

TISSUE PAPER COLLAGE – Karen Stefano and Anthony Blake
A method of active imagination developed by Dr Edith Wallace
Presented by Karen Stefano

Without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable. C. J. Jung

Background

The principle of active imagination was established by Carl Jung and gave rise to numerous forms of application. Over the last 30 years or so, Dr Edith Wallace has developed a method that uses tissue paper collage to enable people to access unconscious material, acquire new insight and direction and promote healing of the psyche. She has worked with hundreds of people using the method. Karen Stefano has taken up this method over a period of 20 years and is currently using the technique in various applications.

In active imagination, the individual works in a medium to give rise to forms, images, metaphors and so on that can reflect unconscious content back to her. The media of expression serve to both distance the individual from the content of her concerns, desires, searchings, relationships and inner promptings and also make it visible in a form that can be processed and understood. In this method it is assumed that, for most of us, it is not possible to go ‘directly’ to unconscious content. The method uncovers information about the individual in a non-threatening form.

The Method

In the method as used by Dr Wallace, there are four main components:

1. Making collages
2. Viewing the collages
3. Writing a story
4. Performing a dance

In most cases, the work is done in a group of say around 12 people.

Making Collages

The materials consist of

Colored tissue paper (33 colors) of a kind that easily ‘bleeds’ (its color runs when wet)

Sheets of white card (11”x14”)

Brushes (1’) and medium gloss varnish

The person

Selects tissues of various colors (that draw her attention in some way)

- Tears off pieces (using whatever shapes happen to arise)
- Glues them on the white cards with the gloss medium
- Builds up the collage until it is felt to be finished
- Sets the collage to dry (when the colors might change in unpredictable ways)

In any one session, an individual can produce from 1 to 20 collages. Each of them is (usually on the back of the card):

- Given the person's name
- Dated and numbered
- Given an arrow showing the way up the collage is to be viewed (i.e. as it was made)

In making the collages, the individual is advised to:

- Not to think about what they are doing, in the sense of planning what they do
- Not to use known forms (known to the individual)
- Not to use scissors or any other mechanical device
- Not to interpret what they are producing
- Not to copy others
- Work in silence

Even though people are advised 'not to think' there can be *attention* and *self-observation*.

Viewing

The viewing is done both privately and in the group.

Privately: each person takes her collages to her own room and puts them on display. The suggestions are:

- Spend time with your collages
- See what emerges from them: images, associations with their colors and forms, sequential patterns, etc.
- Give each one a *title* that expresses what it means to you
- Reflect on your feelings when doing them and when looking at them
- See if you associate to emergent issues for you, anticipated problems
- Enter into (or pretend to enter into) the collages
- Allow them to talk to you and listen to their meaning (have a dialogue with them)
- Reflect on amplifications that come to mind
- Make notes on the above

In Group: taking turns, each person shows their collages, or a series of them, and speaks about them. An etiquette is followed:

- The individual says what she wants to say without any comment from other members of the group (if others comment, their words – e.g. identifying an image – will 'fix' that image in the mind of the person who made the collage and this *cannot be reversed*)

The facilitator can carefully evoke further meaning from the individual by asking her questions (such as, 'How did you feel when you were doing this collage?' 'What does this color say to you?') but should not impose her own interpretation nor even disclose it

The individual is encouraged to reflect on emergent meanings in relation to self, family, culture, etc.

Then other members of the group can comment on what they see (this is then material *for them* as much as it is for the individual concerned)

It is also possible for the group to reflect on any *shared* meaning they feel, or on *archetypal* insights.

The process of viewing and finding meaning continues throughout the period available, once a series of collages has been made.

Writing a Story

Each person is asked to write the story of their lives in the form of a fairy tale or myth. Such forms enable people to take some distance from their life issues while bringing out some main salient features. Since the stories are shared with other members of the group individuals may want to 'hide' some of their deep concerns (even from themselves!), the mythical form provides a more neutral public form than a factual account. Use of such universal forms also makes for sharing of meaning. Both myth and fairy tale have special properties. (1)

In the initial application of the method, writing the story was done *before* engaging in the collage process, as a preparation or 'tuning up'. However, with time, it has come to be worked on *during* the collage period.

Another form used is that of poetry. Dr Wallace herself used *haiku* over many years.

The medium of the story is reciprocally linked with the emergence of meaning from the series of collages. The *sequence* of collages is considered most important as possibly reflecting an internal process, which is being worked out in the individual's life. The individual also has the choice of writing their story based on the collages they make.

When the story or poem is read to the group, it evokes empathy and also creates connections between the individuals involved.

Performing a Dance

This is an optional component, which works very well for some people and not at all for others. Its greatest value is for those who do not find themselves able to verbalize what they feel from the collages they make. These are the general remarks:

Some collages cannot be expressed in terms of images or words

Dance to or from the collage – look at the lines in the collage and reflect them in gestures and movements

You can use music and 'props' such as objects and costumes

The dance is performed in front of the group

Other Optional Components

There are two types of 'meditation'. One is designed so as:

To be in touch with the imaginal world

To practice relaxation

To connect with the 'somatic self' (or 'get inside the body')

The other, in the evening, is to become empty and silent.

There are daily movements sessions enabling people:

To be grounded

To become familiar with different types of movement

And discover their relationships to feelings

Kinds of Application

Besides the use of tissue paper collage in special 'playsshops' lasting 3 to 5 days, it has been used with groups meeting twice a month for 3-4 hours and also in psychotherapeutic practice as an invaluable aid to deepening the self-understanding of clients.

Currently it is being used in the integrative methodology of 'psyche education' (developed by the DuVersity) as one of seven methods. The same principles of generating material, reflecting, associating, dialoguing and exploring meaning between individual and group are embodied in all seven methods, but in contrasting media (see parallel paper on *Psyche Education*).

The Experience

For most people the method is a developing process that takes time to assimilate and respond to. It serves to provide a 'language' for elements of experience that may not have been accessible before. Initially, 'masculine' analytical people may find the method difficult to deal with but most can rapidly find it 'doable'.

Because of the very medium of expression, there are strong associations with early childhood experiences and some tendency to regress. This liberates a childlike feeling and innocence and Dr Wallace herself insists on calling her programs *playsshops* as opposed to workshops.

The nature of the process is creative. Many of the collages produced – by people who have had no artistic practice before – are of great beauty. The sheer experience of color and form is itself therapeutic. The experience of allowing meaning to emerge and show itself is the very core of active imagination.

People can feel very supported in this 'work'. First of all, it is not possible to make a mistake! Secondly, the group process is constructed so as to enhance empathy and the

sharing of meaning – the *dialogue* between the members of the group is most important. Thirdly, the facilitator acts ‘to contain’ the group and mediate transitions taking place within people. This includes a sensitive amplification of the tentative insights individuals are making into themselves.

The process and content of the tissue paper collage method is very akin to dreaming and the processing of dream experience through free association and the amplification of associations.

In general, the method:

- Builds self-esteem
- Activates the imagination
- Enables healing
- Inspires a link to the transpersonal
- Gives confidence in the meaningfulness of emotions
- Maximizes the mutual benefit of the individual and others (the more any one person discovers, the more everyone learns)
- Promotes understanding, activates consciousness, encourages growth and transformation

There is a need to trust the self regulating function of the psyche, or what Jung calls the ‘self’, which Dr Wallace refers to as ‘the creative source’ or the ‘inner guide’.

References

- Edith Wallace *The Queen’s Quest: Pilgrimage for Individuation*, Moon Bear Press, 1990
How It All Began and How It Continued: No End!, DuVersity Press, 1990
‘Healing Through the Visual Arts – A Jungian Approach’ in *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique*, edited J A Rubin, Brunner Mazel, 1987
- Anthony Blake & Karen Stefano ‘Psyche Education’ paper IGAP 2003

(1) Dr Edith Wallace has said, for example:

The fairy tale takes care of the struggle, the deeds, the changes that lead to ‘and they lived happily ever after’

With a myth you can say: I was there when it happened and it happened a long time ago

With a fairy tale you can more easily say: This is my story, seen in a specific way, and told this way it tells me something

To be able to write a myth we must believe in ‘the great realities of the spirit’ – a myth has something to do with sacred and great happenings.