

## **Beyond Words: Nature-therapy in action**

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**SUMMARY:** Whereas most psychotherapies are verbal and take place indoors, this article presents a creative approach using nature as a partner in the process

### **Prior to a journey:**

**Nature-therapy** is an innovative experiential therapeutic approach taking place in nature. It seeks to broaden the classical concept of 'setting', as static, permanent and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967), as it relates to the dynamic natural environment as a partner in the shaping of the setting and process (Berger, 2003, 2005; Berger & McLeod, 2006). It develops concepts and methods that assist its operation in this live and open environment while using its healing elements (Berger, 2003; Berger & McLeod, 2006) to support therapeutic process and open them to additional dimensions. Nature-therapy is a post modern approach based on the integration of elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism and body-mind practices. The development of the approach is based on the personal and professional experience of the author using the research process of a Ph.D to conceptualize, analyze and further develop it. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational and health sectors in Israel. Training is provided in a few academic institutions in Israel and is currently developing in Europe.

### **From theory to practice: Nature therapy within a psycho-education school setting**

'Encounters with Nature' is a therapeutic-educational program for children with special needs taking place under the Israeli education ministry and The Nature-therapy Centre. It takes place in 'natural' spaces within the school's territory or in an open 'natural' environment near it. It operates as a two hour weekly program throughout the school year. The program is facilitated in co-operation with therapists and teachers who participated in a Nature-therapy training program and work under a routine nature-therapy oriented supervision. The case study described in this article was part of a larger

research scheme which explored the program's impact and examined the specific influence that the contact with nature had upon the participants (Berger, 2005).

The aim of this article is to present some of the core principles involved in incorporating nature in therapy while relating to it as a key reference in the process. The paper will focus on a way in which the approach can be used with children with special needs within the school. The article will integrate theory with examples from practice, seeking to offer participants concepts which they can use during their work with different clients and in different settings.

### **Building a home in nature**

A class of seven children aged 8 – 10 studying in a school for children with special needs in the north of Israel participated in the 'Encounters in Nature' program. The aim of the program was to widen the children's communication skills, to strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence and to help establish their integration as a group. Since the children were not accustomed to the idea of doing experiential therapy or to the concept of working outdoors, the program began indoors, inviting the children to look through the windows of the class-room and observe the changes that autumn brings. This exploration of changes in nature was then used as a metaphor to present the new concept of doing experiential work in nature and working under the collaborative facilitation of a teacher and a therapist. Having set a safe foundation in the well-known environment of the school, the sessions were gradually transferred to the outdoors to a remote and unused territory in the back yard of the school which was chosen as a base for the encounters. After two months, as it became clear that the group was dealing with issues such as independency, borders, self-confidence and self-expression, the facilitators decided to use the 'Building a Home in Nature' model (Berger, 2004), hoping to use its concrete, active and non-verbal mode to support the individuation process of the children in the difficulties and, since the group was quite scattered, the facilitators offered the participants to choose specific locations in the (group's) larger territory and use the materials they found in nature to construct a personal spaces – homes. The children did not need many explanations as they happily joined this playful offer. The symbolism which stood out from the 'home building' process was amazing: The home of a child who lived in a chaotic family had no boundaries, while the home of the child with an aggressive and invasive mother

was surrounded by a wide wall. The home of a new child who just joined the class was built on the edge of the group territory and the home of the dominant one was built at its centre. This 'concrete symbolism' (Berger & McLeod, 2006) that stood out from this creative work in nature allowed the participants to express basic issues in a non-verbal and creative way, using nature as a mediator to find identification and a sense of belonging. Relating to these concrete symbols further work was developed as stories from the children's real homes were shared and expressed. Using the drama therapy concept of 'distancing' (Jennings, 1998; Landy, 1996) the children were invited to explore their current choices allowing them to re-shape and change them according to the new perspectives they gained in the 'here and now'.

This intervention triggered a turning point as the children began to take more responsibility for their choices, acknowledging that their wishes could be transformed into reality, in the form of reconstructed homes. This active mode of working helped the participants to expand their ability to conceptualize and provided them with a strong sense of control over their lives.

### **Touching nature**

As winter stepped in, the environment changed: rain and mud took over, plants sprouted, and animals such as migrating birds and earthworms appeared. These elements intrigued the group members who were not accustomed to be in such direct contact with nature. Dan (a presumed name) engaged with the process of birth and maturation (growth) of a tiny plant which sprouted from a rock he placed in 'his home' boundary. He was excited by his discovery as he was overwhelmed by the strength and persistence the plant had as it made its way through the hard rock. Dan was worried that its roots would not have enough space to develop in the rock and that it would lack the nourishment it needed to grow. Using story making techniques (Gersi, 1997; Lahad, 1992) it became evident that the plant coping story touched upon some traumatic experience in Dan's life: moving from one home to another facing the question of his own roots and belonging. Following this line, aiming to expand Dan's sense of capability, the 'plant coping story' was used to extend the personal story as it focused on the coping mechanisms and strength Dan found in complex moments of his life. This mode of working combined elements from Lahad's (1992) and White's (2004) approaches to working with traumatic episodes and the concept of unique

outcomes from the narrative approach (Freedman & Combs, 1996), as it used the story of the plant as a way to connect the child with his own strength and abilities as well as to connecting him to the primal sense of continuity and cycle which is shared by all living beings (Macy and Fleming, 1998).

### **Expanding the alliance**

Dan's story highlights the concepts of the 'Three Way Relationship: client-therapist-nature', a main nature-therapy concept (Berger & McLeod, 2006). This concept seeks to extend the therapist-client therapeutic relationship by adding 'nature' as a third partner to it. As such it is designed to help the therapist relate to nature as an active partner (perhaps a co-therapist), influencing not only the setting but the whole therapeutic process. Relating to this concept, the therapist is invited to develop a specific standpoint by which he may take a central position working directly with the client relating to nature as a backcloth, a tool provider or, take a quiet role in the background allowing the client to work directly with 'nature' as he remains as a witness, human container and mediator. This way of working can expand the process into additional spiritual and transpersonal dimensions, allowing the client to connect to the 'larger than self', providing a fresh meaning, a sense of partnership and interdependence that he shares not only with people but also with nature (Abram, 1996; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Davis, 1998; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003).

### **Working with the seasons**

As winter came to an end and spring arrived, temperatures rose and the soft grass turned into yellow thorns. The independent dynamics of nature triggered the participants to voice their discomfort and raise their desire to move from the present location into a new, shadowed one. Relating to this uncontrolled yet unexpected dynamic, using the concept of the 'Three Way Relationship', the facilitators asked the participants to re-examine the seven month long process as the possibility of choosing a new territory was acknowledged. During this process it became clear that the participants wanted to design and build a new common 'home' in a more central place in the schoolyard. As the participant's responsibility and involvement increased, the group debated about basic questions regarding their wishes and needs as they were transformed into concrete demands of space: How big should it be? Should it be open or closed? How near to the class-room should it be? Having chosen a new location in

a small grove, relating to the concept of 'Therapy as a Journey' (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLeod, 2006) the facilitators offered the children the opportunity to conduct some kind of 'continuity' ritual, making a link between the old, individual homes and the new common home territory. During this journey important memories were shared and elements which had significant meaning (physical and emotional) to the kids were taken to the new location. This process took place towards the end of the school year and was used to introduce the closure of the year-long process. It received a special meaning as the separation included not only a departure from the group members and facilitators—its 'human potential space'—but also from its live and physical home: nature. This separation process allowed unfinished separation stories to be told and enabled the group to conclude with a sense of faith and hope as the image of the sprouting plants and migrating birds became dominant, reminding the participants of the universal cycle of life and death, beginning and ending (Berger & McLeod, 2006).

### **Towards the end of a journey**

Based on a nature-therapy case study with a group of children with special needs this article has illustrated a way in which nature and the relationship with nature can be incorporated into therapy. It presents the potential that lies within non-verbal and creative modes of working, including a way in which the direct encounter with nature can support and extend the process in ways which are beyond words. My hope is that as more practitioners develop, implement and study their own ways of doing therapy in nature, a broader set of case studies and a more fully articulated theoretical framework will be built and that this young approach will further develop.

Practitioners interested in sharing their experience and forming further dialogue are invited to contact the author at: [ronenbw@hotmail.com](mailto:ronenbw@hotmail.com)

For more information about nature-therapy: articles, academic training and research please refer to: [www.naturetherapy.org](http://www.naturetherapy.org).

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