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**"Expressive Arts Therapy --  
including Storytelling Therapy --  
in Cultural Context"**

by Dr Eric Miller

Expressive Arts Therapy

Howard Gardner's book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, published in 1983, made a big impact in the fields of Psychology and Education. This work acknowledged that the human mind works in various ways, not just through abstract thought.

This kind of approach has encouraged people to connect their intellects with their emotions and their sensory experiences. It has helped people to live in more well-rounded ways, involving developing and integrating various aspects of themselves.

It is interesting to consider why it is that in the modern world, soft skills, communication skills, and conflict-management skills need to be taught, especially to people working in fields such as finance, engineering, and information technology.

It seems there is a lack of *emotional intelligence* in many people in the world today. This would include the ability to express feelings and ideas in ways that others can understand. Improving this communication ability may involve developing more working knowledge of one's inner self, as well as more empathy for others.

In response to these needs, in Education there has been a movement towards experiential learning -- activity-based and project-based learning, at times occurring in small groups. This does not just concern methods of teaching. It concerns methods of teaching-and-learning -- that is, enabling the unique abilities for learning in each individual.

In Psychology, this movement has manifested in terms of therapeutic approaches that seek to integrate the conscious intellect with the emotions, and with the experiences of the five physical senses.

A common element of all of these new approaches is a discovery, or re-discovery, of the whole self. Along with this has come the realization that the human animal has its own inherent learning and healing mechanisms. Teachers and healers can stimulate and guide these mechanisms.

The goal has come to include helping people to humanize themselves -- helping them to develop their humanity. This has also involved helping people to connect with the rest of nature, and to overcome those curses of modernism -- alienation, loneliness, and the isolation of the individual.

Arts Therapies have arisen to help with these processes. When used separately, each therapeutic mode using the arts is often called a "Creative Arts Therapy". The integrated use of these Arts Therapies is often called "Expressive Arts Therapy" (EAT).

The Arts Therapies utilize "Projective techniques" in that clients project aspects of their unconscious minds onto objects they find or create.

The arts can be considered as forms of play. When a client plays, or does activities in playful ways, material often spontaneously comes up from his/her unconscious.

Expressive Arts Therapy can be practiced with clients of all ages. "Play Therapy" was originally developed for use with children, but is sometimes used with teenage and adult clients also ( [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play_therapy) ). To date, I have been unable to discern substantial differences between the approaches of Expressive Arts Therapy and Play Therapy.

Whether the process may be thought of as involving projection, or as play: once material has come up from the unconscious, once inner feelings and thoughts have been given voice, a client can discuss this material, and integrate it with his/her consciousness.

The Expressive Arts Therapy process typically involves using numerous art modalities in a single session. Actually, forms of drama and storytelling naturally feature all of the other arts. Participants in such sessions might work with situations, relationships (within a family, organization, community, etc.), dreams, or other material that is on their minds.

In a session about relationships, for example, participants may draw or paint images. They may make movements and sounds relating to these images, or to other aspects of the relationships. They may do individual or group dramatic enactments of the relationships. These enactments may feature speech -- and possibly singing and/or other forms of stylized speech -- and movement-dance, as well as scenery, props, costumes, and masks the participants might make.

The Arts Therapies can be used with individuals and groups, with people who have cognitive challenges, with children, and also with "ordinary" adults.

### Storytelling Therapy

The time has come for Storytelling Therapy to take its place alongside the other Arts Therapies, such as Drama Therapy, Psychodrama, Poetry Therapy, Visual Art Therapy, Dance Therapy, and Music Therapy.

Stories and storytelling are often credited in the literature about Expressive Arts Therapy (McNiff 1981). However, Storytelling Therapy -- also known as, Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling, and Storytelling and Healing -- is only now emerging as a widely-recognized and acknowledged practice (Perrow 2008).

Stories help to give people senses of identity and direction. Self, community, and society are all conceived of and experienced largely in terms of story. Stories are manageable ways to package data and give it meaning, with relatively easy storage in, and retrieval from, memory.

Telling one's stories to sympathetic others may help to empower one and give one a feeling of control over one's life. One may find that a personal experience may involve social issues that may also have affected others. The processes of telling, listening to, and discussing such stories may lead participants to making plans designed to improve their selves and/or environments.

Globally, a social-cultural urge for intra- and inter-personal reconnection and wholeness emerged in the late 1960s. One aspect of this has been the Storytelling Revival. In the USA, the Storytelling Revival occurred in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movements -- first with African-Americans (some of whom held "rap sessions"); then with women (some of whom held "consciousness-raising sessions" and "sister circles" in the process of developing the Women's Movement and feminism); and also with Gay/Lesbian/Bi-sexual/Transgender people, people who have cognitive and/or physical challenges, and others.

A mode of therapy known as Narrative Therapy has been developed since the 1970s, especially in Australia ( [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy) ). This method has primarily been used with adults, and especially involves stories about personal experiences told in conversational tones. One thing that occurs in this process is that clients' coping skills are identified and developed. This form of therapy is not usually thought of as involving artistic expression.

I would suggest that Storytelling Therapy could be an umbrella term for the various forms of therapy that are based on Narrative Psychology ( [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative\\_psychology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_psychology) ). (Story and narrative can both be defined as, a series of events. Narrative may refer to a mere report of events, whereas story may refer to a more processed and artful presentation.) I feel it is important to include, "telling," in the name of this form of therapy -- this acknowledges the potential psychological and social therapeutic aspects of the storytelling *process*.

One way Storytelling Therapy is practiced is: The client tells a brief version of his/her Life Story. The client and therapist identify outstanding themes and turning points in this Life Story. They then recall and/or create, and share with each other, stories that relate to these themes and turning points. Thus, this form of Storytelling Therapy is a type of "Metaphor Therapy".

If needed, "Life Story Repair" can occur. This can be done by helping the client to understand: 1) how the client's life might have gone differently, in challenging ways, from what the client might have expected; and 2) what the client might now do to live as "happily ever after" as possible.

Imagining and discussing all of this may give a client feelings and realizations regarding ways to envision, and to live, the balance of his/her life.

Clients' dreams (material from the client's unconscious); and relevant fairytales, legends, epics, and myths (material from the client's culture) can also be used in Storytelling Therapy. One type of Storytelling Therapy is Fairytale Therapy ( <http://tinyurl.com/o7yxjmw> ) .

Two founding thinkers in the field of Storytelling Therapy are the Psychologist Carl Jung (who focused on helping one to symbolically integrate aspects of one's psyche, especially through the use of images and stories) (Jung 1971); and the Mythologist Joseph Campbell (who saw the stages of the hero's journey as representing the inner maturation and actualization of the individual) (Campbell 1949). Incidentally, both Jung and Campbell were especially fascinated by the mythology of India.

One organization that is helping to develop Storytelling Therapy is the Healing Story Alliance ( [www.healingstory.org](http://www.healingstory.org) ). The HSA is a special-interest-group of the USA's National Storytelling Network.

## Expressive Arts Therapy comes to Asia

Visual Art Therapy has been taught and practiced since at least the mid-1990s in Far East Asia (especially in Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong and other places in China) (Kalmanowitz, 2012).

The other Arts Therapies, and Expressive Arts Therapy, are just now becoming popular in Asia.

In October 2015, the Bi-annual Conference of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA, [www.ieata.org](http://www.ieata.org)) was held in Asia for the first time (in Hong Kong).

Arts Therapies and the Storytelling Revival began in the West. These movements involved helping people in those societies to re-connect with the ancient, and with nature. And now these Western practices -- which were in part inspired by aspects of Asian cultures -- are reaching Asian shores.

In the late 1960s, three ways awareness of Asia came to people in the West were: 1) Vietnam was invaded and occupied by the USA, 2) the Peace Corps (a USA government program) enabled young USA people to teach and do social work in various Asian (and other) countries, and 2) many young people of the West came to India searching for spiritual enlightenment. A number of the early developers of EAT in the USA were exposed to Asia in one or more of these ways.

The founders of EAT cite shamanism as a precursor of and inspiration for EAT (McNiff 1981). Shamanism is associated with tribal society and culture, and also remains very popular on the folk level of society throughout Asia. A shaman is an ritual specialist who communicates with spirits on behalf of human clients. Two ways this may occur are: a shaman may call spirits into his/her body; or a shaman may go on spirit journeys to visit spirits.

Both the shaman and the Expressive Arts Therapy session leader use various sensory modes to facilitate communication between ordinary consciousness and other realms -- in the case of shamanism, with the realm of the divine (often to ask questions of, and receive guidance from, divine figures); and in the case of EAT, with the realm of the unconscious (for the sake of psychological healing).

However, in Asia it is not just in shamanism that various art modalities are used in conjunction with each other. In Asian cultures in general, there are many ancient practices of using the arts -- separately and in integrated ways -- to increase well-being. For examples:

Telling "grandmother stories" (folk tales) to give comfort and guidance.

Drawing kolams to help align one's home with the divine.

Doing puja ceremonies -- multi-sensory experiences that may involve song, movement-dance, the pouring of liquids, the scattering of flower petals, etc.

In Asia, the arts traditionally have also been used together not just in rituals, but also in various forms of storytelling (by individuals and groups) and dance-drama. The separation and compartmentalization of the arts common in the West has not occurred as much in Asia. It will be very interesting to see how Expressive Arts Therapy develops in Asia in the coming years. As mentioned above, Asian cultures inspired numerous

elements of EAT, and now EAT is being brought to Asia. In Asia, practitioners of Arts Therapies could build upon local ancient cultural practices (some of which are meditative, mystical, and/or devotional), combining elements of these traditions with the introspective, analytical, and secular methods and approaches supplied by the field of Psychology.

### **Citations**

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