

# The land of AWE: Exploring the connection between walking and arts therapy

Bettina Evans

## Abstract

In this article I am introducing my AWE practice (arts / walking / expressive arts therapy). I share my experiences of a daily walking practice, which is sense-based and may include play, rest, art-making, connecting to other sentient beings, close observation, collecting of natural materials and an aesthetic response after the walk. The creation of story maps became an additional tool to deepen this practice. I explore my evolving relationship to the natural world around me through paying attention to particular details as well as engaging with larger existential questions of belonging and connection. This practice has resulted in an increased feeling of connection and belonging to my environment, as well as an increased sense of self.

## Keywords

Nature-based expressive arts therapy, ecopoeisis, decentring, story mapping, walking

*I walk under rain-drenched trees – this feels special, as rain in Christchurch, the driest city in New Zealand, never lasts very long. My body feels alive, awakened by the staccato drumming of the drops on the leaves and the liquid elixirs of eucalyptus and pine trees in the air. I feel raindrops land on my hand and when standing very still I can hear the sound of a single drop falling on a leaf. As I walk on, the raindrop orchestra's drumming changes subtly depending on whether I walk under thick or thin canopies of broadleaf trees or under needle trees. I follow one drop, then many, channelling into the deeply grooved bark of a pine tree, gathering with other rivulets in wooden pools and puddle lakes, formed between the gnarled roots of the trees. On my last walk here I enjoyed the roots' polished feel under my bare feet; glancing down, I had seen the sun light up patches of golden dust. Today the roots provide the walls for silver lakes, where pine needles float like miniature tree trunks, and gather in outflows, creating tiny beaver dams. Further along the path the hazy light and dove-grey horizon start to envelop me. Instead of listening upwards to the rhythm of clapping raindrops and leaves, I become aware of the gravitational pull of*

*rain; I become heavier, more earthbound, my shoes get sucked into the mud, splattered dirt creeps up my trouser legs, even my hair is pulled down by the weight of water – time to walk back home.*

*When I have dried off and am writing about my walk I am in the midst of it again, giving voice to the multitude of experiences.*



Figure 1. Bettina Evans, *Before the rain*, 2018, photo.

## Preparation

As an adult I have always enjoyed walking as a way to release tension and exercise my body, as well as a means to help me think and ponder about work and life problems. In the last three years I realised that I was integrating art and mindfulness into my daily walks, and created the acronym AWE (arts / walking / expressive arts therapy) to describe this practice. On reading Atkins and Snyder (2018) I realised AWE was closely related to nature-based expressive arts therapy, which the authors describe as engaging in “a sacred practice that helps us cultivate our own sanity and re-member ourselves as cells in the body of the Earth” (p.118).

Two concepts underpin my practice. The first is ecopoiesis, which views “human creative process as part of, and embedded within, the ongoing creative process of the living Earth and the universe” (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p.118). My AWE also has a decentring function – I am able to leave my ordinary life behind and enter into an alternative reality not related to the rest of my life. Being in this imaginal space allows me to step out of my everyday thinking-dominated state and become more playful and creative (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005, p.83).

As soon as I start my AWE practice, my whole sensory system becomes more alert and alive, I feel antennae and feelers sprouting out of my head eager to pick up messages and signals from the

world around me, my ears enlarge, I am hungry for tastes and smells, and my skin, hands and feet long for connection with water and sun, wind and rock. This connects to the quality of ‘paying close attention’ and ‘being present’, which a wide variety of poets, writers, scientists and therapists have recognised as a foundational quality to engaging fully with the world around us (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Kimmerer, 2014; Oliver, 1994, 2009; Macfarlane, 2016).

My AWE practice is not so much about solving problems that I encounter in my life as an individual, arts therapist and arts therapy lecturer, but it helps me to put those problems into a wider context. The existential theme of isolation – Where do I fit, where do I belong? – is often present for me as an underlying layer of inquiry, connected to the theme of meaning making (Krug, 2015). As my cognitive understanding, physical engagement, emotional immersion and spiritual connection to the natural world around me grow, so my sense of belonging increases.

I am interested in maps and mapping as a way to make visible the connection between inner and outer landscapes and experiences. Robert Macfarlane, who writes about the connection between landscapes and the human heart, calls them “story maps”, as they represent the journey of an individual, giving space to experiences as well as place (2007, p.41). I created a map to illustrate some of the aspects of my walks and provide a story map for this article (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Bettina Evans, *The land of AWE*, 2019, paper collage, 420 × 300mm.

This article will meander like my walks, but will be structured around five stopping points: the meeting places, the creative cliff, the resting rocks, the play puddles and the observatory. While they are separate on the map, in reality they often are situated right next to each other.

The 'pay attention' swallow will swoop and dive through the different chapters and the compass with its four points of meaning and belonging, shape shifting and grounding, will provide some orientation for the article.

In this article I am only able to present a broad overview of my practice, rather than provide an in-depth exploration of how I am engaging with the natural environment.

### Starting out

I am lucky that I live in Lyttelton Harbour, with many walks within easy reach from my home. In the 13 years of living here I have walked all the tracks close to my house, getting to know them in all seasons and weathers. Over the years I have whittled these down to three walks that I use most often in my daily practice: the pine walk, the valleys walk and the sea walk. Each walk crosses different terrains, including a variety of views and



Figure 3. Bettina Evans, *Summer wheel in valleys walk*, 2015, natural materials, approx. 1300 × 1300mm.

vistas, wildlife and moods. Instead of becoming bored with the same walks, I have experienced an unfolding which ties in with Macfarlane's thought that every single place holds infinite creative possibilities (2016, p.327). This links in with McNiff's (1998) assertion that repetition in art-making leads to new insights and gestures, helped by the rhythm and patterns of movement (p.121).

This choice of walks was also influenced by the time it takes to complete them – they are between 45 and 90 minutes, which is a manageable time to fit into my daily schedule, and which also happens to be roughly the time of an arts therapy session.

Going for a walk exposes me to a very different environment from the classroom in which I teach arts therapy or the arts therapy studio I use with private clients. The classroom and studio are square, constructed from human-made materials, and everything is human-sized to satisfy human needs – shelter from the elements, heating for warmth, furniture for comfort: inside buildings, humans are the centre of the world. This unchanging, safe environment is an important feature of the studio. It is a secure base for the client and therapist, enabling forays into risk-taking through engaging with arts materials (Brown, 2008).

The paths on my walks provide a similar function. They are the element of the walk that is the most stable – the paths never alter in length or elevation. If the path is muddy after rain or strewn with fallen branches after a storm, then this is an expected change. Paths provide the balance to the inherent wildness and unpredictability of nature off the paths. They are human-made and human-scaled – instead of sheer cliffs to climb, steps have been hewn into the rock; instead of having to wade through knee-deep mud, a wooden boardwalk has been constructed. This means that instead of exerting energy to negotiate a physically challenging environment, my mind, body and senses are free to concentrate on the AWE process of walking and the environment around me.

On the walks I engage with the environment through a variety of means: through the physical act of propelling my body forwards, taking in the environment through my senses and actively engaging with it through making art. After returning home I may do some writing or make art in response to the experience.

## One foot in front of the other

Walking is an active physical act, so is more comparable to dance movement therapy, as the process of moving is more important than a finished art product. The advantages of walking for physical well-being are well known (World Health Organization, 2018), so I will concentrate on describing some of my personal experiences where physical well-being overlaps with soul and mental well-being, based on sensory experiences.

I love waking barefoot and have mapped all the sections of the walks where this is possible. When I walk barefoot my attention is on my feet, rather than the usual focus on my upper senses. This often means that I am walking more slowly, and take in more detail of my surroundings. I have seen that the leaves of the ngaio and pittosporum trees look droopy and sapped of water in a dry summer. The soles of my feet provide me with another layer of knowing; I can feel the leaves the trees have shed to survive, the brown husks disintegrating under my footfall, their dry brittleness so different from the juicy, spongy fresh leaves. I experience barefoot walking as truly walking *on* the earth, rather than over it. Macfarlane talks about “the skin of the walker meeting the skin of the land” (2013, p.159).

I have become attentive to the speed of my walking. Usually I walk fast and steady, but there are nuances, and often my body lets my brain know how I am feeling. If I suddenly find myself sprinting up some steps I know that I am feeling well and energetic. When I find myself walking slowly I take this as an indication that I may be physically tired or need extra energy to deal with other issues in my life. The environment of the walks influences my speed: walking in the shade of fragrant pine trees overlooking the turquoise mirror of the harbour on a hot still summer day, my body settles into a slow, swinging, languid rhythm, whereas on stormy and cold days I am more likely to walk fast and staccato, with more abrupt movements. The rhythm of my steps is often a reaffirmation of my existence – every footfall tells me: “I am here, I am alive, I am moving.” This helps me to ground myself in the body, and disengage from the never-ending round of thoughts in my head as the kinesthetic/sensory aspect of walking provides self-regulation (Hinz, 2009, p.40; Malchiodi, 2016).

## Play puddle

Behind every corner of the paths a play puddle is waiting: I kick pine cones down the hill to see whether they land on rocks or bob in the sea. I swing on rope swings, throw stones into the water, splash through mud, scuff around in pine needles, paddle in the sea, and on hot days I go for a swim. Often some shells, stones or sticks catch my eye and I will create a quick assemblage. These activities are inspired by the material around me, and are spontaneous, experimental and fun. McNiff (1998) likens the effects of play to those of meditation, and states that immersion in play works directly on body and mind, calling it “potent and valuable medicine” (p.117).



Figure 4. Bettina Evans, *Strutting pine woman*, 2018, natural materials, approx. 200 × 140mm.

## The meeting places

It is through my senses that I connect to and meet the world on my AWE practice. My senses are open and receptive, looking forward to sights or smells or sounds I have encountered before: the stately gathering of old kōwhai trees on the valleys walk, or the sight of the heads of the harbour when cresting the saddle on the pine walk. Equally enticing are new and ephemeral experiences. On the valleys walk I was stopped by a large, wet and glistening bird poo in the middle of the path; it

would have been messy to step into, but it was wonderful to behold – its main mass of white had marblings and swirls of purple, ranging from dark prune and plum purple to the lightest tones of mauve and lavender. How I wished I had my camera along with me! Instead, I stood gazing in amazement at its colours and wondered about the provenance of it. Suddenly I remembered that the elderberries were ripe, and walked around the area till I found an elderberry bush with half-eaten bunches of berries. Beauty is often not pretty, but enlivens us and intensifies our awareness of the experience (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p.65).

Smell and taste are two important sense impressions that connect me more deeply to the environment on my walks. Wild Italian flat parsley grows almost year-round on the seashore walk; elderberries and blackberries arrive in autumn. My most affecting taste sensation however is sipping rainwater or dew from leaves. I can't remember when and how I started this, but it has become one of my most tender moments of connecting to nature. While walking I scan the trees and bushes at head height for leaves that have a drop of water suspended at their tip. I approach the leaf very carefully, extend my tongue till it meets the leaf, and the drop melts onto it.



Figure 5. Bettina Evans, *Wild sweet pea*, 2018, chalk pastels, 200 × 140mm

This delicate transaction feels like a communing and communion between me and the plant, a gift offered to me freely. Usually I use my hand to drink from a mug. This direct connection, drinking straight from a leaf cup with my tongue, brings an immediate feeling of being closer to the animal kingdom and my animal self. I am more aware of the refreshing quality of water when I partake of this one single drop. (I do feel self-conscious when doing this, and try to do it away from the path, afraid that other walkers may think that I am weird!)

Smell is an underutilised sense in arts therapy, but the smells on my walks become important grounding points. I look forward to the parts of the seashore walk that host wild rose bushes, as the scents of their leaves, flowers and rosehip fruit pervade the whole area; in spring wild garlic and hawthorne scent the air, in summer wild wallflowers. I can smell the acrid guano on the nesting trees of the common shag long before I see them on the sea walk. Sometimes the smell of a decaying animal carcass wafts across one of the paths. Those unpleasant smells are a reminder that death and decay are as necessary to nature as beauty and life. This mirrors the importance of working with the shadow in therapy; if left unacknowledged shadow forces can become destructive and harmful (McNiff, 2011, pp.83, 84).

The palette of sounds present on the walks provides another grounding practice: listening to the dialogue of bellbirds, the twitterings of fantails, the sighing of the wind in the tree branches, the slapping of the waves against the rocks. Of course none of the senses is separate and paying attention to one sense can often lead to discoveries in another. A few weeks ago I was walking along the sea walk, my ears loosely attending to the soundscape around me. I picked up the excited voices of at least four terns. The terns I had observed previously flew mostly alone, sometimes two of them exchanging short, isolated calls. This cacophony was so unusual that I scanned the sea to find them. The terns were all circling around one central point in the harbour. Soon I could see they were following a ducking and diving Hector's dolphin, who must have disturbed fish, providing an easy catch for the terns. I watched the birds and dolphin on their journey, till the dolphin dived out of sight and the terns dispersed, finally only their isolated cries audible.

## Creative cliff

I love exploring this cliff, with its multiple seams of treasures, again and again. One seam is photography. I enjoy relaxing into the process of taking photos, spending time scanning the horizon, looking at shade and light, shapes and colours. Some viewpoints I never tire of. There is an old macrocarpa tree overlooking one of the bays, and the view beyond it gives my heart a jolt whenever I see it, and I have taken photos of the same scene in different seasons and lights. I enjoy the physical aspect of taking photos of small things: lying spread-eagled on the soft pine-needle bed to see mushrooms or lichens close up, smelling the damp friable soil they grow out of, and pushing and rolling myself from one mushroom to the next.

On the pine walk I created a pine-cone web connecting two trees, loosely exploring the idea of the wood-wide web, which is the layman's term for an underground network of microbes connecting all trees, proving scientifically what indigenous cultures have always known: that all living things are interconnected (Hansford, 2017). I used a handful of clay to create a small woman's head on a dead pine stump, thinking of her as the guardian of the path (Figure 6). Over several months I watched her dry and crack and change, lose her pine-needle hair, and finally disintegrate and dissolve back into the soil, mirroring the cycle of human life.

Sometimes I carry natural objects home to create an aesthetic response to what I have experienced on my walk. An aesthetic response, as described by Knill in Levine, Knill and Levine (2005, p.137) refers to a distinct response to an artwork (or in my case natural phenomena) that we associate with beauty. This is quite different from my spontaneous interaction on the AWEs, as it may take me days or weeks to use the objects in ways that honour their beingness, and their and my connection to their place of origin. Lopez (2019), another writer looking for meaning and purpose through a lifetime of exploring landscapes, talks about the numinous quality of inanimate objects, and goes on to say that "a stone, presented with an opportunity, with a certain kind of welcoming stillness, might reveal, easily and naturally, some part of its meaning" (p.28). This encouraged me to sit with a variety of volcanic basalt soils and ground rock I had collected on a valley walk. During most of the year the surface

of the path is compacted, damp or muddy. Only in the height of summer does the soil dry out into tiny dust particles. The path becomes silky-slippery with layers of dust, its colour and texture resembling spices: ground cardamom, chilli, cinnamon, ginger. At home I let the bags of soil and rock rest, enjoying their colours daily, swirling my fingers through their texture, but every creative idea I came up with seemed forced and trite.

Solnit (2001), in essays exploring art made from natural materials (pp.52, 163), says that giving form to a natural substance is not necessary to create meaning, as every object contains in itself the story of its process, and can express what is absent. So I decided to let the soils speak for themselves. I used earth pigments to paint a sheet of paper with contour lines, cupped each soil sample in my hand and poured it slowly onto the paper. Each soil formed its own hill and valley shape, mirroring its origin (Figure 7). The final step will be to release the soils back into the hill, where they can sink back into their original environment.

This particular process had a deep impact on me, possibly connected to the cyclical nature of this process, and the mirroring of it in myself: the hill and the soil as one, yet distinctly different; my daily contact with hill and soil through sight and touch; the solidity of the hill looking down on me, and its simultaneous fluidity in its reincarnation as soil.

One long-term project was the creation of two story maps of the sea walk, which are loosely based on the geographic lie of the land, but are filled with my sense impressions and encounters with animals and plants. I did not want to use the decimal system as measurement, so I counted my steps as I walked and noted what makes this walk special to me. This map is still developing; I have not yet added layers of memories built up over years of swimming there, having family picnics, women's rituals, earthquake walks, talks with friends – all of which influence my experience of the walk (Figure 8).

The second map (Figure 9) depicts interconnection: it is not just trees that communicate with each other, but every animal, plant, bacterium, fungus, rock, every drop of water, the air and I – we meet and influence each other. We are connected through rhizomic growth, through Indra's net, through interbeing. As I was drawing this map I was sinking deeply



Top to bottom, left to right:

Figure 6. Bettina Evans, *Guardian of the path*, 2018, clay, natural materials, approx. 200 × 140mm.

Figure 7. Bettina Evans, *Home*, 2019, ground rock and soils on painted paper, 590 × 420mm.

Figure 8. Bettina Evans, *Story map of sea walk*, 2019, watercolours and ink on paper, 420 × 300mm.

Figure 9. Bettina Evans, *Interbeing*, 2019, water-soluble pencils on paper, 420 × 300mm.

into the walk, recreating in my mind the screech of seagulls, the sight of the kingfisher roosting, the feel of the path under my bare feet. Both maps have become treasure maps for me, depicting and honouring the experiences this walk has gifted me. It also has become a transitional object, connecting me to the walk even when at home.

## Observatory

The 'pay-attention' swallow is a regular visitor to the observatory and together we make sense of our surroundings by looking both close in and stepping right back. Macfarlane's (2007, 2012, 2016) passionate writing about his deep engagement with the natural world inspired me to pay closer

attention to the plants, animals and rocks I met on my walks. I regularly saw flocks of small, orange-brown butterflies in one distinct area of the valleys walk (Figures 10 and 11). On researching them I discovered that the small common copper butterfly/pepe para riki lays its eggs on the wire vine/pohuehue. Now when I see a common copper I look around to find its companion plant, the pohuehue. Last year I decided to plant some wire vines at the edge of my garden to attract more butterflies, feeling more connected to its life and life cycle, and in a very small way supporting it.

Getting to know the common copper butterfly and its environment more intimately has diminished the distance between us, and has

increased my appreciation and wonder for it. I took photos of it, painted it, and refer to the area where they flutter as ‘butterfly boulders’. Pepe para riki has become my guardian/power animal of the valleys walk, alongside the much rarer and more elusive hawk. Working in the observatory opened the path to the meeting place.

I also carry a small notebook and have used different soils and leaf and flower juices to colour my pages, creating visual vignettes of the plant communities of a particular place and time (Figure 12).

At other times I use the notebook to observe and draw, to give special attention to a particular part of the walk (Figure 13).

## Resting rocks

The resting rocks provide places of stillness and calm to balance the movement and activities of the walk. There are many resting rocks on my walks, often next to a meeting place or leaning onto the creative cliff. I can incubate on the resting rocks, gaining insight and connection through just ‘being’.

Some of my favourite resting-rock words come from Kimmerer (2013), an indigenous American scientist, whose ancestral teachings consider plants and animals as our oldest teachers. She says about the reciprocity of love: “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street to a sacred bond” (p.124).

On each walk I stop, usually in places I connect to especially, such as a small beach or under a giant guardian tree. I stand in silence and express my gratitude in words by addressing the four elements of fire, water, earth and air, which I see as the symbolic building stones of nature. Lately I have also felt the need to ask for forgiveness for humanity’s treatment of the earth, and I have asked for help, as I believe that only if we include nature’s voices and wisdom will we be able to survive these difficult times.

My love and responsibility for the natural environment that I live in also shows in small, practical ways, such as removing rubbish from the beaches I walk on and helping to plant more trees in the bare hills.

## Homecoming

Every walk leaves me refreshed, but not every walk engenders moments that will stand out in my mind, these are the moments I have concentrated on in this article. Many walks mirror the meeting with an old friend; we are comfortable in each other’s company, but do not feel the need for many words or extravagant gestures of love.

The questions of belonging and connection will always accompany me in my AWE practice. Initially I questioned where my physical body ‘fits’ into this landscape – am I too large, too small, too loud, too ‘other’? When I rest after climbing a rocky ridge, the air, wind and sky swirl around me, their infinite size rendering me a speck; similarly when swimming in one of the bays of the harbour, I am flotsam, pushed and pulled by the tides spanning the globe. Lying on my stomach in the pine forest, looking up into the finely chiselled gilled cap of *Amanita muscaria*, admiring the delicacy of its partial veil, I feel like a giant looking into an ivory castle. Walking away later I am afraid my clumsy feet will destroy tiny kingdoms with every step.

Through my AWE practice I have experienced moments when the landscape opened up and invited me inside fully: ascending downhill I am walking through a field of tall, dried-out, bleached summer grasses, and for a split moment I am moving in the same rhythm as the grass, the grass is accompanying my steps with its gentle swaying, we move as one.

A similar experience happened when I saw the dolphin and the terns, the one swimming, the others flying. And there I was, on land, able to adjust my earth-bound steps to their speed, and for a while I was able to accompany them, move in dolphin time, and feel my heart flutter like the terns, excited about their generously provided catch. After I had farewelled them and continued walking I found myself using my hand to inscribe the graceful arc in the sky that the dolphin’s back had shown me. I experienced these moments as brief instances of metaphorical ‘shape-shifting’, where I become one with my surroundings, without any separation (Gale, 2005). In these moments I feel awe, which is described as a “sense of transcending day to day experiences in the presence of something extraordinary” or larger than ourselves, promoting mindfulness and flow experiences (Farber, 2017).





Left to right, top to bottom:

Figure 10. Bettina Evans, *Earth created me* (detail), 2018, acrylic paint and sunlight on paper, 550 × 500mm.

Figure 11. Bettina Evans, *Commom copper*, 2019, photo.

Figure 12. Bettina Evans, *Oak*, 2018, periwinkle petals, oak humus, oak flowers, oak leaves, 140 × 140mm.

Figure 13. Bettina Evans, *Lichens on sea rocks*, 2018, watercolour and ink, 140 × 140mm.

These experiences will stay with me forever, and have intertwined my life closer to the natural world around me. The question of ‘fitting in’ has receded, to be replaced with a recognition of relationship.

The healing function of the AWE practice lies for me in the engagement and challenge of my

whole self, and the vacillation and connection between attention to detail and the larger questions of belonging and connection. My art-making, writing and moving honour the healing power of nature and celebrate the particularities of the environment that has invited me so generously into an evolving relationship.

*While working on this article I have continued my AWE practice as a break from writing. A couple of days ago I did the seashore walk. It was low tide and on the exposed rock shelves I found a small rockpool. I squatted down and explored it. Nothing seemed to stir in it, but as I continued to watch, it came alive. First I saw two tiny glass shrimps scooting around in the water. Their translucent bodies swam in and out of focus, sometimes shimmering like small crystals, at other times their brown markings blended in with the mottled rock, till they set off on another hunting foray and gave their presence away. It took a while longer to spot the dance of the three sea*

*snails. Unlike the glass shrimps, all elbows and jerky movement, the snail ballerinas glided over the rocks slowly and gracefully. By lowering my face to water level I could see their delicate black feelers probing the rough rock, their dark planet-like shells orbiting in their glittering universe. As I was about to leave I saw a minute sea anemone, which fanned out its inky blue arms, the size of eyelashes, in one fast movement. I unfolded my body from the uncomfortable crouching position, the rockpool world receded, the enormous 'rock pool' of the harbour came into focus and, walking home, I thought of myself as yet another miniature creature swimming through the waters of the world.*



Figure 14. Bettina Evans, *Waters of the world*, 2018, photo.

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