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Aesthetic Empathy and Imagination: The Pedagogy of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis with Applications for Religious Educators

Precis

Building upon the concept of aesthetic empathy, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis devised an art pedagogy that would become the basis for the practice of art therapy. The art courses she conducted for children in the Terezín ghetto during the Holocaust, were meant to free the child's imagination, nurture creative agency and restore a sense of reality in the midst of chaos and deprivation. Using her pedagogical methods, a workshop will be designed to develop aesthetic experiences that will stimulate the imagination and nurture creative responses for at risk youth in a religious context.

As religious educators, we are all too aware of the challenges that confront the children and youth we serve. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “Each year more than ten million children in the United States endure the trauma of abuse, violence, natural disasters and adverse events.” (NCTSN) Violent home and community environments, random gun crimes, worldwide conflict and instability significantly contribute to the fostering of insecurity and uncertainty in the lives of our young people. Crippling socio-economic conditions, fear for personal safety and physical and/or emotional abuse in the daily lives of children and youth have the potential to adversely affect their ability to engender empathy toward others. This lack of empathy creates the potential for causing harm to the child or youth and contributes to the continual cycle of violence in the surrounding community. “Treating other people as if they were just objects is one of the worst things you can do to another human being, to ignore their subjectivity, their thoughts and feelings.” (Baron-Cohen 2001, 7-8) The consequences that are devastating.

The path forward requires a myriad of responses from the religious community. Chief among them is the task of fostering the imagination and providing aesthetic experiences that can engender empathy. “An aesthetic experience involves both thought and feeling, the mind as well as the senses. The intellectual appreciation of the artistic work coupled with its emotional ability to move us gives rise to a complex mix of feeling, thought, insight and beauty.” (Howe 2013, 8) Empathetic imagination allows the child or youth to imagine being in another’s situation or to imagine being another in that other’s situation. This creates possibilities for transformation and healing rather than a perpetuation of a destructive cycle of negativity and damage. “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.” (Buber 1958,) Empathetic imagination engenders the possibility for the presence of the divine. “The purpose of relation is the relation itself - touching the You. For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life.” (Buber 1958,) In this context we are facilitating the possibility for healing and divine surprise.

Being intrinsically affected by another’s emotional experience or entering into feelings brought about by an aesthetic experience involves being able to imagine. Sacred texts can serve as the foundation of aesthetic experiences that have the ability to foster empathy in our children and youth. “There are many everyday opportunities to develop and maintain empathy. Indeed, empathy is promoted whenever we reflect on the human experience, read a novel, act in a play or watch a movie. The recognition that a strong empathic sensibility, whether emotionally or cognitively inspired, tends to make us more moral, pro-social and community minded and has encouraged many people to seek its promotion in both children and adults.” (Hume 2013,160) Using art, music, drama, poetry, rap, film and movement offers the opportunity for a child or youth to dare to imagine. Entering into the creative process using the sacred text grounds the experience and offers a synthesis between Story and art. This allows the child or youth to affirm the creative spark that is within.

Facilitating the creative process provides the groundwork for developing empathy. The emphasis is to be placed upon the aesthetic process that offers the possibility for transformation. The incorporation of artistic mediums is not about the final quality of the art produced but centers on the process and its outcome. “This is the eternal origin of art that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but something that appears to the soul and demands the soul’s creative power.” (Buber 1958, 9) The creative process brings the child or youth out of an insular or self-absorbed setting and invites her/him to imagine what “the other” is feeling, thinking or doing. It provides the child or youth with the agency to enter into the creative process and bring about a new way of perceiving the world. The child or youth is offered the capacity to move from objectification of the other to a subjective identification with the other. “Love does not cling to the I in such a way as to have the Thou only for its content: its object; but love is between I and Thou.” (Buber 1958, 16) The impetus for empathetic response is in relationship.

The pedagogical framework developed by Friedl Dicker- Brandeis facilitates aesthetic empathy. “Dicker-Brandeis used her teaching to enhance children’s relationships with themselves, to participate sympathetically with the world. It was her way to help the children psychologically survive their experience, whatever, their eventual fate. She felt that empathy, personal meaning and a shared humanity could be found through art.” (Hume 2013, 178) In order to comprehend how she developed and applied her teaching method it is necessary to explore the concept of empathy in her formation.

Empathy as a concept has a relatively recent history. Extremely influential in the philosophical life of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, it was intrinsically connected to the artistic world in Vienna and in the early Bauhaus movement. Built upon the term *emföhlung*, or ‘feeling into’, one is invited to view a work of art beyond a cognitive awareness or comprehension of it. *Emföhlung*. requires the perceiver to enter into the work, providing an avenue to form an emotional connection that has transformational potential. “The aesthetic experience is one of empathy, in which the viewer resonates with the work in such a way that he or she sees and feels something of both the thing rendered and the mind of the artist who rendered it. Thus, to be involved in art, either as artist or viewer, is to be part of an empathic experience in which perception, understanding, meaning and interpretation are changed.” (Hume 2013, 177) The potential to bring about a shift in perspective or heighten meaning through the aesthetic experience is integral to the concept.

Dicker-Brandeis was a devoted pupil of Johannes Itten, an artist-philosopher and mystic. She studied with him in Vienna and followed him to the Bauhaus in its formative years. Itten’s work would have a profound impact upon her and she would incorporate his teaching techniques into her pedagogical framework. “Itten’s method of teaching differed radically from others practiced in Vienna in that time. A philosopher himself, he devoted great effort to shaping his pupils’ conceptions, considering this a basis for independent creative activities. At the same time he taught them the intricacies of the liaisons between spiritual teaching and its embodiment in form, colors, materials and the unique analysis of painting.” (Makarova 1990, 10)

Highlighting the importance of developing the body and the mind and integrating the importance of play into his pedagogical framework, he instructed his students to fully develop their personalities and self-awareness as part of their artistic training.

An ardent member of the cult of Mazdaznan, a type of Zoroastrianism, Itten incorporated his theology into his teaching. Reverence for nature, care of the body, and the importance of personal responsibility all informed his art and teaching. “The pedagogical principle on which Itten’s teaching was based can be summarized in a pair of opposites: ‘intuition and method’, or ‘subjective experience and objective recognition’. (Droste 1993, 24) In this way, Itten’s students were able to develop a balanced, integrative worldview that would enhance the way in which they were able to create. The epic battle between the forces of light and darkness underscored his artistic expression. “ In Theresienstadt his “theology” of the battle between the sun of light and the sun of darkness became all too real. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis made practical use of his rhythmic exercises as a device in her battle against the chaos of time and space.” (Makarova 2001, 191-192) She prepared her pupils to engage in the artistic process using breathing exercises and body movement, engendering a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. Her artistic world provided stability and order where there was none. Like Itten, she avoided the use of personal criticism because of its potential to damage the creative process.

Dicker-Brandeis followed Jacob Itten to the Bauhaus where he formulated its core pedagogy. They would be a part of the community from 1919-1923. “What was probably the most successful and far-reaching school of design began with a vision: the idea of creating a “New Man” from the disaster of World War I. This was to be a creature who, endowed with all the senses and trained by the best artists and architects of the age, would be able to invent the present and the future of a modern century. “ (Fiedler & Feierabend 1999, 8) Building upon ideas of aesthetic empathy and a holistic approach to the practice of art, the Bauhaus was an artistic utopia. “The early Bauhaus years were characterized by a powerful community spirit. An environment fit for ‘new man’ was to be planned, designed and built on the ruins of the old empire. All saw themselves as artists, but artists who would make their contribution to the ‘cathedral of the future’ through craftsmanship or teaching. “ (Droste 1993, 22) The Bauhaus incorporated art, music, weaving, printing, graphic arts, costume design, photography and theatre, among other art forms to provide an integrated approach to artistic life.

At the Bauhaus, the established ways of teaching and shaping young artists were abandoned. Technique was no longer the primary focus and the prior types of artistic instruction were considered impediments to the creative process. The students of the Bauhaus were encouraged to begin with a *tabula rasa*. “The goal of such “unlearning” was to bring the young artist back to a state of innocence beyond the corruption of culture —to a childlike self — from which learning could begin anew.”(Bergdoll,&Dickerman 2009, 17) An emphasis was placed on the integration of art forms, the incorporation of body, mind and spirit and the importance of ‘play’.

During her tenure at the Bauhaus, Dicker-Brandeis was also influenced by the artist, Paul Klee, working with him from 1921-1923. " Friedl studied with Klee every day, listening to his lectures on the essence of art and childhood imagination and watching him paint." (Makarova 2001,13) She would leave the Bauhaus with Jacob Itten over artistic differences about its direction. The overarching ethos had dramatically shifted to a new emphasis upon design for mass production. Dicker-Brandeis would go on to Berlin and Vienna practicing art and architecture successfully, until the rise of the Nazi movement. She became an émigré, moving to Prague and "because she felt her place was in Europe, turned down a visa that would have enabled her to enter Palestine". (Volavkova, 1993, xix) In 1942, she took up residence in the infamous "model prison camp", Terezin, along with fellow artists, dramatists, writers, musicians and scholars. She perished in Auschwitz- Birkenau in 1944.

When Dicker-Brandeis was preparing to leave for Terezin, she used her suitcase allowance to carry art materials in order to teach the young people incarcerated there. " In her own study and practice, Dicker had learned how to use art to break with old patterns and to remain spirited in times of despair through clear artistic expression. At the camp she taught children similar lessons. She instructed them in the the skills necessary for giving artistic form to their experiences. Thus did she provide them the means to sustain hope in the face of their own suffering. " (Wix 2010,123) Dicker-Brandeis had encountered her own personal challenges and endured disappointment and sadness during her life. Her artistic training helped her navigate through the darkness. It would be the impetus for her work in Terezin.

Children and youth in Terezin were housed in quarters that separated them from their parents. Frightened, hungry and locked away from any vestiges of normal life, they were traumatized on a daily basis. They were surrounded by death, disease, hunger and degrading living conditions. "Of the 15,000 children deported from Theresienstadt [Terezin] to Auschwitz, 100 survived—none under the age of fourteen." (Volavkova 1993, xxi.) The young prisoners were not permitted to be educated but were allowed to practice art, drama and music. Dicker-Brandeis affirmed the humanity of those she worked with through her teaching. "By encouraging them to trust their own imagery and develop their own artistic forms she helped them find inner resources to honor their own sense of reality, creating a psychological space of empowerment, meaning, and freedom in the midst of dreadful oppression and daily horrors." (Wix, 2010, 19) Dicker-Brandeis sought to bring a sense of order and meaning into the daily context of chaos through art education. She stated that "Aesthetics are the ultimate authority, the moving force, the motor capable of creating production, while defending man from forces over which he has no control."(Makarova p. 43 FDB) Her teaching environment became a safe haven for children and youth to react to their experiences through art.

Although Dicker-Brandeis had no formal training in pedagogy, the legacy of her own artistic training formed the basis for her teaching. She centered her lessons on the transformative effect of the artistic process. In her essay, "On Children's Art", [Terezin,1943] , she asserted that "Art lessons do not intend to turn all children into artists, but try to unlock and preserve for all of them the creative spirit as a source of energy to stimulate imagination and strengthen their own ability to judge and to observe. " (Wix, 2010, 129) Her classes included the opportunity to work in groups , enabling a supportive and nurturing environment.

She stated that “Through the interdependency something comes about that in later life will play an enormous role; that is, the work of a group becomes not the work of competing individuals but an achievement of all of them.” (Wix 2010,133) Her emphasis on developing a stable community brought children and youth together in a system of support and care. They would discuss and critique each other’s work, learning to see and experience it from the other’s point of view.

Eva Štichová-Beldová, one of her Terezin students recalls, “In what were called the free lessons, no theme was given. The children were not even supposed to think—simply draw, collect themselves, dream, and then draw again, whatever came of it. the goal of these lessons was spontaneous expression, which was supposed to lead to the freeing of the spirit.” (Makarova 2001, 213) Dicker-Brandeis allowed each of her pupils the gift of self-expression patently obvious in their preserved works. Murals created from scrap materials gleaned by the students, pencil drawings of their prior lives, paintings of their daily existence, all were given her personal care and attention. Štichová-Beldová states, “It was not her technique that made the difference; it was the feeling of freedom that she conveyed to the children—her own inner feeling of freedom, not the technical skills.” (Makarova 2001, 214) The facilitation of the creative process would be the ultimate gift given to her pupils.

When Dicker-Brandeis knew her selection for ‘transport’ was imminent, she packed about five thousand drawings in suitcases and concealed them in Terezin before she left. They are now on display in the State Jewish Museum in Prague, bearing witness. These drawings are the silent reminders of the thousands of children and youth who perished, calling us to remember. “If the human species is differentiated from the beasts by the marvel of consciousness, then we enact our humanity and the very authenticity of our being by straining to “know” through awareness the “unthinkable” experience of others.” (Langer, 1995, 15)

Dicker-Brandeis took the initiative to ensure that the artistic legacy of the children and youth of Terezin would survive. Her action was the final step in the artistic process she fostered.

Implementing the essence of the pedagogy of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis does not require that the teacher be an artist or endowed with creative talent. Instead, it demands that the educator is, above all, willing to be empathetic and nurturing. When preparing for facilitating this process be sure the gathering space is inviting, comfortable and welcoming. It should be a secure space that offers the participants a sense of trust and a non-anxious environment. Avoid making value judgments or formulating preconceived outcomes or projections of personal bias upon the reactions of the children or youth. The following four stage process moves from encounter to implementation implementation followed by reflection and resulting in transformative action.

Encounter

When preparing for the encounter, the religious educator should select a scripture reading or prayer as the foundation of the aesthetic experience. Using this as a catalyst, incorporate an artistic medium that illustrates the sacred text, such as a painting, photograph, film clip, or musical selection. Invite students to enter into the realm of the artistic medium. Have them consider how the aesthetic experience made them feel.

Implementation

The implementation stage invites the students to use art, music, collage making, poetry, movement, drama, photography, hip-hop, rap, sculpture, film, etc., as a response to the artistic medium presented. Give the students as many options for expression as possible. Be prepared to offer direction or assistance as needed. Each participant will work at a different pace, some will prefer working in groups, others alone. Stress the importance of the creative process. The outcomes will vary but all will be valued by the teacher and the participants.

Reflection

Each artwork will then be shared with the group. Discussion is to take place in a safe space. Every person is encouraged to participate, inviting reflection on the work in a caring and supportive way. Expressing the feelings the artwork engendered in them is the primary goal. Care for the feelings of each person and respectful listening is integral to the circle of discussion.

Transformative Action

Students are encouraged to consider how the sharing of the creative experience has changed their perceptions of themselves and one another. The empathic response engendered through the experience can offer the students new ways to perceive the world and provide the impetus to bring about change.

The legacy of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis is a gift to be used to restore empathy and sustain hope in a broken world.

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