

Imagination, Intentionality and the Will

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“All that we are is the result of thought” The Buddha

The healing power of images

As an artist I have always been fascinated by images. I knew - even as a young child – that when I was drawing imaginary worlds I was safe. They were places I could hide and play in, or explore. I could meet whom I wanted. A Second Life equivalent BC – before computers – (well, home computers!) So at some level I had experience of my imagination’s ability to nourish and heal.

Later – as an art teacher I often witnessed how the mood of an unfocused teenager or a depressed adult would reverse and the élan, the life-force, would return and flow, when they became absorbed in the process of creating or image making. Even if the image was not initially their own – such as in a still-life set-up, they would imagine or visualise the outcome they were working towards. This is what absorbed them – and meaning and purpose sprung from their imagined intention – the picture they saw and willed in their minds.

Focused or intentional imagining

My first direct experience of using my imagination as a healing tool was in 1976 after I had injured my right leg in a car accident, a few centimetres below my hip. I narrowly escaped paralysis – but I could not walk properly. I started to work with a very wonderful Australian Alexander Technique teacher, John Skinner, and he told me to visualise the movement in my body that I wanted – to see myself walking, and not only that – but running and dancing. He asked me to imagine the specific locations – skipping through a meadow of grasses, running along a beach beside the waves, and to exercise daily in my imagination. **This was my first conscious experience of applying purposeful focus to my imagination – that is - with intention and will.** Where the muscles were torn and I was disconnected from hip to thigh, he asked me to imagine energy and life flowing through the hip-barrier and down through my whole leg to my toes and up again. I would do this as a form of meditation and would actually see the life-force as a golden or white light.

He also wanted me to visualize the severed nerves reaching towards each other – and the fractured bones mending. I found this more difficult – but he assured me that he would also direct his thoughts towards that part of the process for me – which at the time I found a bit strange! Scientists now call this process – of directing a visualisation for the benefit of others - ‘distanced intentionality’ - psychics call it absent healing. Magnetic Resonance Imaging – MRI scans - can now show how this impacts on the brain.

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*There was an experiment set up in a hospital where a group of patients chose to receive absent healing from a sample of healers. Each healer was given the details of the patient they were meant to focus on and heal. Another group of patients were **not** informed that they were receiving healing. The MRI clearly registered the brain responding to this surge of focused healing at approximately the same time that the healers were attuning to their individual patient. Not only that – but the part of the body or organ focused on by the healer showed activity in the part of the brain responsible for that part of the body. The scans also registered activity in the brains of the patients who were unaware that they were receiving absent healing.*

When my adoptive mother lay in a coma and I went to meet her for the first time, I spoke to her and asked her to squeeze my hand if she could hear me – and she did. At some point when I told her that I understood, had forgiven her, and that I loved her, a tear rolled out of the corner of her eye, - though she was still to all extent and purposes, unconscious.

A few years after my car accident, when I began my own therapy, it was the active imagination processes – the visualizations and dialogue with images, that affected the most profound inner transformations – and which I believe were causal to changes in my outer world. Thus began a lifelong fascination with imagery and visualization and a curiosity as to how imagination works and heals.

It was Jung who said that the imagined world was as real as the outer world, and there are countless quotes from spiritual texts and wise teachers – from ancient to modern – repeating that our thoughts create our reality, that our inner beliefs shape our external world. In the Act of Will Assagioli reminds us that we are using the creative power of thoughts continuously and spontaneously – but often without being aware of it. He spoke of ways that we could learn to practise beneficial thought – **‘constructive beneficial application of thought’** he wrote – and devised exercises and tools to help us do just that. They are not ‘new’ – thinkers from Buddha to the Dalai Lama, the Upanishads to the quantum physicists, energy-field theorists and modern energy psychology practitioners - all speak of this. But it is only comparatively recently, in the past ten years, that neuroscience has the brain scan evidence to actually show us – how our brain positively changes when we meditate, visualize, direct our imagination or reverse our thinking processes.

The many exercises and tools that Assagioli devised from his own experiences and observations, and that others have since added to, do in fact work!

Reflective-receptive practices, creative visualizations, allowing the light of potential to show us a different picture, to image what is possible, all those tools in the psychosynthesis toolkit – of drawing, guided and spontaneous imagery, dialoguing with dreams, blocks or disease, or higher wisdom, ideal modelling, the evocation of positive qualities, acting as if, word cards that stimulate visually and vibrationally, affirmations and the awareness of the very words we use, journal keeping, and the practice of intention and will, - all these – and

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more –we now have evidence for how these methods can affect beneficial changes in our brain – and impact on our body.

If you imagine evoking a quality – let's say of inner calm, and see yourself embodying that – at work, with family, in your life – present and future, then the brain thinks that that is what is actually happening. Messages are sent to the part of the brain responsible for the state of calmness, which is then activated – and remarkably - chemicals are produced to enhance calmness – and before you realize – the calm is felt and embodied. If you picture yourself in a serene location – a temple, or being in a peaceful landscape, the same happens, the brain thinks it's there – and the feeling of serenity is evoked – and chemical and structural changes occur in the brain.

I recently had the privilege of working with a medical & genetics researcher Dr. David Hamilton. David's worked for many years, in the pharmaceutical industry, researching placebos. He is an inspiring enthusiast, a rarity in the medical world, – and he has given permission to quote from his references. Some research experiments are fairly well known now and some featured in the series of documentaries that the BBC did a while back on the placebo phenomenon. I quote mainly from his most recent book 'How Your Mind Can Heal Your Body'.

To remind you – a placebo is a dummy drug that is made to look like a real drug – and is used in medical trials to be tested against a control. It is not supposed to heal – but it does – because the patients believe it's a real drug. Their belief in it is what swings it – it's their mind or thinking that does the healing! Brain-imaging technology now shows that when we believe we're taking a drug that is actually a placebo, the brain lights up as if we really were taking the drug and produces its own natural chemicals.

Recent scans have also shown that when a placebo is taken instead of the anti-depressant fluoxetine (Prozac) the placebo affects most of the same areas of the brain as the actual drug. Thus if the patient believes in the Prozac working – not knowing that it is a placebo, then their belief affects the brain, causes chemicals to be produced and the outcome is often the same!

IF YOU BELIEVE IT WILL WORK – IT WILL!

Fake surgery & Sham Operations:

This is the experiment that was quoted in the BBC documentaries - where knee surgery was offered to a trial sample of arthritic patients who had difficult and painful mobility. A few of the patients had the actual surgery – and a number merely had an incision – that left a slight - and convincing – scar. The recovery rate – to pain-free mobility - was as high in the patients who had not undergone 'proper' surgery – as in those that had! But

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because they believed that they had been successfully operated on, - after all they had the scar to prove it! – these patients resumed their ability to walk. Years later they were still walking well and without pain!

Another example of 'fake' surgery that worked is the one where 21 angina sufferers were given the real operation (which involved tying off arteries to divert blood supply to the heart) – and 12 underwent an operation – but without their arteries being tied at all.

After the operation – 67% of the patients that had undergone the real thing – reported significant improvement – they had less pain, required less medication and were able to exercise longer without an angina attack. However – incredibly – of those that received the sham surgery – 83% reported a marked improvement – equal to the real-op. results! **The belief in the success and effectiveness of surgery was as beneficial and healing as the actual surgery itself!**

Then there is the strange phenomena that the homeopaths that I supervise speak of: sometimes they need only to suggest a remedy to their patient – and if the patient attunes to it, their symptoms often seem to disappear or alleviate. **The intentionality from both prescriber – and patient – seems to set this process off.**

The **optimism and beliefs of the practitioner/therapist are key factors in the healing process.** Research shows that the thoughts, intent – and therefore the consciousness of the therapist, and their belief in what they are doing has much more effect on the client's healing – than a neutral, non-committal attitude. The ability of the therapist to hold hope and to envision progress – even where the client is unable to, is vital. This does not need to be stated – it is a vibrational stance embodied by the therapist.

Herbert Benson, Harvard medical professor and author, studied angina drugs that were well known and effective in the 40's and 50's, helping 70-90% of those that took them. When they were later retested in higher quality trials they were found to be much less effective. From then on, they stopped working so well for people, even though they had worked previously. Benson suggested that it was mostly because the doctors prescribing them didn't believe in them as much as they previously did. Therefore they were unlikely to be as enthusiastic as they had been when they initially prescribed them.

IF THE THERAPIST BELIEVES IN THE THERAPY IT' S MORE LIKELY TO WORK!

Imagined as real It seems that the frontal cortex of the brain cannot tell the difference between what's real activity and what's imagined. So Jung was right when he said that the imaginal world is as real as the real one. To the brain it is! Being asked – way back in '76 – to imagine running, dancing and skipping – and to imagine exercising daily –felt almost as if I was doing it for real.

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If you focus your thoughts on a part of your body - that part feels it. If you repeatedly visualize exercising or strengthening muscles evidence shows that the muscle strength actually increases! (Athletes practise mentally seeing themselves achieving their highest levels – which a scan can now register the impact on the brain. So we can actually see how visualization stimulates and strengthens muscle strength.)

An experiment was set up in 2004 (Lerner Research Institute in Cleveland) where 30 volunteers were asked to exercise their little finger for 15 minutes, 5 days a week, over a period of 12 weeks – to build muscle strength. Another sample were asked to just imagine exercising their finger for the same amount of time. After 12 weeks the results were recorded – and although – as to be expected – the muscle strength of those that did the actual physical training was much improved, by 53%, there was also, remarkably, an increase of strength, by 35% in the group that had just done the mental training – even though they hadn't actually 'lifted a finger'.

That does not mean that we can all suddenly get out of actually getting to the gym!

Another example – is the 1994 Harvard Medical School piano exercise experiment. Volunteers had to practise playing notes on the piano with five fingers for two hours a day, for five consecutive days. Another group were asked to just imagine doing the same exercise, and to hear the notes, for the same amount of time. At the end of the five days, the brain maps of all the volunteers were recorded – and the maps of those who imagined doing the exercise had grown to the same extent as the group who had actually played the piano!

Prosthetic limb movement

One of the most exciting developments to evolve from research is in prosthetics. The movement of prosthetic limbs – let's say an arm – can now be activated by thought! The imagined movement (let's say waving) stimulates the part of the brain responsible for that movement, and converts the neural message into a computer signal (**neuronfiring**) which then electronically instructs the prosthetic limb to wave. Specific movements can be visualized – such as stroking, stirring, or hand-shaking, for instance, and the thought will activate the neural instruction to the limb. Will into action.

Repetition is important here. **Repetition and persistence** are effective elements of using the will — and repeated intentional thought forms more neural connections in the brain. As with a weak or damaged muscle – the more you exercise it, the more it strengthens - and if you don't use it you can lose it – i.e. parts of the brain that don't get used atrophy or get smaller. Conscious repetition (like Assagioli's Useless Will exercise), or repeated healing visualisations are more effective than one-offs.

You all know the Bicycle Story – from Piero's What We May Be – where a little girl was given a two-wheeler bicycle for her birthday – and without hesitation, never having been on anything other than a tricycle – she got

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onto the bike and started to cycle. Her family – who were anxiously expecting her to wobble and fall – were amazed. They all applauded and later when they asked her how she managed to stay on – she replied “Easy! Ever since I knew I was going to get a bicycle, I imagined myself balancing and riding it every day! So I knew when the day came I wouldn’t fall!”

Many therapies employ repetition – such as repeated movements and re-posturing, or certain repeated sounds, (like with tinnitus therapy), or vibrational reversals, (such as in EFT or tapping) – these are all ways that can bring about neural change in the brain, in our consciousness, therefore in our behaviour, and in our body - our energy, our cellular memory, our DNA and our immune system.

Although this is relatively new research, neuroscience is exploring the **benefits of talking therapy** on the brain. David Hamilton describes how *‘when working through a trauma, and speaking about it, the neurons in the prefrontal cortex light up – are activated – and activity in the area that processes painful emotions reduces. . . In biological terms, energy is diverted to the front of the brain and away from the area that stores the emotional pain.*

Neurogenesis – the brain’s ability to regenerate – is a way by which the brain can repair damage – such as that caused by trauma. **We know that with severe trauma, deprivation, abuse, chronic stress or even depression, some kind of neural damage can occur - but recent studies have shown that in some cases the brain can regenerate and repair the damage.** Ten years ago the idea that we could not only rewire our brain but regenerate it would be considered science-fiction, but it’s actually become scientific fact.

The brain’s **neuroplasticity** – is its capacity to re-form and change. In physiotherapy repeated exercise will strengthen a weak muscle, so daily crosswords, or learning a new skill or language, **visualization or thought reversal**, - all these will enable parts of the brain to grow stronger with use and other parts weaken or shrink.

If, for instance, you decide, as an act of will, that instead of habitual complaining, you will start to think more positively (a switch to **acting as if**, i.e. a psychological reversal) – and for example, to practise gratitude, then new maps – or pathways - are formed or ‘grown’ in the brain to process this new way of thinking. Research shows that this process takes about 21 days. After that time – and after repeating your gratitudes, and thinking positively, then the ‘positive gratitude’ map shows up in the scans as being more developed or connected to, than the ‘constantly complaining’ map – which will have shrunk through underuse. I often give very self-negating clients homework – to reinforce the changes or reversals they are making, to make lists of things they like or appreciate about themselves, to acknowledge a few gratitudes a day.) These are ways of re-mapping or re-wiring the brain. The repeated practice of thought reversal – such as shifting from expecting the worst to appreciating the moment, will enable them to imagine and to see in a different way what is possible and the muscle of intent or will is strengthened.

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Over the years I have practised holding the vision and intent for clients to heal, in the best possible way for them, and I make use of case-specific imagery and intentional directed thought. There are many success stories – but I thought the best case I could present is myself. Going back to that old car injury of 1976 – doctors predicted that I would be crippled with arthritis by now, probably with a hip replacement. Last year I was offered yet another operation – this time to fuse the ankle of my compensating left ‘good’ leg – because the lack of fluid between the ankle joints was causing pain and degeneration. Since then, as well as having physiotherapy and taking certain minerals, I have been actively using my imagination to image squirting a golden tube of viscous paste between my joints – so that they move freely and painlessly. I do this automatically – on walks, whenever possible. The pain has gone and I am moving with ease. The consultants are amazed. I have my young physiotherapist working with me visualizing, and that seems to help too!

I’d like to end with a quote from Albert Einstein:

I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination.

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

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