

SELF PORTRAITS: SEEING AND BEING SEEN

The author uses self-portrait drawing dyad process to assist a client imprisoned by an obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) to become free. As the author engages the client in drawing her own portrait simultaneously she draws her own self-portrait. She then uses her drawings in her own therapy to discover characteristics about herself that had been hidden.

by Patti Wallace

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My experience as an Art Therapist has led me through a myriad of healing journeys. This narrative is about an experiment in the primitive land that I refer to as **seeing** and **being seen**. The technique is to draw a self-portrait, looking at yourself in a mirror, drawing a contour line on large paper while your eyes stay on the image of yourself in the mirror. It is called blind contour drawing. I use a modified version where you can look periodically to reposition your pencil for inner contours and details, but essentially do not look at the drawing. The participant is forced to have a new experience in drawing. The idea is to draw very slowly, as if caressing the contour edge you are observing and traveling over the forms and contours of your own face and body. Kimon Nicolaides, in his 1941 classic, *The Natural Way to Draw* states,

There is only one right way to draw and that is the perfectly natural way. It has nothing to do with artifice or technique. It has nothing to do with aesthetics or conception. It has only to do with the act of correct observation, and by that I mean a physical contact with all sorts of objects through all the senses.

I believe that we take for granted the gift of **seeing** and do not utilize it as fully as we might.

Vision can both soothe and enrich our experience of being in the world. Many of the people with whom I have worked do not really **see** themselves when they utilize their mirrors to brush their teeth, put on makeup, comb their hair, or straighten their clothing. There seems to be splitting that goes on and only portions of the body or face are taken in... we essentially **see** only self-fragments and not our total selves. "Artists" are people who learn to **see** more fully and are able to draw what they **see** more realistically because they are using the non-dominant hemisphere of their brains. Betty Edwards' (1989) world renown research on this subject is presented in her book *Drawing On the Right Side of The Brain*.

REFLECTIONS ON RIGHT BRAIN DRAWING

My experience has been that right brain drawing techniques help to relax the total person which paves the way for fuller expression of feelings, thoughts, ideas and observations and frees the mind to make different kinds of internal connections and lay down new pathways to healing. Acceptance of the totality of the self seems enhanced by studied visual observation of one's facial expressions, imperfections and significant contours. A deeper relationship is forged where a more

integrated and grounded self-image develops with the dedicated pursuit of this self-portrait technique. The time commitment is important and each drawing sessions needs to be at least two hours each week over a six month block of time to study the process and portrait product.

PORTRAIT DRAWING DYAD

One client and I were able to meet, draw and process the experience for six months. I decided that I, too, would participate in the self-portrait drawing process. This client agreed to share her drawings and insights with others, and write a process note to go with each drawing. In her third self-portrait there was a dramatic shift from flat drawing to a more alive, dimensional rendering. This client's emotional suffering was very grave as she was limited by her obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). She looked forward to our meetings because she knew she could escape the OCD thinking when she was immersed in the contour drawing task. She had a taste of freedom. In the midst of the drawing time together the client was able to get her own dog and care for it. Several months later, after terminating our time together, she took her first vacation in 18 years, driving with her dog, through the natural wonders of Northern California. She was able to extend her freedom to include experiences previously forbidden by her illness.

CLIENT'S WRITTEN REFLECTIONS ON SEEING HERSELF

She writes, "I rushed to get here and I was late but there was a calmness inside as though the anticipation of the drawing drew me toward a state of readiness. This state of readiness is unusual to me. It's not busy and rushed but relaxed and calm. A calmness like really being able to 'see' myself once a week and looking forward to it. I notice now when I draw that I can begin to see into myself and through the contours of my face, my essence and mood comes into being."

Another entry, "Each week my form is the same, my face. If I look at the ensemble of pictures individually I see the general 'over all' similarity as a being that looks like myself. If I observe the drawings together, side by side, I see the many differences from one picture to another. Surely, each nose will be different, each glass frame will vary, but the essential difference is in the mood or attitude of the drawing. Some weeks the mood escapes me as if I had drawn the picture of an unliving statue. But there are times, especially the last few weeks, that I am developing an 'eye' for capturing the feeling of the moments that my hand travels over the paper, capturing my 'lines' and expressing a feeling. I am not a statue and these pictures are not a token for what I am but breathe with life and view of the world as I see it. These pictures of myself are not cartoons and will, the reverse of cartoons, live forever. As I am alive now – and after I am gone. Over these weeks my drawing eye and my feeling heart have merged to capture my living self." These moving words are a testimony to power of art in the healing process, I thank my client

for sharing her experiences.

THERAPIST'S REFLECTIONS ON SEEING/BEING SEEN

My own drawings showed me the feelings and body rigidities that I couldn't "get" intellectually or cognitively. I made progress in ways I hadn't been able to before. For one of the sessions, I used three mirrors and did three images on one large page and wrote,

*Mirror, mirror on the shelf?
How many ways
can you show a self?
Round is close and
Oval
Intense...the eyes...
to look to see
the frightened, sad...
Intense me,*

As the Art Therapist, I could be there for my client and give her feedback on what I could see and I received her impressions of my drawing as well. I took my self-portraits to my own therapist, experiencing contact and healing in our looking at the drawings together. Having someone important to see and enjoy my own expressions of seeing myself... that is, being seen, was immensely rewarding, fulfilling and supported my own sharing of these experiences. I had always been the seer of the art work of others but had not really felt being seen in my own therapeutic journey.

The art task of looking at and drawing yourself offers the opportunity for building up experiences where you learn to see all of you and become your own observer and nurturer. Acceptance

is the key word. The human eye is the avenue of connectedness where we link up with or shy away from contact with each other. It seems we can forge a healing relationship with ourselves by learning how to use more fully the tools with which we are equipped. All of our senses, especially the eyes, are present to experience the world in a variety of ways. There are many possibilities for feeding the soul available through our visual experiences, but sometimes we get bogged down in the everyday life duties and forget to relax, enjoy and see the beauty of color, shapes and forms in ourselves and in the natural world.

The eye's many metaphors always fascinate and touch me deeply. Perhaps this fascination with seeing carried me on

this Art Therapy professional journey for the last 24 years. The eye is the window of the soul. Take very good care of it. It feels as if I can now hold on to myself and feel more real as I've reconnected with the inner as well as the outer beauty. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and I can now behold myself, embracing the beauty within. □

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