

## Not Being Able to Paint (Marion Milner): Review of Part I (chapters 1-5), the Emergence of the Free Drawings (Firing of the Imagination), and Implications for Art Therapy

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Marion Milner (1900-1998) was a distinguished British psychoanalyst, educationalist, autobiographer, and artist. Her first books, published under the pseudonym Joanna Field, were actually self-analyses; she later published under her own name. She became a prominent member of the Independent Group of British psychoanalysis, and was influenced by the works of Jean Piaget, Jungian analytic psychologists, and Eastern philosophies. She made considerable use of painting and doodling (scribbling) in her therapy and was also an enthusiastic painter herself. Her observations on the art process and consequent products as windows on the interplay of the inner and outer worlds and on creativity were published in her book *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950/2010). Note: All the following quotes from Milner are from this book.

Milner discussed the nature of creativity and forces that prevent its expression. In her forward to the book, Anna Freud explained, "She chooses as the subject of her scrutiny not the professional and recognized artist but herself as a 'Sunday painter'; not the finished masterpiece but her own fumbling and amateurish beginner's efforts to draw and paint" (p. xiii). Milner's journey, which grew out of her first-hand experience with art expression, corresponds to the obligation of the art therapist to be familiar with art expression. "The creativity of the therapist is, however, critical to any effective therapy, including art. Many . . . have suggested that a clinician needs to be able to use his artistic self in a flexible, yet disciplined way" (Rubin, 1999,

p. 129). Through a first-hand experience with art making, we learn its unique therapeutic qualities and about ourselves.

In Part I, Milner depicts how free drawing emerged as her preferred method of drawing. She discusses three visual dimensions: lines, colors, and composition (space). She deals with the interesting relationship/dialog between the inner and outer realities of the creator in regard to these graphic visual dimensions.

In the first chapter, Milner describes the frustration she experienced prior to adopting the free drawing method. She had read many instruction books about how to draw and tried to follow their advice, but noticed that her motivation in nearly all previous attempts had been to depict beauty. However, she wrote, "It occurred to me that preconceived ideas about beauty in drawing might have a limiting effect on ones freedom of expression. Beauty might be like happiness, something which a too direct striving after destroys" (p. 5).

Milner thus understood she must free herself from issues of appearance. This point resembles our basic attitude as art therapists when we say to our clients: "In this room, there is no beautiful or non-beautiful drawing; everything you draw is okay." This striving to establish a non-judgmental space in which to create is a necessary condition for true self-expression and the therapeutic process. When clients struggle against excessive self-criticism, the struggle becomes an authentic part of the therapeutic process.

As part of her personal struggle to free herself from drawing beauty, Milner attempts to express her mood with lines, without regard for appearance. She seated herself in

front of a lovely field of flowers, but surprisingly drew a completely different scene – of a flame of smoke coming out of the earth. This experience was duplicated when Milner attempted to draw her mood beneath a beautiful beech tree during "a perfect June morning" (p. 6), but instead drew two bushes on a snowy cliff bending in a storm. Milner wrote, "It seems very odd that thoughts of fire and tempest could be, without one's knowing it, so close beneath the surface in what appeared to be a moment of greatest peace" (p. 7).

The drawings were the product of a free method, which revealed rich inner experiences:

*Although the drawings were actually made in an absent-minded mood, as soon as one was finished there was usually a definite "story" in my mind of what it was about. Most often these stories had been written down at once but even when not so noted I could remember their exact details years after, they seemed to be quite fixed and definite, having none of the elusive quality of dreams. But I could not at this stage bring myself to face the implications of the fact, though recognizing it intellectually, that the heath fire and blasted beeches . . . all expressed the opposite of the moods and ideas. (pp. 7-8).*

Milner's experience with free drawing as "a way of letting hand and eye do exactly what pleased them without any conscious . . . intention" forms the starting point of her book. It became clear to her that the drawings convey not only clues to the unconscious, but by being connected to issues of creativity also reflect the basic problems of living. Sayers Janet, in her introduction to the second edition of *On Not Being Able to Paint*, writes Milner's book "helped transform psychologists and art therapists into much greater awareness of the interplay of inner and outer reality in art and everyday life" (p. xxiii).

In chapters 2-4, Milner suspends discussion of the meanings of these free drawings and goes back to learning the painter's task from books. She discusses issues of composition, line, and color as well as the relationship between outer reality (artists striving to depict in their art) and inner reality (in the form of the artists' perceptions, or in other words, their subjective experiences).

Milner noted the twofold task of the artist: to depict the object according realistic phenomenology (distance,

solidness, shading, perspective, etc.) and the artists' wish "to express the feelings that come from the sense of touch and muscular movement" (p. 10) rather than from the sense of sight of the object. Additionally, there are visual matters that meet the opposite: "For instance, once you begin to think about distance and separation it is also necessary to think about different ways of being together, or in the jargon of the painting books, composition" (p. 12).

Milner deals with **composition** as reflecting togetherness and separateness. That is, she describes the degree to which the objects in the drawing/painting relate to one another: their degree of coherency. Coherency in the art product can express significant issues, for instance cognitive capacities, the degree of integration among self-structures, mental representations, memories, and self-other relationships.

Composition is bound to relations between the input of the senses and our imagination:

*Certainly seeing with one's own eyes, whether in painting or in living, seeing the truth of people and events and things needed an act of the imagination; for the truth was never presented whole to one's senses at any particular moment, direct sensory experience was always fragmentary and had to be combined into a whole by the creative imagination. . . . But to know the truth of people you have to select and combine; to grasp the essence of them, whether in paint or thought, you have surely to combine all the partial glimpses into a relevant whole. This, however, since it requires imagination, brought me face to face with certain dangers inherent in the nature of imagination. (p. 14).*

The creative experience Milner describes could also depict the endeavors of art therapists in discovering the complete picture of their clients, who represent themselves through art as well as verbal and non-verbal expression. These can be seen her "partial glimpses into a relevant whole" (p. 14). Inherent to the clinical art-based assessments that are part of the therapeutic process is the danger of personal projections, especially when art products could have various possible meanings. Here, as opposed to art-based assessments, Milner is the observer and the analyzer of her own images.

Milner discusses **lines** or **outlines** in the drawings. She quoted Harold Speed's observation in his 1913 book *The Practice and Science of Drawing*:

*A line seems a poor thing from the visual point of view: as the boundaries (of masses) are not always clearly defined, but are continually merging into the surrounding mass and losing themselves, to be caught up again later on and defined once more. (p. 50).*

After reading this, Milner tried looking at the objects around her and found it was true.

*When really looked at in relation to each other their outlines were not clear and compact . . . they continually became lost in shadow. Two questions emerged here. First, how was it possible to have remained unaware of this fact for so long? Second, why was such a great mental effort necessary in order to see the edges of objects as they actually show themselves rather than as I had always thought of them?. . . the effort needed in order to see the edges of objects as they really look stirred a dim fear, a fear of what might happen if one let go one's mental hold on the outline which kept everything separate and in its place. . . . Thus the outline represented the world of fact, of separate touchable solid objects; to cling to it was therefore surely to protect oneself against the other world, the world of imagination. So I could only suppose that, in one part of the mind, there really could be a fear of losing all sense of separating boundaries; particularly the boundaries between the tangible realities of the external world and the imaginative realities of the inner world of feeling and idea; in fact a fear of being mad. (pp. 15-16).*

In art therapy, lines can signify various conditions, such as developmental abilities (e.g., fine motor control), physical state (e.g., abilities vs. inabilities, pharmacological side effects), cognition (e.g., reality perception, perspective), emotions (e.g., stress, anger), and relations (e.g. mutuality, fight, dominance of control). Milner defines the function of lines as representing the world of facts and knowing about them. They communicate our self-knowledge while at the same time contradicting the sense of losing separating

boundaries, as could happen in our subjective life, for example, in relationships and/or during spiritual experiences.

At this point Milner moves on to deal with **colors** as a phenomenon distinct from lines. Milner describes a time when she was eager to draw the inner perception of a landscape. She didn't know how to draw it, so she sketched and wrote down ideas regarding what she saw.

Milner asks herself about the colors she is seeing and why she usually avoids them. She notes that the colors left on the palette after painting are interesting and alive, contrary to the painting itself. I must say that her observation is quite familiar to me as an art therapist and as a creator, when I pick up used palettes after a therapeutic session in which the client's (or my) painting has expressed defensive, false or stereotype stances. In other words, when creativity has been blocked.

*August 9th. Still I want to paint these earth colours, under a heavy sky, wet short grass, ragwort, green and yellow. I've tried making little water-colour notes of colour combinations but water-colour used like that seems to lack vitality, no glow in it. I want to make colours lit from within. On this cloudy day after rain wet grass glows its greenness from inside itself. (p. 18).*

Milner's delicate phenomenological observation of the colors in the external world, and the inner world arising from the artist's frustration in depicting them on canvas/paper, is shown here. Again Milner describes tension between the inner and outer worlds.

*How colours in nature alter when I shut my eyes; they seem to grow and glow and develop. It looks as if colour ought to be very free to develop in its own way from the first impression – and it needs time, willingness to wait and see what it does. Yet in saying this I have a flicker of fear, fear of where it may go with no checks, no necessity to copy exactly the colour of the object as it seems at first sight. . . . This feeling of colour as something moving and alive in its own right, not fixed and flat and bound like the colouring of a map, grew gradually stronger. Again the fear of losing one's hold on the solid earth may remain unrecognized; but that as soon as one tries to use one's imagination, to see with the inner as well as with the outer eye, then it may have to be*

faced. I say "may" because obviously there are some people for whom ventures into the world of imagination are not beset with dangers, or, at least, not always. (pp. 23-24).

Milner illuminates the inner experience of colors and of being attached to inner or outer scenes. I can think of many vignettes in which I ask clients to close their eyes and see the inner color arising from a specific feeling/experience and to represent it with materials they choose. This option in art therapy binds the inner and outer worlds and creates an aperture to the subjective world. I cannot, however, recall a sense of danger as Milner describes, perhaps because of the structural character of these experiences, or my recognition that inner colors are part of our inner world.

Milner experimented with older color drawings she had done. She drew on top of them, with no intention of producing the original realistic light or colors, and found her new products more enlightening. It seemed to her that painters give something from within themselves to the object they draw. Milner's observation raises the issue of inviting clients to draw on top of their older drawings or to erase parts of them. These opportunities could function as tangible decision-making, self-choices, and meeting with the destruction and building processes that are part of human growth.

In the fifth chapter, Milner deals with the relation between perception and dream as a subjective realm:

*I thought. . . that the first phase of experience is a dream rather than a perception simply because we are not born knowing the difference between thoughts and things, not born knowing the difference between subjective and objective, it is a knowledge only slowly acquired. . . . Our experience is as yet a wholeness in which subject and object are still united. (p. 27).*

Art, in Elinor Ulman's words, is "The meeting ground of the inner and outer world" (In Jakab, 1971, p. 93): a ground that enables this wholeness to be present. Milner discusses the relevance of symbolism, which has its own external expression. She also depicts experiences that come from the outer world and affect imagination:

*But I wanted to add that of course imagination itself does not spring from nothing, it is what we have made within us out of all past relationships with what is outside, whether they were realized as outside relationships or not. (pp. 27-28).*

In art therapy, we occasionally meet with drawings that express wish fulfillment, which connect to a conflictual/missing aspect (for example, bodily, environmental, or emotional) of outer reality.

Milner asks about moments when self is experienced as an un-separated entity.

*Did it mean that they are moments in which one does not have to decide which is one self and which is the other – moments of illusion, but illusions that are perhaps the essential root of a high morale and vital enthusiasm for living – moments which can perhaps be most often experienced in physical love combined with in-loveness, but also which need not always require bodily contact and physical sexual experience, but which can be imaginatively experienced in an infinite variety of contacts with the world? Now I thought I could answer my own doubts about the passing of the transfigurations and see their place in the context of ordinary living. For I read: "The gods sometimes appear, and when they do they bring us a foretaste of that sublime victory of mind over matter which we may never gain in experience but which may constantly be gained in thought. . . . A god is a conceived victory of mind over nature. A visible god is the consciousness of such a victory momentarily attained. The vision soon vanishes, the sense of omnipotence is soon dispelled by recurring conflicts with hostile forces: but the momentary illusion of that realized good has left us with the perennial knowledge of good as an ideal" (Santayana: "Pathetic Notions of God," p. 55). If this were true then it was surely by those moments that one comes to know what one loves, comes to hammer out over the years the knowledge of what it is worth striving for; and by this comes to achieve a growing integration in one's living. They were surely moments when, by the temporary fusion of dream and external reality, the dream itself becomes endowed with the real qualities of the peg that momentarily carries it; thus each time one's gods descend they themselves become*

*enriched by that very incarnation. Or rather they become enriched as soon as one takes action to bring this transfigured object nearer to oneself. (pp. 29-30).*

This paragraph represents Milner's basic eagerness to feel herself "part of things," part of life, alive. Drawing, whether free or naturalistic, can be seen as arising from this basic drive. As an art therapist, I sometimes have the sudden recognition that I choose to meet myself and others through art expression by way of this unique medium for meeting inner and outer realities; as if art allows accurate communication, but sometimes it takes time to understand its meaning. Winnicott, reviewing Milner's book, wrote about art as "the process by which the inner becomes actualized in external form and as such becomes the basis, not only of internal perception, but also of all true perception of environment" (1951, p.76). Thus, art-making offers us a way to explore our imagination and perception as two dialectic experiences. The ability to move along this dialectic continuum represents healthy flexibility and a space in which creativity can evolve.

## References

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