

The Creative Artists Support Group: A Follow-Up Report

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the continued therapeutic benefits of a community-based creative artists support group that has been meeting monthly for the past two and a half years. The author is also the participant/facilitator of the group. The relevant experiences of a number of members of the group, including those of the author, have been chosen to briefly illustrate the diverse kinds of social and therapeutic benefits that people with creative artistic inclinations may experience.

Keywords: creative artists support group, humanistic psychology.

Introduction

When I first wrote my article *The Creative Artists Support Group: A Case Study* (Benjamin, 2014a), I had been facilitating my monthly creative artists support group meetings for 7 months. As my creative artists support group has now been going on for nearly two and a half years, in this article I will give an update of what has transpired in my groups since I initially wrote my article.

The way that I facilitate my creative artists support group continues to be based upon the guiding principles from humanistic psychology of caring, support, and authenticity in relationships, as initially described by Carl Rogers (1961)¹, as well as on the basic foundations of what I have previously described as the Artistic Theory of Psychology (Benjamin, 2008, 2014a, 2014b). To briefly summarize, I have previously described the "successful creative artist" as follows:

A person who has received the respect and acknowledgement of his or her work by a community of his or her peers or society-at-large and also who is considered both psychologically and ethically to be a "well adjusted" member of his or her society and the greater world (Benjamin, 2008, p. 64).

Using this twofold definition of a successful creative artist, along with humanistic psychology co-founder Abraham Maslow's (1962) ideas about self-actualization as the creative fulfillment of a human being's deepest life aspirations, I formulated the following three main components of the Artistic Theory of Psychology:

1. the successful creative artist resonates with the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of human potential;
2. there are some people labeled as mentally ill who have the potential of becoming successful creative artists; and
3. a sensitive, understanding, and supportive educational environment may be conducive to enabling a mentally disturbed person with creative artistic potential to significantly develop and actualize this potential in life (Benjamin, 2008; p. 66).²

My creative artists support group as been offered monthly, free of charge, at the library in my home town in Maine, U.S.A. for the past two and half years. The number of people attending my groups has remained quite small, generally varying from two to four people, not including myself, though once there was just one person attending and twice there

were six people attending. Two of the three people I wrote about in my previous article (Benjamin, 2014a) are still regular members of the group: Eleanor: the writer who has been trying to find an agent for her novel, and Linda: the woman in her 80's who often brings in her drawings and photographs³. There have been a number of people who have attended the group once and never returned, and four people who have attended the group at least twice, in addition to Eleanor and Linda, who I will now describe, followed by updates on Eleanor and Linda as well as myself as a group member, and my summary conclusions pertaining to the value of facilitating a creative artists support group.

Gordon

In my previous creative artists support group article (Benjamin, 2014a), I referred to Gordon, without name, as the photographer who answered my question about why he continues his art with the statement "Doing my art is like breathing for me." Gordon has now attended six of my meetings, and is frequently discouraged and not in a good state of mind. Gordon describes how he takes his photographs "the old-fashioned way" where he carries around his very heavy equipment and experiences deeply for himself what he is photographing. He complains that nowadays everyone is a "photographer" with their cell phones, and that his work is no longer appreciated. He is trying to get his work shown in more galleries, and was particularly discouraged at a meeting he attended a few months ago, as he had recently experienced the non-appreciative response he received from the judges at an event that he attended.

Gordon is in his 60's and feels that he is up against a brick wall, confiding in us that he has been finding excuses to spend less time taking his photographs. Yet when it comes down to it, Gordon still cannot picture himself doing anything other than his art. How is my creative artists support group being helpful to Gordon? I believe that it is, and this is why Gordon continues to attend the group. It is a place where he can vent his feelings and frustrations and disappointment, and feel that he is accepted, understood, and valued. Our group serves as a buffer to the harsh world that Gordon continuously experiences, and I am glad to continue to offer this to him. However, I wish that I could offer him more. I wish that I could offer him guidance and advice that resulted in people appreciating and buying his photographs. But I do not know how to do this, and neither do the other people in my group. It seems the most we can do at this point is to listen to Gordon as he vents his feelings of frustration and disappointment, but

it appears that this is still a valuable function of our group for him.

Steve

Steve is a wonderful addition to our group who has attended our last four meetings, and whom I now consider to be a regular member of the group. Steve has long hair and a muscular, youthful appearance and is in his late 40's or early 50's, although he looks at least 10 years younger than he is. He has had a career marketing other people's music, as well as successfully marketing his own commercial rock & roll music, singing and playing guitar, and has written poetry and published some of his poems. But Steve now wants no part of commercial success, and has been immersed in writing what he refers to as a science fiction rock opera for the past 5 years, doing all the voice and instrumentation by himself. Steve does not share his music with many people, but he sent me a sample of his music and I found it to be stimulating and creative, although not something I would listen to for my own enjoyment. He very much appreciates being part of a creative artists support group, and gives valuable feedback to everyone in the group. At our last group meeting Steve played some of his music for the group and I suggested he bring in more of his music for our next meeting, and I believe he will do so. Steve's strong interest in attending our group is much of the reason why I am continuing to offer a creative artists support group.

Bill

Bill is a psychiatrist in his 60's with a strong muscular weightlifter build, who has attended our group twice, and has written about the abuse he experienced as a child by a clergyman in his church. During the first meeting he attended, Bill read to us from his autobiographical writing, and it was poignant and deep. Bill has much experience working with people in his previous psychiatric practice, and I enjoyed conversing with him about humanistic psychology, philosophy, and the pitfalls of medication. For the second meeting that Bill attended, he was the only member of my group present, but we had quite the stimulating one-on-one exchange for an hour and a half. However, although I think the feedback and appreciation of our group for Bill's writing is valuable to him, he has not attended the last few meetings, and he has not responded to my asking him if he wants to remain on my group meeting e-mail notification list. It thus appears that the group has not sustained sufficient interest for Bill to continue to attend our meetings.

Nancy

Nancy is an extremely high energy woman who appears to be in her late 40's or early 50's, and initially attended our group out of her interest in promoting the activities of creative artists in her community activities. Nancy was involved in orchestrating art showings and plays by creative artists who had been in mental hospitals, and she apparently had a multitude of connections with the media and various influential people. I had mixed feelings about Nancy attending our group, as it felt like Nancy could be the vehicle to make our group much more widely known, and I felt ambivalent about this happening. On one hand it certainly would be consistent with my goals to have more people being able to

benefit from our group. However, it concerned me that our group could become too well known and consequently have too many people attending our meetings to have the kind of intimate and supportive exchanges that all the regular members in our group, including myself, value so much. Soon after Nancy attended our group, I had some e-mail exchanges with her and ran into her once at my local bank, and a few months later Nancy attended our group again. This was a particularly stimulating group meeting and was a meeting where six people attended, not including myself. However, Nancy has not attended any more groups in the past 9 months, and I believe that promoting our creative artists support group is not on her list of priorities; all things considered I am relieved.

Linda

Linda continues to enjoy attending our group on a regular basis, talking about her various creative activities, bringing in her artwork and photographs, and hearing about the artistic events and experiences of the other members of the group. It is particularly interesting that Linda had attended the same recent judge's event as Gordon, but had an entirely different reaction. It was a positive experience for Linda, as she received much appreciation for her photography. Linda modestly said that perhaps it was just because people were "being nice" to an old lady, but neither Gordon nor the other members of the group thought that this was the case. Linda's photographs that she chose to show at this event were much more traditional and acceptable to wide audiences, in comparison to what Gordon chose to show, and I was glad to see that Gordon was able to accept Linda's very different reactions from the judges in a constructive way.

At our last few meetings Linda has been particularly taken up with her experiences of synaesthesia, where one sort of sensation, such as hearing sound, produces another sort of sensation, such as seeing color. It has been very beneficial to Linda to receive positive feedback from the group about her experiences of synaesthesia, to help her assimilate her experiences in a healthy way and not feel like she is "crazy." She felt motivated to bring in an impressive painting she did many years ago, which she said was a representation of how she experienced synaesthesia.

Eleanor

Eleanor also continues to enjoy attending our group on a regular basis, although she has not made much progress with finding an agent for her novel, but she is still trying and is now working on a second novel. Like Linda, Eleanor very much enjoys hearing about the creative artist experiences of the other members of our group, and she was particularly appreciative about Steve joining our group. However, Eleanor and I went through an uncomfortable exchange as she read my *Life after Death Explorations* book (Benjamin, 2014c) and did not appreciate my writing style. Eleanor felt that my writing was too academic for her and that I did not convey enough "stories" to make it interesting enough for people to want to read. This was hurtful and uncomfortable for me to hear, especially as I think my book is full of people's stories, including my own, and I learned that this kind of unsatisfying feedback from group members can be one of the pitfalls of a creative artists support group.

One attends our group to gain support from the other members of the group, and I always encourage people to bring in their creative artistic products they want to share with others. But I have learned the hard way that this can backfire. Eleanor said that she was interested in reading my *Creative Artist* book (Benjamin, 2014b), specifically to learn more about my deceased brother who I described in both my books (Benjamin, 2014b, 2014c). However, I feel nervous about her reading my *Creative Artist* book, and I am relieved that she has not yet ordered my book as she says that she needs to be careful with her budget. But I know that Eleanor and I both like and appreciate each other, and I hope that we will be able to accept the difficult exchange we experienced while continuing to gain value from being together in our group.

Elliot

For me, I continue to find value from our group as I am embarking on trying to promote my books and articles through my website, as I am now working with a marketing consultant and have initiated my social media periodic presence on facebook⁴. This is no small step for me, and talking in my creative artists support group about my conflicts about being a philosopher and marketing my philosophy is valuable to me, as I feel that the other members of my group very much can relate to this conflict.

However, what is most meaningful to me is seeing that my group continues to serve a valuable function for other creative artists. This was particularly apparent to me at one of our recent creative artists support group meetings. There were six people at this meeting aside from myself: regular members Linda, Eleanor, and Steve, and three new people, including a creative artistic ex-judge, who were temporarily visiting Maine.

We had a very dynamic and interesting meeting, which included my sharing about my concerns and conflicts regarding my son's continuing struggling saga and dire financial circumstances as he continues to try to become a successful Hollywood actor after being in Hollywood for nearly three and a half years (Benjamin, 2014b). It was apparent that having three new people attend our meeting was stimulating and supportive to myself, Linda, Eleanor, and Steve. At our last creative artists support group meeting there were no new people but all regular members attended: Linda, Eleanor, Steve, Gordon, and myself. The fact that my small creative artists support group is continuing after nearly two and a half years is a reinforcement of the values of community support to the creative artist, and of my philosophy of the creative artist Benjamin (2014b).

Conclusion

The creative artist support group that I initiated two and half years ago has sustained itself during this time with regular monthly small group meetings, and now has five regular members attending, including myself. The value of the group for its members ranges from support and feedback of members' creative artistic products to sharing stories and conflicts about being successful in one's chosen creative art to listening with caring to a member's frustration and discouragement about not being appreciated for his art. This creative artists support group continues to serve a function

as a safe environment where creative artists can "drop in" to gain support in various ways and continues to be free of charge. The way the group is facilitated continues to be based upon the principles of humanistic psychology that focus upon engaging in genuine, caring, and supportive relations with others, as well as on the author's Artistic Theory of Psychology.

Notes

1. Both Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1962) are considered to be the primary founders of humanistic psychology.
2. For related work on the relationship of the creative artist to mental disturbance and mental health see Cameron (1992), Runco & Richards (1997), Jamison (1993), and Barron (1969).
3. As in my previous article (Benjamin, 2014a) all names of participants in my creative artists support group are fictional, to preserve the participants' anonymity.
4. See my website at www.benjamin-philosopher.com

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