

## METAPHORS INSPIRED FROM NATURE USED FOR SELF-EXPLORATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*The article presents some of the ways natural elements may be used to explore the inner psychological dynamics for psychotherapeutic and prevention purposes. They all rely on projection, a defense mechanism, which is thus transformed into a valuable tool for the discovery of personal resources. A qualitative design with metaphor analysis was conducted. Three personal development or psychotherapeutic exploratory techniques integrated into a process of four steps supporting personal transformation have been used: one creative meditation, one dynamic gestalt technique, and the genogram with the support of natural elements. The analysis comprises material from the cultural background regarding the symbolism of the chosen elements from the universal and Romanian point of view and, in the results section, the psychological content elicited by the exercises, and the personal development effects. The results confirm the value of the natural elements in accessing both past experiences which have been labeled as negative at the time, and psychological resources undiscovered yet.*

*Keywords: creative meditation, nature metaphors, metaphor analysis, psychotherapy.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have explored the importance of the natural environment in reestablishing a psychological balance, with overall effects on the psychological functioning. Some of these are psychological restoration, attention concentration (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2011), awareness of own's emotions and available resources to satisfy them (Răban-Motounu, 2014c, Vitalia, 2014), self-regulation (Răban-Motounu, 2013), interruption of automatic negative thinking (Vitalia, 2014).

The constant interactions with the environment has allowed the development of the capacities of the human beings in general, especially those of receiving and processing information. Natural elements are a frequent theme in the artistic creations, revealing the creator's complex affective states (feelings, emotions, dispositions) or symbolic life, but also eliciting them in the one contemplating them. Thus, they serve for both catharsis and enriching the inner universe purposes of the person. The natural elements have been used in the martial arts in order to support the development of certain traits and to facilitate the assimilation of some practices by the trainee (Musashi, 1995). Nature meditation has been over the years a technique utilized to alter the consciousness in the sense of expanding it and facilitating the meditator's integration into the world. The practice of psychological assistance of the persons with psychosomatic disorders has highlighted that, depending on the disturbed significant relationships in their life, they have dreams in which the archetypes are expressed in the form of primary symbols (from nature), as a consequence of a weaker conscious contact with those archetypes (Kardin, 1997).

The experiential psychotherapy of unification (PEU, Mitrofan, 2004, 2012) or the unifying personal development (UPD, Mitrofan, 2004, 2012) is a holistic approach of the human development, according to a personal dynamic on the axis connecting the Self and the I (Mitrofan, 2004), in which the person uses the life experiences for a better adjustment and integration into the world (cultural, social, natural) in a continuous process of personal development, resulting in well-being and the sense of meaning in life. In this process, very often, even life events and the personal reactions to them can be considered metaphorical expressions of the personal universe and its relationship with the outside world, which can be formulated as typical life problems. The process has four stages: a metaphorical experiment (symbolic play or a creative task) involving the persons in a new and creative way of being which helps tapping the personal ways of being which have been blocked or unexplored. During the second phase, the psychotherapist supports the person in following the personal meanings of this symbolic situation in order to track the obstacles in personal development and expression in the form of past traumatic experiences. During the third phase, the psychotherapist and the group members (if it is the case of group work) help the person in finding new and more fulfilling actions in that situation, also in a metaphorical experiential form, and in restructuring the personal scenario. The support of others is mainly affective and in the direction of facilitating the personal consciousness by clarifying personal meanings so that, in the last phase, she acknowledges the personal ways of development and she assumes responsibility for it (Mitrofan, 2004, 2012, Răban-Motounu 2014a,b). As Tay and Jordan (2015) have recently highlighted, metaphor plays not only a conceptualization role, but also a “scaffolding role in trauma talk” helping target abstract therapeutic issues and address the sense of control. By adding the experiential dimension, the intense bodily sensations can be integrated, the metaphor helping in structuring the personal experience in re-establishing the sense of control. Lacey, Stilla, and Sathian (2012) have come with evidence supporting the perceptual grounding of metaphor understanding, which lacks in processing literal sentences with the same meaning. They have showed that processing textural metaphors involves the texture-selective somatosensory cortex in the parietal operculum. In the light of these findings, the use of metaphors inspired by the natural environment and natural elements themselves offer, the same time, a comprehensive enough framework for self-discovery and integration and the somatic experience connected with the past traumatic events in a person’s life.

The objective of this study was to explore the manner some natural elements, integrated according to the experiential psychotherapy of unification, support the exploration of the inner psychological universe and dynamics, the access to the past traumatic experiences (otherwise inaccessible to the consciousness due to the defense mechanisms), and the discovery of some personal resources which have been unconscious before. We have started from the hypothesis that these three applicative objectives would be accomplished by integrating some natural elements, with their rich symbolic value, in the metaphorical exercises used as personal development or psychotherapeutic techniques.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To accomplish the objectives we conducted a qualitative study using, as main method, the metaphor analysis as the psychotherapeutic metaphor plays more than a facilitating role in communication, but also that of helping a personal restructuring. The analysis will refer mostly to the psychological content elicited by the metaphorical exercises.

**Participants:** ten persons with a mean age of 26 years who expressed their wish to participate in a personal development group centered on overcoming emotional difficulties.

**Procedure:** The participants were involved in personal development four-hours sessions led by two specialists in experiential psychotherapy. The analysis was focused starting from three metaphorical exercises.

“A small loop in the circuit of life” is an exercise whose goal is to allow the person to get in contact with the Self in order to clarify the self-image, but also to identify the difficulties both in this process and those encountered in the personal development, the modalities of overcoming them which she has used, and to allow the activation of the self-regenerating capacities by getting in contact with the positive aspects of the Shadow (the rejected part of the Self). The natural element for this was that of a growing plant (it may be even a tree, depending on the participant’s preference). According to Eliade (2006), the tree of life is “the prototype of all miraculous plants, which brings the dead to life, heals the illness or restores youth”, the herb from the Romanian fairy tales has the same properties and even more (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, Jung, 1996, 1999b, 2000, 2003, 2005). It is based on the analogy with the Self, containing both conscious and unconscious resources, a source or regeneration after traumatic situations, maybe illness or interpersonal distress.

“The natural water cycle” is a gestalt-therapy technique centered on the symbol of femininity: The goal of the exercise is becoming aware of and integrating some aspects of the feminine side as it has resulted from the personal life experience or as it is at a potential level (ibidem). It is a dynamic exercise during which the participants try being in each water state at an imaginary level and she or he states three characteristics. Afterwards, they all get to the next state. Some rituals use water for its magical therapeutic properties of rising people from the death (Eliade, 2006). In the Romanian fairy tales “the living water” has the property of bringing back to life the exhausted hero. Most of the times it is given to him by another character whom he has previously helped unconditionally. The water is often seen as washing “the sins” and “the meanness” from the world which otherwise would destroy its creative power (Eliade, 2006, p.209). Ritual baths help regaining access to all that is virtual, regenerating by cleaning the traces of time passing.

The genogram with natural elements requires that participants use natural elements (stones, flowers, leaves, shells etc.) to represent, in a composition on a white sheet of paper, their family with its members, living or dead, and the relationships among them. They are encouraged to get in sensorial contact with the elements at their disposition so they would find the one that fits best the relative they want to represent or their relationship with her.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The psychological analysis which followed the first creative meditation targeted the participants’ needs which had been met so that they would grow, develop and feel fulfilled when evolving and regenerating. This was realized in connection with the present unsatisfied needs of getting to the next level (by getting a more meaningful or rewarding job, having a long-term romantic relationship or becoming a parent).

The second exercise was the pretext used to explore different hypostasis and forms of expression of femininity, each participant being able to recognize which are more or less comfortable, novel or familiar for him. These were associated, during the next phase, with the concrete aspects of life by each participant, pretext for self-discovery. For example, some of them felt less comfortable being “ice” or a “sticky” water vapor or “falling” as waterfall. The psychological themes associated by the participants with these characteristics were the emotional distance and coldness, emotional dependency, but also fear of failure, of abandonment, of stepping into another stage of life, the need for emotional support.

The genogram with natural elements has significantly helped in revealing the family dynamics as they have been lived by each participant: alliances among different family members and exclusion of others, generational borders, emotional closeness. Significant events from the family history may be symbolized. The characteristics of each element were used to establish the connection with the real person, but also with the participant's feelings for her and her image in the family history and clarifying the family dynamic and the way it was interiorized.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The metaphors inspired from nature, when integrated in different psychotherapeutic or personal development techniques, have the potential of bringing into focus, in a delicate manner, unsolved life problems or unsatisfied needs and to prefigure ways of solving them, thus supporting well-being in a person.

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