

Introduction

“The smallest incidents of our social life contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of oppression.”

Augusto Boal 1990 quoted in embodied activism

by rae johnson

On June 1st, 2015, I became unexpectedly unbusy – after four decades in the world of work as a nurse I was dispatched on “gardening leave”, erased from the organisation’s history and unemployable. In a few months I had gone from hero to zero, I could not work, was frequently overwhelmed and exhausted by trying to work out what was going on. Recovery and return to working in any capacity seemed impossible.

Art and poetry have been sites of repair for me, and I am keen to find ways of connecting with others that might also find this reparative and restorative path a countermeasure to the narratives of individual blaming and shaming that exhort us to be more resilient, resourceful and less reactive¹.

In my session I shared some of my lines of enquiry/flight and discussed how this has enabled me to restore trust in new relationships and develop ways of supporting others that are affirmative, careful and thoughtful². It was also an opportunity to explore the relationships between forgiveness, expression and connecting.

I invited responses to my poems and art in ways that might shift perspective and provide threshold moments for engaging with the world in novel ways. I will explore how response-ability and sense-ability can develop thus shifting the gaze from judgement to self-compassion. Allowing us to pay attention to the environmental conditions that we find ourselves in and systemic and structural issues may be calling our attention thus countering the narratives around resilience and prevention of burnout. What if we are experiencing a perfectly “normal” response to a messed-up world. ³

Finding common ground feels important and this session explored the possibilities of poetry within the context of writing, reading and sharing poetry – drafting and crafting were also explored as sites of healing and how the coming together for writing and responding to poetry might have potential for helping those who feel that they need to find new ways of relating to the work they do and with whom they work.

¹ Taylor, F. (2023). *Unruly therapeutic: Black feminist writings and practices in living room*. WW Norton & Company.

² De Marco M.J. (2024) 6-Fold path to self-forgiveness: an interdisciplinary model for the treatment of moral injury with intervention strategies for clinicians *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 DOI 10/3389/fpsyg.2024.1427070 retrieved 14/04/24

³ Gabor Mate with Daniel Mate (2022) *The Myth of Normal Illness, health and healing in a toxic Culture* Penguin Books

FIRST PLACEMENT

"life is shit and then you die!"

Furious at missed care – you vented on social media.

The ward sister insisted on making you an example,

I apologised for her outrage – assured her that

you would find better ways to process feelings.

In the canteen, away from the ward, we talked
about what to keep hidden and how to make sure
you stayed safe and away from her gaze.

Her marking you out for blame and shame
confused me and stirred latent sorrow.

Showing up my ambivalence and discomfort.

Grief comes in many guises

When you are nineteen and on your first ward.

That first death – can make you mis-step.

BYPASS

Unlike plumbing human hearts

Are not stamped from a mould.

Products of generations, products of genes.

Products of systems and environments.

You can thread a thin line,
with a balloon, up into the blockage,
navigate a stent.

Quick, well-practiced movements
help to maintain the flow.

The human heart, the size of a clenched fist
– recent tinkering

will keep it going for an indeterminate time.

HINDSIGHT

take certainty down a peg or two

listen for

veiled threats and mockery

tangible traces – illusive or imagined

take nothing for granted

measure progress by stamina

long walks – bird song – lichen patterns

this language thing is tricky

– we miss

many moments

– rush on – falter

false visions – erased memories

WEEKEND CLEANING

she left the incendiary device in plain sight

she knew the lotion cupboard

would be

a good starting point

sat at the nurses' station she had a clear view

and she could/would keep it

under close observation

nobody stood a chance

patients, relatives, carers, porters,

scattered/shattered – it was thought to be

an initiation

a way to teach

valuable lessons

THE CENTRE OF THINGS

Distance creates perspective
that had been missing for some time.

Caught up in vitriol and bile
she had lost her edge.

Discoloured and distorted but never
clear about who what or why.

Some issues seemed small minded
and others larger than any life she had known.

Easily eclipsed by nonsense now
she notices her deflections, refractions.

In her soul – the heart of the matter
A story worth telling.

KEY CHANGE

One foot back in the past I quickly discover
I am not wanted. Pointing out the bleeding obvious
a gift from childhood – that just keeps on giving.

Bruised, battered I pick myself up,
give myself space and take solace in inactivity.

When it comes to shelter and healing
it isn't about time or the place
it is the connection that matters

Fellow travellers in an undefined land.

Hatton ward

The steel door at the back of the sluice
was the escape hatch – through there you would disappear
across Trumpington Street to the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Once there you could sit in quiet rooms
away from the fret of care – muse on Byzantine art.

Looking back you can see that it was never really
quite thought through – felt trapped
never straying
too far or for too long
into those rooms across the street.

Always rushing back to make sure you weren't caught
thinking too much or having airs above your station.

Back in the sluice you wiped bedpans,
straightened commode wheels
and made sure you knew your place.

POSTHUMAN CONSOLATION

An intensive field of study lies before us.
Twin births of peril and possibility – numerous episodes
placing blame -
Modern pressures – erode our worth.

Fortune hunters? – labile allies?
Are they grandstanders, bystanders –
or upstanders?

It has taken a single species – with many attributes
collecting medicines, diagnoses – codifying and labelling
to churn up trouble, backbiting and grudges.

But if we carry a bundle of leaves
and sticks to this place, place them with care
– press into the feeling then
this ritual might save us all.

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These are poems written by Sue from 2015 and
presented in Durham at Moral Injury Conference
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Concluding thoughts

Maintaining momentum and a sense of purpose after a conference might be one of the challenges that I find most tricky. ALL the connections and connectivity are there in the room, the encouragement and affirmation. However what happens when you get back home, find yourself on your own and dwelling on what to do next. I am not in the world of work, answerable to any institution or mission. I now know that is what kept me going for four decades of professional practice.

For me retirement has been about isolation and removal from the centre of things that gave me oomph! I think it is the shadow side of service and attachment and one we need to pay attention to, We cannot simply assume that people can keep going without a boost now and then. Do we ever to think about checking in with folk and providing a regular contact?

I have become interested and invested in the idea of response-ability – mobilisation of capacity and questions about what diminishes our ability to respond.

What might be the environmental conditions that limit our abilities to act and do the right thing in the moment? What are the internalised messages that stop us realising our potential? As I am reading and thinking in a post-conference reverie I am wondering how we can keep momentum going, not making assumptions about what it is that motivates us to do the work we do. We all have different callings to this work we do and I have learnt that unpacking assumptions and leaning into differences are the most important first steps on sustainable and generative coalitions – we need to find ways to resist and ways around the hegemony of individualism, heroism and commodification of good work.

Vocational awe, missionary zeal and white saviourism are not ingredients I can support – we need to find ways to counter neoliberal capitalism and the allure of modernism – it has harmed many and it will continue to harm us all unless we resist.

Glimmers
and DIFFRACTION

Sue Spencer