

Psychodynamic processes in aromatherapy

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Claudia de Vos is an aromatherapist, artist and designer from the Netherlands. The psychodynamics of aromatherapy and the symbolism of scent have an important place in her work. Claudia has an aromatherapy practice, gives lectures and workshops and works actively to promote awareness of aromatherapy in the Netherlands via the SBA foundation (Stichting ter Bevordering van Aromatherapie: www.sba-aromatherapie.nl) and has designed a range of aromatherapy cards to help introduce people to aromatherapy and help them in their journey of personal development. In this report, she shares her particular psychodynamic approach using essential oils.

Introduction

The field of aromatherapy still requires much pioneering work, from scientific research to practical implementations that need to be tested extensively. We all acknowledge that if aromatherapy is to be taken seriously in Western society, it needs to conform to rational demands and this largely means that it needs to be evidence based. After all, in the absence of rational (read: scientific) evidence, any method will normally immediately be branded as quackery.

In France, a rational approach to aromatherapy is already commonplace. This was clearly demonstrated by the presentations of several studies at the recent 10th International Symposium of Aromatherapy and Medicinal Plants* that took place in Grasse. At this symposium a large number of statistics and figures were presented and yet, I couldn't help feeling that one extraordinary aspect was being overlooked, that which makes aromatherapy so special: the psychodynamics of essential oils and aromatic extracts.

Roughly speaking, according to the methods of Western science, something does not exist if it cannot be measured. However, opinions about (technically measurable) scientific proof appear to be changing. This was clearly demonstrated by the presence at the symposium of a somewhat surprising speaker who had been invited, the Canadian Indian shaman Claude Aubin. He lectured on the relationship between man and nature and plants from an Indian perspective; his knowledge and traditions. He tried to clarify to his audience the importance of the choice for a particular plant medicine and the ritual that accompanies it. The latter is especially important because it deepens the understanding of the choice and allows the plant to function better. This tradition distinguishes between plants that affect the body and plants that affect the spirit or spiritual awareness. In addition, it is important that the plant is used in the correct manner and with the correct intention. Finally Aubin pointed out that we can only achieve the best results when we learn to use our own tools (read: own traditions).

I believe that the psychodynamics of scent in aromatherapy do have rational aspects; psychologists acknowledge that

scent can conjure up memories and as such can condition the person's responses and affect their behavior (Claassen, 1993; Vroon et al., 1994; Hellema, 1995; Holland et al., 2005).

Scent has also been shown to be highly subjective; each individual experiences a particular scent differently and thus evokes different associations. Another possibly more exciting idea is that different levels/layers of memories can be activated through scent, and it is this aspect that intrigues and inspires me.

I believe that in order to unravel the psychodynamic workings of scent and aromatherapy, we need to look beyond scientific research. This is especially relevant since the field of natural medicine considers each human being a unique individual and not a group or category and is thus inherently 'immeasurable'.

My path to aromatherapy

My studies and background as an artist and designer where I specialize in 'putting stories into pictures' serve to reinforce just how important the senses are. With regard to the visual sense, every image has a hidden message and my work in theatrical architecture/ film and other medias has shown me how images can communicate a powerful message on a deep level to large numbers of individuals if one is able to 'distil' and accurately capture the essence of the message that is intended to be conveyed.

This same concept was further reinforced during my training as a life coach for personal development with the Symbool ontwikkelingsprocessen school (www.symbool.com). My interest in Jungian psychology was also further deepened through further studies in Amstelveen, Netherlands under the directorship of professors Hamaker where archetypes and symbolic psychology were widely explored (www.Asfaloth.nl). Further studies in flower essence therapy and in Reiki served to build on this conviction. When I finally discovered essential oils and undertook a three year aromatherapy training in the Netherlands, this really gave me the answer that I was looking for as plant essences are so intricately linked with our most primitive sense and