

The immaterial fish; a therapeutic journey of imaginal transformation

By Venus Soberanes

Introduction: a recurring dream

The therapeutic journey I am going to relate in these pages started when I decided to work with the images from a recurring dream I have had since high school. When I was in high school, I was given a large fish tank. I filled it with water, and bought all the necessary equipment and machinery to support freshwater fish. I also purchased some Japanese fish and other small freshwater animals. To my dismay, one of my fish became sick, soon the whole aquarium became infected, and one by one all of my fish died, causing me enormous grief.

Since then, I have had a recurring dream that goes more or less like this: I am in front of a big fish tank, and either the tank is leaking and all the water is slowly draining, or the water is polluted with something that is killing the fish, or all the fish are sick and dying. In all the dreams, I frantically try to save the fish, to stop the leakage, or to transport the fish into another aquarium, or to change the polluted water for fresh clean water. The dream always ends with me feeling powerless to save the fish, and unable to stop them from dying.

I decided to work with the images of the dream, and make a series of mixed media collages that I named "the immaterial fish". I created 23 collages exploring the images of the dream. A fish, a big black circle and a number of smaller colorful circles were the common motifs for this series.

But it wasn't until I wrote a haiku about one of my fish images that I discovered what the images really were, and the secrets they were waiting to reveal to me.

Immaterial fish, a haiku

Fish facing the moon
An ocean of consciousness
Enveloping me

In this poem I found out that the black-lined circle was the moon, and that the fish was located in the universe, in an ocean of consciousness that contained everything in existence. The revelations went further after I dialogued with another one of the images in the series.

Talking with the image; discovering impermanence

For the first dialogue, I picked an image that was a little bit different; in addition to the circles and the background, this image has an oversized flower in one of its sides. My dialogue with the image went like this:

Dialogue with image “fish 01”

Me: *Hello Picture, I can see a fish, a flower, a number of circles, a lot of colour. I like your playfulness and the way the yellow background makes me feel.*

Picture: *you may want to remember me, the fish. I am that image of fish that you keep dreaming about, the fish in the tank that is dying and that you always want to save. Some times you do, some times you can't and all the fish die. In this picture I am well, I have been saved, I am floating in space, facing the moon and the planets in a galaxy full of stars.*

Me: *I am glad to know you are well and floating in the universe. I also see a big flower in the corner of the picture.*

Picture: *I am the flower. I am big, as big as the fish, and I am also floating in space. I am here rotating like a planet around the fish, rotating around the moon. As I rotate, I go from bud to bloom and then I die, and then I go back again to bud and bloom only to die again and again as I go around the fish floating in space. That is the nature of existence, creation, destruction, creation, destruction, and the universe keeps circling around. Planets are created, they bloom with life, and they die. Stars are born and die every second in the universe, and everything keeps rotating. The cycle of life remains. In the end, everything is created from the same atoms, and everything that dies goes back to be part of the universe, all the atoms get recycled into something else.*

Me: *So the fish that die in my dream follow that cycle of creation and destruction, and their atoms, as old as the universe, get recycled into something else.*

Picture: *And all that remains is the picture from your dreams.*

The fish and the flower are metaphors of impermanence, dancing in the universe with the song of creation and destruction.

That day, a number of interactions happened between my classmates, my image and me. I cannot remember the specifics of these interactions and responses, but what I do remember is the *emotions* I had while witnessing them. I was deeply moved and inspired, and at times, I held a feeling of deep connection with my classmates, with my images and with the universe.

Look, a butterfly! And learning from one's mistakes

I will take a small diversion from my main theme to investigate the learning's achieved through one particular interaction that occurred in class.

In one particular instance, we were asked to produce clay sculptures and then pair up to assist each other in dialoguing with our images. At the end of the process, each person was supposed to respond to the other person's image. My partner had an elaborate landscape with plants and flowers, a sun, a moon, and a big butterfly. His

dialogue consisted in talking with the moon in the corner of the picture, and at the end, I was expected to respond to his picture. After thinking about it for a moment, I wanted to represent the cycle of life and death, to then create more life. A butterfly is the last stage in the life of the insect that starts as a caterpillar, then metamorphoses into a butterfly to reproduce, then has eggs, and then it dies to give space to new caterpillars, and so the cycle goes on.

In any case, I wanted to respond to my partner's image by emphasizing the impermanence of all life. So I stood up, pretended to be the butterfly, slowly dying, its wings falling off, and then, it died.

After the class, I couldn't forget the image I had created. *I had killed the butterfly.* Something that was so alive and vibrant in my partner's image, I had chosen to respond to by killing it! I was extremely unhappy with my performance, and I felt regret and an inability to articulate the cause of my disturbance.

A few days went by, and I continued to think about the image and my choice of response. Of course everything is impermanent, but is that the adequate response to life, to think of everything as finite and dying?

While reading a random book, I found the answer to my conundrum. The book related a traditional Chinese story that goes like this:

A disciple goes to his master and tells him: "look master, look what I wrote"
A butterfly. I pluck its wings and look, a pepper!
The master tells him: "no, no, you got it all wrong" and he writes:
A pepper. I add wings and look, a butterfly!

What a serendipitous encounter! It even talked about a butterfly!

In the story, the teacher explained it all when he *added* wings, correcting the disciple's original image. ***The image has to be creative.*** The response to the image, in the same manner, has to be *creative*, giving space to more creativity, not destructive. Nothing can come after death, for death has a finality that cannot be followed by another image.

As Stephen K Levine says, talking about the intention of ritual as an image response in a group, in his essay, "Bearing gifts to the feast":

"Ritual, then, is inherently *creative*, not primarily conservative."¹

My inexperience had made me respond like the disciple in the story, and thus my deep regret and discomfort afterwards.

¹ Levine, Stephen K. *Poiesis*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, page. 50

But I had understood and learned from my mistake, and a profound change of consciousness was to follow. A change so deep, it even changed my dreams.

Birthing fish

A few days after the above revelation, I had the following dream:

I am carrying a package. Inside it, there are a few branches of live red coral. The coral is drying out, and I know that if it dries it will die, so I am wetting it with a moist sponge.

I look for a bucket or a big bottle to place the coral under water, and I start walking. I find a deep pool of blue water and I throw the coral in the pool. I enter the water myself, I am submerged to my waist, and then I start to pull out fish from inside of my vagina. I pull out live fish, one after another, and I release them in the water. I pull out several fish, then I pull out a full-size dolphin, then another and another. I keep pulling out fish until the pool looks like one of the fish tanks at the aquarium. Everything is alive. I know that I didn't conceive all those fish and the three dolphins, but rather I had put them inside of me so that they wouldn't dry out until I had found a hospitable place with deep water to release them.

I remembered my dream as soon as I woke up, but it wasn't until I started to write it that I had the realization that this dream was indeed a change of consciousness from my previous recurring dream.

After a few days of sitting with the dream, I made a picture (see image "fish 02" in the attached CD), and one morning I woke up with the intense desire to dialogue with this picture. The dialogue went as follows:

Dialogue with image "fish 02"

Me: *I recognize your picture; you are the image from that dream.*

Moon: *I am here, a witness to the image. I move slowly and change the tides.*

Me: *what do you want?*

Moon: *I want to be far away and slowly go around to observe everything from different angles.*

Me: *I see a school of fish. Where do you come from?*

Fish: *we come from inside the woman. She had kept us inside of her so that we would be safe and moist, waiting for the right time and place to come out.*

Me: *what do you need?*

Fish: *we need clean water, we need the right environment to survive and thrive. We were there, inside of her all along, waiting for a hospitable environment so that we could come out and grow and swim and play, and keep on being alive and reproduce.*

Me: *water, what do you want?*

Water: *I want to be clean and have the right temperature to keep the life I hold and to promote life. I want to have an ecosystem.*

Me: *what do you need?*

Water: *I need to be respected and to be trusted, I am part of nature, I can create a good environment for life, and I can clean myself and be part of the cycle of life. I am not that fragile.*

Me: *I see a woman giving birth to the fish.*

Woman: *I didn't conceive the fish; I merely had them inside me to keep them alive, I was just waiting for the right environment to let them out. The fish were always safe, here, inside of me.*

Me: *what do you want?*

Woman: *I want to swim in the water, with my fish; I want my fish to be free and alive in this water, in this new environment that is so benevolent.*

Picture: *I am alive.*

Me (to the picture): *I can see your vibrancy and bright colours, I can see the sense of humour and I have a feeling of optimism. Is there something you want to tell me?*

Picture: *trust the cycle of life. It is self-maintaining and self-perpetuating. Trust that images like me are alive inside of you, like the fish inside the woman, waiting for the right environment to come out. Trust yourself and the resilience of life.*

Rather than explaining all the ways in which this dialogue is revealing and relevant to me, and how it speaks about my individual process of life and recovery, I will share a haiku I wrote about it, summarizing my feeling for the dream, the picture and the dialogue:

Immaterial fish, a haiku

Woman giving birth
A deep ocean within her
Exploding with life

The creation of waking dreams

How to keep the image alive and vibrant? How to, as Shaun McNiff says, "stick to the image"? How to further creativity and the creation of more art?

I wanted to go beyond image interpretation, for “experience in art therapy has repeatedly shown that meditation on the significance of the image for its maker [...] furthers, rather than obstructs, the making of art”²

I got an idea based on the expressive arts therapy concept of changing modalities and moving with the image between different art mediums. So I took my latest haiku, invented some moves to go with it, and decided to perform it in front of hundreds of live fish – and people – at the Vancouver aquarium.

My image had taken me to the aquarium to interact and observe living fish. My original image of dying fish had completely transformed itself when I surrounded myself by *real* and *live* fish at the aquarium.

In a way, this act I was performing functioned like a waking dream. A consciously constructed lucid dream. My artistic actions while awake had influenced and changed my dreams, and now the images of my dream had influenced and changed my waking life. As Shaun McNiff says;

“Dreams are vital participants in our art therapy studios. Their emanation closely parallels the making of artistic images, and we respond to dreams in much the same way that we engage paintings. The making of artistic images can be linked to a waking dream. By sharing dreams we immerse our studio in the irradiations of psyche and invoke its manifestations. My meditations on dreams spiritualize my waking life, and there is no doubt that the raw material of what I do each day, the significant, subtle, and unwatched experiences, provide the subject matter for the psyche’s nocturnal art.”³

Dancing at the aquarium

I went to the aquarium on a cold Sunday afternoon. As I entered the aquarium, I felt a rush of emotion swiping through me. This emotion changed to something close to infatuation as I saw the first fish tank full of fish, and a giant octopus migrating from one side of the glass to the other.

I walked through the aquarium very conscious of my feelings and thoughts. I tried to be in the present moment and to record my subtle changes of feelings and emotions as I observed the live fish and their ecosystems. When the moment felt right, I stood in front of a fish tank, and performed my movements accompanying my haiku. I did it again for the camera, as my friend documented my action by taking pictures. I performed my moves a total of three times in different parts of the aquarium.

Later, as I observed more fish tanks, I performed small movements and actions inspired by my observations, much in the same way as we (the students) create responses for each other’s paintings in the arts therapy class. In this case, I was

² McNiff, Shaun. *Art as medicine*, Shambala Editorial, page. 67

³ McNiff, Shaun. *Art as medicine*, Shambala Editorial, page. 131

responding to living images in the real world, “living art” created spontaneously by the ever moving fish and their colorful environment.

Through acting in this way, I was talking directly to my mind and to my dream self, by speaking the language of the unconscious, the language of symbols and metaphors. This act of moving from the imagination in the every-day environment could be viewed as a performance.

Conclusion

The process of translating and transmutating an image from medium to medium is healing, in that every step of the way represents a small change in the person who is experiencing it. In every step, every time the image evolves, the feeling of the image changes, even if this change is very minimal and subtle. Every small change seems to clarify or elaborate on the previous one, and slowly, the person itself is changed.

My image started as a recurring dream. It became a series of paintings, to then be transformed into a haiku poem, translated as movement that later became a dialogue. This process transformed the dream itself, and the new dream became a painting, then a dialogue, then a new haiku that inspired a series of movements that became a performance piece at the aquarium.

It is very difficult to measure therapeutic change. It is equally difficult to explain what “therapeutic” means objectively, because whatever is happening to the person in the healing process is happening internally, in their sensations and emotions and thoughts. The results are experiential.

One way to affirm that something is, or has been therapeutic, is by having the conscious knowledge that whatever one is experiencing after the fact, wasn't there before. After my journey with the image, I have a greater awareness of all the new experiences I have gone through, and so my vision of reality is richer and more extensive. The nature of my image has changed, regardless of the thoughts and emotions associated with it initially. In other words, a spontaneous change of consciousness has occurred. My new dream – the new image – is the manifestation of that change, the testimony of a new Self.

In my opinion, a therapeutic change of consciousness is a move away from suffering, fear, and pain, and into healing, inner peace and self-realization. It is the opening of new experiences that weren't there before, moving away from death and into being fully alive and in the present moment. And I have experienced just that.







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