

Kotodama: Moving beyond language and exploring creative communication through an arts therapeutic journey

Ayaka Shima

Abstract

When I came to New Zealand, I felt that I lost a sense of myself and connection with others because I did not have the vocabulary to easily communicate in English. Through my arts therapy journey in New Zealand, I learned creative communication and formed new spiritual connections through this form of expressing myself. When I returned to Japan I regained the ease of communication in my native language, but in the process of writing this article, realised that I lost my ability for creative communication and connection with my spirituality. This creative writing and art-making has restored a sense of resonance in an intersubjective creative space where I could feel my creative communication and spiritual connection, like the Japanese word 'kotodama' (言霊 in Japanese), finding our spirituality and using soulful words.

Keywords

Arts therapy, creative communication, intersubjective space, language, resonance, Kotodama

Introduction

In 2017 I left my home in Japan and travelled to New Zealand, where I began studying arts therapy. Despite beginning well, as my studies progressed, I began to struggle to build my confidence in speaking English. Through this, I began to feel I was losing my sense of self. I therefore observed myself speaking English as a second language through my creative process. As a result of the research, I recognised

that the most important goal was not speaking, but was being myself and connecting with others beyond verbalisation through embodiment of the arts. Though use of language is very useful anywhere in the modern world, there was a part of myself I could not express in words. The arts therapeutic process that I experienced as a student at Whitecliffe contained many supportive elements (see Figure 1) that helped me on this journey. These elements were all connected and influenced each other. It felt like a

safe place. I experienced something similar returning to Japan. I regained the ease of verbal communication, but I again felt as if I had lost some part of myself. I wondered how this could happen even though I could use my mother tongue, Japanese. In this creative exploration, I revisited my experience of arts therapy in New Zealand and explored this idea of interconnection and the intersubjective ways in which the arts process can move beyond verbalisation.



Figure 1. Ayaka Shima, *Supportive elements*, 2019, soft pastel, 390x540mm.

Remembering my creative self

Colours are dancing in darkness.

The darkness holds light.

Creativity is happening within my whole being.

In May 2020, six months after completing my Master of Arts in Arts Therapy at Whitecliffe, I was walking in my neighbourhood in Japan. There were trees lining a long pathway to a park. I felt my feet firmly on the ground and I could hear the birds singing freely. Sounds of leaves swaying in the wind were echoing around me. Since arriving back in Japan at the end of March 2020, my body had become stiff and my creative energy felt blocked. I felt a hollowness inside me, as if a hungry creature had been eating through me. This sensation caused me to feel darkness and emptiness in my heart. But here, in nature, the scent of fresh green leaves allowed me to breathe deeply. The lively and harmonious atmosphere reminded me of experiences and people who I had met during my arts therapy training. I stepped forward firmly and continued to walk. Feeling grounded, my eyes moved, following the natural contours with my hands, aware of the textures and the scents that reminded me of how things were. The memory of these sensations restored my sense of self.

After this experience in nature, I contemplated using Japanese carbon ink to express my feelings. I watched the black ink silently. The darkness of the colour was swallowing everything inside of me. It was touching my darkness. After a short pause, holding the brush, my hand moved in a circular motion with one breath and a small mountain shape appeared at the bottom of the circle. I saw the empty space and then, curiously, I noticed the shape of the mountain. I coloured around the black circle with warm colours and cool colours divided into upper and lower, feeling my energy with the colours. After that, I felt like using a green colour on the mountain shape within the circle. The green-coloured line grew from bottom to top, with the shape of a sprout or baby bird. When I added red and yellowish colours around the green-coloured creature it suddenly contained warmth; a new life. Afterwards, I played with shades of white, drawing wavy lines on the black space like roots under the ground or a nest in a tree. Many other colours were sprinkled on the black-and-white circle as if they were dancing together in the darkness (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ayaka Shima, Talking with darkness, 2020, carbon, ink and acrylic paint, 240x205mm.

The black circle on the artwork represented darkness and emptiness in my heart. It was also like a frame placed between the internal and external worlds or between myself and others. The darkness reminded me of my sense of loss. The empty space on my artwork appeared as if my soul was absent. I remember when I lost my father and had to leave my previous home. Before I moved, I looked around the house where I had lived with my family. I was aware of the empty house, which was physically there but it was no longer a 'home' I could go back to. I couldn't feel the soul of the place. I felt as though I was a rootless person and I lost myself on a spiritual level. I felt immobilised and isolated within the darkness and emptiness.

However, after my nature exploration in Japan, my body remembered the feeling of mobility, and I recalled the experience of dancing with my classmates and teachers in New Zealand. When I was dancing with them, my body could move freely, feeling their energy and talking with them through my body sensations. The playful moment was intersubjective and non-judgmental, with a gentle boundary. I felt this was a safe and creative framework within a soft and stable space. I could just stay and be present. I felt safe in the space because I trusted we would never hurt each other in this context. It gradually led me to dance. I could

release my sense of helplessness, powerlessness and vulnerability in using the English language by sharing these joyful moments in an intersubjective space in a non-judgmental way. The space was like nature that contains diversity and inclusion, and staying in the space led me to realise the diversity of myself and others. I needed a creative, non-judgmental space like the one I felt during arts therapy training. I was struggling with creative communication in Japan, but recalling that intersubjective, non-judgmental space allowed me to remember my creative self, and new energy welled from within. While I felt the darkness and soullessness, I felt that the colours complemented each other within the creative space. A new life was born in a black circle with feelings represented by colours and the creature connected with white waving lines intertwined around the black circle in my artwork. When I remember my creative self, this experience helped me to realise that the darkness was not just black and empty.

This process told me that I was spiritually hurt and my sense of loss intensified a feeling of emptiness because I had not been able to verbally explain this sensation as my spiritual pain. The darkness and emptiness were similar to my experience of struggling to acquire English language skills when I was in New Zealand. When I suffered without telling others, even when I had the opportunity to speak my mother tongue, a similar sensation happened on a spiritual level. I was aware of the necessity of creative communication and spiritual connection in Japan. Embodied memories of creative experience enabled me to feel an invisible connection with my inner and outer selves.

Finding an invisible connection

My first experience of feeling an invisible connection within arts therapy happened early on in my training. I had an opportunity to do a presentation about myself, introducing a mythical story that resonated with my life experience. I chose the story of the MochiMochi tree (see Figure 3): a sensitive boy had been scared to go outside alone at night because there was a MochiMochi tree outside that looked like a ghost. He became brave, however, when he tried to rescue his ill grandfather, a person very precious to him. On his way home, after going out and getting help for his grandfather, he saw the MochiMochi tree. The tree was beautiful, with colourful lights twinkling

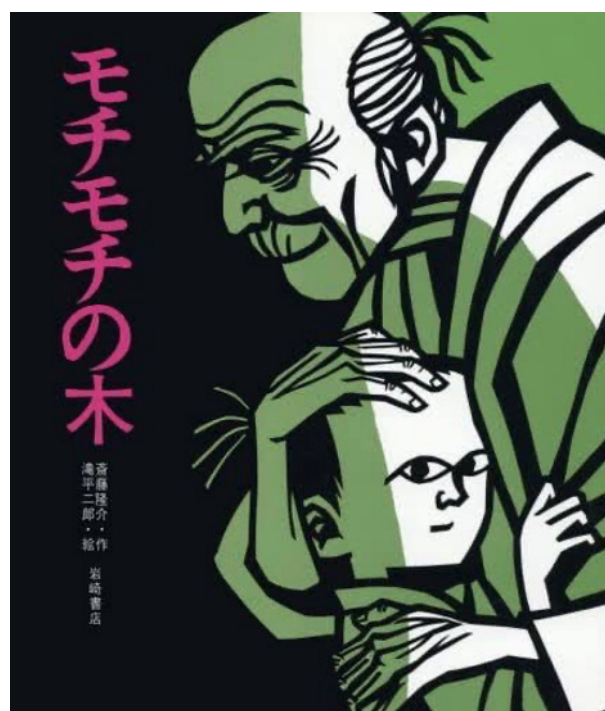


Figure 3. Jirou Takidaira, Cover of the book *MochiMochi Tree*, 285×250mm.

in the darkness. This story encouraged me to wonder what the most important thing in my life was. I was born in Hiroshima. My grandmother had survived the atomic bomb in 1945 and I have heard stories of the survivors since I was little. Their hearts crying out for peace was engraved in my heart as well as their will to live and their survivor's guilt. In March 2011, a big earthquake happened near the place where I was living in the north of Japan. Many people died as a result of the tsunami that washed/tore over the land. This tsunami also caused a nuclear problem that was not only life-threatening but also affected many relationships. People tried to hold back their anxieties and fears. We needed, however, to learn how to express ourselves and to reconnect with people. My deepest hope was that I could say we had restored peace in a true sense when we found ways to connect. I therefore travelled across the ocean from Japan to New Zealand so that I could learn arts therapy, hoping to find ways to help the people of my home country again find inner peace.

I used wool felt to make my 'MochiMochi tree' and touched the soft texture of the wool as if I was reaching into New Zealand. The skeins of wool were soft but became stable when bonded and connected together to make felt. I remembered the story of the 'Aogiri' tree that had survived the atomic bomb in

Hiroshima even though the city had been burned out. It gave the survivors encouragement. When I saw this tree, I imagined that it had been alive for a long time watching over us. I used felt to blend together the Aogiri tree and the MochiMochi tree. The roots spread (powerfully) under the ground, and the tree grew towards the light. After creating the tree, I used blue-coloured wool to represent the sea around the tree because my hometown faced the sea. The sea is connected with everywhere, including New Zealand. I folded 'Orizuru' (the paper crane) which is a symbol of peace in my hometown. Ever since I was a child, I have made a lot of paper cranes, hoping for peace. Therefore, the birds represent 'prayer' or 'hope' and the prayer or hope played an important role for my growth. The birds also convey seeds which grow into plants that produce fruits. This referred to the next generation, which was related to my hope that children could choose their own path for their future without feeling threatened. Finally, I sprinkled beads like the ones I used to play with. These beads expressed and reflected particles of light representing the preciousness and power of life. Life, hope, connection, courage and brilliance were all contained within my prayer. There was a connection of life, a trustworthy world and our power of growth in the world of my MochiMochi tree. The process of making the MochiMochi tree helped me to awake my spirituality and interconnectedness of soul.

A space of resonation

*Inner reserve of shining and fluctuations of our soul
touching the preciousness of life
A drop of tears nourishes a circulation of prayer
resonating through our soul
as if the sounds of birds' fluttering wings are
echoing in the air.*

During my studies at Whitecliffe I delivered a presentation about my story with my MochiMochi tree, which I started by singing a song from my hometown, connecting with the survivor's cry and prayer. In my hometown, we share our prayers or convey our hopes by singing a song together. Singing the song empowered me to share my story with my teachers and classmates. I tried to follow a script, but my voice was trembling whilst reading it. Tears welled up in my eyes when I tried to verbalise my feelings and seemed to reflect where my heart was, conveying a non-verbal message of how I was truly feeling.



Figure 4. Ayaka Shima, *A space of resonation*, 2020, acrylic and watercolour pencil, 340×210mm.

After that I sang another song related to the story to finish my presentation. I sensed a deep emotion from within my heart when I sang this song.

Songs helped me to express myself to others rather than just crying. I saw the gentle eyes of a teacher who had encouraged me in this process. I was aware of some tears in the audience and I imagined each had hope resonating in a deep place in their heart. After telling my story in English, my paper cranes were folded in my hands to convey my hope that everyone could share this with the whole world. I often feel lonely in other countries, with unknown words, culture and social manners. I felt this in New Zealand, a country that was also foreign to me. When the paper cranes reached others' hands, I felt they communicated over the sea and made a connection between my hometown and New Zealand.

With the memory of this presentation, I put blue and yellow acrylic pigments on white paper. Sensing

my breathing, I slowly touched the pigments with the fingers of both my hands. My fingers moved up and down repeatedly on the paper. The back of my body was stretching with the movement. A long and wide-based thick line appeared. After writing poetic words, I enjoyed tapping with my fingers on the paper with blue, yellow and red colours around the thick line. Then I started drawing thin lines using green from the middle of the thick line to the top of the paper, using a brush. The thin line was increasing like a branch and three white flying creatures appeared in watercolour pencil above the branches. I contained the branches and creatures by drawing a big circle in green. After that, I added brown to the bottom of the thick line and the lower parts of the branches. The picture was taking the shape of a big tree. I dropped water around the tree and the water helped the colours to widen, spread and mix harmoniously (see Figure 4). When I saw the thick line in the centre of the paper, I felt the centre of my body. I saw a person who has wings made of older and younger branches in the picture. Young leaves were growing from the back of the body, supported by older branches. The white flying creatures were conveying invisible, precious messages, such as soul, prayer and hope. This picture represented a sense of resonance to me.

This experience made me aware, that 'creativity', to me, means this whole process of moving towards connections beyond a framework of languages. Emotional and spiritual pain that could not be expressed by words healed through metaphorical transition. I could feel an invisible connection with my ancestors, emotions, prayers and hopes with a simple reality that our lives are supported by many other lives. I found my spirituality through the invisible connection in this form of creative communication. This experience encouraged me to trust the non-verbal world, feeling the space of resonance and interconnectedness. I experienced this beautiful moment unexpectedly.

Soul connection within words

When I could not find a way of communicating creatively, a sense of soullessness emerged, representing the darkness and emptiness. Creative communication that was intersubjective and non-judgmental helped me to express my authentic self and connect with my spirituality. I could feel the centre of myself and interconnectedness between

myself and the world around me. The creative communication conveyed soulful elements within words in a space of resonance beyond the limitation of language. Like a song, there was harmony between rhythm, tone and words in the space of resonance. It not only contained a spiritual aspect but also included primitive processes such as breathing, vibration of sounds, and attuning to the inner and outer world. This sense of resonance made me realise 'kotodama' (言霊), the idea of words that have soul. The concept of kotodama allows me to use words that convey soul. The vibration of voice and tone in words is a way to share meanings and a resonating creative expression. This connective power rests in the sound of our voices, which can convey energy, emotion and prayer. I find this expression of words creative, sharing our presence, experiences and the space together. When sounds represent our experiences and our harmonious selves become words, the words have spiritual connections. We can witness the light and darkness at the same time, as if lighting our prayers, sharing a moment of silence together. This resonance invites me to feel a sense of commonality of prayers within the intersubjective space. I sensed a co-existence where we were equally all creative creatures.

I believe creative communication enables us to share these kinds of soul words because I have felt this kind of commonality and vibrancy in arts therapy. The intersubjective creative space cannot be judgmental, it should provide an empathic framework and playful moments. These moments allowed me to create a sense of forgiveness and the stability in the space. There was something flowing consistently and this helped me to become centred, creating a sense of coherence of my inner world. This stability helped me to create appropriate boundaries for others and make connections within my outer world safely, allowing me to live freely and adventurously, and to trust this creative process. Therefore, arts therapy builds a peaceful space where we can share ourselves safely and creatively, and are able to share our soul words, expressing our authentic selves. Soulful words can move beyond languages.

Conclusion

The process of arts therapy gave me another opportunity to find myself and open the door of my creativity and spirituality. This helped to open my heart to connect with others by being myself

and feeling a spiritual connection. When people do not knock on the creative door, or when I cannot find their creative door, I can only manage to communicate with them verbally. At home, in Japan, this led me to feel loneliness and my body reacted with stiffness. This stiffness was related to my spiritual pain, which, at the time, I could not have recognised and verbalised. Remembering my experience of arts therapy, however, helps me to reconnect with the place of resonance where I can feel spiritual connections. Through the exploration for this article, I realised that I had lost my creative communication and spiritual connection in Japan, and I found my creative door in the place of resonance that was intersubjective and non-judgmental.

We usually share language to manage our society. Communication through language brings with it cultural aspects, such as cultural experience, stigma and historical issues between people. The language can be a frame that supports our daily life and helps us to understand our thoughts economically. People can feel safe with a clear frame of language. At the same time, it can be a wall between us, particularly when we live in an unknown community where we are easily isolated physically and mentally, and feel a sense of loss. This leads to loneliness and emptiness, and feelings of emotional and spiritual pain. Creativity releases our soul from the judgmental frame and creates something we can share to build and connect with our worlds. Arts therapy provides an alternative stable space where we can share our authentic selves through spiritual connection, and feeling this connection enhances a sense of coherency within. When we communicate in a creative space, this allows new meanings of words that build empathetic understanding. Words with soul can emerge in an intersubjective creative place, incubating our strength and possibility, breathing together and connecting our souls.

Our ancestors managed to survive a range of events such as natural disasters, wars and pandemics, holding on to their sorrow. Facing death is inevitable, and conveying the soul can give hope to a person and others around them. When we have an opportunity to express our whole self, our soul can find an invisible connection with another soul. I consider what life means and I realise that my heart can resonate with someone else's soul. This is an important meaning of creativity in arts therapy to me. Listening to our

heart's cry and expressing it can enable us to turn the trauma and the bottled-up emotions into connections between people rather than fear or hate. The sharing experience enables us to create a new frame and our own way of communicating together, finding invisible connections. The sharing gives us power. When we can trust our coherence, sharing the invisible connection can move beyond physical distance. There is always our own life behind our presence. When our unique lived experience is resonating in an intersubjective place, our voice shows a creative healing power. Now my new journey is to find and use soul words and to communicate creatively in Japan, sharing the creative intersubjective space.

Acknowledgements

This work would not be possible without the support of Dr Deborah Green who encouraged me on my journey within arts therapy at Whitecliffe and invited me on this creative adventure, providing generous professional support. I deeply appreciate it. I must thank people who I met during the arts therapy course at Whitecliffe. They have made me what I am as an arts therapist. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my English teacher, Dan Krebs, and proof reader, Justine Giles. They beautifully supported my writing in English as a second language. Finally, a special memorial acknowledgement for my father who encouraged me to study abroad, be creative as a therapist and contribute to world peace by helping people to achieve their hopes and dreams.

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Volume 16, Number 1, 2021

Published by The Journal of Creative Arts Therapies

Online and open access at <https://www.jocat-online.org/vol16no1page>

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ISSN: 2652-9459

Design and production Vic Segedin

JoCAT is produced by the School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University on behalf of the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapy Association.

