

# Art

## Containment and language of soul

*Renate Düllmann*

*The point of art is not simply to express ourselves, but to express an external, concrete form in which the soul of our lives can be evoked and contained. It is about arresting life and making it available for contemplation. Art captures the eternal in the everyday, and it is the eternal that feeds the soul – the whole world in a grain of sand.<sup>1</sup>*

ARTS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES have long found their way into our present retreat culture. They involve exercises which make use of the arts, music, painting, modelling, dance and gesture. The aim is not to interpret or produce objectively beautiful sounds, or aesthetically pleasing pictures, or perfectly measured movements, but to facilitate important processes that effectively aid someone to discover the meaning and the mystery of God in their prayer and their lived human experience. Arts-based retreats, especially if they include art-making exercises, are generally advertised as such. If not explicitly referred to in advance, art-making will often happen as part of the retreat process, either at the request of the person engaged in the retreat or at the invitation of the retreat guide, as a means towards a deeper understanding of the retreatant's personal spiritual journey.

Arts-based experiences in retreats happen in different ways. They can be offered and held on an individual basis or allowed to unfold in a group context. They may either form the heart of meditative prayer or contemplation, or they may be encouraged to develop as a reflection on the experience of prayer, or they may be allowed to flow into creative expressions of liturgy. If contained in tangibly visible forms, art-images can embody feeling responses, or thoughts, or desires, or experiences of mystery, or images of self or of God, all of which allow for discovery, insight, enlightenment and discernment. Furthermore, art-images provide the frame and the focus for a form of attentive listening that is more immediate, perhaps, than listening to words shared between the individual retreatant and the guide, or the group and the guide, in the presence of the Spirit and in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. Such genuinely attentive listening transmits energy. 'It is like a *feeling listening* to the divine mystery in my life rather than a *rational*

*understanding of it'*, a recent retreatant commented, as she placed into the group space a clay model of an open hand holding a finely made human ear.

Art-making in retreats seems to attract and encourage those who, for reasons of their own, are very often put off by traditional 'God-talk' or quite simply fail to find words to express inner feelings and the experience of God in the depths of themselves. Such persons feel drawn to a level of touching upon mystery in non-verbal symbols. They challenge us to allow into the retreat space the process of reflection on art-images, made either by themselves or by others, which act as containers of soul and mediate between their outer world and the world of the Spirit. These people may include those who in psychological disciplines have drawn some benefit from the freeing, the healing and the integrating power of arts-based experiences, and desire such healing integration in their spiritual journey also. Lastly, the arts in retreats seem to speak to those who have come to recognize through the experience of imaginative contemplation, or other forms of guided imagery, 'that when imagination is allowed to move to deep places, the sacred is revealed'.<sup>2</sup>

### *The arts in therapy*

To provide a deeper understanding of the significance of the creative arts in the retreat experience, it is perhaps worth while to point to some of the beneficial effects of image-making processes in other encounters. Over the years the arts therapies, such as dance and movement, drama, music and art therapy, have played an important role in a wide range of therapeutic settings. They are evolving professions, and their practitioners are concerned with offering opportunities for the expression and exploration of feelings in non-verbal modes. In their specific settings the creative medium becomes *the* channel for communication and expression, with the aim of helping clients to discover an outlet for often complex and confusing emotions which may be difficult to describe in words.

The arts offer opportunities for the forming of feeling in ways that can enhance understanding. Expression through art media can transform vague, confused or dimly aware feelings into communicable, clear and insightful statements. Expression through art media can also be used to contain or free emotional energy as appropriate, to offer a safe channel for explosive feelings, to rehearse change and in doing so offer opportunities to try out new ways of being and doing.<sup>3</sup>

My own personal experience of the effectiveness of art as a channel for communication is in the setting of art therapy, which relies on the use of art materials for the expression of thoughts and feelings and inner experiences in visible form. Art therapy is based on the idea that visual symbolic representation is far less likely to interrupt and distort than verbal translations of sensory-based experience. Thus, central to the art therapy process, as I see it, is the individual's or the group's involvement in spontaneous image-making in pencil, chalk, paint, clay, etc. in the presence of a therapist. It is the images, made in consecutive sessions over a period of time, which communicate experiences of self and the world. Images are like vessels in which memories, thought and feeling responses can be contained and safely held. Images can be *seen*, and reflected upon. With time they can become *knowable* and thus powerful agents of self-awareness. As they reveal emerging patterns and themes, images can provide ongoing reflection and deepening insight. In this way they act as catalysts for growth, change and more integrated ways of responding to self and the world.

Once an image is pictured it is 'out there' rather than internal; it can be seen and this effects a change from an unconscious state in the artist, to a more conscious one. As a result of this, even without verbal interpretation, a transformation begins to take place in the inner world of the artist.<sup>4</sup>

When exploring images one is filled with wonder, even if the image is horrific, by what the image knows. The capacity that art has to be a bridge between inner and outer worlds enables it to have the role of mediator, holding and symbolising past, present and future aspects of a client.<sup>5</sup>

### *Images hold the ache of loss*

In order to illustrate something of the process outlined, I would like to use the following examples. The object of my first example is a small bronze sculpture of a *pietà*, made by the German artist, Käthe Kollwitz. This sculpture is housed in a Cologne gallery, amongst a large collection of her work. The viewer cannot fail to notice the artist's preoccupation with the theme of women mourning the loss of children. Amongst these exhibits, the sheer mass of cold bronze of Kollwitz's *pietà* slowly releases the features of an old woman, holding in her lap the body of her dead son. The woman's right arm rests on her knee, with the hand firmly placed over her mouth, not as much to emphasize her

inwardly directed, somewhat brooding gaze, it seems to me, but almost as if to prevent her from voicing her inner pain and sorrow.

In a letter to a friend the artist relates that her original intention had been to create something which would embody the feeling world of an ageing person. Instead, she admits to recognizing an image of the *pietà* which, she comments, does not reveal pain, but merely lingers over the past. She regretfully notes the absence of the sacredness of surrender to sorrow and grief, so palpably present in medieval representations, and so important to transformation. In numerous entries Käthe Kollwitz's diary speaks of recurring incidents of bereavement in her childhood and adult life (that have been left largely unresolved, I feel) that are often attributed to the consequences of two world wars. The presence of her bronze *pietà* in the Cologne gallery seems to make something understood about unexpressed feelings of loss and grief. In the many images surrounding the sculpture, the heavy black line of charcoal and Indian ink dominates, frequently flowing into intense black shading, passionately applied. These, also, are vivid reminders of strong, sometimes intolerable feelings entering into images, and adding to their emotional force.

The subject of my second example is a woman of injured memory patterns, caused through tragic circumstances. Over months she engages in the ritual of drawing in faint pencil the outline of a small dog with sad eyes on innumerable sheets of white paper. This image holds the memory of her own much loved dog which was run over by a car, but also seems symbolic of the many losses that she has encountered as part of her condition. Above all, the nameless dog is like herself – sad, lost, and fragile – a sign of her fragmented inner world. Eventually the small dog is invested with different colours of varying shades and intensity, embodying feelings she finds difficult to tolerate, let alone talk about, such as fear, shame, anger and grief, as well as profound disregard for herself as a person.

Then her images begin to alter in content. The small dog is one object among others in a room, indicative of *home* and a *contained space*. The room has a window, a fireplace, and cut flowers in a vase on a sideboard. Outside the window a tree begins to grow green and inside the flowers blossom in more vivid colours. One day, the sign of a fragile-looking butterfly is attached to one of the cut flowers, replacing the small nameless dog. It seems as though this tiny creature heralds something of change and acceptance within herself, however small, as she alludes to the Christian mystery of the death and resurrection of

Jesus and of Christ's presence in the Spirit in order to make herself understood.

### *Images as divine guests*

When thinking about the kind of surrender of conscious planning experienced in making my drawings, phrases from the Gospels kept cropping up in my thoughts, such as 'Consider the lilies of the field', 'Take no thought for the morrow . . .', 'The meek shall inherit the earth . . .',<sup>6</sup>

It is now necessary to consider in more depth the significance of the arts in the retreat experience. To begin with, I feel we need to acknowledge something of the mystery of the imagination in our encounter with the divine. We need to remind ourselves that art, music, dance and poetry would not exist without the imagination. Imagination in its fundamental meaning, as known by all great artists, is the making of or responding to images of all kinds in our outer and inner worlds. Scripture speaks to us in the language of imagery. We are encouraged to pray with the imagination, to see it as a divine gift and a major resource on our spiritual journey. Awakened within a context of faith, imagination can be an instrument of grace, bringing us in contact with the mystery of life and the mystery of God. 'With a little practice everyone can develop their power to imagine and thus acquire untold emotional and spiritual riches.'<sup>7</sup>

It follows then, that image-making within the retreat space is not for remedial purposes such as finding more appropriate ways of self-expression in the world, or uncovering problems, or improving interpersonal relationships per se. We can look on the process of contemplating or making images during a retreat as seeking 'with courage the imagination of God'<sup>8</sup> in order to gain a deeper understanding of the presence and the mystery of God in our prayer and our lived experience. Inner images evoked in meditative prayer, or images made in clay, or paint, or music, or movement, are like divine and transforming guests who knock on the door of our souls, seeking admittance and hospitality. They invite us to share the bread of reflection with God or the retreat guide in a feeling way on existential questions such as: 'Who am I? What am I living for? What gives me meaning? How do I experience God? How do I cope with suffering or loss? How do I relate to others in the world?'

Whenever we create or ponder images in a space set apart for silent, meditative and reflective experience, something will be known and understood about our inner feeling responses and resistances to new awarenesses, insights, and the kind of exchange which transforms into the 'image that we reflect' (Cor 3:18). Most importantly, images we make or contemplate in the context of prayer can enshrine moments of peak experience, which are thus held and remembered in visible form long after the experience has faded. Images help us to know when our sense of self, our relationship with God and others is distorted. They invite us to see and acknowledge unresolved feelings around hurt and forgiveness, as well as the blockages of pain and suffering. Above all, where can the healing and transforming power of images be experienced more effectively than in the space of a person's encounter with the divine source of healing and transformation? In the gospel story of the Samaritan woman, imagination may draw us to see the jar which she lowers into the well as an image containing her feeling responses and reactions to Christ challenging her in conversation. As she metaphorically raises draught upon draught, the Samaritan woman seems to reach down into the depth of her limited image of God, self, and other to encounter the transforming power of Jesus who mirrors an exalted image of God and the human person.

### *The greening life force in the ground of being*

It is hoped that the following examples will illuminate something of the *soul-making* dimension of the arts in prayerful, reflective spaces. The examples given here are from persons I have listened to over the years and who have allowed me to use some aspect of their history. My first example is of a young student who offered me the gift of a tape of recorded music. He had it set at a particular place. I felt that his intention was that I began listening to the music from this set position. He mentioned that for him listening from this point onward was like praying, like finding peace of mind. In fact, following his instructions, I heard the opening notes of the slow movement of Rodrigo's *Concierto De Aranjuez*. I remember the initial, plaintive stir of the cor anglais awakening the sound of the guitar to a most moving melody, inviting the imagination to create images of the divine guest drawing forth the song of the soul. Later we listened to this part of the concerto together, catching more clearly the feeling sound. In that listening space some profound point was touched, not only in the experience of prayer, but also in the grief over some personal bereavement, which, with time, could be known and shared.

During a retreat weekend, an undergraduate student of science responded to an experience of guided meditation on 'The inner tree'<sup>9</sup> in the following way. She drew a picture of her room in her hall of residence. On a white sheet of paper, she sketched in hard pencil the sparsest of living spaces. The room looked extremely functional, empty almost, and hardly lived in. The walls were lined with bookshelves, drawn with mathematical precision and measured with a ruler, that housed merely the occasional book or file. However, the wooden desk, which occupied the central space of the picture, was *split asunder* by a fragile sapling tree, forcing its way up to life and light. This image seemed to speak of loneliness and isolation, evoking feelings of confusion and anxiety. Yet the young tree struggling for space poignantly symbolized a longing for an accepting and nurturing environment in which growth could happen. A second picture followed, also of a young tree, at first equally fragile looking, with tenuous roots and branches, but central to the page. Then the quality of the drawing changed. The maker of the image began to strengthen the trunk of the tree, allowing more vigorous lines to flow from the branches into the roots. She added leaves and colour, then soil, water and light, signs of food and nourishment. She seemed absorbed and more relaxed. Something of her inner feelings could be seen and acknowledged 'out there'. What is more, her images provided connections with words from the Scriptures which could illuminate her inner experience: 'You shall be like a watered garden' (Isai 58:11); 'Leave the tree for another year, until I dig around it, so that it can bear fruit' (Lk 13:8-9).

### ***Icons for the shining forth of God's healing and transforming touch***

'When we meditate we create the compassionate space that allows for the arising of all things: sorrows, loneliness, shame, desire, regret, frustration, happiness.'<sup>10</sup> Meditation involves healing, based on the mystery of change and resurrection. It can transform the crippling effects of painful wounds and give us such depth of love and insight that the ghosts no longer frighten us. When we meditate with images we admit into our sacred space the healing, transforming and reintegrating effects of the image upon the soul.

An eight-day retreatant was invited during a time of prayer to enter imaginatively the gospel scene of Jesus and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). He felt drawn to a postcard size representation of a painting by the artist, Sieger Kröder, who invests the scene with significant facets of

emotion. The central part of the painting is taken up with the poignant gesture of Christ embracing Zacchaeus in the entrance of his home which is painted in a prominent white. In fact, the opening to the house looks more like the entrance to a cave. Zacchaeus seems to block the darkness inside with his back. His anxious-looking face suggests fear and unease. The lower foreground of the picture is taken up with the huddle of a group of shocked people, whose judgemental condemnatory demeanour is powerfully expressed in their grim faces, their clenched fists and wagging fingers. In his prayerful reflection with the image, the retreatant began to see that his desire to be close to Christ was deeply thwarted and undermined by the accusing voices in his own inner world. In conversation with Christ he began to let his feelings and thoughts be known. Looking at the different expressions of dismay and disdain on the faces of the crowd, he allowed himself to name accusing feelings in himself. As he focused more visibly on the central part of his own inner image of Christ in the doorway of his home, even the shadow of the clenched fist against the white wall of Zacchaeus' dwelling spoke to him of something significant that needed the forgiving, healing touch of Christ.

During his experience of the full Spiritual Exercises a retreatant found himself dry and distressed at the time of reflecting on the gospel scenes of Christ's infancy. He could not enter these scenes with the imagination. The intimacy of the family at Bethlehem eluded him. He decided to paint the story of the shepherds on their way to see the Christ child. The centre of his picture revealed the image of a stable, with a lit window and a closed door. The rest of the picture was dark. He described how in prayer he had wanted to look in by the window to see the family inside, but his eyes had not been able to travel beyond the blurred glass. Reflecting on the painted image, he commented, had prompted him to remember the circumstances surrounding his mother's untimely death one year shortly before Christmas. He mentioned his daily journey home on the school bus at nightfall, passing people's homes that Christmas time, and watching families sit down for tea behind lit windows. The image of the lit window and the closed door unlocked much of the grief he had never owned. As the days went by this retreatant began to express his thoughts and feelings to 'the child' and to the child's parents, savouring deeply such words as: 'His mother stored all these things in her heart' (Lk 2:52), and 'They returned to their own country by a different way' (Mt 2:12).



*Where do we go from here?*

It is hoped that the examples given throughout this presentation and the mention of different art media as part of these, will help to illustrate how art-making may purposefully be included in the retreat process. It seems necessary, however, to add some suggestions from my own experience which may offer further guidelines. I believe it is essential that guides, sensitive to the image-making process in retreats, foster and deepen for themselves an understanding and an appreciation of art images, whether used or made, in meditative spaces. It seems equally important that any concrete image-making in clay, paint and other media is seen as an integral part of the retreat process, not merely regarded as a recreational or occupational extra for in between times. We need to remember that images made or pondered in meditative experiences need space for contemplation, 'for the alchemy of reflection',<sup>11</sup> and for dialogue between the retreatant and the guide, not merely interpretation by the guide.

Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to make dialogue with the divine persons, with Mary and with the saints. Images are a wonderful way of encouraging such conversation between the retreatant, the image and the divine persons, or between the retreatant, the image and the guide. This process can foster insight and a deepening understanding of thoughts, feelings, desires, responses, and the recognition of the divine, transforming presence. We also need to be reminded that because of their immediacy images can touch into unconscious material. This must be held safely and worked with responsibly. Disturbing images may well need the attention of another helper. Furthermore, not every retreatant benefits from the use of images in prayer – this is not for everyone, and not for anyone at all times. The heart has different seasons for different ways of prayer. Similarly, in the maps of the spiritual journeys, there is the kataphatic and the apophatic way – both can lead to union with God.

It is important that whatever images, symbols, or art reproductions we offer retreatants for prayerful reflection, they have the capacity to evoke a sense of mystery and invitation to contemplation. We can provide an array of basic art materials, such as paint, brushes, chalks, oil pastels, pencils, felt tips, paper, clay, etc, in an accessible and an inviting space, personal enough to respect privacy. We need to remember, though, that many retreatants have not touched a brush, or paint, or clay since they left school. Frequently their experience of art-making in this context has not been supportive of any further creative endeavour. Pointing out that artistic excellence is not necessary for art

expression in prayerful spaces, and could be a hindrance, a kind of defence, rather than a help, often assists in overcoming the block and unlocking initial inhibitions. There is a timely moment in which to suggest art making, and there is wisdom in presenting the invitation in a way that allows for freedom of response. Few images or the engagement with one single image can provide the key to the unfolding of the retreat experience or to deeper understanding of some aspect of a person's spiritual journey.

Most importantly, we need to receive images made by retreatants with great reverence, and to consider what they contain worthy of reflection. At the point of intersection between the third and fourth week of the Spiritual Exercises, a retreatant drew the following picture, which was divided vertically into three parts. The first part, on the right-hand side of the drawing, showed a tranquil landscape, like a Japanese garden, with an encircled empty space in its left-hand corner. The second part of the picture merely showed the encircled empty space, filled in with the warm shade of black pastel. The third part revealed at its centre the empty space encircled by flowers, symbolic of resurrection. Reflecting on the whole image, the retreatant remarked, 'When I heard the words of the gospel, "Mary saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb" (Jn 20:1), I knew'.

Lastly, I feel this is an opportune moment to reflect in depth on the unique place of the arts in meditative and reflective spaces. Such researching would lead us to address something of the space that extends above, beyond, and in between imageless prayer and the prayer which invites imagination and the use of images.

**Renate Düllmann** is a German Dominican. She has worked in Zimbabwe and in the University Catholic Chaplaincy in London. An art therapist, she is at present a member of the team at St Beuno's Spirituality Centre, North Wales.

#### NOTES

1 T. Moore, *Care of the soul* (Judy Piatkus Publishers Ltd, London, 1992), pp 302–303.

2 *Op. cit.*, p 289.

3 D. Sandle (ed), *Development and diversity: new applications in art therapy* (Free Association Books Ltd, London, 1998), pp 43–44.

4 J. Schaverien, *The revealing image* (Tavistock/Routledge, London 1992), p 7.

5 C. Case, 'Heart form – the image as mediator' (*INSCAPE: The Journal of the British Association of Art Therapists*, Winter 1990), p 20.

- 6 M. Milner, *On not being able to paint* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, Oxford, 1990), p 162.
- 7 A. De Mello SJ, *Sadhana: a way to God* (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash Anand, India, 1978).
- 8 C. Collins, *Meditations, poems, pages from a sketchbook* (Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, 1997), p 22.
- 9 C. Tilmann, *The practice of meditation* (Search Press, London, 1997), pp 114–115.
- 10 J. Kornfield, *A path with heart* (Bantam Books, New York, London, 1993), p 31.
- 11 T. Moore, *op. cit.*, p 301.