Quilt of Comfort: Finding meaning in troubled times

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Abstract

The Quilt of Comfort is an experiential activity designed to help individuals explore personal meaning in challenging circumstances. The author has utilised this approach with both individuals and groups in her work with people experiencing anxiety and depression related to loss, such as life-limiting illnesses, bereavement and life transitions. Additionally, this process can benefit personal development and therapist self-care.

Key Words

Meaning, quilting, existential, art therapy, creativity, psychotherapy, vicarious trauma

Introduction

The theme for the SEA Conference 2024, 'In the Room Where It Happens', prompted my consideration of the diverse range of practices gathered under the existential psychotherapy umbrella. My personal development as an existential psychotherapist has been influenced by the writings of a variety of thinkers, notably the humanistic psychologists (May, Frankl, Rogers); American therapists (Yalom and Schneider); British therapists (Cohn, Strasser, Spinelli and Deurzen); the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; the work of phenomenologists Husserl, Jaspers and Heidegger; and existentialists Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Buber. This list is not exhaustive but illustrates the multiplicity that informs existential ways of working.

So, what goes on 'in the room where it happens'? Reflecting on my personal preferences in my client work, I often find myself drawn to integrating learning from my former training as an art therapist with existential psychotherapy. I was delighted to be invited to lead an experiential creative workshop during the conference, introducing the Quilt of Comfort, a creative tool I developed to explore meaning with clients facing despair. This paper aims to share the directive with a broader audience by outlining specific techniques used during the workshop's creative activity and how it can be adapted for different populations. I will situate it within a theoretical

framework that blends my views on existential psychotherapy, art therapy and positive psychology.

Why work with the metaphor of a quilt?

Fibre arts have been used for storytelling for centuries. One of the most famous examples is the Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidered cloth nearly seventy metres long that depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, culminating in the Battle of Hastings. Such narrative works held meaningful stories that the people of the time, most of whom were illiterate, could follow.

Fast forward to the twentieth century and the AIDS pandemic of the Eighties. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt began in 1987 by San Francisco AIDS activist Cleve Jones to honour his friend Marvin Feldman, who had died as a result of HIV. It is an enormous example of art as a healing process and political statement, one that brought communities together in their grief and brought political attention to a public health crisis. In an interview, Cleve Jones described his inspiration for the quilt in the *History Workshop* article 'Radical object: UK AIDS Memorial Quilt':

> *When I was born in 1954, there was this quilt, and it is actually part of my earliest memories of childhood. Whenever I was home with a cold, my grandma and my mother would make a bed for me on the living room sofa so I could watch television, and they would tuck me in with this quilt.*
>
> *My father…explained to me that this quilt had been made for me by my great-grandmother, of whom I had only the vaguest memories. I still have that quilt and still love it…*
>
> (quoted in McManus, 2021: online)

Quilts are folk art. They are often deeply personal, treasured objects with significant meaning for individuals and communities. Quilts can hold memories and a legacy, connecting generations and representing comfort and safety.

The Gees Bend Quilters, African American descendants of enslaved people in rural Alabama, are the focus of the BBC programme *Stitching Souls* (2020). Their story is of immense resilience from slavery days to the civil rights movement of the Sixties. The workers' cooperative Freedom Quilting Bee provided economic opportunity and political empowerment for a community during a time of political unrest and extreme poverty. The work of the Gees Bend Quilters is now heralded as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced" (Kimmelman: 2002), with many pieces held in the permanent collections of over thirty leading art museums. Artists continue to make political statements using

the medium of quilting; for example, UK artist Louis Blackburn coordinated the 'Comfort' Breast Quilt that toured museums in the UK from 2023 to 2024. This quilt pays homage to the experiences of having breasts, celebrates difference and is inclusive of all people with breasts.

Quilting has also been the focus of art therapy research, which explores its therapeutic value in groups for the well-being of older adults (Gardner, 2016). The findings support my thesis that using the metaphor of quilts can support the search for meaning. It allows individuals to share their narratives about what matters to them to promote well-being, particularly when holding on to hope while facing despair.

The Quilt of Comfort: An existential art directive

Finding a place of compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, for others and for things out of our control is often a challenge that impacts our ability to cope and find peace when facing adversity. Everyone deserves a Quilt of Comfort to wrap around themselves when life seems unbearable. This would be a blanket that has stitched into its fabric all the things that hold meaning, value, support and comfort for you...all the things that sustain you when you feel most vulnerable. A blanket you can close your eyes and metaphorically wrap around your shoulders, feeling those comforting things around you, helping to protect you and hold onto hope.

I have used this process in my work with both individuals and groups. It is suitable for ages twelve and up and is inclusive and sensitive to cultural, ethnic, gender and neurodiverse differences. Clinical applications include supporting individuals facing difficult life transitions such as bereavement, ambiguous loss, illness, depression and anxiety. It can explore a sense of self and can clarify identity, values, meaning and preferences. I have also used the tool for therapist self-care to combat potential vicarious trauma by remembering that there is good in the world even when we are regularly exposed to suffering during our work as we witness distress in others.

The process

Begin by gathering and preparing art materials. The following supplies are recommended: card stock cut to 6"x 6" squares; white glue or glue sticks; scissors; a selection of art papers; and found images such as magazines, newspapers, personal photos, origami paper and so on (these can be precut to 2"x 2" squares). I also like to have colour markers and pencil crayons on hand for those who choose to draw their images.

To help the client or group settle into the activity, I find it helpful to practice a grounding exercise such as a short breath work meditation (Koniver, 2023). Such exercises centre participants, enabling them to be present in the here and now. Inviting client participation and always offering choices is important because some people are averse to creative activities.

Collage is one of the easiest mediums to work with since it requires no drawing skills. Nevertheless, any art-making can provoke anxiety in some individuals, and therapists need to be sensitive to the potential fear of judgment in the creative space. Reassuring participants that there is no right or wrong way to complete the process helps.

Sample script

1. Take a few moments and think about the things in your life that sustain you (give you hope and courage) through good times and difficult times. Consider family, friends, pets, faith traditions or personal spirituality, meaningful rituals, music, art, nature and recreation. Think about your history, career, values, priceless life lessons, and even the simple pleasures you enjoy.
2. Identify one per square in the 'quilt' table provided. You do not have to fill in every square.
3. Make a collage with the art materials provided using a different colour or image to symbolise the things that hold meaning for you.
4. If you are comfortable in doing so, take some time to share your findings with the person next to you. Discuss why these squares that make up your quilt are so important.
5. Remember, no judgment: nothing is right or wrong, good or bad; witness the other person's process with curiosity.

Witnessing the final art product is about inviting the other to share their process and findings. The witness does not judge the product as good or bad, ugly or beautiful, but instead observes with curiosity. The artwork can be a springboard for deeper exploration of emerging themes or the blueprint for further creative activity within the therapeutic relationship. For example, one woman I worked with used her paper quilt as a reference for knitting a blanket. The activity of piecing together her knitted squares, each representing part of her narrative about what held meaning for her, was an extension of the original activity. Months later, I was invited to visit her at home as part of the cancer home-care team, as she was near the end of her life and was unable to travel to meet in my office. I was deeply moved to be invited to her home for a final conversation. I noticed her quilt of comfort, in pride of place with her on her bed. I was close to tears when I got outside, sitting in my car. I was sad because I knew that we would not meet again, and I was awed that a simple art directive had culminated into a treasured object.

Discussion and theoretical underpinnings

The Quilt of Comfort is informed by theories of art therapy, existential psychotherapy and positive psychology. I first trained as an art therapist

in the United States and later as a psychologist at the New School (NSPC) in London. My interest in existential ideas began during my art therapy studies when Bruce Moon, a visiting lecturer, introduced the concept of therapeutic art-making as a phenomenological process. I had yet to learn at that time what he meant by phenomenological. However, I was intrigued, so I bought his book *Existential Art Therapy* and began my ongoing quest to understand more about what it means to be human.

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy is

> *a mental health profession that works through integrative methods, engaging the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are distinct from verbal articulation alone…Visual and symbolic expression gives voice to experience and empowers individual, communal and societal transformation.*
>
> (ATTA, 2024: online)

Art therapist Elinor Ulman suggests that

> *making art brings structure to chaos…its motive power comes from within the personality; it is a way of bringing order out of chaos – chaotic feelings and impulses within, the bewildering mass of impressions from without. It is a means to discover both the self and the world and to establish a relation between the two. In the complete creative process, inner and outer realities are fused into a new entity.*
>
> (Ulman & Dachinger, 1975: 13)

The Quilt of Comfort utilises the idea of visual and symbolic expression, giving voice to experience, and adopts Moon's definition of existential art therapy, being "a dynamic approach to the therapeutic use of art processes and imagery that focuses attention on the ultimate concerns of human existence" (2009: 5). It is an invitation for participants to express what is meaningful to them, first in language, then translated to imagery, and in doing so, be able to engage with what is already known, but perhaps forgotten, with new eyes.

There are many examples linking the arts with existential thinking. Writers, filmmakers and visual artists each attempt to illustrate lived experience in their artistic expression. Works of art can represent concrete situations and show the complexity and holistic perception of life (Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). Merleau-Ponty wrote extensively on art, devoting an entire chapter of *Sense and Non-Sense* (1964) to exploring Cezanne's attempt to paint the world not as photographic realism but as nature itself. In addition, Merleau-Ponty frames painting as more than an observation of the world, describing art as an engagement with the world in an embodied

way. He points to using the body to create and observe art (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]). Applying these ideas to the Quilt of Comfort allows us to explore what holds meaning on a cognitive level and engage in the creative process, embodying what holds meaning for us.

Heidegger (1962 [1927]) writes of the world's thrown facticity. When we are thrown into a world that we do not choose, a world we do not like and one that is not part of our story, how can we experience authentic living? The artwork offers an opportunity to express the story I offer in the quilt – an experience of authenticity, identifying the things that connect me to myself, the things that I actively choose.

Serning (2012: 7) points to the Sartre-influenced view on the formation of self and argues that humans integrate transparently with tools and extend through them: "The hazy boundaries of our selves make us include objects and concepts outside our bodies into our experiences of self. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the blind man's cane (1962 [1945]: 245), and Heidegger speaks of his hammer (1962 [1927])". In constructing the Quilt of Comfort, the artwork becomes an extension of me, a concrete, visceral, real thing in the world.

Frankl's meaning-centred logotherapy and existential analysis is a philosophy of human existence based on the premise that meaning is the primary motivational force of life. Frankl (2006 [1942]) believed that life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most difficult ones, drawing upon Nietzsche's statement, 'He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how'. Dezelic (2014: 112) offers an outline of the methodology of logotherapy, which can be a helpful resource for clinicians exploring and witnessing the artwork with clients. Using Socratic dialogue, the therapist can invite the client to encounter the art and share its symbolic content. The Quilt of Comfort activity is also a valuable method of deflection. It asks the client to temporarily set aside their problems, allowing space to stop ruminating in despair and instead turn to other thoughts during the activity. Being in a state of creative flow can help with self-distancing from emotional pain. Sitting with the final product, seeing the art and being seen by another during the witnessing process can precipitate attitudinal change, facing the truth of our dual nature of existence.

The third theoretical perspective informing the directive is the PERMA model of positive psychology. Seligman (2011) points to the need for positive emotions, a sense of engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment or achievement for authentic well-being. The reader might wonder how positive psychology can be integrated with existential approaches. Peterson (2008: online) reminds us "positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living, being as concerned with strength as with weakness". In addition, positive psychology adopts

a dual approach, which does not ignore or dismiss the real problems people experience but instead reminds people of the choices they have and can make to change the things they can. This reminds me of Existential therapy, as Emmy van Deurzen (2012) described, which focuses on what can make life meaningful in times of distress. In fact, for Deurzen, "the despair and the sense of futility that clients start out with is construed as a necessary first step in a quest for meaning" (ibid: 16).

The Quilt of Comfort directive offers a way to connect with a sense of well-being, particularly during times of distress. It is aligned with the PERMA model as follows: first, when participants are invited to think of people or things that are important to them, those that sustain them and hold personal meaning, they have an opportunity to experience positive emotions; second, the creative process offers the potential for a sense of engagement, a flow experience in which we may lose track of time, become completely absorbed in the thing at hand and be immersed in an enjoyable activity; third, essential relationships are considered during the process and identifying these connections with others is vital to well-being; fourth, experiencing a sense of meaning is recognised as a vital part of our humanity. Finally, once the art directive is completed and the participant witnesses their creation, they often experience a sense of accomplishment.

Reflections and conclusion

Research suggests that treatments that explore life's givens and existential moods without addressing meaning have an insignificant effect in clinical trials (Vos, Craig & Cooper, 2015; Vos, 2018). Therapy that focuses narrowly on describing feelings alone can deepen clients' experiences, making them psychologically unbearable (Yalom, 2008; Vos, 2015). In contrast, when clients connect their lived experience with meaning, space is created to live in the here and now, despite and with our limitations.

Vos reminds us of Heidegger's dual nature of existence:

> *Focusing on meaning is not a denial or avoidance of life's givens, but instead an embracing of the fact that all humans have a dual nature: although we know that our death is the end of our possibilities, we are not dead yet and live in the here and now where we have the possibility to live a meaningful life.*
>
> (2018: 182)

Vos asserts his belief that "meaning-centred treatment is always existential meaning-centred treatment". I concur that meaning-centred practices like the Quilt of Comfort address this dual attitude. Based on these arguments, I would suggest that art therapy that explores meaning in life is existential art therapy.

In the room where it happened, the workshop participants engaged with the art materials and were observed by this writer to be fully immersed in the flow of the creative process. When the time was called to share with a partner, the group organically paired up or made small groups of three and appeared to be in deep conversations about their findings. I was privileged to witness one participant's experience and hear their feedback on what held meaning for them in their life and how they could see this tool applied in their practice. My only regret is that time ran out before the whole group could reconvene for general feedback. Forty-five minutes to share this work was not quite enough time, in hindsight. When working with a clinical group, ninety minutes is needed to ensure safe practice. That said, during the remainder of the day, I had many conversations with participants who shared their appreciation for the exercise and ideas of how they plan to take this forward in their clinical work and self-care practices.

Although very little has been written specifically on existential art therapy, I hope I have shown how art-making can help explore lived experience, meaning, and the dual nature of existence. I invite you to continue this work, play with art materials, and create your own Quilt of Comfort.

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