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Creative writing as a tool in rehabilitation and educational work

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AIM OF THIS ARTICLE – to present personal creative writing experience in rehabilitation and educational work in Lithuania

REHABILITATION is understood like a complex of medical, social, educational and professional tools, used to improve the functional activity of disabled or ill people. Trauma or illness can disturb ability to take part in the cultural, professional life, to satisfy spiritual needs. Usually psychosocial rehabilitation has a goal to help to get out of loneliness, to find social confirmation in the community, to deal with grief, despair, big losses and lost dreams about future. After psychotrauma an individual can lose feeling of identity – it is a challenge to strengthen ego. When the ego is strong, personality is more able to deal with trauma, to face reality, to accept what has happened.

Personality after trauma needs to understand the self to know the strongest and weakest parts of the self, to have a

wish to survive, to concentrate vital powers for withdrawal, needs to make spiritual connections between him / her and Nature, and the Community. A person, who experiences psychotrauma, often has a wish to speak from within, but experiences failure trying to speak up. In the most difficult situations an individual experiences sensation of heaviness, not understandable darkness and has thoughts of suicide.

People often want to speak in a right way: they inhibit negative emotions, repeat what they have learned about positive thinking instead of sharing feelings and thoughts in authentic way. Writing exercises can help to reduce emotional tension, to increase spontaneity and to express inner truth. At first it is necessary to create a healing environment. The same things (tolerance, sense of freedom, mutual trust, and a sense of belonging, change-acceptance, and intellectual curiosity) describe a creative and healing environment. In guided writing therapeutic goals are client's liberation from the role of victimized person; inspiration to survive, guided motion after beacon of hope, enlightenment. Some material from unconscious level is brought into conscious level and it gives new future insight during writing, but our verbal and inner intelligences are different, abilities to find new power to survive are different, so it is not enough to have only writing activities in a therapeutic group, it is useful to combine writing, reading and dialog or discussion.

Social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists use the same writing therapy techniques: some of them haven't got a gift in artistic speaking / creative writing, but they all are able to strengthen personalities, to develop their communication skills. An occupational therapist tests the patient, explores the strongest and weakest parts of a

person, and suggests writing as a form of activities to reach emotional life with positive emotions, to develop self – understanding and communication skills. An occupational therapist is able to give emotional support, but sometimes it is necessary to get out of cocoon – to go through inner transformation. An occupational therapist is weak as a leader in a difficult existential journey to new horizon. A writer is able to inspire, to be an emphatic listener, to revitalise client’s narrative: to transfer client’s biography from poor language with fragmented sentences into vivid language. A writer is able to change person’s self – image and an image of surroundings thanks to the writing gift; the inner intelligence and meaningful writing production. A writer often doesn’t want to know, what health is, and doesn’t want to try to live healthier. A writer is able to look at writing therapy from phenomenological perspective, to create writing techniques “here and now”, inspire and make strong impact on emotions, facilitate a person’s journey to new horizon through inner transformations.

Professional writing therapist means 2 in 1: an instructor of writing and counselor of personality (psychologist). A writer can develop the skills of counselor and can work in clinical settings, psychologist or occupational therapist can learn techniques how to encourage people to write. In many cases it is enough to have a healing environment, a group leader able to inspire writing, and the chance to read written piece for good listeners. We discuss in Lithuania today the benefits of poetry or writing therapy, therapist’s competences, but there are other fruitful methods – collaboration with a client and the creation of literary text using concrete facts from the client’s life. A person’s self-esteem

can be improved with the individual's story told by the writer, and it can lead to new insight and help to discover the meaning of life. Writer's residence program could be discussed more often in the contexts of health and culture.

If we are creative persons, we can change our environment, but at first we need courage to liberate creative powers, we need patience to move through darkness into the light, the courage to witness our existence, to believe that our testimony advocates for humanity, and that the inner power is the most important. This leads to authentic life and authentic language. When we focus on the value of a literary text, we focus on both: on literary aesthetics and on the interaction with the reader, and when we focus on therapy the main thing is to express personally important truth and to have a sensitive listener (reader).

Healing through writing can be described interdisciplinary (psychological access, educational, spiritual, language arts). Main writing methods are diary (blog) writing, poetry writing, storytelling, and collaborative writing. A written piece in therapy group seldom has aesthetic value, but always expresses personal meanings and witness individual's existence. This is important not only in therapeutic context, but in cultural context as well. "The creation of cultural environment and understanding are part of life, the existential project of every individual. Existential objectives form his / her social environment as the cultural part and the whole",- writes Lithuanian philosopher T. Kačerauskas, in "Philosophical poetics", 2006.

Strong wish to write beautiful poetic text is the reason of increased anxiety, and it blocks spontaneity of writing. We escape the blocking power of anxiety if we focus on senses.

FOCUS ON SENSES

Stimulation of sensations reduces intensity of feelings and enlarges perception. In therapy we use simple exercises: examples are given below.

First exercise: look around and write about what you see in front of you. What sounds do you hear? What smells?

Second exercise: take a cup of tea. How does it smell? How does it taste? Do you often drink tea with other people or do you usually drink alone? Write about your tea.

The third exercise: imagine a favorite and safe place, focus on sensations (What do you see there? What do you hear? What do you taste? What can you smell? Are you alone? Are there any birds, animal, people?). Write about this place.

The benefit of writing was confirmed in my writing therapy groups. It was confirmed by clients' observation and by their witnessing.

...Woman experienced continuous trauma. Often uneasiness and not understandable sensation of heaviness blocked her energy to do something and to live. She found a way to survive: it was diary (blog) writing. Every time she began writing from the description of the environment, she often looked through the window and focused on the trees, birds, grass, and only after writing about the nature and surroundings, she was able to express her inner feelings and difficult thoughts. View of nature reduced her emotional tension and liberated power to keep hope of more easy future.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Writing is speaking from within, from the depths of soul. Writing means liberation from suffering, helplessness, and means the drawing the contours of a new life. Autobiographical writing is a way to sense and to confirm personal identity. In therapeutic sessions I invite clients to put his / her memories into his / her story, and help them to evoke reminiscences. History of life looks like a necklace made of different beads, so it is useful to encourage to focus on details. For example, I ask the client to tell a piece of personal story, to imagine one of her important moments: the first time at school, the first time at the sea coast, I ask to remember a concrete view of nature, for example, a white seagull on the top of a beacon...

INNER EMPTINESS AND WRITING

Among mentally ill people I met those who told that life is grey, without meaning and memories. They didn't want to write, but they attended my poetry therapy hours. We sat in a circle. We all were equal. My clients wanted to listen to each other, and (it is very important) they all wanted to share feelings and thoughts, but faced inner emptiness, so they asked me to read poems. The content of the poems gave us topics for the conversation. The discussion was based on the existential similarities of the participants and the hero of the literature and on the participants' personal meanings.

Another time I gave them a list with 10 different words

and asked them to choose one word, to write it down, and to use this word in writing a sentence. These writing games deepened our discussion about personally important meanings and helped clients to remember that they had a life and to remember some nice moments. Memories and reminiscences helped them to perceive the self easier and improved their self-esteem. Inner emptiness can occur when person inhibits painful feelings, loses self-esteem, feels himself (herself) different and loses community feeling.

A person always has his/her living space. Sometimes he/she faces the threat, sometimes – the ruins, always wants peace. A person has to name objects in the world around, and name inner objects – this helps him (her) to understand his (her) living space and the self. We need the words to name our nearest surroundings and inner processes. It is easy to find words for description, what is here and now. It is more difficult to find words to express inner experiences. Usually we need symbols, metaphors to express complexity of inner state. The more difficult feelings we experience, the more difficult we find the words to describe them. Psychologists and psychotherapists know the term alexithymia. Psychologically wounded persons, depressed persons loose ability to express inner state verbally. The first step to recapture the lost verbal skills requires to stop and to look around, to say what is in front of you, to identify sounds, colors, smells. Writing develops self-understanding, reduces emotional tension and helps to achieve better quality of life, but therapeutic writing or writing for wellbeing is a process. Inner emptiness is like a desert in our heart. When we write about the sun, clouds, rainbow, we transfer these

objects into our inner life. Language connects inner life and external world. When we begin to speak about external world, first rain drops brings water into the heart's desert. When we find ties between us and external world and abilities to speak (to write) about simple things, we can look for similarities between inner and outer world. If thoughts and emotions are heavy, it is possible to imagine them as dark heavy clouds or like heavy stones in the heart. When we identify the problem of our unique situation, we can reflect and ask ourselves: "Am I defeated?"- And answer: "If I am alive, I can imagine a bright tunnel in the darkness. I can change the picture of my life in my imagination, I can ignore despair". When our words have personal meanings, naming of the situation means creation. We create our biography, we meet and recognize our self, and we begin to understand who we are and where we are going.

NARRATIVE

When we enrich an individual's narrative we enrich person's life. We can work with narrative of contemporary period of life; with narrative of traumatic period, with narrative of whole life. It is always possible to find new points of view to the same situation, to discover ties between separated phenomena and to conceive them as wholeness. Deep listening and questioning helps to develop a dialog, but at a psychiatric clinic the client sometimes has difficulties in expressing emotions and thoughts verbally. Some people have problems due to too demanding requirements for their writing and a need to control their writing process

– in this case we can notice a lack of authentic life in writing and a lack authentic writing style. Exercise of Acrostic writing helps to bring some information from unconscious level to consciousness and helps to disclosure more authentic details of life.

ACROSTIC WRITING EXERCISE

Ask you client to use his (her) name for acrostic writing.

- N (write word with first letter N)
- A (write word with first letter A)
- M (write word with first letter M)
- E (write word with first letter E)

Ask your client to use written words in sentences. This exercise is used in the work with different groups (schizophrenic, depressed, healthy...) this exercise is useful when our clients have a fear to write. If our clients did this exercise easy, we can ask to write a coherent text. If an individual has poor language and difficulties in writing, we can use acrostic writing material for dialog. Often patient's written sentences can be very simple. For example: "Bag was red". Our intention to know more about the meaning of written simple sentence can change client's relationship with us and helps to develop his (her) speaking skills.

EMPHATIC WRITING

Client's acrostic writing gives the material for deep dialog. I ask a person about personal meaning of every sentence; try to explore not only biographical facts, but the context as well. During listening to the client I catch essential details and other information useful to imagine situations of client's life. Later I stand into the shoes of the client and write a blog. I use views of nature, express client's thoughts and mood, and show the direction to future life. The person recognizes his story, written by me, and finds there beauty. This helps to enlarge the field of consciousness, and to increase self – esteem, and strengthens ego.

SPIRITUALITY AND WRITING

Spirituality means individual's experience with the sacred, which can be experienced anywhere. Spirituality can be understood as "heart knowledge", as power that comes from within and acts on our feelings; as power connected with knowing our deepest selves and what is sacred in us; the nourishing of the inner life can lead to more meaningful and productive outer life (Fox, 1994). By Goddard (1995) spirituality is described as integrative energy. Nowadays life is often fragmented, sometimes cruel. The voice of the soul is often fragmented, and connections with Nature often weak. The voice of the soul can often be characterized by sharp, metallic ringing. Individuals often experience loneliness in society and are longing for spiritual conversations. Fragmented, our life is very far from the harmony

of Greek mythology, but it is necessary to find that healing and poetry have the same roots. Sunlight God Apollo was the patron of music and poetry, Muses choir leader and the famous musician, known as the prophet and physician. The goal of healing is to find healing light within us and to put it into words in our fragmented, sometimes cruel life. Love, peace, sense of wellbeing, hope, forgiveness, and beauty are the attributes of spirituality (Ashmos, Duchon 2000). Poetry therapy or writing therapy begins to act on us when we find power to open our souls to pain, to understanding of temporal being, to dialog, to future project, to creation of new situation. Some clients are able to open their souls only to nearest place (the room of therapy hour) and the voice of therapist. My therapy hours always have direction: from darkness to dawn; from silence to the first word, from lost self – esteem to new understanding of identity. Personal, social and spiritual growth is the result of poetry / writing therapy.

WORK WITH SCHIZOPHRENIC CLIENTS

Low self-evaluation and low self – esteem have negative impact on behavior and social communication. Low self-esteem is a quality useful to describe the group of schizophrenic clients. Low self – evaluation is associated with suffering: with fear to experience loneliness between people, with feeling of quilt that his/her life is different, that dreams are shattered. When person tries to escape suffering he/she tries to escape contacts, and loses abilities to use language for deep and spiritual dialog. Superficial

communication do not liberate from loneliness. We know different forms of schizophrenia, and different outcomes of this disease. It is necessary to evaluate client's ego: to evaluate ability to see the world in realistic way, the power to integrate emotions into one emotional state, ability to open the self to new relationship without fear to lose the self. Often their ego is weak. This person often isn't able to answer to a simple question: "How are you?" The person answers: "You are the physicians, you know better, you can decide about my mood". Daily impressions are poor or negative. The speech is poor: fragmentary sentences. Sometimes I meet hyper rational schizophrenic clients. A rational patient (hyper rational) is able to express desire to recover from mental illness, makes efforts for recovery, is able to write normal sentences, but speaking / writing is disconnected from emotional biography. This person has difficulties when he wants to tell what is in front of him now; are these objects important for him or not. In the work with schizophrenic there is always a lack of ties between inner and outer worlds, and the connectedness with self, with others and with environment is insufficient. In therapy hours a poem inspires them to pay attention to nature, and we learn to be observers of nature, to share our findings and to discuss our relationship with nature. Speaking about nature inspires to speak more openly. People begin to share negative or painful experiences. The more painful or negative experiences they confess, the more power they get to be observers and to speak. One of the clients evaluated poetry therapy hour: "... we find that nature is beautiful, magical, and after poetry therapy hour, a full day, we are able to see the trees, the grass, and so it

becomes quiet, it seems that even people became better. This is not only my experience. I spoke with other people". Client's acrostic writing and therapist's emphatic writing helps schizophrenic client to find the fragments of personal life story. Client's narrative becomes more understandable and lighter.

WORK WITH DEPRESSED CLIENTS

Characteristics of depressed patient: fear to feel, tied with fear to experience negative emotions, and negative painful memories. No horizon, fault, self-blame, isolation and self-imposed isolation (social, psychological). These clients need existential knowledge, how to survive. Our task is to help the clients to discover that peace can be found in nature, to find the myth hero and inspiration to survive, to find a way to wholeness, to confirm what is – is, and to help to recapture lost positive memories. Poetry reading, sharing of personally important things, writing about favourite places confirms personality, strengthens self – esteem and the community feeling. The effect of therapy can be strengthened by poetic improvisation.

POETIC IMPROVISATION

I take a few words or sentences of every client and I imagine life as a journey to more light future. The main thing is to show the direction, to confirm clients' efforts to survive.

Difficult day → more easy day → difficult day, but I am stronger and more able to survive, I go to easier day → easy day...

Depressed or schizophrenic clients usually haven't any future dreams, but we try to stimulate their imagination, ask them to imagine a nice future day. The main thing is to repeat all clients' words and to show the direction to the hope. I as a poetical improvisator sometimes identify myself with the tree and testify my growth. I describe what my land is like (dry land, wet land), how did it look earlier, what are my roots like, how does my branches look, what is my top like, how does the sky look? Again the most important thing is to repeat clients' words and to confirm the growth. Useful symbols: roots – history (personal, national), land (conditions to live), the top (desire), the sky (desire), night, darkness, dark clouds (difficult period), the buds (state before changes), sunny sky (good conditions to live, joy). Clients recognize their words in the poetical text and feel themselves very inspired. This tendency was seen in all groups: healthy, depressed, schizophrenic. There was seen a big influence on the person's verbal skills in the group of depressed individuals. After poetical improvisation all persons, especially depressed individuals wanted to share their feelings and thoughts.

In poetic improvisation I use the words of all clients. Clients' words with important personal meaning are used in therapeutic poetic improvisation and open new, more positive view of world, which in the moment of identification with hero of poetic improvisation is perceptible as more positive experience and as more light future perspective. Recurrence of these experiences in continues poetic

therapy process transfers client's "I" from the context of disability into the context of empowering.

WORK WITH ELDERLY PEOPLE

Reading, discussion and writing in elderly people's group is a way to achieve a better quality of life.

80–85 years old women hadn't any experience in sharing of memories aroused by the poetry reading, and they were disturbed when hearing my invitation to share personal experiences. Some of them had the collections of poetry and expressed a wish to read their poems, but they as well as other participants had a fear to try writing in the class. Old women had strong desire to write nice and meaningful texts and had doubts about success. It was a challenge to accept acrostic writing as a game, to write acrostic spontaneously, and to use its words in the coherent text. Acrostic writing let to use some experiences from unconsciousness level and consciously to find their personal importance. Women, invited to read the created texts, complained about the lack of literary skills, but agreed to read out aloud. They were very excited reading their texts: they inhaled loudly, sometimes for a moment hold their breath, some of the words were spoken louder; one of the women said that she has warmed reading her text. Due to the acrostic writing women got a power to write about authentic things; thanks to reading aloud they found each other as spiritual personality: group members listened deeply to every person's writing, and found everyone's writing interesting.

After writing about the bread and reading the text aloud

one woman told: “Wonders happen here. For more than half a year, I could not write, and I wrote here, – and added, – and it is very warm here”. Writing in the class helped elderly people to release emotions, and to speak up about the unique experience. Listening to stories and storytelling has improved communication, strengthened self-esteem and aesthetic literary needs.

Loss of social meaning is one of the factors causing depression. Symptoms of depression were often noticed due to poverty (pension is much less than the salary), deterioration of health related to aging, and big changes taken place in the orientation of people’s values in Lithuania over the last two decades and also a preference given to tangible values strengthen old women’s feeling of social isolation. Emotional inhibition reduces the ability to focus on new things, to understand the whole of human existence, to integrate individual episodes of personal life into a whole, to understand the meaning of life, and it causes a very strong feeling of loneliness. Inhibited negative emotions reinforce the inflexibility of thinking. Writing, based on personally important meanings, disclosure of these meanings, and sharing of written pieces with the group members enriched emotional and social life of elderly.

In conclusion, elderly are motivated to learn for reasons of self-fulfilment (Boulton – Lewis, Kuys, Lowie Kitchin, 2006), participation in writing therapy group can be understood as transformative learning in language arts.

WORK WITH NURSING STUDENTS

We supposed that nurses are more able to provide nursing care spiritually when they are comfortable with own spirituality and therefore we suggested an alternative course – Poetic therapy. We used reading, discussion and writing to disclose students' values and to strengthen focus on inner life, to promote understanding of emotions, to reflect on personal experience and personal life meanings, to disclose and identify own existential problems and their connectedness with inner self, to improve the use of the self in interpersonal relationships, to analyze patient's need for attachment and its impact on nurse's psyche. We read poems about death written by medical professionals and tried to understand our own similar experiences, paying attention to own senses: seeing, hearing, smells. Students have learned to find their most favorite poem, to read it out loud in the group, and to tell about their personal inner experience, and its connection with poet's words.

Students learned to use the poem's line or strophe as a tool for disclosure of their colleague's feelings and thoughts. Students wrote acrostic and used their names for this exercise, during discussion learned to understand, how writing helps to disclose their inner experience, and to bring knowledge from unconscious level to consciousness

Students wrote about a beloved, meaningful person, wrote about their patient, imagined themselves in the role of their patient and wrote a letter to a nurse. Before writing exercises students always were asked to pay attention to their senses: seeing, hearing, smells, tastes in the mouth. All discussions were enriched with psychology or literature

knowledge, but always we focused on personally important meanings. At the end of every session students reflected what they have learnt in the session and wrote down their reflections. Analyzing students' written reflections, we found out that daytime students have a fear to speak openly. They are depended on group members' opinion and they have a fear that other students will devalue their opinions. Students discovered that creative writing exercises gave them courage to write, and that reading developed courage and skills to speak before audience. They evaluated images of nature as very important things to inspire writing. By words of informants opening up and sharing experiences were the biggest values of poetic therapy course.

Some students (informants) confessed that they became able to disclose important inner experiences, and that they have never imagined that such open speaking could be exist. Full time students wrote that earlier they couldn't imagine that human being is such complicated and rich. Full time students more often confessed that they have difficulties when they deal with patient's death. Nursing students found that everyone wants to share feelings, thoughts and reminiscences, and found joy in communication with the group. Opening up and sharing experiences let them discover inner beauty of colleagues and understand how different they are.

Students wrote about learning experience in the wheel, and told that the wheel gives power to feel equality with other. They evaluated poetry reading as a way to find common topics for discussion and as a way to create safety – possibility to speak more about poetic images and less about own experience when the theme is very painful. All

students wrote about relaxed, reduced emotional tension, and about energy growth in poetic therapy sessions. Opening up, sharing feelings strengthened connectedness to self and to others, strengthened perception of wholeness, acted on behavior and professional attitudes. In conclusion, Goldberg (1998) noted that nurses are carrying spiritual care at unconscious level, and it is possible dramatically to improve patients care by bringing spiritual care experience from unconscious level into conscious awareness. It is clear that increased self-awareness lead to an improved use of the self in interpersonal relationship, poetry therapy / writing therapy is good method to increase self-awareness.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of qualitative data collected during practice in various poetry therapy groups 14 years revealed that guided writing is a tool for self – disclosure, gives material for deep dialog and discussion, empower individuals to find spiritual ties between them and other group members, between them and the nature. Focus on senses (smells, sounds, colours) inspire participants in all groups to write; acrostic writing techniques often liberate personally important words and enables participants to find dialog between individuals when there is a deficit of verbal skills. Acrostic writing brings to consciousness some unresolved problems or not clarified points of view in all groups; makes the dialog deeper, creates precondition for personal, social and emotional growth. A client's words with his or her personally important meaning used in poetic improvisation

open a new more positive view of the world, which in a moment of identification with the hero of poetical improvisation is perceptible as a more positive experience and perspective of the future. Writing is a tool of empowering to find new inner powers within us, theoretically this model is based on conceptions of individual psychology (Adler, 2009), logotherapy (Frankl, 1997), cultural spiritual tradition (Tisdell, 2006), on Buber (2001) dialog principles and modified Freire social emancipation learning theory (Sučylaitė, 2011), philosophical poetics (Kačerauskas, 2006)

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Sučylaitė's first novel was published in a state magazine when she was only 17; around the same time she was also one of the winners of the Soviet Union's children's literature competition.

At the Medical University, she was an active participant in the movement of Lithuanian medical poets. She has had several groups of poetry therapy in psychiatric hospital and rehabilitative contexts and she has given courses for teachers on creative writing. Currently, Dr. Sučylaitė is a member of the Lithuanian Psychiatric Association, the Lithuanian Writers' Union and the Lithuanian Arts Therapy Association.

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