

Earthquake and Arts: A Rebuilding Project in Peru

Jose Miguel Calderon, Judith Alalu and Martin Zavala

We are in Pisco, 290 km south of Lima, the capital of Peru. It is five o'clock in the afternoon and the sun is starting to set. In a public schoolyard, boys and girls take newspapers and colourful sheets, costuming themselves. The sound of drums moves with the wind. A little boy walks among the people dressed as a house: the walls with doors and windows are big pieces of paper attached to his clothing. He knew how to build his house. He wanted it big and to have it strongly attached to his body so the wind could not take it. It seems he only needed somebody else to help him with his creation. At the other end of the yard, a group of girls watch as the house they built with rolled paper falls down. After a while, with our help, they put it up again using a school desk for support. All the children want to participate in this rebuilding and accompany it in costume with music and movement. We feel things following their own rhythm and, as in a river, we abandon ourselves to its stream.

Four months have passed since the earthquake that shook the region. The earth moved for three minutes with a magnitude of 7.9 on the Richter Scale. More than 500 people died, 32,310 houses collapsed and approxi-

mately 180,000 people lost everything. Reconstruction tasks are going very slowly; there is little response from the government.

Expressive Arts Therapy

TAE Peru, a training program in expressive arts therapy, committed, along with other institutions, to collaborate in providing emotional support for people, especially children, affected by the earthquake. As a part of this exchange, a project¹ was developed to train three groups of people to work with children living in poverty. One of the groups was composed of voluntary artists who wanted to bring their art to the affected communities (Voluntary Artists Network). The other two groups included adolescents and children from the communities that belong to a National Organization of Work-

1. The agreement was made jointly with the Human Rights Office of Ica (Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos CODEH) and Save The Children. CODEH has been working with the National Organization of Working Children and Adolescents of the region for more than a decade.

ing Children and Adolescents. Both groups were already doing arts-based work with the most affected communities in the region before the earthquake occurred. One of these groups drew on children without prior acting experience to mount plays on social and human rights issues. The other, for young people, created song and dance performances with puppets. All three groups shared the aim of teaching children and young people some artistic techniques and giving them some creative opportunities, in the hope of building up morale in the area stricken by the earthquake.

When we first arrived, we felt that the trauma of the people was evident in their mood: simultaneously mourning and looking for rebuilding. Most fallen houses were built from adobe (big bricks made of clay). After they restored the foundations of their houses by their own efforts, people expected the trucks and excavator machines to come. In spite of having cleaned the terrain, the debris in front of them reminded them that the task might be harder than they imagined. Rebuilding tasks will last years and not all communities are organized; not all communities have reached a level of organization necessary for this rebuilding.

In confronting this unexpected development and before meeting the training groups, we asked ourselves: What would be the most adequate way to intervene using expressive arts therapy? What should training include? Is "training" the right word for this task? How could we introduce expressive arts therapy to a group of children and adolescents and the Voluntary Artists Network already working from their own aesthetic point of view? Does expressive arts therapy have its own aesthetic point of view? What kind of beauty will be produced

in this encounter? How should we lead with the arts in this context?

With no intention of answering all these questions, we started working on the training and the encounter with the various affected communities. Our purpose was to transform the debris through imagination and to allow people to inhabit the same destroyed space in a different way. Encountering death returns meaning to life, and trust in the arts enables communities to be empowered in spite of the desolation.

From the beginning of the work up to the present time, we were hoping to use the arts in a way that would allow a unique encounter to happen between the affected population, the members of trained groups and the staff of TAE Peru.²

We arrived without knowing what we would find and tried to put aside all preconceived ideas. We established an open bond with the groups that allowed them to connect with this spirit. Our trust in the experience of doing art as the basis for these encounters touched all the trained groups. Without explicitly mentioning what arts can do, all the participants allowed the arts to guide them. We, as therapists, allowed the groups to experience a new type of relationship, a more open and creative one, and the groups responded in kind. Thus far, the adolescents and children we have been training have valued the space for artistic expression outside the conventional rules of good and bad, ugly and pretty. They are in a space where they can listen to what they want to say. They are starting to gain an awareness that the

2. The intervention project lasts nine months from which four has passed up to this date.

arts can be present in an authentic and transformative way for communities without imposing on or directing their path. In that sense, it is necessary for us to reaffirm their essence and for them to do the same thing for us, within an honest and permanent dialogue. Therefore, the therapeutic power of art can be present when there is an authentic encounter that allows us to be able to connect with ourselves in the presence of others. There lies the magic of the encounter, an encounter of mutual human existence.

These groups have started to understand that this experience of connection and authenticity is one they can bring to the population at large. They need to go beyond simply repeating the activities they have learned at TAE workshops or just applying certain artistic techniques. Our hope is that their memories of the relationships formed in working together creatively will give them new ways of working with the affected population.

All this experience is making us think about and imagine expressive arts therapy from different perspectives. Expressive arts therapy has a social and political ethos because of its capacity to give a voice to marginalized populations. It is able to reflect not only the lived realities and specific challenges faced by individual communities but also the resources and capacities that they can bring to bear on their problems. We consider this quality as inherent in the therapeutic character of the work we practice.

Expressive arts therapy lets people and communities recognize and listen to their own voices, reaffirming themselves and regaining their capacity for action. It is not our purpose to establish or direct the lines of such action. Nevertheless, we recognize that in a sense health

is at the core of our work with these communities, although in this case, it is more of a social and communitarian health. We have been trying to draw on the power of the arts to help communities to respond creatively to disorganization, indifference and hopeless feelings.

All of this allows us to redefine the way expressive arts therapists relate to others in a communitarian context. It is not only important to consider the relationship that the therapist builds with others but also the need to use similar methods to build creative and healthy bonds among the members of the community. This kind of work does not abandon the therapeutic aims of expressive arts therapy, but rather builds on them, enriching them with a new social and political dimension.

We know that the arts have always had a communal aspect and been vital for human existence. By expanding the use of the expressive arts from individual therapy to community settings, we find that the arts themselves have been enriched. At the end (or at the beginning) of these reflections, we can simply hold onto the image of a little boy dressed as a house walking through the yard of his school in Pisco. We are in the middle of this project and we hope that these encounters among arts, artists, debris and its rebuilding keep surprising us with the possibilities that being human can bring.

Jose Miguel Calderon, MSc, CAGS, **Judith Alalu**, Lic, CAGS and **Martin Zavala**, BA (currently enrolled in the Expressive Arts and Social Change MAPS program at EGS), are Directors and teachers at TAE, Peru, Institute of Expressive Arts Therapy.

From dissertation in progress: *The Shaman and the Tuning Fork*.

Judith Greer Essex

The world was burning.
There were too many cars and not enough polar bears.

Someone was suffering, hurting.
Someone was lost in the woods.
Something was broken or missing.
They were stuck
or they were floating.
They were spinning out of control
and they were miserable.
They were crying into the wilderness.
They were crying alone.

They could not lift their heads to sing,
they could not step into the dance.
Their rainbow was dull.

They come to the doorway, the opening, the aperture.
They come in through the window,
They come in a wagon, a litter,
they come in a sponge.
They are at the bottom of a well, in a dark box, nailed to the floor.

I was waiting. We wait.
This place was built for them, and
for those who mourn, which is all of us.

Somehow they arrive.
They cross the threshold

They slide into the cave or the cauldron;
to the kitchen, to the cook pot.

What makes this place safe or special?
The clocks stop now.
There is no Time.
The dog is at the door
The curtain is drawn across the window.
The deep ear is at work.
The open heart is at work

We meet there—
With our dues paid,
we wear the marks of our calling
We belong to that tribe,
We know the way to walk and how to hold the mouth
We peer into the dark.
We are spelunkers and deep divers.
We speak in gibberish and nonsense,
and translate it to the language of the foot and the hand
which we understand.
We eat pain,
which is a lost art.

We act like a Shaman,
or the elegant philosopher
We pretend to be a Midwife, or Composer.
We might wear the red nose, or the carry the baton.
We bang the drum, we start to hum
We make a mark or scratch a spark
We light candles and mark the circle off.

Strangers enter the mystery—
Me and Thee and We
come into the Protected Space—
together cross the threshold.
Something is ending.
Like a bell, the Master of Ceremonies begins to vibrate and ring,
the cold and sad person recognizes the tone.
together over a foot bridge into
the silence and the stillness.
into the scary place, the sacred space
monsters appear, but they are giggling.

They melt and are dismembered,
like caterpillars in the chrysalis
like the gods were,
so they say.
They dance and they play

The choreographer of sole feels the dance of small movement
and of stillness
the minstrel of soul hears the sound and the silence.
We see the architecture in the crumpled paper
No effort is too small.
Then an angel arrives, or an ogre
but in any case an emissary
from the other place.
It is carrying a small surprise,
a reward for the effort.
The Protector of the Space
helps the now warm person listen.
A simple message arrives:

"You are here" it says.

It is a pea of comfort in an ocean of pain.
The pilgrim takes it.
It is a talisman, a gift.
They weep. They embrace.
They discover the gift is a key (or a kiwi).
and take it back to the armchairs.
The pilgrim eats it or puts it into the keyhole,
which opens a box or not.

He says farewell.
The clocks begin again.
The next time it is entirely different.
Or exactly the same.

Judith Greer Essex is Director of the Expressive Arts Institute, San Diego,
a licensed psychotherapist and a Registered Expressive Arts Therapist.