after the revisions to its original construction were added as a reflection of the transformative interfaith dialogue). The observations of each participant are included below each image to explain the way that art had initially been created and the way it was revised after the triadic sharing (Christian, Jewish and Muslim).

Following the table are the comments that the three participants offered regarding the entire process of the group.

Comments from participants about the process

Dina:

"The art kept me from using my habitual language, my less intuitive, more literal way of speaking."

"The conversations caused me to encounter at the same time **ideas** that I did not hold and **people** I wanted to know."

Enisa:

"I consider myself un-artistic and participating was a leap of faith. I made the leap because I wanted to experience my faith in an unfamiliar way. . . rejuvenate myself with art as a portal."

"With the women I built another circle, the vulnerability was profound and helped me reach new ways of knowing."

Grace:

"It was a beautiful example of the spirit at work surprising me with what I can create in such a space of open-heartedness."

"I learned that it takes time to build relationships and that empathy can be built in a creative, safe, respectful & loving way."

Participants' experiences summarized

The summaries below emerged from the text and image analysis that illuminated the main ideas and overall understandings expressed by the participants.

Dina

Dina's first image depicts a tentative attempt to represent (with torn fragments of text) the impact of the interfaith dialogue as

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