

ALYSON QUINN

## ABSTRACT FOR PRESENTATION

### ENGAGING THE SOUL IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The purpose of the presentation is to demonstrate the power of engaging the spirit and integrative work into Social work practice. This will be demonstrated by a brief presentation. Then an experiential process where participants are able to experience “Experiential Unity theory and model: reclaiming the soul” and its impact. Experiential Unity theory and model was devised to address the current concerns dominating the field of group therapy and individual counseling. It is an integrative model, it includes the mind, body, spirit and emotions in its treatment and therefore is able to provide a healing milieu whereby clients can address the core of the problems and heal fully.

## PRESENTATION

My name is Alyson Quinn, I am originally from Zimbabwe but have been living in Vancouver Canada for about 26 years working in Psychiatry as a group therapist, individual and couples counselor during that time.

In the last 8 years I started to consolidate a new theory and model and eventually named it “Experiential Unity theory and model; reclaiming the soul” and introduced it in my place of work. In 2012 I published a book with the same title through Rowman and Littlefield. The book and the model was a result of working in the field constantly revising and noting what works and what doesn’t. I have been practicing in this way for the past 7 years in a group, individual and couples format. I have taken pre and post scores in the groups I work in continually and the results have been a resounding success. In all the years I have been working in the field I have not seen consistently positive results for any other format. For the purpose of this presentation I will focus primarily on

group work but will include its application to an individual counseling format later too and ways to deepen soul work in individual sessions.

The theory and model is called EXPERIENTIAL because a major feature is to include here and now processes in the educational component of the group or individual work. UNITY in the title relates to 2 aspects:

Firstly – It is an integrative theory and model inclusive of the mind, body, soul and emotional content during the therapeutic process.

Secondly –in regards to group work it is a bridge between psychodynamic and psycho educational group processes. The model helps to illuminate patterns in relating to others and making unconscious patterns conscious, key aspects of the model by Irvin Yalom.

Also similar to the Yalom model the focus of the group is on the ‘here and now’ processes. Unlike the Yalom model however it uses tools in a psycho educational format to highlight themes of the group, feelings that emerge, and also helps to deepen group members understanding of themselves and traps and or barriers to their progress.

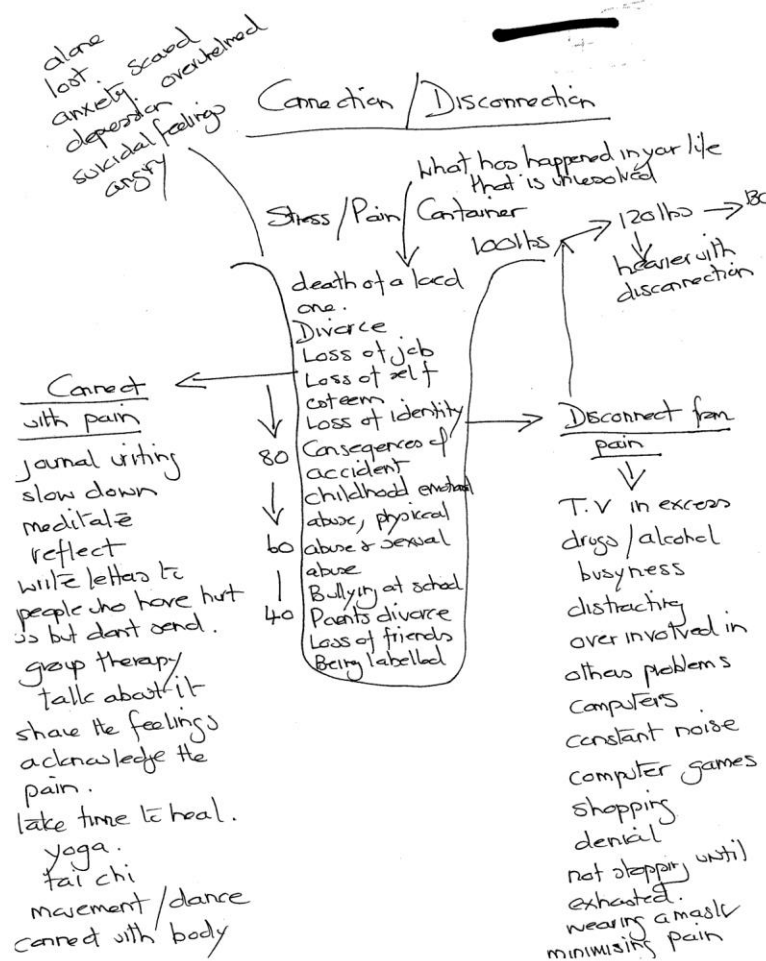
RECLAIMING THE SOUL is in the title. The soul is reclaimed layer by layer partly through the use of visual metaphors (the language of the soul) in the form of tools. The tools help clients bypass conscious processes and dip more easily into their unconscious, thereby accessing deeper parts of themselves. The soul is also accessed through the feeling state; each tool includes feelings generated by looking at the predicament they find themselves in. The body, another important source of soul retrieval, is also included in the therapeutic process through movement in group work and breath work and visualizations in both individual and group formats.

One of my beliefs born from my time spent in Africa that has helped me personally, and also became a lens in my work, is the belief that a deep connection to self and others protects and shields in times of grave distress. Often in my work and personal

life I experience swimming in a sea of disconnection. I started to observe the cultural traps in the North American context that contributed to this. In the Experiential Unity Model I named 9 cultural traps that are significant barriers to healing. Namely The Busyness Trap, The Technology Trap, The trap of Speed, The trap of Overworking, The trap of Excess Activity, The trap of Cerebral communication, The trap of Stimulants, The trap of Materialism and the Trap of Martyrdom. It is common for these traps to come up in the visuals or tools.

In this light the first tool I devised was the Connection / Disconnection tool. I start the tool by saying we all have pain unresolved from the past and this pain tends to be harbored in our bodies. I ask them where they think they store their unresolved pain. They talk about their necks / back / stomach etc Then I ask clients to name any unresolved pain from the past and put it in a stress / pain container which I draw on the board in a U shape.

See figure below



I then ask for feelings and thoughts that are a result of this pain.

I then highlight choices re connecting and draining the pain in the container (ie: our bodies) or disconnecting and adding to the pain container.

Disconnection as Thomas Moore talks about in *Care of the Soul* accounts for a great deal of the distress in the twentieth century. He states when the "soul is neglected it doesn't just go away it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss our meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try and eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it." (Moore, 1994: xi). He goes on to state that symptoms like emptiness, meaninglessness, vague depression, disillusionment about marriage, family,

and relationships, a loss of values, a yearning for personal fulfillment and a hunger for spirituality Moore believes are all indicators of a loss of connection with soul.

Mark Ettin in his book foundations of group therapy talks about the importance of “mental images that provide direct access to the preconscious processes while touching deep emotions and underlying meanings” (Ettin, 1992:217).

Connection / Disconnection is an example of one of 30 tools I have included in my book Experiential Unity theory and model: reclaiming the soul. Later I will go through more of the tools but at this stage I would like to share the other components of the group model and then at a later date describe the individual counseling format.

#### 1– BREATH WORK / VISUALIZATION

Each week clients learn different aspects of breath work. It may be counting ones breath and using visualizations to calm the mind and connect to the body. It may be breath work drawn from yoga techniques like the bumblebee breath (taking a deep inhale and then with lips closed make a humming sound on the exhale), alternate nostril breathing or pony breath. They are encouraged to do body scans and become aware of areas of tension in the body and use the breath to calm and soothe those areas. Breath work is highlighted as a critical tool in calming ones mind, learning to regain a feeling of control and to become more mindful of ones responses and actions.

#### 2 – FEELING ROUNDS

The second aspect of the theory and model is ‘the feeling’ rounds. As Candace Pert states in her book Molecule of emotions – “it is this unhealed feeling, the accumulation of bruised and broken emotions that most people stagger under without ever saying a word, that the mainstream model is least effective in dealing with” (Pert, 1997:265). The rounds are simple but profound in their impact. Clients are willing to share thoughts with ease but stating a feeling requires a different level of awareness. Many clients state that issues

related to childhood surface in the feeling rounds as they had extreme cultural training on denying and suppressing their feelings. In the feeling rounds clients consciously breathe, close their eyes and come up with one word to describe the feeling that is most dominant for them right now. This continues for 3 or 4 rounds and it helps the clients experience emotion at a deeper level. With their emotions honored and acknowledged they are more likely to be present for the other parts of the group process.

### EXPERIENTIAL PROCESS

To illuminate the feeling rounds I would like us to do some breathing and feeling right now. Get comfortable in your chair, pulling your back away from the back of the chair to assist in more breath coming in and imagining a string is pulling your head up so you are erect. Now imagine your feet are in thick black soil and you are pressing your feet deeply into the soil right now. Do that now. The more you press your feet deeper into the soil the more grounded you are. Start to breathe – breathe in as long and slowly as possible, hold at the top of the breath, then exhale as long as slowly as possible. Continue on your own. Thoughts in your mind imagine they are logs on a river and you are watching them float by. Now feel what you feel, we need to feel in order to heal, what is the strongest feeling you are feeling right now. When you have it open your eyes and share the one word with the group. No explanation just the one word. Now breathe again and explore for 3 feelings. This is a critical piece for grounding and calming before the other therapeutic processes and helps the clients become present and access deeper material.

### 3 – CHECK IN – relates to group work

The check in has a slightly different emphasis depending on the group theme i.e. depression, anxiety, communication etc. – however an overarching theme is often connection and disconnection in the last week and how did that impact your anxiety, depression etc. The clients are then able to associate twenty hours of TV with an increase

in their depression for example. It is also a time clients report on their action plans or goals. The check in gives clients an opportunity to air their struggles in the week briefly, and also to report on how they are implementing the tools and ideas in the group to effect different results.

#### 4 – FEEDBACK ON STRENGTHS – relates to group work

After the member has completed their check in two clients and one facilitator give feedback on strengths. The client remains silent whilst receiving feedback so they can remember it, and then give a brief comment if they wish afterwards. This not only has a powerful impact on the client who can recall few times in their lives that someone acknowledged their strengths; it is also an important opportunity for clients to develop the ability to acknowledge strength in others and themselves.

5 – TOOL - The Connection / Disconnection tool is a powerful tool to get a reading of soul connection or disconnection and assess the clients readiness to heal. It is a powerful tool to be used in a first session in either a group or individual counseling process.

From then on generally the tools are a reflection of the current preoccupations and concerns of the clients. The therapist is on high alert throughout the group or individual session listening deeply for an underlying theme. The theme that is gleaned is then fed back to the group or client for approval – if the client or group agrees that the issue is relevant the counselor comes up with a visual to best depict the theme. This way of working is experiential and so requires a great deal of presence from the facilitator. It is critical to calm and ground oneself prior to a group or individual session quieting ones own mind. With a calm mind one is more able to listen at a different level. The following quote captures the essence of the listening in an experiential session.

“Knowing what is happening”

When you cannot see what is happening in a group, do not stare harder. Relax and look gently with your inner eye.

When you do not understand what a person is saying, do not grasp every word. Give up your efforts. Become silent inside and listen with your deepest self.

When you are puzzled by what you see or hear, do not strive to figure things out. Stand back for a moment and become calm. When a person is calm, complex events appear simple.

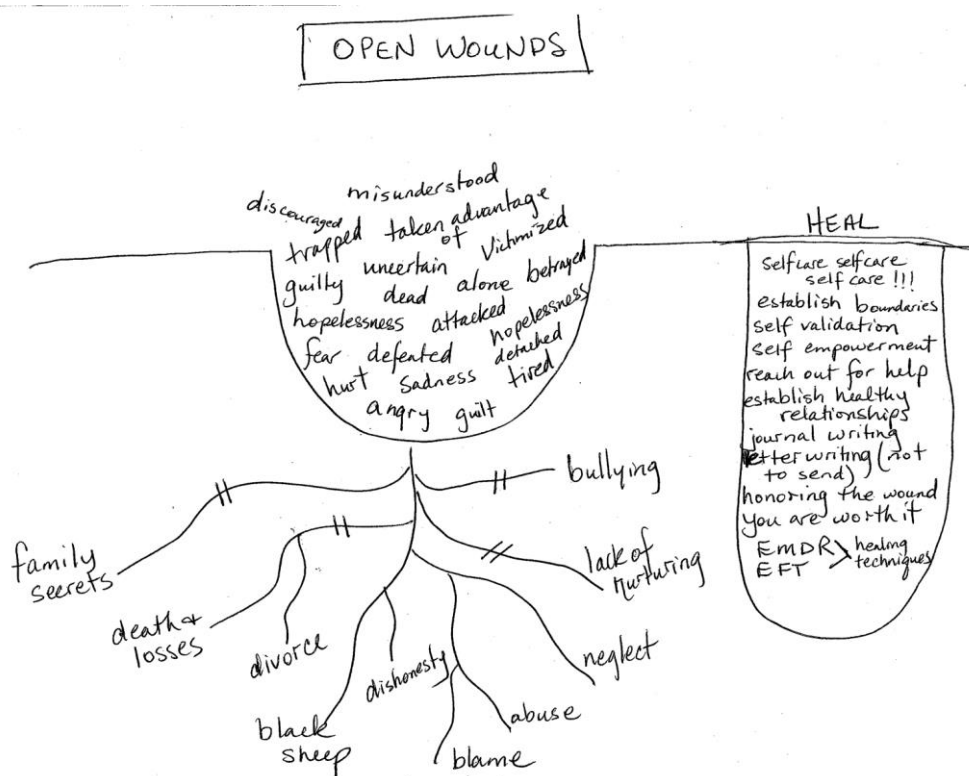
To know what is happening push less, open out and be aware. See without staring. Listen quietly rather than listening hard. Use intuition and reflection rather than trying to figure things out. (Heider; 1986: 14,1)

The following are some of the tools that have been drawn from a group or individual session in the here and now. The visual is attempting to capture the clients preoccupations at the time.



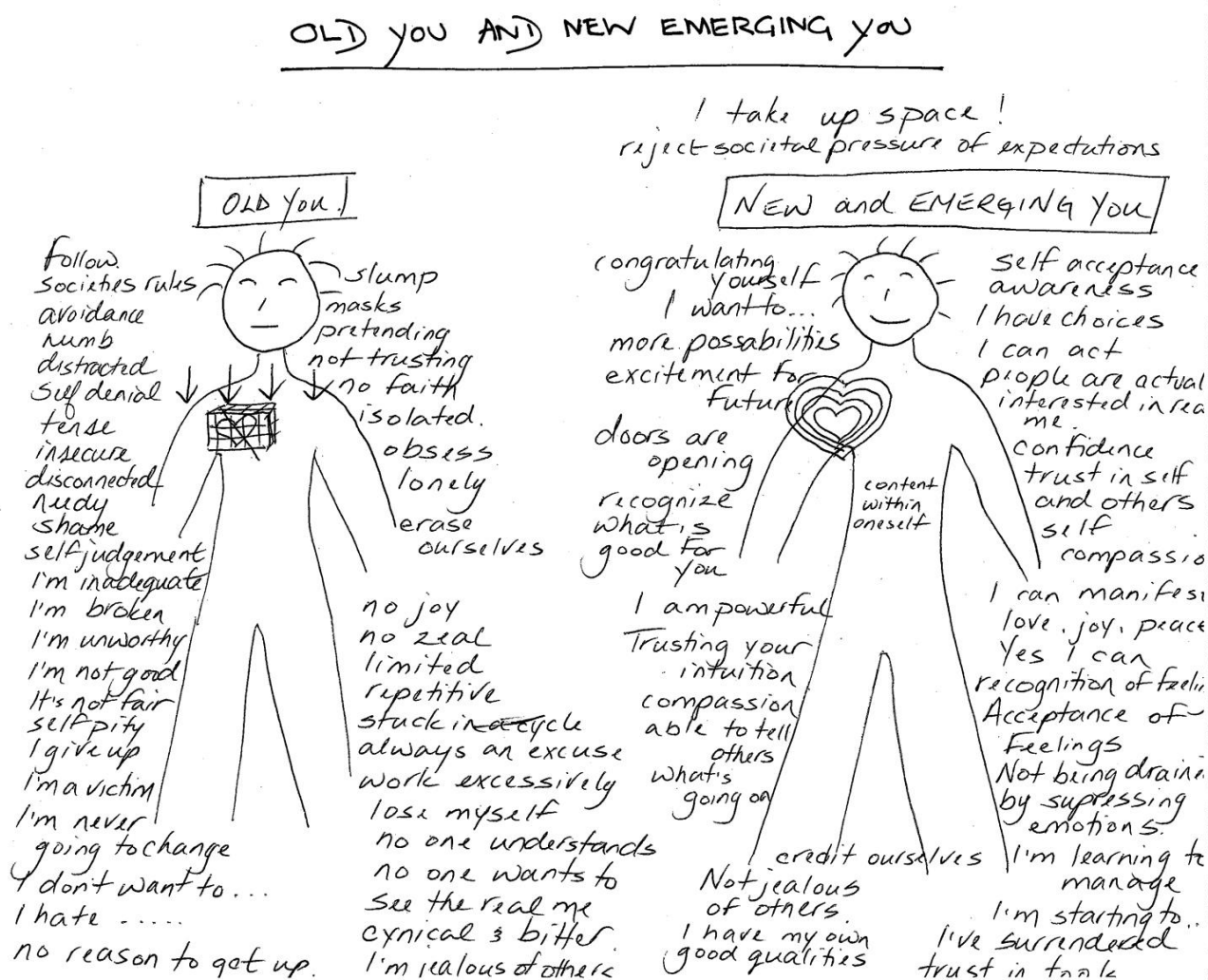
TOOL 1- OPEN WOUNDS – the wound is the pain they are currently experiencing.

Then the clients trace the root of the recurring wound. Then they focus on how they can heal the wound.



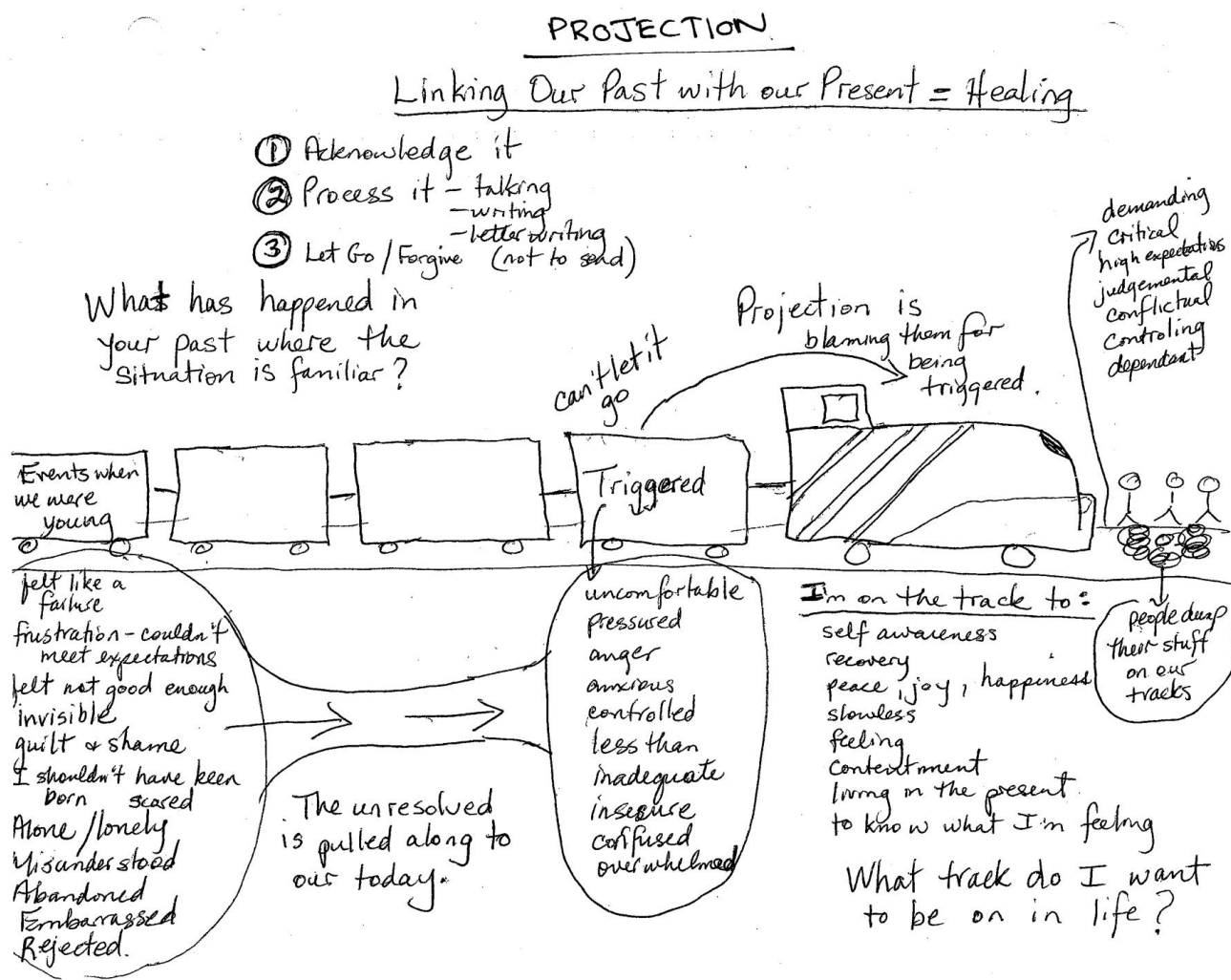
## TOOL 2 - OLD YOU AND NEW EMERGING YOU

This tool is only used when the clients have made sufficient progress and they are starting to acknowledge their changes. It can be a very powerful motivator of change.



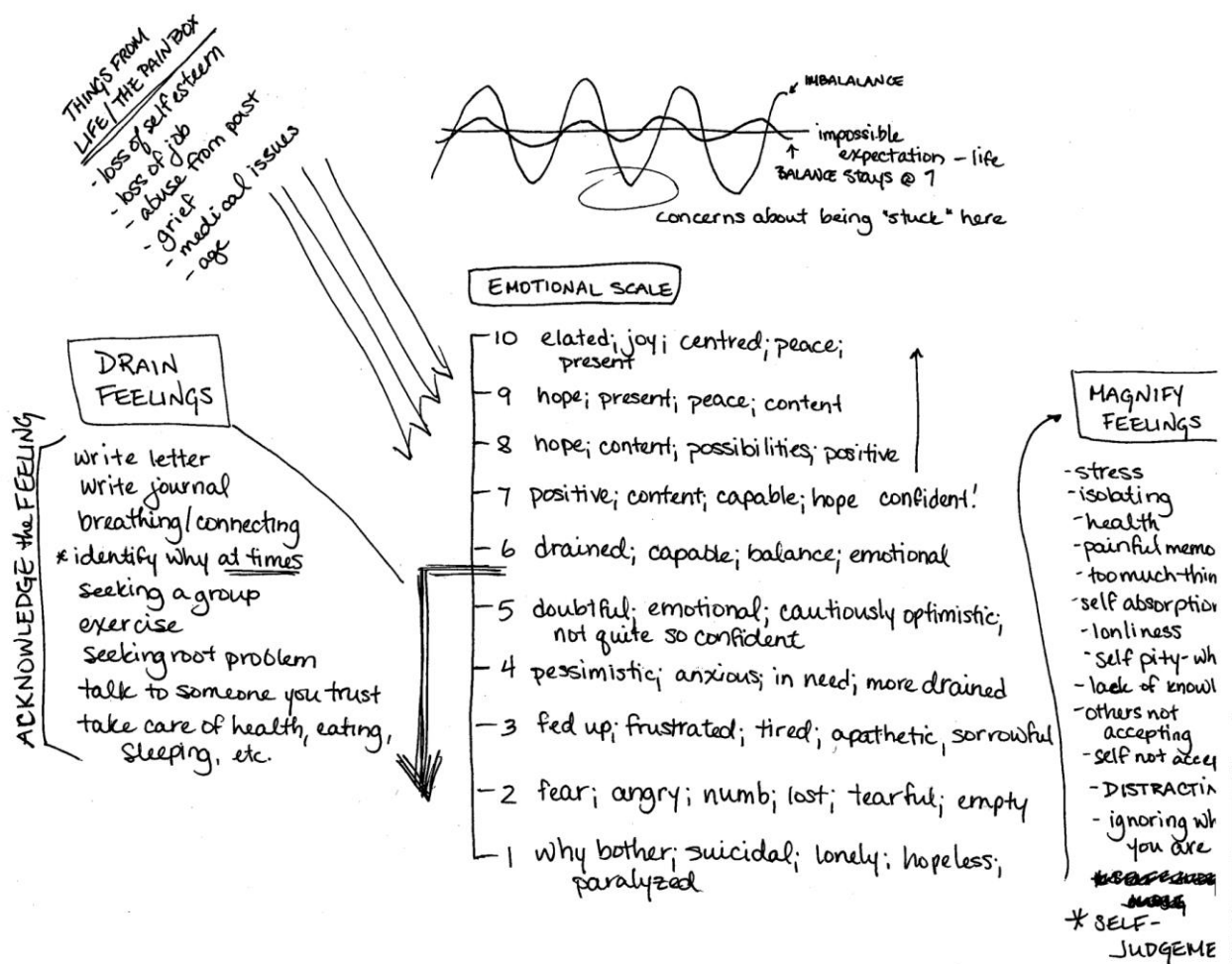
### TOOL 3 - PROJECTION

This tool came from a communication group whereby a client was reliving the triggered emotion she felt around a neighbor's behavior. Focus initially on what behaviors in others trigger us. Then how do we know we are triggered? The group then brainstormed past issues, which may be contributing to the trigger. They brainstormed the solution as acknowledging it, processing the trigger and letting go.



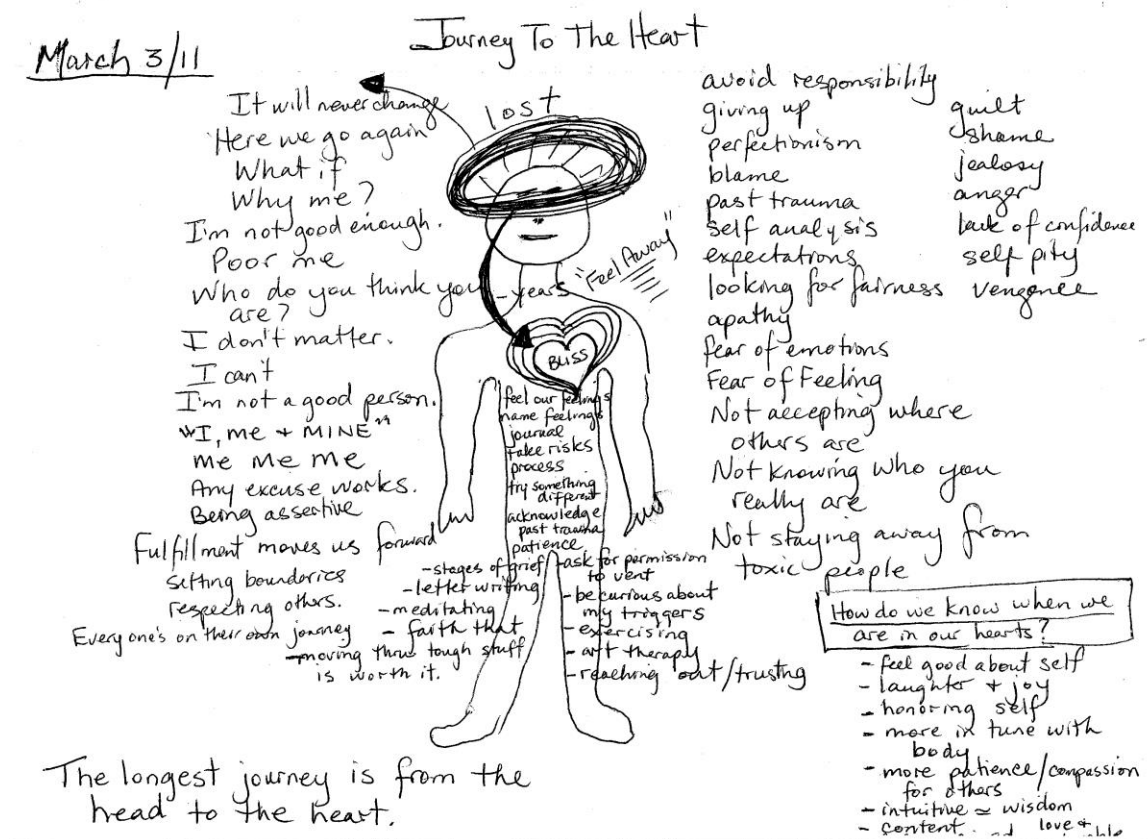
## TOOL 4 – EMOTIONAL SCALE

This tool assists clients to get a better handle on their emotions. The scale gives them perspective - the tool resulted from an intense fear of feeling in the group. With each of the markers on the scale the clients brainstormed what they could do that would help drain their feelings. They also became aware of what magnified their feelings.



## TOOL 5 – JOURNEY TO THE HEART

This tool helped clients to start their healing process. It came from a realization that being stuck in their heads was keeping them stuck emotionally. The listed the consequence of being out of touch emotionally and what would help them to know they were in their hearts.



## OVERALL BENEFITS OF THE TOOLS

1. Clients process made visible – clients teach themselves – it is their ideas.
2. Tools are symbols and metaphors, the language of the soul.
3. Tools help bypass conscious processes and allow the unconscious to be accessed.
4. Tools help to bypass defenses.
5. Visual confronts the client not a group member or facilitator – helps to lessen power dynamics.
6. Bypass the intellect and reveal unhelpful belief systems.
7. Tools help to elicit deep emotion – it provides a way for clients to express deep emotion.
8. Tools help clients develop a bird's eye view of their predicament.
9. Tools help clients explore their barriers to change.
10. Assists in getting the pain out and seeing pain outside of themselves.

## CLIENT FEEDBACK

Here are some of the client's comments after a group meeting regarding the visual metaphors, namely tools, employed in the therapeutic process.

Client A – I would never have been able to learn how to survive, tolerate my depression without the tools. I refer to all of the tools because one is not enough. I cannot stress how much better I have felt about myself since starting this particular group session. Thank you, thank you and thank you.

Client B – Yes I think the tools are helpful and beneficial.

1. Subject is expressed by the group during discussion, so always relevant.
2. Designed to be interactive with participants – thought provoking.
3. New – tool being copied to keep for future reference.

## Client C

1. Helps me build strength when I am feeling weak.
2. Creates awareness of behavior patterns combining thoughts and tools to empower us to know we can change the way we think and see things.
3. Gives us hope we can live a happy and peaceful life.
4. The tools are created in a sharing environment where we find we are not alone and there are others who also struggle.

## Client D

1. Collective effort.
2. Achieving positive outcome.
3. Problem solving.
4. Giving new awareness.
5. Understanding problems in objectivity.

## Client E: why tools are helpful

1. Provides visual metaphor / analogies for abstract concepts.
2. Accessible images are easily accessed, i.e. climbing a mountain, foundation, bird's eye view, Gibbons stay in my mind!
3. Provides something to "grab on to". Pulling out a tool – suddenly brings me to that space of self-awareness and reminds me that I have options and choices in my reactions / responses to situations. Gives me breathing space.
4. Concept of "tools" and "tool belt" accentuates the idea of building and rebuilding, strengthening oneself.

## Client F

1. Great reference – I look back on them sometimes when I am journaling and they help remind me of some of the choices I can make.

2. Some of the examples really click with me and help me to make sense of my feelings – they are very visual.

3. They also remind me of where I want to go in terms of my self-growth and consequently remind me of the positive changes I've made.

Client G

The toolbox has helped me in recognizing that I am worth fighting for. It makes me feel that I am capable of climbing the mountain reaching certain plateaus and setting boundaries myself.

## 6 – MOVEMENT

Indigenous cultures have used dance as a healing tool for centuries; I saw it used powerfully in the struggle against apartheid, it appeared to not only build resilience, but was a form of bonding with the group. Bradford Keeney in his book *Shaking Medicine* captures its impact “there are significant healing and transformational benefits when we allow our bodies to naturally and effortlessly enter ecstatic realms and then effortlessly shift into deep states of relaxation. Perhaps Africans learned a more effortless entry into the healing cycle by beginning with spontaneous movement.

Tannis Hugill a clinical counselor and dance and drama therapist reiterates this point through a quote from Johnson on her site “Dance movement therapy is an important resource for treatment of trauma. It provides vital tools for reconnection to the body and to the self. It gains access to the implicit memories that are encoded in the primitive brain as visual sensory imprints because it uses the language of the body, moving beneath the words which often block conscious awareness (Johnson, 1987: 7-13).

Clients are asked to find a space on their own – face outward from the group and to shake their body in any way which feels comfortable. For those unwilling to do movement they go on a mindful walk for about 5 minutes or take their time stretching. Some clients have



resisted the movement at first and then started using movement at home to shift their mood. On the whole it has had a very positive impact, it lightens the mood, clients sometimes bring their own music and they often talk of feeling more connected overall. After 5 minutes of dance we move onto 5 to 10 minutes of Kundalini yoga. I am not a yoga teacher but have attended classes for 5 years I have felt the mood altering benefits of breath of joy, and various other techniques, brought to the West by Yogi Bhajan to help clear emotionally and detoxify physically. Yoga is built on the idea that there are issues in our tissues and by movement we can shift energetically. The clients often remark on how they feel lighter, and that their mood has shifted post the movement section of the group.

#### 7 – WRAP UP

This is a chance for clients to state what stood out in the group, a feeling word and an action plan. It is a helpful time for the facilitators to glean what made an impact in the group and is a chance to reassess the impact of the varying techniques on the clients. This information is also gleaned in post evaluations of the group. Most often the clients talk about the impact of the tools and how they have assisted them in making progress. They also comment on the use of movement and building strengths as important components of the group.

#### INDIVIDUAL FORMAT

All aspects of the model are covered in an individual counseling session except a specific time for movement. It is common for me to start out a session with some breath work and or visualization. Then for the client to name their feelings for a number of rounds. These feeling rounds can reveal to me how comfortable the client is around 'feeling their feelings' and the extent of their disconnection from self. I wrote and published a self-help book to assist those clients who are fearful of feeling called RECLAIM YOUR SOUL

YOUR PATH TO HEALING. I have included twenty feelings in the book some challenging, some uplifting, each with some insight re the feeling. Also in the book I have included twenty-eight patterns of behavior some that keep us mired and stuck, and others that assist in our soul transformation process. If I have time I will read a vignette from the book.

The tool in an individual counseling is gleaned from the conversation during the session; it is again the overall theme that they are struggling with right now. A portion of the session is devoted to filling in the tool. The tool can also illuminate action needed in regard to goals etc that will assist the client move through their current distress.

Occasionally in an individual session when I intuit that a client is feeling stuck I have employed some yoga techniques to help them get their energy moving, and to help release trauma. At times I have also encouraged clients to employ a specific yoga technique to assist them in their process.

## CONCLUSION

In the use of this model over the past 7 years I have witnessed radical change and transformation in the clients I work with. Overall what has struck me over and over again having worked in psychiatric settings for over 26 years is that soul disconnection and disconnection from community leaves us all very vulnerable to ongoing distress in the form of depression, anxiety, stress, anger, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive behavior etc. I would like to end with the words of Malidoma Patrice Some for our future “As they walk toward their future may they wake up fast to the dialogue between the soul and the spirit. And may they labor to clean the world from its paralyzing epidemic of soul barrenness so that tomorrow our children can sing together in peace”(Some, 1993:103).

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