CC BY NC ND

Interview: Jordan S. Potash, Ph.D., ATR-BC, REAT, LPAT(DC), LPCAT (MD)

Jordan S. Potash, PhD, ATR-BC, REAT, LPAT(DC), LPCAT (MD) is a registered, board certified and licensed art therapist (USA) as well as a registered expressive arts therapist. He is an Associate Professor at The George Washington University (GW), Art Therapy Program. He has worked with clients of all ages in schools, clinics, and community art studios in the United States and Hong Kong, and gave workshops in China, Thailand, Korea, and Israel. Jordan is primarily interested in the applications of art and art therapy in community development and social change, with an emphasis on reducing stigma, confronting discrimination and promoting cross-cultural relationships.

Jordan is an active member of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), Editor-in-Chief of the leading art therapy journal, Art Therapy Journal (2019-2024) and past Chairperson of both the Multicultural Committee (2003-2005) and the Ethics Committee (2013-2016).

Q: Dear Jordan, could you say a few words about your professional growth, how did you become an art therapist?

A:I've always been into the arts. Even as a kid, I was always the artist in my family. At some point in high school, I knew I wanted to go into the helping profession, and fortunately, I knew about art therapy very early in my life. At Syracuse University, I took a dual degree in Studio Arts and Psychology.

My professor in an Introduction to Psychology course told me about the psychiatric facility just down the road from the campus that had an art therapist working there. So, I got in contact with her and she was willing to have me as a volunteer. I had experience with ceramics, running a kiln, and glazing, and she needed assistance with that, so, I started helping her with studio maintenance. I was only 19 years old and I was working with acutely and chronically ill adolescents and adult groups. In the end, I stayed there for about three years. Over time, I interacted more and more



with the patients and had very interesting conversations with many of them.

At the same time, I was in the honors track at my University and pursued a thesis in Art on the subject of coming out for LGBTQ students. I am gay, and I was an activist on campus. So, I got approval to interview 12 students about their experiences of coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual – they made art about that experience. It wasn't art therapy, however, the peer counseling aspect cemented the idea that art therapy was what I wanted to do. I studied for my master degree at GW University and I have been an art therapist ever since.

I've always been interested in working with populations that tend to be more disenfranchised, and in how the arts and practice can be used to foster dialogue in communities. When I was a student, I didn't see any examples modeled on this kind of work and there wasn't much literature about it. But I was fortunate that my first job developed from my internship at a school for youth with behavioral problems that stemmed from psychological trauma, racial injustice, and poverty – social factors which made it hard for them to succeed. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, I wanted to do much more community work. I took a job in public mental health service, which placed me in a public high school and the community to strengthen mental health in the neighborhoods surrounding the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Later, I worked as an art therapist in the community, but I made another switch when I moved to Hong Kong. So, my early career was a mixture of the things I wanted to do as the opportunities presented themselves.

Q: Obviously something drew you to the social justice issues and the community work. Can you say something about that? What part of your life's journey has been crucial in creating your identity as an art therapist?

A: My interest in social justice wasn't fully modeled in my life, although my family really cared about social issues. When I was in high school, I had an opportunity to participate in a week-long program that brought Jewish teenagers to Washington, D.C. to look at what Jewish teachings say about different progressive issues. At the end of the week, we met with our representative in



the U.S. Congress. This event moved me in the direction of social justice. When I went to University, I became involved with the Jewish organisations that were based in the campus interfaith chapel, so I interacted with people from different backgrounds. It was there that I was fortunate to meet Mrs. Francis McMilan Parks, the director of community services. Her mentorship and teaching, and ongoing relationship to this day, have been incredibly formative. Her approach to social justice is very much rooted in the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the idea that social change should be nonviolent, community-focused, and focused on people who cannot otherwise access services – whether working in a soup kitchen, teaching kids to read, formal protesting, or changing legislation and policy. My choices to follow the ideas of Dr. King came from her modeling. I have come to really believe in them, even when circumstances make them hard to follow, because I see the long trajectory and benefits of this approach. So, when I arrived at my graduate program, with a background in the arts, psychology, and art therapy, I brought this orientation towards social justice that could transcend into individual encounters as well as larger communal groups.

Q: It's a big mission. Also in numbers, you are working with community and big groups of 75 or more participants...

A: Well, I don't do it alone. But it is big. What I've learned from these groups is activism matters, how social issues show up in people's lives matter, and alleviating current suffering, pain, and injustice matters.

But what also matters is process. Peace through peaceful means is important; otherwise, you end up in a situation that can look like peace or justice, but it's just a veneer. Underneath, there is bitterness. With this, democratic processes matter – that is, the ability for everyone to be able to contribute. We are all so different; it is impossible to form a position that would appeal to all people all the time. Still, decisions should be made that will appeal to as many people as possible. And when that cannot happen, the political minority is still protected. Peace and democracy, as history is showing us, are the ones that lead to the greatest assurances of justice for most people.



For me, one of the hardest aspect is finding the balance between a justice orientation and a human rights orientation with a focus on peacebuilding and democracy. They can be at odds, but I know I am not the only one that struggles with that. So, as an art therapist, guiding clients to cope with situations they cannot control is certainly a worthy goal, but alleviating those barriers to full participation in society and strengthening the ones that need to be uplifted is part of what we need to do. To me, it's all part of being an art therapist, whether I implement these ideas in individual work, group work, communities, teaching, or editing the journal.

Q: There seems to be two sides to your approach, justice and democracy on one side, and on the other side the intercultural and racial issues. How does art therapy help in these cases?

A: I am always interested to find out what are those unique action that only art therapists can offer. Certainly, we can join protests, we can boycott and we can hold dialogues. But these are not unique to art therapists, it just means using established activists' techniques. Now that is fine, but how can we really show the value of what we do? What that means to me is taking all those relevant actions and theories from the studio or centers where we work with clients and applying them to the larger community. For example, I can have people use art to take a step back and contemplate, reflect, or be aware of what they are experiencing at that moment and how what they are experiencing allows them to access the fullness of being in their own presence, and while being in relationships with others or experiencing the world around them.

We use art therapy to help people not only to express themselves but also to tell their stories, their feelings, their thoughts, their bodily sensations, their memories or their dreams. By relating to their own experiences and viewing their art in a nonjudgemental way, they could embrace perspectives – even the challenging ones – for how those stories and images might have the ability to initiate changes in their agencies, institutions, communities, or governments.

It can be a challenge to use art therapy for what people need in addressing social



issues. For example, I work with young adults at a drop-in center for people without secure housing. Many of them have told me that at this moment, they need their basic needs covered, a roof over their heads, food and a job, which does not leave a lot of time or energy to engage in activism. So, I remind myself that my aspirations of what social justice could look like cannot be imposed upon them. Maybe in this setting I offer ways to help them alleviate their suffering and find other outlets to address the systemic causes of poverty. For me, it goes back and forth.

Q: Are the goals for the client and community different? How does the work with the community influence goals? They represent interconnected areas between the art therapy and activism.

A: I use the sensibilities from what I've learned by being an art therapist, activist, and organizer. You root your work, the approaches, and the community where you are invited to participate with whatever guidelines exist. So, the service I offer will look different. Do I have a dedicated studio? Am I here only today or weekly or for a year? Those factors lead to different goals that we might accomplish in a given time. For me, there is little difference between working with clients and working in the community. I will find the boundaries within the framework that is given and a way to work within it.

There is the factor of setting up the space and the tone. I appreciate Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Loyd's idea of a portable studio and ways to create a space, not in the physical sense but emotionally and psychologically, based on what you can do. It's more like a creative problem. It's beyond the metaphor; it's life. You work with what you have, and you expand it.

I know that my clients live with challenges, without food and security. However, when they are in the studio, they can temporarily transcend some of their situations, and use them to find the meanings of their conditions through art, and to study the relationships with them and the environment. Clearly, this doesn't automatically solve the problem, nor does it give them a home or food. However, it is important that it creates an idea of what life could look like, which brings us to the subject of the importance of imagination, the ability to visualize the future, and the



hope that what happens in the studio is conveyed to the real world.

So, there is the importance of working towards a goal but there is also a purpose in just being in the studio – taking a break from your life to re-engage. Some of those ideas derive from what I learned in Hong Kong where I worked at the Centre on Behavioral Health at the University of Hong Kong which specialized in integrating Chinese health practices with contemporary Western approaches to mental health. An essential component of that work was meditation and mindfulness based on work of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, who was an activist for peace during the U.S.-Vietnam war. Part of his teaching is to retreat into yourself, to solidify, and then to re-emerge into the world to make it better. So, this is what I believe you can do through art therapy.

Q: It sounds like the guided relation viewing you developed is connected to what you did in Hong Kong.

A: You're absolutely right. I researched this subject in my PhD and this is also where this phrase comes from. In the next project I conducted with my collegues, we developed a larger model with four different ways that art and compassion come together. Part of it is giving people space for contemplation and reflection. Someone can tell their story directly to another person or they may need space where this can be done indirectly, through a narrative, a piece of art, etc.; this is where an art exhibit comes into play. Art exhibitions are a way to encourage some kind of a dialogue and relationship, even if expressed in a symbolic or metaphorical way, because sometimes people are not ready to communicate face to face. We are not always ready to receive other people's stories and images – which are sometimes based on prejudice or discrimination, or trauma and pain, on something that makes you unacceptable for other people at a given moment. An art exhibit can be a small step in bringing people together. What is different with the guided relational part is that people are engaged in artwork they see. So, the art exhibits are a link in a chain of getting people together by offering some prompts that can help in guiding and making art to slow down with the intention of bringing together art and people, even if they cannot directly engage at that moment.



Q: Is this the way you led the community through the project you did in Hong Kong, where part of the project was an exhibition of psychiatric patients and visitors who created artistic responses to the patients' artworks with the aim of creating a mutual space to meet, better understand and lift the stigma?

A: Yes, just, by "led" I would say it was a semi-structured leading. Because we know from psychology, sociology and behavioral economics, that if people feel forced into something they don't respond well or their defense systems kick in. We give choices. For example, we ask exhibit visitors: "Identify one piece of art that is meaningful to you, that you authentically connect with. What could you say about it and, if you could, what message would you write to the artist? It might be difficult to connect with all the artworks in an exhibition, but there is probably one that you can relate to."

In other events, where visitors knew they were coming for a longer engagement, people were also asked to create art about their experience in relation to selected piece of art. And then there was an opportunity where we brought together the original artists and other people living with mental illness to create art together. They could have a different sense of each other by relating as fellow artists to discuss policies and programs.

Another project with a similar direction was one with my collegue Martina Efodzi for people who have experienced gun violence. Here, in the U.S., gun violence is a big problem. We offered trauma-informed options for a person to tell his/her story through art, focusing on just one part they wanted to tell to policymakers. And the next day they were accompanied by legislative advocates to the U.S. Congress to bring those images and share their stories.

Q: It seems like these are all acts of activism within art therapy.

A: I always come back to my initial training and what my first mentor Francis McMillan Parks used to say, "Activism looks different in different spaces." It's not always yelling and boycotting. Research and political strategies suggest that if you can target your activist's strategies to the situational factors, context, and audience,



there is more likelihood that you will be successful. I do think through the activist's mindset. When I go into spaces, I am always looking with the activists' lens, and in my view that means human rights, social justice, and democratic dialogue processes.

A an Editor, for example, I realized how much power is consolidated in a single role. I realized that the selected articles would become part of the professional literature, available to everyone and forever, and so I wanted the articles to be diverse and considered from different perspectives. So, I personally balance my perspective with editorial articles of different content. We don't have to agree with the perspective of the author of the article, but it is important that it is written with critical analysis.

This also meant that the structure of our journal had to change, that we had to put more voices in leadership, particularly clear and diverse voices, so as we don't repeat ourselves, but offer different ideas.

I always had an affinity to work with people that don't have access to services, especially art therapy. I am fortunate that my university gives us one day a week to work in a community or clinical practice. I personally chose to volunteer with an agency that otherwise would not be able to hire an art therapist. This is also an aspect of activism because access to services is a social justice issue. Access to health and mental health services cannot be a privilege. So to me, being able to provide at least limited services is a choice. I would like to be able to fight for them and change these social policy choices but until then, I can choose to deliver services where I can.

Q: You are finishing your term as Editor-in-Chief of the most read art therapy journal. What was your goal and what legacy did you leave behind?

A: I do recognize the successes of the journal, they are visible in our metrics. But it's not me. The reason that the journal has been successful in these last 6 years can be found in the enormous amount of effort by a lot of people. This is the problem with leadership, I've been singled out for both merits and blame. However, there were a lot of people that helped to increase the reach of the journal, increase the metrics of the journal, increase the quality of what gets published in the journal. And this is



the credit that goes to authors, reviewers, associate editors – in part, by forming a more democratic form of leadership in which everyone participated. And there is, of course, AATA which is a publisher, and supports and promotes the journal.

I hope that I am leaving behind a journal that has a firm position and that will continue to offer quality research, theory and practices to inform art therapy for years to come. I hope the changes that I have been a part of - installing the leadership structure - will continue, not only to avoid burnout and ensure leadership succession but also to truly model inclusive leadership. The more voices – the more ways to equalize the power where possible and we have shown that we can do that. In particular, we have tried to help engage a mentor for new authors to give them a little more guidance. I hope the authors that we have really invested in will see that they have a place in art therapy and in professional literature and that they'll continue to contribute and set the profession in motion . Also, to know that the journal is in a place where we can have a wide range of voices, styles, and perspectives, and that each article is rooted in scientific and clinical analysis with a clear vision to maintain the integrity expected of a peer-reviewed journal.

It's been a challenging time to be the editor. We had to pull through difficult times in the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic, and several wars across the world. We managed to create this space for a productive, scientific, critical and fierce dialogue. Even if we disagree with the perspectives presented, we can agree that each publication is founded on good science, principles, and critical analysis.

Q: Could you share your viewpoint and guidelines for the new profession of art therapy in Croatia?

A: You can learn from what's happening around the world but stay rooted in what Croatia needs. There is no one way to offer art therapy and I think nothing is ever finished, we always continue to develop, educate and grow. In the US, there is a longer tradition of art therapy, our journal is 41 years old, there are credentials and licenses for art therapists. But, it is also true – and this comes from my activism and art therapy mindsets – that we are



all always in a process of struggle and development. Respect where Croatia is in this moment of professional development and push that forward.

HART: Thank you for the inspirational and insightful talk, Jordan!

We wish you the best of success in your future work!