

NATIONALLY SPEAKING

The Spiritual Depth of Occupation: Making Worlds and Making Lives

When it comes to discerning a spiritual dimension in occupational therapy, it helps to consider the kind of seeing that causes three-dimensional pictures to emerge from designs called stereograms. Stereograms are patterns of brightly rendered bands or figures, their overall effect much like gift wrapping. Experts give this cue for finding the third dimension: Gaze through the pattern to some point beyond it (Baccei, 1994). This broad way of seeing, freed from a fix on details but still led by them, yields a vibrant picture. The discovery is awesome.

The dimensionality of the stereogram can go unnoticed. Because the deep dimension emerges only when a viewer knows how to look, the term that best fits the requisite looking is *discernment*, an act of seeing through or seeing into that yields discovery (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1993). The patterns of occupation and occupational therapy seem much like stereograms. Within them is a depth not always seen.

Occupation as an Act of Making

One construct that prompts me to see the spiritual dimension within occupation is that of *making*, as described in this poem by Petersen (1976):

There is a shouting SPIRIT deep inside me
TAKE CLAY, it cries,
TAKE PEN AND INK,
TAKE FLOUR AND WATER,
TAKE A SCRUB BRUSH,
TAKE A YELLOW CRAYON,
TAKE ANOTHER'S HAND—
AND WITH ALL THESE SAY YOU,
SAY LOVING.

Suzanne M. Peloquin



So much of who I am
is subtly spoken in my making. (p. 61)

I have elsewhere shared my grasp of this passage—that meaningful occupation animates and extends the human spirit (Peloquin, 1996). When therapists take part in this animation, they enact the profession's tacit philosophy—that persons are makers of their worlds and lives. Scarry (1985) saw the world-making function of persons:

As one maneuvers each day through the realm of tablecloths, dishes, potted plants, ideological structures, automobiles, newspapers, ideas about families, streetlights,

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language, city parks, one does not at each moment actively perceive the objects as humanly made; but if one for any reason stops and thinks about their origins, one can with varying degrees of ease recover the fact that they all have human makers. (p. 312)

The objects of human making, not just the tangibles like belts or splints, but the less tangible like friendship and discovery, extend the world and show the human share in creation.

Passages from the profession's early literature support a spiritual perspective on making. Barton (1920), a founder of the Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy, named practice a making—not of a product, but of a person stronger physically, mentally, and spiritually than before. When he spoke to a class of graduating students, Kidner (1929), another founder, described life making:

May you realize in increasing measure the value of certain spiritual things which are the real making of life, but which we call by many common names. Kindness, humanity, decency, honor, good faith—to give these up under any circumstances whatever would be a loss greater than any defeat, or even death itself. (p. 385)

To see such radical making in the acts that we commonly name *doing*—purposeful activities, *performing* life roles and tasks, *adapting* to the environment, *adjusting* to disability, and *achieving* skills or mastery, is to discern the spiritual depth of occupation.

Discerning the Spirit

To see occupation as the *making* of lives and worlds is a deeper—and more spiritual—perspective than to see it as doing or performing. The image of someone

in the act of making is one in which human being (character, heart, spirit) flows into human doing. The difference between doing and making is one of substance rather than semantic. *Making* suggests a creation.

Elaboration on this perspective seems important. Consider once again the stereogram and the way of seeing that permits discernment of its deep dimension. Recall the experts' cue to gaze past the pattern. Colloquialisms that name daily tasks a *making* are much like the experts' cue; they direct us to the point beyond the tasks. For example, we name hair care grooming, but we can also see it as a more meaningful act of making oneself presentable or even likeable. What we call cooking we could as easily call the making of a meal within a much larger making—of hearth, home, or tradition. We may call the performance work, but we can see it more deeply as making a living; making a family, place, or community; or making a name for oneself. What we call cognition we can also see as making sense, choice, or inquiry. We may name the performance component psychosocial, but we can better see its depth when we call it making love or making peace. When we take this perspective, we see the spirit in occupation.

Consider too the health delivery system's pattern of naming some persons patients and others therapists. Past the construct known as *patient* is a person who turns to occupational therapy hoping to make a transition, recovery, or change. From behind the label *therapist* emerges a person who hopes to make a difference and a connection. Together, these two make a covenant of care that turns on the patient's search for meaningful making.

We can see acts of making embedded within the occupation of therapy and within the roles of patient and therapist. We can look past our questions about doing to see the actions that shape each person's sense of *making*. We can look to the point beyond our doing and discern a spirit expressing itself; we can revere that spirit. We need not change

our lexicon, but we must know the depth of our engagement.

In a novel about the third millennium on earth, McCullough (1985) portrayed a charismatic man inspiring others with this message:

Understand that the more persistent in the face of adversity any human being is, the richer will be his [sic] pattern of life, the happier he will be contending with his life, the bigger his spirit or share of God will grow, and the easier [sic] he will face his death. And learn to be busy with hands and mind.... Because I have seen the patterns—in the world, in other people—and in myself. (pp. 259, 264)

This is the kind of seeing that therapists can bring to the patterns of the everyday. When human being flows into human doing, persons become world makers and life makers. For this reason, some call creation what others name occupation.

Occupation, the core of our therapy, animates and extends the human spirit; we participate in that animation. Gazing past the details of practice while led by their design to the point beyond, we discern a deeper aim. The discovery is awesome.

About This Issue

This special issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* gathers diverse insights and inquiries into occupation, spirituality, and life meaning. A lively response followed the call for papers that launched this project: we received more manuscripts than this issue could hold. Some authors had strong interest in the topic but found the deadline for writing prohibitive. Because of the interest, more discussion of spirituality may grace later issues. We hope that the action that we are taking—making an issue of spirituality—will transcend these pages. ▲

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