

Arts and Crafts as Authentic Experience for Older People

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"Creativity," writes Arieti, "can occur at any age, even the most advanced, and seems to have a salutary effect . . ." The skilled worker must use her own creativity to tap the creativity of the client who may lack the attitude, cultural background, the self-confidence to do so by herself.

Although Arts and Crafts activity is generally included in programs for Older Adults, its utility as a creative experience is often overlooked. Rather, many times this activity becomes routinized, failing to tap the creative potential of the client or worker. Besides the pride and satisfaction in producing the creative objects, Arts and Crafts is a means to involving people and helping them in many other ways in the process. In a society that conspires to rob the aged of much that has formed the basis for their self-identity and self-esteem, the need to restore both is paramount. Fostering creativity and aliveness can counter the ill effects of aging, mainly in maintaining one's capacities, and even *increasing* an ability to function. This paper will discuss the possibilities in a skilled worker's creative use of Arts and Crafts, within an agency that is supportive of such programming. Arts and Crafts programs have the potential to both stimulate and provide an outlet for the creativity of client and worker alike.

In my work, I have observed that older people engaged in Arts and Crafts find it a source of pleasure. If this activity is accompanied by a high degree of creativity, they become intensely absorbed, develop pride in their achievement, and demonstrate an improved self-image. It appears that the greater the possibility for self-expression, for originality and decision-making, the greater the positive effect on pride and self-image.

Conversely, the more creative the intervention, the greater is the degree of satisfaction experienced by the worker. These observations, resulting from a long involvement with Arts and Crafts activity and the elderly, raise questions about the nature of creativity and its effect on the ego-strength of the aged. What is creativity? What is the impact of creativity on the aged individual? How do we free the person to use his creativity if it has been submerged for 60-70 years? What kind of setting, nurturing, or structure is needed?

The Meaning of Creativity

Plato gave the name "true artist" to those who give birth to a new reality. Rollo May makes the distinction between superficial aestheticism, the mere production of pretty objects, and authentic creativity, the "process of bringing something new into being." He elaborates on the creative process as involving true and intense encounter, engagement and commitment.¹ John McLeish defines creativity as the courage to continue one's reaction to life challenges with zest and gusto, to respond with activity, and to explore new frontiers. Like legendary Ulysses, creative people are tireless travelers in the perilous journey of life searching for new and creative ways to express themselves.² Silvano Arieti calls creativity a "prerogative of Man" and his humble counterpart to God's creation. "Human

¹ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975.

² John McLeish, *The Ulyssean Adult: Creativity in the Middle and Later Years*. New York: McGraw Hill—Toronto: Ryerson, Ltd., 1976.

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creativity" he says "uses what is already existing and changes it in unpredictable ways."³ These then are concepts of creativity that transcend the notion of the making of great works. These definitions are more concerned with process than product. In a profound sense, even the smallest and most apparently "insignificant" action can be considered, since every action can be creative. These concepts involve attitudes, personality traits, a method of dealing with life's challenges, and they present a way to confront our environment unencumbered by age limits.

Attitudes Toward Aging

Our youth-oriented society has perpetuated the myth that the aged are of little value. Tragically, the aged themselves often have internalized this myth and fail to view themselves positively. So powerful is the impact of negative societal perceptions that one cannot talk about aging without taking these perceptions into consideration.

I believe it to be very important for society and professionals in particular, to revise their commonly held misconception of aging as a passage, a phase. Rather, it is a process that takes place during one's entire life. The law may set a certain age as mandatory retirement, but the fact that aging is a continuous and lifelong process is ignored. We must learn to stop looking at every "Senior Citizen" as if he/she were at the same stage of development and possessing (or lacking) the same kind of skills and potentials. Alex Comfort⁴ states: "In the absence of ill health . . . aging has no adverse effect on intelligence or learning power" and goes on:

. . . Physical aging is only 25% of the picture. 75% is accounted for another type of aging, which has no physical basis. It is the role which our folklore, prejudices and misconceptions about age impose on "the old." It requires no scientific discoveries to abolish this aspect of aging: simply a change of attitude . . .

³ Silvano Arieti, *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

⁴ Alex Comfort, "Age Prejudice in America," *Social Policy*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1976).

Dr. Comfort points out that in our society the aged are perceived as "unintelligent, asexual, unemployable, and crazy" and are treated accordingly, thus initiating a vicious circle of hate and self-hate. Surprisingly, when subjected to hostile and degrading treatment, the aged often react in ways that reinforce this prejudice. It remains an enigma that those who shun the elderly fail to see themselves eventually becoming old. "One wonders" Dr. Comfort muses "What Archie Bunker would feel about immigrants if he knew that at 65 he would turn Puerto Rican?" Or Black, or a Jew, or a woman and so on . . . It is possible that he would despise himself. My observation of the attitudes of the aged toward aging appear to confirm this statement. Thus, the ego-strength of the aged person is enervated by the combined impact of societal rejection and internalized negative self-perceptions. In a society where people assume much of their identity from their work role, retirement is of great significance. Retirement very often causes the elderly to lose their identity and motivation. If people are to regard their retirement in a positive way they must reorganize their self-concept, their values, and to find new motivations.

Discovering Creativity Through Skilled Leadership

Retirement, despite the unfortunate aspects already mentioned, can be a very beneficial period. It provides the time to devote to the exploration of the world of the spirit and to develop a greater self-awareness. I believe that retirement *can* be a time of growth, an occasion for discovering creativity and untapped potentials.

How can we help the aged client live more creatively? How can we help restore some of the eroded self-esteem characteristic of many senior citizens? These are questions we must focus our attention upon if we, as professionals, are to deal effectively with the problems of the elderly.

A. Maslow, writing about the behavior leading to self-actualization, lists as necessary honesty, responsibility, and the ability to make

choices. He also points out that individuals actualize themselves in different ways as no two individuals are exactly alike. This points out the necessity to provide services and opportunities for all aged clients, at whatever their level of development. Therefore: (1) It is necessary to provide a setting that will cater to *different* people at *different* stages of development with a variety of needs and potentials. (2) Such setting must offer a wide range of activities to suit the various levels of abilities and skills. (3) The agency must be staffed with carefully selected instructors, well trained not only in the usual interpersonal skills, but with an appropriate attitude towards Arts and Crafts. (4) The agency must not view "creative" activity merely as busy-work but as an important and essential tool to restore the aged client's bruised ego, and accord it recognition and status. (5) The agency must view the creative process as a potentially effective way to stimulate growth and self-awareness in the client it serves, regardless of age.

Such individualized, carefully selected activity requires a careful evaluation of the client's present status and a highly competent worker. I submit that authentic experiences in Arts and Crafts, when guided by a creative, sensitive, and skillful worker, can make great strides in combating the undesirable consequences of "sociogenic" aging and restoring some measure of self-esteem in the elderly. While the agency must provide the resources, the support, and a favorable setting, it is the worker that must provide warmth, sensitivity, and understanding. The worker must seek out and make creative use of even the most limited abilities of the aged client. The successful program, therefore, requires all these elements as well as effective coordination.

Some Examples: A Helping Process

At the Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. of Metropolitan New Jersey, a serious effort has been made to provide the members of one of their Older Adult Centers with a plethora of activities to satisfy all interests, potential skills, and needs.

Crafts were designed to ensure that practically everybody could participate. The worker attempted to encourage the participation of even the less capable members. Some examples follow. A gift of hundreds of buttons was made to the Center by the Essex County Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, an organization that for many years has co-sponsored the Older Adults Centers of the "Y." The worker seized the opportunity to use the almost universal skill of sewing on a button to engage a portion of the less skilled members in sewing a "picture" using the buttons instead of paint. Some members provided the design, others helped with the selection of colors, and others sewed the buttons on. The result was a beautiful wall hanging, proclaiming, in colorful "buttoned" letters: CREATING IS JOY! This was an exciting achievement for the members, many of whom had never created a picture. Following the completion of the first project, several members decided to engage in another, employing the same technique. They formed a committee, appointed a chairperson, and with the assistance of the worker, designed a banner reproducing the logo of the Council of Jewish Women. The project took place over a period of time and became the focal point for good social groupwork. The group decided to donate the banner to the NCJW and a "Friendship Day" for the presentation was planned. While another committee procured refreshments, representatives of the organization were invited and the banner was presented in a moving ceremony affirming the long friendship between the NCJW and the Older Adults. This demonstrates how a "simple" craft project can be used for a multiplicity of social work purposes: (1) as a group activity itself, (2) as a group decision-making process, (3) for reinforcing a sense of dignity by putting the members of the Center, who had always been on the receiving end of the relationship with the NCJW, in the position of hosts and gracious givers.

If Arts and Crafts activity is to be used as a means to build self-esteem, it is vital that the

greatest amount of choice, participation, and commitment be encouraged. The client, who in many instances has never had the opportunity to test his or her artistic ability or aesthetic judgment, must be encouraged. A positive image can be greatly enhanced by encouraging and supporting the development of new aesthetic values and genuine judgments. The simplest painting, the plainest handmade garment, the most naive poem, or primitively fashioned sculpture, can be immensely important in the development of a new self-awareness and positive self-image. It is important for the worker to be aware of the fact that a majority of aged clients have had little or no opportunity to explore their creativity as an aesthetic experience. Therefore, an initial period of education would seem an appropriate starting point. Accustomed as the elderly are to deriving a sense of identity and self-worth from their job and their role as providers, they may not be ready to embrace the role of creators of "useless" objects. As a consequence, they need continual encouragement. Many aged clients are confronted with leisure time for the first time in their lives. It is the responsibility of the sensitive social worker to re-educate the client and encourage the development of a new set of values. The attentive social worker can also help the client to reach a new appreciation of beauty and art. Above all, the worker must be constantly alert to the possibility of increased self-esteem that can flow from the humblest type of "creation." In the following example, the supportive role of the social worker can be more clearly seen.

As so many members of one of the Older Adults Centers sponsored by the Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. of Metropolitan New Jersey possess some basic sewing skills, the worker organized a class that utilized this skill to advantage. Pictures were drawn on some kind of suitable fabric and then sewn over with colorful yarns producing attractive "embroidered" tapestries. Each picture was made independently by the individual or was the product of a lengthy "conference" with the

client during which the subject of the picture was discussed and formulated. Each picture represented a significant aspect of the client's life: a symbol, scene, loved pet, sentimental object, or memory. The worker encouraged the client to draw the picture by him or herself, but when necessary the picture would be drawn by the worker according to the client's instructions. After this, the client would again be encouraged to make the decisions and choices as to colors, type of yarn, stitches, and so on. Therefore, the finished tapestry was the culmination of the client's creativity and imagination. When completed, something truly unique and beautiful was created. In many cases the members gave the pictures as proud gifts to their families and friends.

The cost of the tapestries was partially absorbed by the agency, enabling every member to participate and to own his or her finished project. Because of the large number of objects created, the agency stepped in with an even more significant intervention: the agency sponsored an Arts and Crafts show where the items could be attractively displayed. People known to the public were invited to view the works, prizes were given, pictures were taken and notices and press coverage were provided. The project owed its success to pooled skills and resources, good coordination, and the utilization of the system approach to problem solving. This experience demonstrated that old skills (sewing buttons) can be used for new creative uses. It is apparent that under careful observation and guidance, someone with a minimum of ability can produce beautiful objects. In addition, the social workers, in the role of a catalyst, can stimulate pride and a sense of self-worth, and mobilize the host agency and the community in the effort to repair the tarnished self-image of the aged client.

In another example, a dressmaking class for a group of black women was the *starting point* for a community project. After several garments were finished, the worker suggested that a fashion show be organized. At first timidly, and then with increasing confidence,

the women set a date, invited relatives and friends, and organized the event. It was a truly outstanding show. The women acted as models and a professional caller was hired to describe the garments. The mayor spoke, the newspaper provided the coverage. The gala event was imbued with a special excitement. Most of the women had been "cleaning ladies" all their lives, so their self-image was minimal. The day represented the birth of a new self-awareness. It is interesting to note that the class remained solidified and continued to meet for many years, perhaps due to the positive experience they had shared together.

Conclusions

"Creativity" writes Arieti "can occur at any age, even the most advanced, and seems to have a salutary effect . . ."⁵ The skilled

worker must use *her own* creativity to tap the creativity of the client who may lack the attitude, cultural background, the self-confidence to do so by herself. The worker must "lend her vision," her confidence in the potential beneficial effect of creativity to the client who may not have the understanding of the value and place of creativity in his or her growth process. With the aid and full support of the host agency, the worker can foster a climate in which the untapped creative resources of the client can find expression. She must be accepting, supporting, resourceful, and above all ready to guide and help. The act of creating is intrinsically antithetical to that of being obsolete, devoid of vitality, and useless. Those who claim dedication to improving the ego-strength of the elderly must bear in mind the therapeutic effect of authentic creativity, as well as the maintenance of a sensitive, caring ear.

⁵ Arieti, *op. cit.*