

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 42: Meet Lisa Barrett, Licensed Counselor, Registered Art Therapist

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Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Lisa Barrett. She is a licensed practicing counselor and a registered art therapist. She has an extensive background within diverse clinical settings which include residential treatment facilities as a director of extensive therapies and in a short psychiatric hospital as a primary therapist for children and adolescents. Lisa practices in two different locations, East Windsor and South Windsor Connecticut with her primary practice in East Windsor. She works with children as young as 5 years old through adulthood and she specializes in trauma, grief, autism, depression, anxiety and dual diagnosis.

Welcome Lisa, it's a pleasure to have you today.

LISA: Thank you very much Judith. It's really my honor to be here with you.

JUDITH: Art therapy is a fascinating topic for me personally. I taught at WestConn for awhile and art therapy was always included. I would see the students just get excited about researching the field and also finding an exercise that we could all participate in. And I really think, in the holistic scope of things, art and color, one of our primary senses, visual. It has a place (in therapy). Tell us something about how you began and what interests you in art therapy.

LISA: Well let's see. I have always been an artist myself and unbeknownst to me, when I was younger and experiencing some of my own traumatic events, I actually was doing art as a modality to help me work through and process what I had gone through. Many years later, I got involved as you mentioned, working in residential treatment facilities and I noticed that the youth there had very limited means of expressing themselves and I knew that needed to be eradicated. So, I went in and I started creating tons of visual informing expressive arts programs. Not just art itself, because I've been an art teacher for 20 years. I would teach therapeutic art but also do drumming and dancing and rapping and poetry writing and any and all forms of creative expression. And I noticed immediately from the youngest to the oldest, they started to open up and started to get to a level in their therapeutic process where they were not able to get to before. They started making gains and self-reflection and insight and to having more controls over their behaviors, and really starting to be a little bit more focused. So, from that point on I knew I needed to go to school and get my degree, first in psychology and then on to complete my Master's as a licensed practicing counselor and a registered art therapist. I saw firsthand the powerful, powerful affects it had these youth, but I also experienced it personally in my life too.

JUDITH: Interesting. It is a fascinating discipline and as you mentioned, you kind of came into it understanding and realizing how important all forms of expression are.

Tell me about art and nature and how you connect the dots with our visual senses.

LISA: Absolutely. Well first of all, art is so primal. Many people forget that. It really is how our first peoples of the earth learned to communicate with their emotions and their language. Although, the petroglyphs on the rocks we know that to be true. So really anybody can do art and it doesn't

have anything to do with painting a pretty picture. It's just about expressing yourself. And then, also too, scribble drawing, we all did it.

JUDITH: Right, right.

LISA: We were turning into our little toddler selves. We all scribbled on walls. That in its essence in the kinetic form is all of art, first forms of writing. People don't realize that. And to this day, I do scribble drawing as an art therapy technique. I have them actually stand-up with a large sheet of paper, 18x24 on a wall and employ the primal kinetic movements that we did as a toddler. And when they scribble and release, and randomly choose a color, they scribble, and they release their energy. They do it to some music and it allows the creative process to immediately open up. They get focused and grounded and boom, they're right there in that session now.

JUDITH: How about that! And that's for any age, right?

LISA: For any age. I do it with adults as well.

JUDITH: How cool is that! Tell us about the profession itself. How long is its history and when did it begin?

LISA: Yeah. There's quite a misconception about art therapy. Art therapy actually originated back in 1914. It's a very old profession, a very old mental health profession. It originated with a woman called Margaret Naumburg who was a psychologist, an educator and an author. She first developed dynamically orientated art therapy while working at a psychiatric hospital. It's amazing from that point on how it just flourished. Everybody kind of came aboard and started doing their other spin off forms of art therapy working with specific mental health patients. (And people even back then who had diagnoses that really weren't labeled at that time.)

JUDITH: Right.

LISA: In other words, most people that had any kind of diagnosis were stuck in a psychiatric hospital, so it didn't really matter if you had autism, or if you had schizophrenia, you were put there. And more and more people started using art therapy who were psychologists and psychiatrists to start to bring out some of these patient's inner turmoil and conflict to help them to understand their own patients. It's pretty interesting how that whole thing evolved. In fact, the very first art therapy psychological assessment was

created by a psychiatrist named Fritz Mohr, quite a while back. He created that in 1906. The field has taken quite a long time to grow and be acknowledged, unfortunately. It is a master's level mental health profession. We are educated in all of the psychology principles to be a clinician and the psychotherapy and the psychopharmacology. But then we also are educated on how to do assessments so that we can treat and diagnose.

JUDITH: Hmm, how about that? So, it's a very involved discipline and again you have to have the expertise to be effective and you've seen that first-hand.

Before we get into some application of art therapy, could you tell us something about color and how our bodies respond to it?

LISA: Yeah, I love talking about this because again, people don't really realize how powerful color is. All living organisms thrive and survive on two scientific measurable waves. We have audio and we have light. Color is light. Color is actually measurable in nanometers, and it's an electromagnetic energy. It's measurable in frequencies and wavelengths. Which is so beautiful when you think about that because anything and everything we know obviously is made of energy. People don't realize when they're working with colors, or they have a response to color...I don't know about you, Judith, but I have certain colors that I put on that are like my happy colors.

JUDITH: Right.

LISA: Bright green I feel happy. You know, you are subconsciously drawn to colors because color comes in through the cones in our eyes, goes down into our body and literally has a physiological response. There have been studies done with blindfolds on people, so they could not see color. However, they were exposed to different color rays and they literally had measurable physiological responses.

JUDITH: Oh, that's fascinating, absolutely fascinating.

LISA: And a neuropsychologist then took it to the next step and purposely stimulated the skin through the use of different colors. They have the same exact results and it led to completely different physiological responses in the body. Now we can take that one step further because we have two central nervous system functions in our body. We have our parasympathetic

nervous system. We have our sympathetic nervous system. Our parasympathetic nervous system tells our body to calm down.

JUDITH: Right.

LISA: So, our bodies respond to colors such as blues and greens and activate our parasympathetic nervous system. My office is personally painted a very soft green. Because when my clients come in, I want them to create, immediately have a physiological response of feeling safe and being calmer when they walk into the office. And then the opposite is true for the sympathetic nervous system. It's the fight and flight type of reaction. Colors that associate and kick off our responses for that are the light and bright reds and the oranges and the yellows. Now all of our fast food restaurants, I don't know if you realize it, are typically using bright colors. McDonalds is red and yellow, very bright. They want to get that activation moving in the body. There's a whole science about color therapy. They want their participants to get in there, their clients to get in there, the customers to get in there. They want them in; they want them out. It's flight; it's fast; it's moving.

JUDITH: Interesting that you connected that dot. Yeah, that's true. What about businesses with blues and greens? So those would be the spas, right, the health spas?

LISA: Possibly or even the purples you know. Yeah, it's everywhere. There is a whole psychology to just color therapy and the types of responses that you want to elicit, the particular type of customers or clients that you want to draw in.

JUDITH: Interesting. Yeah and I'm sure there's a great body of research on that because marketing to me has a lot of the finer details of what stimulates us down pat.

Tell us about your practice and what you're.... I would love to hear a story, something successful that you've accomplished with one of your patients.

LISA: Oh absolutely. I remember distinctly working with a 13-year-old female client who had been selectively mute her entire life. She had a number of other diagnoses going on at the same exact time with a traumatic background, etc. She came to see me and wouldn't speak to me for awhile. However, I remember the very first session that we had, again if you

remember I mentioned that I use the scribble technique often as a non-threatening way for an introduction when clients come in to find themselves and release and let go and get into that creative mind. So, she was standing in front of an 18x24 sheet of paper. I had her start off by scribbling and I selected an appropriate song that I thought would go with this particular client. She scribbled so hard and so fast and non-stop. She was literally breaking the tips of the markers right off. And even when the music ended, she just kept going. As part of art therapy, you're trained in observation techniques. It's about the end product. It's about how are they using the medium. How is their body reacting? What are their facial expressions? Is there hesitation? And just watching her was fascinating and then eventually she stopped on her own and took a step back. And I just looked at her and I said to her that, "Wow, you really had a lot to say, good for you!". And that started the therapeutic process. When she came back for many sessions later, she dove right into the creative process and was able to depict so much about her life and even her trauma visually that she could never speak. And that's what's so beautiful about art therapy and really is a result orientated mental health profession in combination with other psychotherapy elements that I pull in from my training as a licensed practicing counselor. It really allows the unconscious, it really allows the emotions that have been stuck down in there and the blocked energies, the traumas, the griefs, the inability to understand why you're thinking and feeling the way you are to come. It gives them empowerment, a form of self-control, a form of self-regulation. It gives them a venue to visually see what's going on inside of them that they would never even connect the dots to.

JUDITH: And you help them connect the dots? You help their clinician connect the dots. Like this one, obviously she had some trauma. Did she have a breakthrough? Did she ever start talking again?

LISA: She started to say a few words to me at the end of our closure of our sessions. Yeah.

JUDITH: Wow, that's amazing, that's amazing. Any other stories?

LISA: Oh, there are so many stories. I also work with medical patients as well and I've worked with those with cancer. One of the things that we're able to do is to create elements and expressive arts. Now art therapy doesn't necessarily mean just drawing. It can turn into 3-dimensional art. It can be clay. It can be building. I mean really it encompasses play therapy

sometimes, role play. It really is all encompassing. And I never know actually what modality I'm going to be using with all my clients because they're sort of allowing me a window into their soul when they walk in the door. We sit down, and we do a quick check-in I'm able to see and know and feel intuitively where I need to guide them. And that's really what art therapy is about. It's using specific directives to allow clients to be slightly challenged because it duplicates the learning process. It's introducing a slight stressor to allow the client to work through some challenges.

So, this cancer patient would come in at different times and either she'd be in sort of a mourning stage or be in a denial stage. Or she'd be in an angry stage and it would depend on what she would do. Once she would come in, we would get to where she was at and then she was able to create these pieces that really helped her to finally process through some of those angers. And also, the other phase of that is what kind of pieces could we do to create the healing now? She was able to create this beautiful doll actually. She made a doll. She picked out its little materials and picked a healing doll and picked out its color on its hair and put a heart in there and put in healing signs and patches and flowers where she had scars. It was a beautiful process and the doll was a beautiful piece when all was said and done, and she kept it.

JUDITH: Oh, how lovely, how lovely. It's a fascinating process. I personally have experience with cancer. I was a cancer nurse specialist for a visiting nurse agency. I saw the different phases that you're mentioning. You know, the denial, the grief, the mourning, the sadness, the anger. Often families shut the person down because they were going through anger and disappointment and sadness, too. That they're going to love a family member so there's difficult communication. I think that's a great story. Thank you for sharing that.

When my son was in kindergarten there was a little girl who did a drawing. I looked at the teacher and I said, "she's got some problems, doesn't she?", and the teacher said yes. She drew herself in the center of a house in a closet, you know? She put a special room in the house and she was crouched in this closet. And sure enough, she had some trauma as a 6-year-old that she obviously couldn't talk about. But it came out in that kind of drawing. It has to be very rewarding for you to see the breakthroughs from trauma, from some of the mental illnesses out there.

LISA: It really is. I totally consider it my honor to be able to help, you know, children, adolescents and adults to heal. I really do. It's so fulfilling to me that...somebody had recently mentioned to me, don't you feel drained, you know, from having to work with high-trauma clients, or people that are passing, getting ready to pass and to transition I should say. Or people who are suicidal? I work with a lot of adolescents who have suicidal ideation or attempts. You know for multiple things, right? Kids who can't speak or autism kids who some people think are very difficult. And my answer to him immediately was no, if anything it energizes me, because it's my calling to be able to help them to heal. And you mentioned you know the scene and the drawing of the house and the person is so interesting because our assessment that we use are evidence-based assessments using psychological principles. And so, we actually use a house to treat a person as one of the assessments. We are trained to literally see the correlation between the three objects to even just the person itself. Does the person have arms? Does this person have arms, legs? What is the facial expression? Is the head enlarged? Are we missing body parts? Is the body turned away? You know? The house, does it have windows, doors? Does it have a chimney with smoke coming out of it? There are so many evidence-based art therapy assessments that we have that we're able to break down certain components of the face where if something is missing it could be an indicator It's never a fact but it could be an indicator of. I use evidence-based art therapy sessions all the time and I end up learning a lot from my clients who are not actually able to tell me some of the details of what's going on by how they're doing these assessments.

JUDITH: Oh, I bet. And of course, that's what you're trained to do is to see ...I guess what I'm trying to say is it's hard for us personally to see the forest from the trees, to use that pun, and with your skills you can help us see the forest from the trees in your assessments. That's fascinating Lisa, thank you. Thank you again. That's a wonderful story.

Well before we go, I would love you to give us some tips from your profession. Something that our listeners can take away today, something they can apply practically in their everyday life.

LISA: Yeah, sure, I'd love to do that. One of the things with the holidays coming up, it can be a very hectic time for families and even for children. Everybody is very over-stimulated. The schedules seem to go from ten different appointments to maybe 20, I'm exaggerating of course, but there's

a zillion people to go visit, a billion zillion things to do and it can create heightened anxiety. It can create hyperactivity. It can create mood dysregulation, short tempers and fuses both from parents and from kids, etc., etc. So just the very basics of art, it does have a calming effect, a neurological calming affect on the brain. So, I would highly suggest to families to **carve out some just creative time** during the upcoming holiday seasons where the TV is off. Maybe there's some nice music in the background and you're getting out art materials and you're allowing yourself and the kids to sit down and just color or create, you know, cards. Remember when we used to create our cards when we were a kid?

JUDITH: Right.

LISA: Well they're still very, very much appreciated but not only that is it's giving them an outlet to calm down and to focus too. Whenever they're doing any type of creative expression like art, again, it allows them to calm down and to focus.

JUDITH: That's a good idea.

LISA: So that would be a great tip during this time of year to actually schedule that, put in a ½ hour we're doing art today.

JUDITH: Yeah, very nice. Anything else?

LISA: Just that, the only other thing I would say to the listeners is to make sure that if you're interested in having yourself or a child or adolescent come to see an art therapist that they are a registered art therapist. There has been a lot of new legislation put in place to make sure that our profession is being put at a level where people know that you maybe do need to have the background education and testing to be a registered art therapist. In other words, I've seen different signs say out there saying, let us teach you how to be an art therapist. It's a sort of a, you can't do it through a certificate. It is a masters level profession, mental health profession, so just make sure that they are a registered art therapist.

JUDITH: Right, right. Do you have your contact information?

LISA: I certainly do. My professional website is www.touchedbyarttherapy.com I am verified by Psychology Today. I have a link to Psychology Today also on my professional website.

JUDITH: Wonderful, and they contact you, schedule an appointment. Do you do anything on line, by Skype or does it have to be in person.

LISA: You know it's interesting. I haven't ventured into the on-line Skype because part of that would be a little bit difficult with the art therapy element of it. I know practitioners who do that who are not art therapists and it's a little bit different because it's more talk specific related therapy. Art is something you need to be present to, watch it being created. You need to have various media present. You need to be able to see, sometimes touch, feel, so I don't know if that's ever going to become something that can be done through Skype. At this point in time it doesn't see even practical.

JUDITH: I agree, I agree because there's nothing like seeing what somebody does first hand and I'm sure you're trained to watch their body movements while they're doing it, I would think. The wonderful example you gave us of the 13-year-old, I bet her body language changed and evolved from the first session to the last session and that's what you're trained to also look for and tap into. Is that correct?

LISA: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely.

JUDITH: Hmm. Well Lisa this has been a great talk and I'm so delighted and honored also to have you a part of the podcast. I tried to connect the dots that there are many spokes on the wheel and if we look at ourselves holistically, the world holistically, I think we find solutions that are more abundant than we realize today.

Do you have any other comment before we close?

LISA: Just the whole tie in to the holistic modality and art therapy. How we talked about color being literally having it's own frequency and wave-length and energy, right? Electromagnetic energy. So are emotions. And I don't think people realize that emotions have their own energy as well. For example, depression and sadness have a lower energy as opposed to happiness and joy and love, and even anger. Now anger can be used appropriately and there's nothing wrong with anger and that energy as long as it's used appropriately, you know. And when you tie in the whole principle of just holistic modality how everything is so interconnected on an energetic level, we are using the emotions with the colors to create healing.

JUDITH: That's beautiful and that's beautifully said to.

Well I do want to thank you again for joining us at The Holistic Nature of Us. You gave us practical tips and I think you gave some good food for thought for our listeners today.

This is Judith Dreyer, author of “*At the Garden’s Gate*”, book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more.

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