

THE BIG PICTURE: USING SOULCOLLAGE® IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

by Katherine L. Ziegler, PhD

*A nutritionally well-informed man in his 60s has four serious health conditions exacerbated by his overeating, yet “loves it” although he sometimes stuffs himself to the point of pain. Dave** remembers having been a skinny child who started overeating at age 5. He links this with his fear of his father’s rages, and of a horror film in which a gigantic monster took over the Earth and even the adults were powerless to stop him. With Internal Family Systems and transference work (therapist, father, wife) over 13 months of therapy, his responsible self-assertion, self-care, and security in his wife’s love increase. The eating binges subside, then recur.*

Offered a SoulCollage® reading, Dave asks his intuitive wisdom (as accessed from among about 60 collaged cards, not made by him), “What do I need to know—no, do to stop this compulsive behavior and start acting in my own best interest?” From a pile of the 8”x5” cards lying face down, he picks four at random, sight unseen.

*The first card shows a very muscular man working out with weights, a grim, ferociously determined look on his face. Asked to imagine himself as that man and complete for him the sentence stem “**I Am One Who...**,” Dave says, “I am completely determined to accomplish something that’s utterly useless. Nothing will get in my way.” When Dave asks for his response to the question, the image on the card dismisses it with contempt. Dave says, “This is not a guy I’d take advice from at all! He’s so compulsive, so single-minded that he virtually has no mind.”*

(The therapist thinks privately, this is one of those cards that depict “the one who is causing the problem!” as Seena B. Frost, MFT, the originator of SoulCollage®, puts it. This bodybuilder speaks for an aspect of what Ecker & Hulley (*Depth-Oriented Brief Therapy*) call the client’s **pro-symptom position**, which as usual has been only semi-conscious—Dave’s **anti-symptom position**, his distress at his overeating, is what brought him into therapy, since as usual this position has not been effective in the long run at suppressing the unwanted behavior. Through our **Internal Family Systems (IFS)** work, we had discovered the overeating part’s strong desire to defy the mother—“You can’t make me!” (eat in a healthy manner)—as a first step towards developing his embattled autonomy. This bodybuilder may represent an even deeper motivation: to become big and strong enough (per the parents’ commands to eat, though mother worried about her own weight) to ward off monsters in a terrifying world where no adult could protect him from his father’s rages and narcissistic demands. His own real self not fully seen by his parents, and his development thus supported only in a lopsided way, Dave as a child seems to have taken it upon himself to soothe and “parent” himself with the means ready to hand, and the habit stuck.)

Another card depicts an erupting volcano, “full of energy,” that advises him to feel it in himself and harness it in a productive way. Dave reflects, “I guess this guy [card 1] has lots of energy and is wasting it doing something stupid,” and acknowledges that it feels novel to think this might be his own energy. The third card shows a man exploring a cave with a miner’s light on his helmet, who seems to Dave to be genuinely curious and non-judgmental and who encourages him to explore his own “innards.” The fourth card is one he says he “can’t relate to,” but he is nevertheless able to try on the imagined viewpoint of the champion swimmer portrayed, who says, “Decide what you want to do, then make it the focal point of your entire life.” Two months later, his urges to binge-eat having dissipated, and exploring new directions in his relationship with his wife, he happily leaves therapy, planning to return when his next growth phase beckons.

***SoulCollagers described come from various locales around the U.S. Names and identifying information have been changed to further protect confidentiality.*

I wrestled with writing this article for weeks, not finding a coherent way to organize the wealth of material. Finally I remembered to consult my own SoulCollage® deck! I framed this question and pulled two cards at random from among many dozens. The first suggested taking off a Carnival mask to reveal the truth beneath. The second, shown here, reminded me of myself crouched intently over my computer, up against the publication deadline, working to legitimize SoulCollage® to my colleagues with a well-read and professional work. Seeing again the thrilling riot of dancers surrendered to the music immediately brought up to awareness my great, even rapturous, love of the whole process, starting with the hands-on shaping of images in collage to express my vision. I realized that what I really want is to share with the reader why I love it. Reunited with the source of my own powerful motivation, I sat sensing it, and the article re-formed itself and began to flow.

This incident may begin to reveal why SoulCollage® is not in itself a psychotherapy, but rather a way of tuning in to alternate inner perspectives on one's situation. Having to cast about to find my truest motivation for this project does not seem to put me anywhere near fulfilling criteria for any condition in the DSM-IV®-TR or, so far, in the DSM-V! People use SoulCollage® to explore many ordinary life situations: career direction, whether to have a child or to dial back on activities as they age, relationship impasse, health conditions, bafflement or impatience with their progress on a spiritual path, embarking on a new year or other time of transition. One man asked, "Why do things like Ouija boards, psychiatry, mysticism and religion make me so skeptical? I can't understand how other people can believe this." The tag line for SoulCollage® is ***Discover Your Wisdom, Change Your World™***.

My SoulCollage® shift also illustrates why, throughout my career, I've returned over and over to approaches that tap such experiences and emotions. As much as I enjoy skills coaching and value cognitive-behavioral theory and technique, they address only certain aspects of the many-faceted richness and inter-related intricacy of the psyche. Other important aspects remain unconscious. Everyone behaves, perceives and apperceives, dreams, forms concepts, believes, imagines, creates, values, feels emotion and sensation, relates to others, is rooted in a body and feels the call of spirit in one form or another. It makes sense that we would be best served by psychotherapies that are mindful, at least to some degree, of all of these aspects of who we are.

So Bruce Feingold's article reviewing Jonathan Shedler's 2010 piece in *American Psychologist*® inspired me to reread it. Shedler identifies as psychoanalytic in origin several **common factors** that the research he cites seems to show underlie good psychotherapy practiced from varying theoretical points of view. Another piece of Shedler's, "That Was Then, This Is Now: An Introduction to Contemporary Psychodynamic Thought" (2006a), likewise shows that he shares this ongoing integrative quest. And indeed, the word "soul" in SoulCollage® refers to one's whole self, including one's embodied, lived experience.

The common factors Shedler (2010) describes are as follows. For each, I give examples of how the SoulCollage® process can help implement these in psychotherapy, including in tandem with other approaches.

1. Focus on affect and expression of emotion.

Laughter, weeping, and heartfelt expressions of esteem and support are common among participants in SoulCollage® workshops and ongoing groups. The power of images to evoke and express emotion is widely known. The word “image” can refer either to a physical likeness or to “a mental representation; idea; conception” (Dictionary.com), but both are emotionally loaded. The very framing of a question usually shows a person’s deepest area of concern at the moment.

In one workshop, participants showed each other cards they had just made. One woman held up her card showing a plastic bride and groom atop a wedding cake against a bright red background. “I want to get away from this old idea about how men and women should relate,” she said. Divorced, she was exploring various kinds of friendship with men. Her reading question for her cards was, “How do I stop my anxiety around eating sugar? I feel so out of control—it goes on for days.” To her astonishment, the card she had thought represented a concept of marriage “said,” “I am one who is enslaved to the sugar addiction, and trapped.”

Another card seemed to express her attempts to soothe herself with the idea “I am one who celebrates my body and accepts my beauty, enjoys my curvy flesh.” But her voice lowered on the words “body” and “beauty,” sounding dead and resigned. Another card prompted a pep talk about ways to think herself through her “attachment to how things are supposed to be” and to move beyond sugar to “be in control of your body and achieve great feats.” But the card that stood out for her was the red one. “It’s hot, the sugar. I’m trying not to live in the polarity of “I can’t have any,” but it just starts this anxiety! Uchhhhh!” Voicing the intensity of her emotion seemed a needed step towards a workable solution.

2. Exploration of attempts to avoid distressing thoughts and feelings.

Unwanted, distressing feelings, thoughts, or action tendencies have been referred to by Jung and others as “the **shadow**.” In her latest book, *SoulCollage® Evolving*, Frost builds upon this concept to identify two ways in which any entity or energy depicted on a SoulCollage® card can become shadowed: through “an *exaggeration* of its best energy—too much of it—or the *absence* of its best energy—too little of it.” Take for example one common pattern, parenting: the idea that one is either smothering or neglectful is highly distressing to most parents. The shadow is often experienced as alien, as “not me,” is often seen only in projection onto others and suppressed, repressed, hidden or acknowledged only with shame and discomfort in oneself. Healing can include becoming aware of the positive elements or manifestations of the energy represented on any one SoulCollage® card. The process of making cards and getting to know their many faces over time, through readings and dialogs with the images, also seems to foster self-acceptance.

In SoulCollage®, every entity or energy is seen as a **guide, ally, or (when shadowed) a challenger** of our conscious stance, of the status quo, and a challenge to our ability to rise to the occasion and develop. What needs developing may be a more expanded view of a situation, or our inner strengths, our patience or equanimity, or the gifts we have to give.

From the pile of images offered at a workshop, Doro quickly picked what she thought was just any old image, in order to participate in the group’s introduction to the I Am One Who. The picture showed a man in a ski cap glancing furtively over his shoulder while breaking into a car. A law-abiding person, she certainly did not see herself in this figure but found herself saying, “I am one who thinks I have to steal what I need.” Only later did she recognize this shameful, *i.e.*, shadow aspect in herself, expressed in her doubts about being truly loved and accepted and her scrounging for crumbs of affection and approval in covert ways.

In therapy, Doro collaged a card on which the thief teetered on the edge of an abyss into which he feared to fall if he did not steal (representing her new understanding and compassion for this part and its life history). She glued to his jacket a picture of a man lifting a veil, to peer beneath it into the new life just coming into view. Gradually she developed more satisfying relationships and activities that led her to feel good about herself, losing interest in her old devious strategies. Later, Doro came to appreciate her “shadow’s” resourcefulness in finding something of what she needed even in difficult situations.

In practice, much anxiety and depression turn out to be caused by a very common pattern often called “the Inner Critic,” which strives to avoid even more distressing experiences and feelings such as shame, rejection, ostracism, retaliation, humiliation, grief, powerlessness, and other kinds of pain. The **IFS** approach recognizes that the Critic, a so-called Protector part, is actually motivated by a loving desire to create happiness. However, it disregards important realities in the here-and-now situation, often causing the very outcomes it is trying to avoid. Its strategies are limited to criticizing (some version of “You’re stupid/ugly/bad”) and invidious comparisons to other people, in strenuous attempts to motivate the person to “improve” or to refrain from dangerous activities, so that he or she can have a good life. Unnoticed by the desperate Inner Critic, the unfortunate side effects include anxiety lest one fail to prove the critic wrong (chronic or recurring anxiety, because the critic by its nature keeps raising the bar if one does manage to “prove it wrong” about one assertion), and depression if one caves in and believes the critiques.

Here are two SoulCollage® cards made by a client (herself a psychotherapist). The first depicts the “stern and indifferent” Inner Critic trailed by a panting and dejected bunny, which is at the effect of the critic and which, in her IFS therapy, the client came to see as an **Exile** (an unwanted painful, vulnerable feeling). Another of her cards shows the miserable bunny alone on the barren surface of the moon.

The second card here, made after a year of IFS therapy, shows the Critic pattern (the stern teacher and ostrich and the Exile pupil in their crosshairs) in the background. Between it and a warm group of well-tended bunnies is a helmeted figure sheltering the rabbits next to his heart. This figure enacts what was actually happening more and more in the woman’s inner life: what IFS therapists and theorists Jay Earley, PhD and Bonnie Weiss, MFT call the Inner Champion, who does not fight the Inner Critic but simply keeps offering powerful acceptance and support.

In IFS, the Critic too is questioned with genuine interest about the good it is trying to do for the person and the feared outcomes it is trying to avoid by criticizing. It is sincerely thanked for the good effects it has had. Virtually always it then expresses exhaustion in its role and will say (if asked) what role it would now prefer to play in the person’s life. This tends to work much better than counter-measures that actually only keep the critic alive, such as fighting the critic or trying to destroy it. It has the fierce love of a mother for the Exile it is trying to protect, and will not stop what it’s doing as long as it thinks that Exile is not yet healed. The SoulCollage® process—collaging cards that turn out to represent these personality parts, and/or dialoging with the collaged images—helps people visualize the parts, thus aiding integration and healing.

3. Identification of recurring themes and patterns.

This is the name of the game in SoulCollage®. First of all, each card has a theme which, though often not apparent while making it, comes into clear focus over time, and which represents a

particular cluster of emotions, intuitions, values, beliefs about the world and one's place in it, and action tendencies.

Second, the act of making a card, then perhaps naming it, then letting it describe itself through the I Am One Who process, and finally doing self-interpreted readings with it over time, serves to raise one's awareness of recurring patterns of behavior, thought, fantasy, and feeling in one's life. Simply keeping a card out where one will often see it yields a rich harvest of insights into one's patterns and ongoing hints as to further developments in areas of interest.

Third, the **four suits in the classic SoulCollage® deck** (which can contain any number of cards) each contains a cluster of themes in four different areas of one's life: personality parts (**Committee**), significant individuals, animals, or places forming one's personal network (**Community**), body and instinctual or emotional energies (**Companions**), and those archetypes of the collective unconscious which are particularly salient to the card-maker (**Council**).

Archetypes range from those related to the body, social roles, and human capacities (Man, Woman, (Grand)Mother, (Grand)Father, Son, Daughter; Hero/Heroine, Temptress, Seducer, Beggar, Artist, Trickster, Clown, Teacher, Healer, Musician, Singer, Dancer, Poet, Actor, Thinker, Medicine Man/Woman, Dreamer, Medium, Shaman, Oracle, Warrior, Protector), to the creatures of myth and legend from all centuries and regions of the world (nymphs, faeries, pixies, trolls, monsters, goblins, vampires, dakinis; spirits of place like Pan, the West Wind, sirens, Rhine-maidens; unicorns, giants, dwarves, centaurs), to the Divine in all its manifold different forms and attributes from spiritual and religious traditions throughout history.

These archetypes appear in dreams, fantasies, and works of art of all kinds, and in the outer world in other people, or societal movements, or acts of nature that grip us powerfully, transforming us in positive or negative ways. They also express in recognizable behavioral tendencies that can easily pattern an entire human life. As such, the archetypes present us as therapists with many opportunities to help them express in positive form.

Dave (story above) pulled the volcano card upside down, saying, "Ooh! Wow!" In his rendition, it said, "I am one who is full of energy." Dave said, "I can't see if it's being used in a positive or negative way—it's just overwhelming." Turning it right side up: "It's more fearsome, now that I see the ground is down here. Exploding. This is my father." Here we see how an archetype—we might call this one something like Power of Nature—can be experienced through a person whom we know, *i.e.*, who is influential in our Community.

Turning the card upside down again, Dave said, "This way is awe-inspiring and fascinating—it's not good or bad, it's just there. Attractive and scary at the same time." He experienced his father's rages as overwhelming and profoundly intimidating, although there were also good times in their relationship. At any rate it was the fascinating and awe-inspiring manifestation that encouraged him, "Feel the energy in yourself and make use of it in a productive way."

It is tempting to speculate that Dave had been trying not only to quiet his fear by overeating, but also to stuff down the rage he feared might destroy his father or their relationship. Certainly he realized that he often relapsed into overeating when angry at his wife and not feeling free to say so and state clearly what he needed and wanted. Having learned over the months that his wife—by contrast with his father—actually welcomed his asserting himself by saying how he felt about things, he went on after the SoulCollage® reading to talk about pursuing current interests of his own (*i.e.*, using more of his own power?) instead of almost always doing things that would keep him physically with her in the same room.

The procedure of SoulCollage® readings in which unseen cards are drawn at random is based on the principle of **synchronicity** as seen by Jung, who called it “an acausal connecting principle” and saw it as one indicator of the interconnectedness of the collective unconscious. Two relatively rare events, neither of which has caused the other (the asking of a question and the blind choice of a particular SoulCollage® card), occur simultaneously in a manner that **has meaning for the observer**. One might say the universe is seen as being patterned in part by meaning, not solely by factors noted in either theoretical or applied physics.

Jung saw what he called the **collective unconscious** as the matrix of the unconscious mind of individuals, as well as a brewing ground for future national and world events, which it foreshadows. In Jung’s own day, for instance, he observed motifs in the dreams of individuals that seemed to forecast the advent of World War II years before there was conscious awareness of such a possibility. Many such events are more positive, for instance some possible outcomes of the current **global paradigm shift** affecting societal norms and institutions around the world—agricultural, financial, governmental, political, social, technical, commercial, faith-based, scientific, educational, and medical. All such events of course profoundly affect our own lives and those of our clients.

Seena Frost and others have come to see SoulCollage® as one of many spontaneous grassroots social movements that she now believes have potential to contribute in a positive way to the paradigm shift. A beautiful hour-long video for the public has just been produced. It is both a wonderful introduction to SoulCollage® and a recording of a community SoulCollage® reading on how best to contribute to the paradigm shift, done at the 2011 International Conference of SoulCollage® Facilitators and Trainers: <https://vimeo.com/47655192>

The SoulCollage® vision of wholeness includes the concept of **the One and the Many** at several levels: many energies or personality parts make up one person, many individuals make a community, and there are countless archetypes within the scarcely imaginable boundless One of the collective unconscious. Each of these particulars, says Frost, “need to be recognized as manifestations of the One, of Source,” which is seen as being beyond form, the matrix of All That Is, and is often seen as divine. She has made an image of **Indra’s Net** on which newly-trained facilitators sometimes glue a jewel, and says, “From this place we know each person is an integral thread in the Larger Story.”

Similarly, **IFS** works to help the many personality parts within one Self cooperate in harmony under its leadership. **Coherence therapy** posits that, even given the “bizarre and truly strange” permutations of completely contradictory yet simultaneously-held mental “constructions of meaning for any one item of experience” (*Depth-Oriented Brief Therapy*, p. 94), every unwanted behavior or feeling precisely expresses a coherent set of beliefs, memories, and emotional truth. In other words, all personality parts coherently express the whole, and the whole enterprise of coherence therapy aims to discover exactly how this is true in any given person.

4. Discussion of past experience (developmental focus).

Many people use SoulCollage® to help them work through painful past experiences which have impacted their development. Dave, the client whose story began this article, used SoulCollage® and psychotherapy to resolve a problem handed down by his father (whose own father had not been able to be emotionally present with him): how best to develop beyond narcissistic wounding. As a feature editor of the monthly online newsletter of the 1500-member SoulCollage® Facilitators Circle, I helped a woman recount her remarkable story of healing her difficult

relationship with her mother with the help of both SoulCollage® and Bert Hellinger's Family Constellation Work.

Often the process of making the cards itself seems to aid working-through. "Accidents" during the process and other exigencies imposed by the materials being used often turn out to express significant truths about the SoulCollager's process. One man was on a spiritual path and tended to focus on non-ordinary states, while his physical health and financial situation were gravely compromised. After the difficult death of a family member who had also suffered from the family legacy of conflict, he made a series of three cards (over as many months) on the theme of a deep split he felt between the distant realms of lush, glorious fullness of life—where he believed his deceased relative to be—and the barren desert of despair in which he found himself most of the time.

Each card showed a barren landscape and a lush one, separated from each other by an expanse of outer space, flecked with distant stars. Carefully he cut narrow strips of color and glued them on either side of the space area, to demarcate it from both types of landscape. He was not used to making things with his hands and was bothered that the space area and the strips of color on the last card came out thinner than those on the prior cards.

On exploration, though, we found that the stark divisions in his inner world were thinning out as well. He went through two more heavy bouts of grieving, then began to take better care of himself physically, and his health improved. He found a job, then a better job where he was promoted. A year later, calm and happy, he said the sense of desolation was gone.

5. Focus on interpersonal relations.

The SoulCollage® suits each represent different kinds of relationship, within oneself (Committee), with one's network of significant individuals (Community), with one's own body energies, which present themselves (via a guided meditation) as animal companions in the Companions suit, and with callings or beings greater than oneself (Council).

Many questions people ask during SoulCollage® readings are about relationships. In a psychotherapy context, just the one SoulCollage® step of framing a question can yield useful information about a client's interpersonal surround.

The full particulars of the following case (not given here for reasons of space and confidentiality) also go partway towards showing how, in the hands of a therapist, SoulCollage® offers opportunities to act on Ecker & Hulley's "conviction that **the unconscious constructs generating the client's problem are immediately accessible and changeable from the start of therapy.**" [emphasis mine] Early change also seems to require that certain other of Shedler's common factors be operating, such as a **working therapeutic alliance** (p. 104), which was not present in this case.

A 19-year-old girl was referred for outpatient treatment as being in danger of relapse into an addiction to pills and heroin after two prior stays in rehab. In the first session, Eve chatted on about her life (school, boys, babysitting), her strategies for avoiding using drugs (watching TV, eating protein), and the greater ease of staying at her father's than at her mother's (where she lived after their divorce) because he trusted her to make her own decisions. When she said, "I'm just rattling on here," the therapist presented some SoulCollage® cards and asked, "What would you ask a really wise person about something that's important to you?" Eve's question: "Why am

I so dependent on my parents?" Indeed she was strikingly so for her age, under a faux-mature persona.

To make a long story short, this question alone pointed to the relationship with her parents as a major trigger for Eve's drug use. Eve came to the third therapy session so wasted on drugs that she was barely coherent and nodding out. All she would say, when asked, was that she had become enraged at her mother for wanting to send her to her father's again. Close questioning of Eve's mother revealed her ex-husband's history of incest-like behavior and his heavy drinking. However, mother was not able (in her own work with another therapist) to frame other ways to arrange time for herself; father had refused every prior offer of therapy; and Eve was not able even to come to therapy sessions sober. Since funds were available for a long-term stay at a good rehab facility, that option was chosen as most likely to help Eve get clean and sober and emancipate from deleterious family patterns.

6. Focus on the therapy relationship.

Like other approaches which help us attune to clients and help them feel seen and understood here and now, SoulCollage® assists this first by revealing things about the client which even she might not fully know, but which carry a felt sense of truth when they arise. The more receptive we are as therapists, the more fully we perceive what's going on in a SoulCollage® reading or card-making session.

Second, and relevant to the above: like IFS and the **coherence therapy** of Ecker & Hulley, SoulCollage® at its core whole-heartedly accepts the fundamental goodness of every psychic content, even if the form in which it's currently expressing is shadowed or distorted and is better not acted out as is. This therapist orientation is beneficial for clients. Third, as a tool for self-exploration, SoulCollage® can keep the therapist aware of her own undercurrents in the exchange with clients, which if worked with cannot help but improve things in the room. I for one find all these factors to be profoundly facilitative of the therapy relationship.

7. Exploration of fantasy life.

By now it may be apparent that SoulCollage® offers the benefits both of art therapy and of seamless compatibility with talk-therapy methods in exploring both the client's fantasy life and one's own. As just one example, Doro (thieving shadow who "believes I have to steal what I need") was a therapist who explored in her own therapy some of her fantasies related to this thief pattern and found, to her dismay, that her clients were for her an important, if covert, source of narcissistic supply. Going on to discover her abundant inner reserves of nourishment and well-being, she became able to work productively with clients whose issues had previously been beyond her reach.

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