

Music, Imagery, and Gestalt Therapy

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As a child, imagination (or imagery) offered me a way to expand far beyond my “here and now.” While sitting in a school classroom in Brooklyn I could watch myself, on a private movie screen that only I could see, running through a field, climbing a tree, or playing with friends. Music also played a significant role in stimulating various journeys beginning in childhood. At about the age of ten, I stood for hours in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror in our living room, conducting the many styles of music I played on the record player. I connected to the music, to my feelings and to the people in the “imaginary” orchestra before me. In my mind’s eye, I was Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic or trumpeter Harry James conducting his big band. Music and imagery became important tools as I explored the unknown. In retrospect, I am not surprised that music and imagery became important mediums in my work as a gestalt therapist, the focus of this piece. Here, I want to share my use of music with imagery and in groups.

Imagery and Gestalt Therapy

I was told in school to “stop daydreaming” and pay attention to reality (i.e., spelling, arithmetic, and reading about Dick and Jane). Fantasy was described as childish and unreal, and besides “life is too important to imagine it away.” I believe I stopped valuing most of my fantasies and don’t recall sharing them with others. In 1971, I attended some experiential-gestalt workshops on the use of dream work and imagery (daytime dreams) as self-exploration strategies that could promote personal growth. I rediscovered my ability and need to fantasize, and how imagery served as my time machine, jet-liner, and magic wand towards completing unfinished gestalts from my past and immediate present, and exploring future unknown experiences.

For more than 25 years I have offered workshops to college students and others on gestalt dream work and utilized semi-guided imagery experiences to demonstrate the non-interpretive, re-enactment gestalt approach to learning from dreams as described by Perls (1969). John Stevens in *Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experiencing* (1971) and Violet Oaklander in *Windows to Our Children* (1978) share numerous examples of imagery or fantasy journeys, with illustrations utilizing the gestalt approach.

Music and Imagery

According to the Wordsworth Dictionary of Musical Quotations (1991, p. 45), Plato said, “Music is a moral law. It gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, and life to everything.” I discovered that adding music to a guided imagery exercise reduced distractions triggered by extraneous sounds that occur in silence, and usually enriched participants’ experiences. I have noticed that my energy was reduced when leading an imagery experience when I did not have music available. On the

contrary, as my body resonates to the music, I feel like I am “conducting” when directing an imagery journey, timing my directions to the intensity and quality of the music I am playing. My experience seems consistent with Bush (1995) who says, “Music affects us both emotionally and physically. It touches us physically through vibration while activating feeling responses and stimulating imagery” (p. 28).

I have not experienced what some others have shared about music interfering with the person’s imagery experience. I believe that a key factor is the choice of the musical selection, making sure that it fits with the theme of the imagery, and allows enough freedom for each participant to have her or his own unique experience. I might listen to 20 or more pieces of music as I walk through an imagery script, in order to choose music that I experience as congruent with the imagery theme and story. I utilize music that is easy to find but not necessarily known by the participants. Another key factor leading to a valuable imagery experience is “slow is better” with plenty of time for assimilation, processing and integration.

Here are two imagery experiences (Witchel, 2006) I have shared with individual clients, in groups and dream workshops, and with graduate students in a group counseling class. The music selections I play throughout the experience are included:

1. Journey into a cave

Get in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and breathe.

Play – Santorini – In *Celebration of Life* (Yanni, 1991, track 1)

You are walking through a field and off in the distance you see the entrance to a cave. You walk up to the cave’s entrance and notice there is a sign above the cave. What does it say? (brief pause) Go into the cave and begin to wander your way deep into the earth (brief pause) You come to one corridor that has a big wooden door at the end. Go up to the door and open it.

You find yourself in a room. You notice a rocking chair on the other side of the room; someone is sitting in the rocking chair. Let it be the first person that comes to your mind. It may be someone you haven’t seen for a while. Go up and sit in front of them; take a few minutes to spend time and talk with them; and hear what they have to say back to you, too. Play – To The One Who Knows - *Dare to Dream* (Yanni, 1992b, track 6) (pause 2 -3 minutes)

For now, say goodbye to them (you can always come back to see them again); you turn away from them and see a trunk on the other side of the room. Open the trunk. There is an object inside the trunk that may be related to the person in the rocking chair. You become the object and see what your life is like as this object (pause for 1-2 minutes). Become yourself again. Then you leave the room and begin to wander your way out of the cave.

Play - Face in the Photograph – *Dare to Dream* (Yanni, 1992a, track 7)

Think about what you just did by going deep into the earth, finding a room, and having an experience. (brief pause) There may be other rooms and experiences awaiting you in

this cave. It's like finding an opening in yourself and going deep inside; there are many places to explore inside of you.

You get to the exit of the cave and notice what the sign says now. (pause) Wander back into the field and as you are walking, you find a note in your pocket written by the person in the chair. Read it and reflect for a moment on what it says. (pause) When you are ready, open your eyes and come back to this room.

When the music is turned off, ask participants to share their experience. During this time I often continue to softly play music from these same DVD's.

Participants in this imagery exercise have shared varied experiences, although a common theme has been visiting someone significant who has passed away, often a parent, grandparent, or partner. Many moving experiences have been reported during this experiment including sharing (a) feelings that were never expressed to the other person, and (b) personal changes that have occurred since their death. In addition, participants have received gifts of support and love, both verbally and in the note, from the person in the chair. In addition to participants sharing their overall experience and naming what parts stood out for them, I utilize gestalt principles and process (i.e., awareness, empty chair, identification-enactment) to help them learn, and perhaps grow from the experience.

Here is a unique illustration of one person's work: Susan, in her late 20's, saw a middle-aged female in the cave she could not identify until after she began to interact with me about her experience. Susan recognized the woman as a next door neighbor who reached out to her in a nurturing way when she was eight years old after her father died. She recalled her neighbor giving her a stuffed animal, which she still had some 20 years later. Susan shared that as her mother was also grieving the loss she was not available to Susan in the way that the neighbor was able to be. When returning to class the following week, Susan shared that she asked her mother what happened to this lady, as they had moved a few years later. Her mom had kept in touch with her and gave Susan her telephone number. Susan decided to call to express appreciation for what she had offered during this difficult time in her life. During the call, Susan learned that her old neighbor's husband had passed away a few months earlier and she was grieving her recent loss. Susan then visited her and was able to return the support that she had received during her difficult loss. She also gave her old friend the same stuffed animal she had received 20 years earlier. She shared that she planned to continue her contact.

Susan was able to learn from her work on the imagery experience and take some action in her life. This was also true for people who saw someone still alive in the chair, as they would often choose to actualize the dialogue they had in the imagery by meeting with that person. Others were also not able to identify the person in the cave. After some work, they identified the person as a grandparent or great grandparent who had passed away before they were born. They had heard stories about them and identified with them even though they had never met, at least in this lifetime. The experience offered an opportunity to make contact and feel more connected.

2. A journey home

Get in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and breathe.

Play - Angel of Hope – *Beloved* (Lanz, 1995a, track 11)

I am going to ask you to travel back in time to the home in which you grew up; if there was more than one, go to the one that meant the most to you. (brief pause)

You are walking down the street or road on which you grew up. You see your home at the time that you lived there; how does it look?

Walk up to a window and peak in; notice what you see. (brief pause) Do you see any family members? Take some time to notice what are you feeling?

Play – Variations on a theme from Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major,– *Beloved* (Lanz, 1995c, track 9) (brief pause) I want you to make yourself invisible and walk in the front door.

You are going to spend some time in different parts of your home. Spend some time in the kitchen; (brief pause) the living/family rooms; notice what you see; notice your feelings; and notice any memories that come up for you (brief pause) See your family members in your home and notice what they are doing. (brief pause) How do you feel seeing them all at the ages they were when you were a child? (pause)

Play – Papillon,– *Secret Garden: Songs from a Secret Garden* (Lovland, 1995, track 5)

Now, find your bedroom and look in; you see yourself at a younger age . (brief pause)

What do you see yourself doing? (brief pause) I’d like you to go in and spend some time with the younger you. She or he doesn’t get frightened about this stranger coming into their room. (brief pause) Have a conversation with them (pause) Ask them how their life is and listen to what they say. (brief pause) What do they dream about for their future? (brief pause) Share some thoughts about how to live life. (brief pause) Just spend some time together and see what happens. (pause) When you feel ready, say goodbye.

Play – Cristofori’s Dream – *Beloved* (Lanz, 1995b, track 10)

Spend some time in other parts of your house – make sure you go to every room, and even the back yard, if there is one. (pause)

Notice if you want to spend time with anyone else you see, and do it now. (pause)

When you are ready, leave the house and begin to walk away. (brief pause) What are you feeling now? (brief pause) What has this journey home been like? When you are ready, open your eyes and come back to this room.

While there is much to share, it is important to process the experiences participants spent with their younger selves, time spent with other family members, and any memories that came up. I have found that doing this imagery exercise in three segments makes sense as it is less likely to overwhelm the participants; for example, stopping before and after spending time in the bedroom with the younger self are good processing points. Participants have had touching experiences of visiting with family members who have passed away. The time spent with oneself as a child can be especially significant. For example, someone who was being abused as a child told their younger self it was not their fault and they will always love them. Another, who

suddenly lost their mom as a teenager, had a chance to talk with their mom and this time, say goodbye.

Imagery with musical accompaniment can make an extraordinary impact, by opening doors to rich awareness and potential for growth. I also have found that playing musical selections at certain moments in groups can add to the individual and group process; the next section will describe this practice.

The Use of Music in Groups

A variation of the use of music with imagery is selecting a piece to play to facilitate, enhance and/or acknowledge the client's personal work of any kind. For example, there is usually a "pause" when someone has finished her or his work, at least for the moment. I have found that filling some of this space with music allows clients some time to settle and take in what happened for them. The music can also offer a transition to what happens next. In addition, the music often promotes other group members, who may be dealing with a similar theme, to further explore and share in the group. One theme that often arises is – the absence or loss of fathers. I discovered a tender song written by Chuck Mangione (1978) called *Lullabye* (rather than Lullaby). The words alone convey the depth of feeling that someone can feel about losing a daddy:

Lullabye

Please somebody hold my hand
 I'm scared and feel real shaky
 Please somebody understand
 I just now lost my daddy
 Daddy said goodbye today
 I miss him so already
 I love mommy very much
 But mommys can't be daddys

I recall playing this song one time when a young man felt stuck as he shared the story of his father leaving one day and never returning. His pain was just below the surface and he was engaged in an internal battle over whether his tears were allowed to flow. While playing *Lullabye*, sung by an adult male in a gentle and sad tone, the young man's tears began to flow. The lyrics and music seemed to help him loosen his grip on his tears allowing his heart to weep the loss of his father. The impact of the song along with this man's tears was felt around the group, drawing others to focus on significant loss in their own life. After he processed what had happened for him, he felt he had addressed a significant loss in his life; and, he felt some sense of closure that he had not felt before.

I have also used *It's Alright to Cry* (Hall, 1987) sung by former professional football player, Rosie Grier. Rosie, because of his size and former occupation, giving permission for

males to cry can make a significant impact. The last words of the song are: “It’s all right to cry little boy, I know some big boys that cry, too.”

The musical selections that can be used are unlimited just as number of life themes is infinite. I have included below a few other musical pieces I have used, along with the life theme focused on in the lyrics. “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” (Robinson, 1962, Track 8) – remaining in an unwanted relationship. “Tears in Heaven” (Clapton, 1992, Track 4) – loss of a child or someone close. “You’ve Got a Friend” (King, 1971, Track 7) – support to someone feeling sad. “You Are So Beautiful” (Preston & Fisher, 1974, Track 7) – a love song.

I have also used music and imagery to help clients explore memories which represented certain feelings, such as anger, sadness, or joy. One imagery exercise is as follows:

I would like you to get in touch with a “sad” memory; let the first memory that comes to your awareness be the one you explore. Play – A Drop of Silence – *Dream* (Kitaro, 1992a, Track 4). Where does this memory take place? (brief pause) How old are you? What happens that is sad? (brief pause) Who else is around or with you? Do they help you deal with your sadness? (brief pause) Does this sad memory still impact you today in some way? If so, how?

My experience of this exercise is that the sad memory often represents some piece of unfinished business and still impacts the person today. The music once again helps in setting the mood for the memory and accompanying feelings to more fully be recalled. I have used similar imagery exercises designed to recall memories that relate to anger, and joy or happiness. For the “angry” memory I have used Mysterious Island – *Dream* (Kitaro, 1992b, Track 2). For the “joyful” memory I have played Facing West – *Pat Metheny Secret Story* (Metheny, 1992, Track 2).

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