

## An Interview with **Marie José Dhaese** CET, RPT-S, RCC, ATR, BCATR

By Llona O’Gorman (British Columbia Art Therapy Association Newsletter)( year: 2000)

Marie Jose Dhaese is an expressive therapist known locally and internationally for her inspiring work with children and adults. In her lectures and training workshops, at home and throughout North America, she facilitates an understanding of her philosophy of process and the approach to therapy she has developed. She founded the Center for Expressive Therapy, which is accredited as an education provider by the International Association for Play Therapy.

In the wonderful location where Dhaese has established her home and studio, participants find a haven and retreat for the soul. “This is a place where people come to heal themselves,” says Dhaese. Having minimized her private practice in Vancouver, she continues to see individual clients, especially children, in her studio, as well as offering her training workshops.

Dhaese offers personal development retreats for small groups and works with those who are ill or bereaved. Her personal therapeutic process was developed over a period of twenty-six years during her involvement with wounded and disconnected children and youth. In striving to attune to these young people and help them find a connection to themselves, Dhaese looked for a “language” with which they could express themselves. Art by itself did not always work, so she looked for that which would give them the “tool” to do things differently. “Together we invented the therapy. Together we discovered what to bring in. Later I was able to model the processes into techniques. But what we create comes from their need and what I am able to offer.”

This journey into expressive therapy began twenty-six years ago at the Maples, a treatment center for youth on the lower mainland. Dhaese had come with her degree from France to teach French at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Disenchanted with that direction she applied and was hired by the Maples and stayed there for five years. She had been a student of anthroposophy since 1970 and had gone to Europe to study the approach of Rudolph Steiner and wanted to become an “eurythmist,” which means beautiful movement. When she met Paul Biscop and Jim Blake in an art therapy workshop at the Maples, Dhaese decided to study art therapy instead. In the late seventies, Kay Collis became her mentor.

Her training in art therapy involved travelling between the Maples on the mainland and the Eric Martin Institute in Victoria. During this period, she and her standard poodle, “Monseigneur,” lived out of a Volkswagon van in Sooke. In 1980 she was registered as an art therapist and was certified as an expressive therapist in 1981.

When Dhaese left the Maples and she was hired by the Ministry of Social Services to run a day program for disenfranchised youth. So began a new phase in her therapeutic journey, for Dhaese discovered that many of these young

people didn't like drawing, and these were youth who could not sustain themselves in any program. The Ministry renovated storage space for her upstairs in the attic of the JANUS CENTRE on 59th and Oak Streets in Vancouver. There they did some art, but she also began taking the youth on outings and the therapy became talking and walking with her beautiful black standard poodle, "Monseigneur." She introduced photography to the agenda, and encouraged the young people to bring in their own music. They had access to a video camera and put on their own shows and movies. These were the tools with which Dhaese worked in order to enter their world.

She discovered the author, Virginia Axline, and her book on play therapy, DIBBS, which reflected the technique of symbolic language coming up in play. She had moved from the day program and began to include children in her therapeutic work, at which time she convinced the Ministry to also let her work with her young clients individually, and play therapy became part of her therapeutic repertoire. Always on the lookout for things to help these children, who experienced very serious problems, Dhaese instinctively began to use what she would eventually call 'sand play' at Jericho Beach. Acquiring a photography tray from Lens and Shutter, she brought back large bins of sand, cooked it and set up a sand tray in the studio. She began collecting stones and shells and brought back treasures from her wilderness kayak trips. Small toys were found, modeling clay provided more items for the tray and cloth and uncarded wool were brought in. Dhaese employed the colour and beauty of nature, and things the children could touch and feel. She provided the tools and the children began creating three dimensions in the sand.

Dhaese observed how easily the children would dissociate and leave their bodies when they started to draw. The challenge was to help them stay in their bodies and she began to formalize her instinctive philosophy of "healing from the inside-out and outside in." Each child's problem manifested in a different way and the children guided her in finding out what felt safe and comfortable for them. She brought in what it was they liked. Food was big! She made visits to NAAM, a health food store and brought back bread and butter and jam. Together they made candles and lit them to symbolize "hope in life."

Dhaese began to design the structure for each session with a beginning, middle and end. They always ended by lighting a candle and making a wish. It was a significant thing for children to connect symbolically with their ability to make their own candle and light it. From the early 80's to the present Dhaese has been weaving together the therapeutic threads that she has so effectively used and taught. Art, sand play, and music using the Waldorf pentatonic instruments with which one can make beautiful sounds without knowing music. She used stories and puppets, always giving her young clients different vehicles to help them give expression to their own feelings and their own self. Gradually, with experience and observation she was able to provide more structure and focus for the exercises.

After five years, the Ministry was in the process of restructuring. Dhaese went into private practice and began teaching more. In the Counselling Psychology Department at University of British Columbia, she met John Allen who was impressed with her work. He introduced her to the work of Dora Kalff, who was also exploring sand play therapy, and to the work of Carl Jung. She received her Masters degree for her work and she presented her thesis on 'Symbols of Grief and Images of Healing in children's Art and Play Therapy.' Dhaese says, "at U.B.C., my work was validated and writing the paper forced me to put words to what I was doing."

She continued to develop her personal way of reflecting the therapeutic process and began to design a space to incorporate a soothing environment, nature, a garden and, of course, to include her beloved poodles as co-therapists. Unable to afford studio space, she began her work in the basement of her home. "The children loved my playroom." Initially, her clients came from contracts from the Ministry, but quickly word of mouth brought more and more people to her door. She renovated her garage "and then," she said, "I began garage therapy."

And she has never looked back. She began teaching her popular courses at the Justice Institute and at the Children's Hospital. Through the auspices of the Play Therapy Association, she began teaching internationally. Garry Landreth brought her to his Centre in Texas, which is a world-wide training center. During the period 1986-95 she completed her Ph.D.

Dhaese stresses that she is never a purist, that she is forever breaking the mold, breaking the rules, a kind of black sheep in any therapeutic discipline. The concept that "healing comes from the inside-out and the outside-in" is primary to her work, and demands establishing "safety, communication, connection and strength" in the client.

Dhaese emphasizes that a therapist must start at that place where the client already is, and must use that person's own language and find ways to help him strengthen himself in preparation for his journey to discover Self. "And for many," she emphasizes, "healing is at the body level."

Secondly, it is critical to make it safe enough to connect to one's own innate wisdom, make it safe enough to approach the block that created the disconnection to Self and then to find the way to make that crucial reconnection to Self. Each individual will find his own unique way to express his own pain and work through it. Therapy needs to be re-invented for each and every client. Each one has his own primary way of expressing Self. The challenge is to work through the layers of disempowerment to find the medium of expression for each individual person.

What Dhaese believes is that expressive arts is only one part of the equation. She feels strongly that "therapy is in itself an art!" And therapy may include "talking, walking, cooking, sewing, gardening, anything that will strengthen the

expression of Self.” Therapy depends on what the persons need, how they have been wounded, why they are disconnected from body/self. As therapists, the challenge is to find a way to help them make images that will express, release and transform their pain and allow them to stay safe and in their bodies while going through that process. They need tools that are useful and connected to their lives so they are able to do things differently when they leave therapy. We must risk creating processes to facilitate transformation. And we pay attention to the emergence of amazing archetypal images, and honour the appearance of their wisdom.

Dhaese confides, “What I want to see is the coming together of all expressive therapies, going beyond expressive art therapies. There would be no separation.” She adds, “I am dreaming of an association that will bring together all of the expressive forms of therapy, a format that will allow us to share expertise, and provide opportunity for consultation”.

Note update: This interview took place in 2000 and Marie José Dhaese now has her practice in Parksville on Vancouver Island.