

The Beauty That Sustains: An Arts-Based Research Exploration of Expressive Arts Therapy with Children

Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K. Levine

Stephen K. Levine (S): The following is an edited transcript of the first session of an arts-based research (ABR) project for Ellen Levine's new book on expressive arts and child therapy, *Play and Art in Child Psychotherapy: An Expressive Arts Therapy Approach*. The session was an experiment to see whether the 'architecture' of a therapy session as outlined in the book, *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy: Toward a Therapeutic Aesthetics*, is also a good structure for doing ABR.

The "architecture", or structure of a typical session, is described in that book as being composed of four parts:

- 1) Filling In – discussing what the client is bringing to the session
- 2) Decentering – moving away from the issue presented into the alternative world of the imagination through play, art-making or ritual
- 3) Aesthetic Analysis – reflecting on the Decentering in a phenomenological way by describing what happened and how the client experienced it
- 4) Harvesting – stepping back and asking what the Decentering might have to do with the issue that was presented in the Filling In.

S: Let me begin by asking you, what's on your mind for this book project right now?

Ellen G. Levine (E): I'm trying to bring together some of my work since I wrote my last book, *Tending the Fire: Studies in Art, Therapy and Creativity*. Sometimes I've used case materials in articles, but I want to pull together my thinking about working with children in one volume. I'm looking for a theme for the book. I can write up all the different cases but I need a theme that helps the book hang together – a through line that makes it cohere.

S: You are also wondering whether ABR can give you some clues for a theme. Is that right?

E: Yes, and I'm interested in exploring what happened in my work with all of these children and situations---how the children were affected, how I was affected. I want to explore this at another level than simply writing about it.

S: Before we go more into that, I'd like you to talk about your understanding of ABR in general.

E: To me, it is a kind of research that requires a different way of thinking; it is not the normal way of inquiry. When I use the arts, I get to be much closer to the subject. But at the same time, the art-making creates a distancing as well. There is a closeness and a distancing at the same time. By making art in relation to the subject matter, I go into a different realm – not sitting at my computer writing about it or thinking about it. This is a way of working with materials that gives me access to a way of knowing that is not discursive.

S: It sounds like you are talking about what we might call imaginative knowing.

E: Something new might come from this. Something more surprising. Something that I didn't already know about.

Filling In

S: OK, it's good to hear some of the background. Let me ask you about the particular session that we are doing now. You are going to be inquiring about working with a child who you've just written about in narrative form for your book. What's your objective for the session today? What would be a good outcome?

E: A good outcome could be that I would play around with some art-making, get closer to the child's experience of what she was going through at the time. Perhaps to see what the art-making could tell me, coming up with a message about my work with her and her experience.

S: And how would you characterize your understanding of that work right now?

E: Pia (as I call her) was going through the dying process and the eventual death of her father. She was seven years old, and was trying to metabolize this experience in her own way. She was actually able to talk about it pretty well, and our work was focused on building up the resources that could sustain her through this experience. Also, I was working with her mother to help her become more of what I would call a "play partner," since her father was primarily the one who played with her, and she was losing him. I felt that it was important to help her and her mother engage at that level in order to build up her own immune system, as well as their immune system as a mother and child together, through play.

S: Having worked with Pia and written about it, what are you curious about at this point?

E: I'm curious about how the metaphors that she used were able to help her get through. I understand it on some level, but there is something that I am not quite getting in my own thinking about it.

S: How the metaphors were helping her get through. And those metaphors were?

E: The main metaphor came from the movie, The Lion King – especially the story line of the relationship between the father and son in The Lion King and the importance of this story throughout the twenty-three sessions in which we worked together. I was interested in how it all worked together: the music, the characters, the narrative. She was quite obsessed with it at the time we were working together.

S: Is there anything else that comes to you before we move into the next phase of the session, the 'decentering' into the world of imagination?

E: Am I being clear about what I am looking for? I'm not too clear myself about it.

S: Well, maybe that's OK not to be totally clear. One of the goals could be to clarify what you are looking for, not only in this case but in general. So far what I am hearing is that you are interested in gaining an understanding of how metaphors work in helping children to move through difficult situations, emotional disturbances, in their lives.

E: Yes, that is a good way of putting it.

Decentering

S: I'm going to make some suggestions to help us get into the decentering phase, the phase where we move away, or 'decenter,' from talking directly about this child and instead move into an exploration through play. One thing I want to mention for our readers is that we are working in your studio in our house in Toronto, and we're surrounded by art materials and paintings that you have done. I see behind you a painting you did that contains a photo of a young child behind a door, poking his head out. In front of the door is a soldier. The soldier is pointing his rifle at the young boy.

E: Yes, it's a photograph that I found five or six years ago in the newspaper.

S: And you've done many paintings with photographs in them, elaborating on them, framing them with backgrounds so that they stand out or are significant in a certain way. So this is one of those.

E: Yes.

S: Let's work with that because it's so obviously here.

E: OK.

S: Take a moment to look at the painting, letting it act on you in any way that it does. See if you have an 'aesthetic response' to it, something that affects you on an emotional or bodily level. See what comes up for you.

E: What comes to me is that I want to say:

(I'm standing behind the soldier and addressing him.) "STOP! What are you doing? You're aiming your gun at this little boy! Why are you doing that? What are you doing? Stop right now! Put that down!

Like the soldier is a little boy and I am the mother and I'm trying to get him to stop doing something bad.

S: What else do you want to say to him?

E: "This little boy is not doing any harm to you. This little boy is just looking at you. What do you think he's seeing when he looks at you? What do you imagine he is seeing? This could be your little boy. This is completely wrong."

S: One thing I'd like to do right now is to move into a method developed by Shaun McNiff called "dialoging with the image." So what I want you to do is to face the painting, close your eyes for a moment, and then imagine that you are that little boy and that Ellen has just asked you what is going through your mind and what are you thinking and feeling at this moment. What would you say?

E: "Wow!! Look at that! That's a big gun. Whoa ... what's happening? "

S: (to the little boy) "Are you scared?"

E: "No, not so scared. I'm really curious and I'm wondering what this guy is doing here."

S: Do you want to ask the soldier any questions?

E: As the little boy?

S: Yes.

E: "Mister, what are you doing here? Are those real bullets in your gun? Are you real? Is this a movie?"

S: OK, now turn around and become the soldier, answering the questions.

E: "I'm here to protect you. Your father is behind the door. Does your father have a gun? Your father might shoot me. I'm not aiming at you, I'm aiming at your father."

S: Now switch roles and become the child again.

E: "My father doesn't have a gun. My father is peaceful. He's a peaceful man. I don't think my father has a gun. Why are you here?"

S: Tell us about your father.

E: "My father works in a garage. My father fixes cars. He doesn't have guns. My father is here, home with me and my brother. My mother is working. It's Saturday. It's a day to take a rest. We are going to go out now and play. We play football. We're waiting until my father is ready."

S: (speaking as the soldier) "How do I know that what you are saying is true?"

E: "I don't know. My father is a peaceful man."

S: "How do I know I can trust you? I might get hurt. I am frightened."

E: "I am only 5 years old. I cannot tell you"

S: "Come out from behind that background."

E: "OK. Can I look at your gun?"

S: "You can look at it but don't touch it."

E: "Why not, why can I not touch it?"

S: "It's dangerous. Something might happen."

E: "But you know how to use it, right?"

S: "Yes, I do."

E: "OK, can I come out now?"

S: "Yes, come out please".

E: "OK. I'm coming out. But can you put the gun down?"

S: "I can lower the barrel but I can't put it away. I have to be ready in case your father has a gun."

E: "Oh, OK. But just put it down so I won't be scared."

S: "OK, it's down."

E: "OK, I'm coming out now. What is your name?"

S: "My name is Mordechai."

E: "And where do you live?"

S: "I live in Haifa."

E: "Oh, where is that?"

S: "It's in Israel. Do you know where that is?"

E: "Oh yeah. That's a bad place."

S: "No, that's not true. Somebody's been telling you lies."

E: "That's a very bad place."

S: "No that's not true. It's just a place where people live, just like everyone else."

E: "But my father told me it's not a good place."

S: "That's because your father has never been there. He doesn't know. He just knows what people tell him."

E: "Do you have any children, Mordechai?"

S: "Yes, I have a young girl, she's three years old."

E: "Oh. What do you do with your little girl? Do you play with her?"

S: "Yes, we play a lot. I like to throw her up in the air and catch her. She really likes that. She screams when I do it but in a good way. It doesn't hurt her. She goes very high and she goes 'Whee! Whee!'"

E: "My father does that with me too."

S: "Does he? You're pretty big to be thrown up in the air."

E: "No, no. He is very strong."

S: "Tell your father to come out."

E: "Father, father, come. It's OK. Come."

S: "Tell your father I am here and you are with me. Nothing can happen as long as he is peaceful."

E: "My father says "No." He doesn't trust you."

S: "Tell him to come out or I will come in after him."

E: "This is terrible. No, no, you can't do that."

S: "Then tell him to come out."

E: "Father, father, come out. It's OK, he won't hurt you. He has a child too."

S: "Is he coming?"

E: "Yes, yes, here he comes."

S: (to the father) "Alright, put your hands up in the air. I won't hurt you, I just want to make sure that you don't have a gun. "

Now switch roles and become the father.

E: (As the father) "What is happening here? What is going on?"

S: "We are looking for terrorists."

E: "I am not a terrorist. I'm a peaceful man."

S: "That may be but we can take no chances. Someone blew up a station."

E: "Oh, I heard about that."

S: "Do you know anything about it?"

E: "No. I know nothing about it."

S: "Do you belong to any organizations?"

E: "No, I do not."

S: "Were you ever in any organizations?"

E: "No, I am a peaceful man. I don't get involved in those things."

S: "Is there anyone else in the house right now?"

E: "No, no. My two sons are right here."

S: "Where is your other son?"

E: "He's there. Can you not see him?"

S: "I cannot see him, he's almost completely hidden. Can you ask him to come out as well?"

E: "Yes. Come out. Both of you come out with me and show this man that we are peaceful people."

S: "OK. I will put down my gun now. I can see that you have no gun. I will leave the house. I am sorry that we disturbed you."

E: "Thank you. Please leave us in peace."

S: "Yes, peace be with you too."

E: "Thank you." (pause)

S: Ellen, we did a little dramatic play there where you and I entered into the personalities of the characters. And I am wondering where you are with it right now?

E: I think we're not finished. There's another part of the drama. Just after the soldier leaves.

S: OK, let's see what happens.

E: What the father says and what the children say. Do you want to play one of the characters?

S: Would you like me to?

E: Yes. You be the boy, the little boy.

S: (as the boy) "Father, father, what happened? I don't understand."

E: "The soldier came and he was thinking that maybe I was a terrorist. Do you know what that is?"

S: "No."

E: "A terrorist is someone who hurts innocent people because they believe something. They think that violence is the only way to get something done."

S: "But we're not terrorists."

E: "No, no. We are not terrorists."

S: "I was a little scared of the soldier. "

E: "Yes, it was very frightening. I was scared too."

S: "My brother, I don't know. He hasn't said anything. What do you have to say?"

Ellen, I'd like you to change physically where you are in the room when you become the brother and get into it in your body. He's a little older and bigger and maybe he has a different attitude.

E: (As the older brother) "I saw you talking to that soldier. Why did you talk to him? He's a soldier. You can't talk to soldiers. "

S: (As the younger brother) "I had to talk to him. He talked to me first."

E: "But all the boys in my street, they say don't talk to the soldiers. Just try to do things to them to make them go away. Like throw things at them. That's what we should do, when the soldiers come, we should throw stones at them."

S: "No, I don't want to throw stones. I don't like stones."

E: "But it's the only way to get the soldiers to go away."

E: (As the father) "Son, this is wrong. Do not do that anymore. Do not go to the street. I tried to teach you that violence is wrong. You must not throw a stone because maybe they will shoot you. They will shoot you if you throw a stone."

S: (As the younger son) "What will happen father, if someone shoots you. If you are dead, what will we do? We will be lost in this world."

E: (As the older son) "But we will be right. We will win."

S: "I don't care. I want my father."

E: "Oh, you don't know anything. You're too little."

S: "No, no. I want father, I want father!"

E: "Father is not with the times. Now we have to fight back."

S: "I don't care. I want father! I want father!"

E: (As the father) "I will not use violence. I will not throw stones. This is not the way to peace. We must talk."

S: "Father, you won't leave me, will you?"

E: "No, I will not leave you."

S: "Ever?"

E: "Never will I leave you."

S: "Ever ever?"

E: "As long as I can, I will stay with you. And mother too." (pause)

S: OK. Ellen, does that feel finished?

E: Yes.

S: I don't want to start the reflection for the aesthetic analysis yet. Let's stay in the decentering for a moment.

If you were to step back from the family as if you were a great distance away, what would you say to them?

E: "You are in a difficult situation. You are torn between reacting to aggression that is coming toward you and trying to maintain your integrity and not fight back with aggressive violence. You are trying hard not to use violence and you are teaching your children not to use violence in their responses. But there is a conflict with the next generation. This is difficult."

S: What is your message to them?

E: "Stay calm in the storm. Don't react back but still be strong. Gather together with others. The other side has so many weapons. So much power. There is no point in fighting back with weapons. Stay steady and do whatever you can not to resort to violence."

S: What do you have to say to the older son?

E: I would say - "I understand your anger and I understand your frustration. But it only will lead to bad things if you fight back with violence. You will go to jail and have to stay there for many years. It's not worth it."

S: And to the younger son?

E: "You are very smart and you ask many good questions. You are not afraid. Stay with the family and do not be afraid. Never be afraid."

S: Does that feel finished? The situation is not finished, but does this part of our work feel finished?

E: Yes.

Aesthetic Analysis

S: Now we are going to step into the reflective phase where we look at what happened in the decentering and describe it. You start, and maybe I can help. How did we begin?

E: We began by looking at the painting here, which is not quite done, and you focused me in on the photograph at the center of the painting.

S: I realize now that I didn't pay any attention to the rest of the painting and that that was a resource we didn't actually use.

E: Although I think maybe in looking at it – this is the first photograph that I have put into a painting that so clearly has the theme of war and conflict in it. My other paintings with photographs leave it more open in terms of what is happening in the photograph. This one is very direct and you get a clear sense of what is happening there: a soldier is pointing a gun at a child's face. What else would you get from that? You might ask yourself: "Why is that soldier about to shoot the child? What is going on here?" But the fact is that soldiers do kill children and innocent people in war. Of course, that is what really happens. But I have placed the photograph on top of the sea. There is something that holds it on the sea. There is the landscape and the photograph is floating there. That reminds me of what I was talking about in the decentering: the idea of calm.

S: There is something calm in the sea, with the blue color.

E: Yes. There is an immensity there. There is something below too.

S: Yes, there is a big gold form below. Now that I step back and look at the whole painting, it's very strong. What do you see there?

E: I don't really know what that is. It's an undersea construction that's very special because it's gold, and it's sitting at the bottom of the sea. I'm trying to see whether it's going to get connected to the photograph above it. I think that it will.

S: I suggest you take a photo of the painting at this stage and another one when it's completed. So then you can go back to it. I also want to pause for a moment because I feel that I missed something there by not seeing the rest of the painting earlier. Not seeing the whole picture – maybe that's a metaphor for the whole situation that the photograph depicts. And part of it is the immensity and the depth of the blue sea and part of it is this golden shape that I can't help imagining as some kind of beautiful treasure, something that is precious underneath.

E: Definitely, yes. It's open. It's got holes in it so that you can see into it. That's why I chose that material (paper used for packaging). I like it so much. It conceals and reveals at the same time.

S: When I look at the bottom half of the painting, I'm no longer caught in the immediacy of that situation, and I have a sense that there is more to our existence than this violent confrontation. And that we have to remember that.

E: That's right. That's what's on the surface. There is always something else going on that you don't see. You know, your conclusion in just looking at the photograph could be: good little child and bad soldier. But things are much more complex.

S: For me, the conclusion would be insoluble contradiction leading to violence and suffering. But below that there is beauty and something....

E: Something that sustains.

S: Yes, something that sustains, whatever we call it.

E: I can't help but go back to the littlest child's attitude--which is curiosity.

S: Innocence and curiosity. It reminds me of the child in the Haggadah of the Passover Seder who really wants to know what it is all about – the wise child.

S: To continue the description – we went into dialoguing with the photograph, not with the whole painting. Then we enacted the roles of the different personae and took it imaginatively a step further---imagining that the father was there and what would happen if they came out from behind that wall. How was the experience of all that for you?

E: I liked it. It was an opening up of the picture.

S: Was there a moment that touched you, that gave you an aesthetic response?

E: I think it was this little boy who was not going to be afraid at first. He wanted to engage with the soldier and was curious about his gun. He wasn't locked into the struggle so much, just looking at things on the surface. Saying: "Oh, look!" and asking: "Who is he? I don't understand." He looks really curious. That is what I love about his little face. He's not angry, he's not worried. At least I don't actually see those emotions on his face. I see curiosity.

S: Were there any obstacles that you were working with imaginatively?

E: The father was a bit of an obstacle: how to portray him.

S: What was an obstacle about him?

E: Whether I wanted him to actually be a terrorist or whether I wanted him to be a peaceful man.

S: Was that a conscious choice?

E: No, I went back to the original photograph where I cut away the image of the father. In the full picture, he's just sitting on a step and looking incredibly blasé with the soldier pointing his gun at his two sons.

S: So you were familiar with the back story.

E: I'm not sure whether it's the back story but it's one that I am making up. The photo has the father sitting farthest away on a step. Next the older son is there---I cut away his face--and then the little boy emerged.

S: OK. What title would you give to the dramatic play that we engaged in?

E: Something about the wonder of the child.

S: "The Wonder of the Child." Anything else?

E: Things are not always what they seem.

S: "Things Are Not Always What They Seem." Is there a message that comes to you from this work? A message that the imaginative play gives to you?

E: Just remember that things are not always as they seem. What you see there is always up for interpretation. There is always more than what you see.

S: To me there is a message about taking in the whole picture. Not only focusing on the difficulty or on the trauma but looking at what sustains us.

E: That's a great message!!

S: Is it mine or yours?

E: It's yours but I'll take it!

Harvesting

S: OK. Good. Now, if this session had anything to do with your initial question, about using metaphor to work through difficulties and about this particular little girl and how she used metaphors to work through her experience of the death of her father – if this session had something to do with that, what might it be?

E: You could see the loss of her father as the most tragic event that ever happened to her in her life. On one level, that might be true. But at the same time, there is a much bigger picture going on in the life of this child, the resources that she has, the way that she is able to use available metaphors, available possibilities. It was just extraordinary and it really needs to be celebrated.

S: I have a sense that another child in that situation might have gone the way of the older brother in our dramatic play and reacted with anger and rage.

E: That's right. She was never angry. She was sad, no question about that, and she said so. She said things like: "My daddy is never coming home again." It was hard for her, no doubt. But she played her way through it, using all kinds of resources to help herself, as I describe in the chapter I wrote about it. She also used resources that I helped to provide, setting up certain situations where she could actually work through some of this.

S: That feels important to me. I hope that my role as a guide was also helpful to you. One of the things that seems to be emerging is the sense that we need guidance in using our imagination and the metaphors that are available to us to help us get through the difficulties.

E: Absolutely. I think she was already using stuff and then I would just pick up on what she brought into the sessions. But at the same time there were crucial moments where I framed things in ways that were very helpful to her.

S: You were helping her find the resources that would enable her to go in the direction that she needed to go.

E: Yes, I think so. These were always experiments. I didn't know for sure if she would do it. But they were successful experiments.

S: And you had to enter into the play fully for it to work.

E: Yes, to be a play partner. And to engage her mother in it too. It was the three of us that were often doing this work together.

S: I'm realizing now that the situation in the drama that we were enacting is somewhat parallel to what you actually did with Pia, that is, that there is a father and a young child and the father is threatened with death.

E: Yes! That's interesting.

S: I actually had that in mind during the decentering. In Principles and Practice, we talk about theme-near and theme-far decentering. And certainly this seemed like a theme-far session in that we were talking about something that wasn't connected directly with the story of the child you had worked with, but rather with something I know you are concerned about: the Palestinian and Israeli conflict and particularly how it affects children and families. So that seems quite distant from the case; it is an ongoing preoccupation of yours. But at the same time, the theme of the child faced with the possible loss of the father recurs.

E: I did not expect that.

S: For me, what particularly stands out from the session is the discovery that there is more to the picture than loss and that the child has resources, something that sustains her. Personally, I found it very touching, that there is something beautiful that she can draw upon, that lies underneath the surface.

E: Yes, we need to hold on to this perspective. Beneath all the pain and the suffering, there is a beauty that sustains. The effective reality of the metaphors we use depends on this aesthetic relationship to the world and others, a relationship which is given to us as a resource and which we can draw upon with the help of another person. Our work with children and adults can only be successful if we hold on to that insight.