

Touching the earth: Creating steps towards re-establishing a connection with nature

Martin S. Roberts

Abstract

With the emergence of an industrialised and urbanised world, much of our environment has been damaged or destroyed. Our consumer-driven economy has resulted in fast and stressful lifestyles that are increasingly disconnected from nature. In an era where time is so limited, self-care is easily set aside; yet maintaining resilience when working closely with people is paramount to a healthy therapist's clinical practice. Contact with nature has long been known to be beneficial to our well-being, and the use of art is well established as an effective tool for insightfulness and healing. This research project used an autoethnographic inquiry to investigate how making art could be combined with nature as a self-care strategy for therapists.

Keywords

Ecopsychology, nature therapy, self-care, art-based inquiry, autoethnography, land art.

Introduction

Last year, during my final year of training to become an art therapist, I undertook a small research study in which I posed the question:

Using an autoethnographic inquiry, what positive benefits are to be gained for therapists from creating 'land art' in a natural bush setting for reflection and self-care?

Throughout my life I have resided in many different locations, but in each place, I have always sought out a green space where I could reflect and rejuvenate myself, away from the hustle and stress of the fast-paced, technology-driven and urbanised world we live in. Training to become an art therapist gave me a formal theoretical understanding of the importance of self-care, for each of us personally, and particularly when working as a therapist with clients (Skovholt, 2001).

"Nature therapy's basic assumption is that nature has healing and recuperative resources, and encountering these forces can promote parallel processes in human beings" (Berger & Lahad, 2013, p.42). I have instinctually leaned towards this potential to maintain my well-being.

The literature on art therapy advocates for the power of art, both in the process of making, and on its reflection, to provide insight and creative ways to process difficult memories and emotions (Case & Dalley, 2006; Moon, 2002; Wadeson, 2000). The aim of my research was to investigate how the areas of nature and art-making could be combined and used as a self-care strategy for the therapist's gain. I wanted to find out why making art in a bush setting is therapeutic and insightful, and how the process is enhanced by the restorative qualities of nature.

Literature review

Approaching the literature

In reviewing the literature relevant to this research, I needed to look at the different components that were important to the approach I would take in this study. My autoethnographic inquiry aimed to find out what the experiences of making art in the bush were like, and how they could cultivate self-care for therapists. Thus I looked at ecopsychology, the use of nature in therapy (particularly incorporating creative processes), and self-care for therapists. Here I give a brief overview of each area's main themes, focusing on those elements that relate to the question I was posing.

Ecopsychology

Ecology is the study of nature, and psychology is the study of human nature. The overlapping of these two fields has been termed 'ecopsychology' (Fisher, 2013). Even before this was conceptualised, various individuals were crossing the boundaries. Jung wrote that as:

Scientific understanding has grown, so our world has dehumanised. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional 'unconscious identity' with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications... No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (Jung, as cited in Fisher, 2013, p.4)

Ecopsychology theory says that as humans we are ultimately connected through unconscious processes to all life, as well as to the earth itself. Interaction with nature promotes mental health and psychological development, and the resulting sensorial experiences are a fundamental source of knowledge and joy (Hasbach, 2012; Fisher, 2013). This theory has arisen from the historical conditions of the industrialisation and urbanisation of human society, and the resulting disconnection from nature (Fisher, 2013). Numerous texts speculate that our current detachment from nature is a direct cause of the deterioration of well-being and social-psychological health (Roszak, 2001, as cited in Berger & Lahad, 2013). The pillaging of natural resources needed for mass consumption is one of the factors responsible for our current environmental crisis, and the mourning of the resulting loss of species and green spaces has been anecdotally termed "ecological anxiety" (Brymer et al, 2010, as cited in Greenleaf, Bryant & Pollock, 2014, p.168). Horsfall, Linnell, Latham, & Rumbold (2014) eloquently describe this bereavement: "We sat under the tree in heart-felt grief for what is lost and what will be lost. The facts are unequivocal but often met with scepticism and denial" (p.282). They wonder if the arts could help in formulating a response to the planetary crisis.

Nature, art and well-being

Extensive literature across a wide range of academic disciplines is reporting what most people have already known anecdotally, including what I experienced by going on my nature walks: that our personal well-being is supported and strengthened by improving the quality of our relationship with nature (Greenleaf et al., 2014). Many case study examples and research studies have examined the use of nature to improve therapeutic outcomes (Hawkin, Townsend, & Garst, 2016; Poulsen, Stigsdotter, Djernis, & Sidenius, 2016; Ray & Jakubec, 2014; Peterson & Boswell, 2015; Sonntag-Öström et al., 2015). In a study exploring the influence of nature on depression, a significant reduction in symptoms was observed in 71 percent of participants. The same researchers suggest that, for mild to moderate depression, a daily walk outside could be as effective as taking an antidepressant medication. (Pretty et al., 2007, as cited in Greenleaf et al., 2014)

Proponents of art therapy write about the therapeutic benefits of art-making for insight and growth (Case & Dalley, 2006; Harter, 2007; Moon, 2002; Wadson, 2000), and some nature-based interventions have incorporated art-making and other creative methods. The Healing Forest (Berger & Lahad, 2013) is a program based on the theoretical framework of nature therapy, which combines ritual and art-making in a natural setting to improve resilience and coping resources in post-crisis work with children. The use of different art media was found to activate the body, emotions and imagination, with the creative process facilitating insight and positive change. In a short-term nature therapy intervention in Israel, elements such as the uncontrollable and dynamic changes of nature, in combination with spontaneous sand-play, aided work with people coping with psychiatric difficulties. These aspects were found to facilitate a way to bypass defence mechanisms and provide meaningful insights and growth (Berger & Tiry, 2012).

Self-care for therapists

Caring for and working closely with others in 'high-touch' fields such as art therapy and other professional areas of healthcare, require the therapist to navigate many different stressors and hazards as their career develops from novice to

senior practitioner (Skovholt, 2001). Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma can lead to burnout symptoms such as exhaustion, cynicism and ineffectiveness. To prevent this, every practitioner must develop a repertoire of restorative strategies to help them process the difficult material that is part of working in close contact with others. Maintaining a balanced lifestyle, self-awareness and personal growth, developing healthy coping strategies, establishing a good support network in both one's professional and personal lives, and practising mindfulness are some of the suggested strategies for self-care (Baruch, 2004; Skovholt, 2001; Williams et al., 2016; Wityk, 2003). Making visual art – with its ability to access pre-verbal constructs with a loosened quality to provide insight that can then be tightened and refined – can help practitioners creatively overcome the difficulties of working in the therapeutic relationship (Harter, 2007).

Research design

This was a autoethnographic research study that took a phenomenological approach to investigate the essence of what it is really like to make art in the natural environment (Kapitan, 2014). Coming from a constructionist viewpoint, I understood that meaning and experience are socially and politically produced and reproduced, rather than residing exclusively within the individual (Burr, 1995, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). By using an autoethnographic enquiry, I brought to the project my own construction (how I came to be me though my past and current experiences), as well as the neo-liberal system under which I live. The process examined what it was like for me as a trainee art therapist to study, work and live during a period of intense growth and change, while searching for strategies to look after myself throughout the process. This in turn reflected back upon the wider sociopolitical landscape in which we work as therapists.

I decided to include an arts-based enquiry in my methodology. This “can be defined as the creation of knowledge through visual means within a research perspective” (Sullivan, 2005, as cited in Kapitan, 2014, p.162), and I hoped it would bring a broadened, more intuitive understanding to what are complex and reticent concepts. My data collection involved four

bushwalks near my home in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, Australia, during the winter months of June and July 2016. Each walk lasted approximately two hours, during which time I would find somewhere suitable to make art, using methods similar to those used by land artist Andy Goldsworthy in the 1970s. By 1977–78, Goldsworthy had developed a method of working in the landscape using only materials available in the immediate location. He found that this way of working gave him the deepest understanding of the landscape and the materials in it (Tufnell, 2006). For the purposes of my study, I hoped that by emulating his art-making processes, such an embodied connection to the earth would begin to illuminate the restorative essences that are central to ecopsychology. In addition to recording my experiences in a journal, taking notice of thoughts, feelings and somatic sensations while walking through the bush, I documented the artworks with photography and video.

As I was both participant and researcher in this project, my own theoretical interests influenced what I was looking to identify, as well as driving an analytical interest in the deeply personal nature of what I had recorded. On analysis, each of the two main bodies of data (my journal entries and the artworks I had created) went through a similar process of ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I approached the artworks with an additional step, whereby I initially interviewed each of them: this involved looking at the structure, form, texture and colour. This was followed by a process of gazing at them to get an intuitive sense of the symbols and meanings that were present for me. I wrote down what I discovered, and added this to my journal entries; I then spent time reading and familiarising myself with the data and identifying preliminary codes. I grouped my findings into themes and sub-themes, which I named and defined. Throughout the process, I reviewed and adjusted codes and themes as necessary.

Being an autoethnographic study, there was no need for an ethics approval review, but considerations concerning the repercussions of the work – both on the environment and on me – were still an important part of its conception. My own personal therapy continued alongside the enquiry, to help process my experiences and

any potentially difficult material. In addition, it is worth observing that the direct engagement with the plants, animals, earth and sky that I was seeking is inherent in indigenous populations, who have no need for ecopsychology (Fisher, 2013). To them, the confinement of modern psychology to a strictly human terrain could seem strange. It is important to remember that ecopsychology is the product of a Western mind, and I tried to “guard against becoming part of the historical process of colonising and appropriating indigenous cultures that today includes the plundering of traditional spiritualities by Euroamerican seekers or new age wannabes” (Fisher, 2013, p.5). The method of using only found objects to create my artworks, without any damage to the bush, was central to the whole process, and I remained mindful of being a visitor in country and acknowledging the traditional owners of the land.

Findings

Touching the earth

I ride the roller coaster
Up and over an eternal grindstone
Time keeps evaporating
Lost in perpetual committal

Slamming the door
I race for the hills
Craving sequestration
I navigate an alternate route

Adventure mounts
Transformed into an explorer
Memories of childhood
Flitting through my mind

Passing through a portal
I access a contrasting world
Reassured once more
Observing my original self

A breeze crescendo
Caressing through the stillness
Massaging the Eucalypts
Adding layers to the calm

Breathless from climbing
I respect my beating heart
Remembering my tired body
Promising kindness to myself

Then a gust roars
I'm back in the present
Senses alert and receptive
The air smells so fresh

Lying on the forest floor
Sadness creeps through
Mourning for so many losses
I cry for what humans have done

Losing my pencil
I write with the earth
Slower more considered
A new way of being

Searching for clarity
In a magical place
Inspiration ignites
From the environment itself

Touching earth with bare hands
Crawling on the floor
I feel grounded and released
A child again carefree

Absorbed in the process
Focused and calm
I create a momentary presence
A delicate memorial to the earth

This creature has a language
Meaning is instinctual
Gazing on its being
It whispers to the soul

On analysing the data, I identified a significant number of themes, which I grouped into main themes and a mind map (see Figure 1). The mind map shows how the themes interwove and related to each other, and identifies some of the sub-themes. The mind map seems to have the form of an embryo, or a seed pod, full of complex structures and potential, ready to evolve into a new life-form or awareness. I shall describe each of the main themes that was important to my understanding of the data. It is important to note that, as this was an autoethnographic study, the themes that I identified as being significant were dependent on my own personality, needs and experiences.

Solitude, privacy and exploration

I found the theme of solitude and a desire to get away from the haste of daily life to be a considerable driving force, in both the

There was a delicate and transient nature to each piece I created. Ultimately fragile and susceptible to the weather, they expressed a desire to build some level of order and tangibility out of a seemingly chaotic environment. Loose structures woven together to create something new pointed to a need to create differing layers of stability. To me this suggested the extended period of learning I was undertaking, where fledgling concepts and ways of thinking tentatively reached out to support each other in my mind, to create a discernible resource that I could draw from with confidence.

Figure 3 shows the piece I made during my second walk: an extremely fragile ring of leaves floating in the branches, embracing a bush that was barely alive. Leaves rest next to each other, supported on spindly branches. It tells me how ethereal and transient is our presence on the earth, and how we need to protect this balance. But it also shows how delicately fine-tuned are our relationships to each other, and how important they are in supporting us as social beings. Difficult to distinguish from the rest of the landscape, it honoured the environment as well as the process of self-care that I was undertaking.

The bush environment and mindfulness The bush itself and the effects of the weather featured heavily in the data, and were integral to the whole process. Upon entering that environment, I immediately noticed a different state of being. My senses were significantly heightened, particularly my hearing and sense of smell, leading to an alert yet calm awareness of my location. The movement of the wind in the trees, whether a gentle breeze or a sudden gust, constantly coaxed me out of my head and back to my heart and the environment in which I was situated. This effect of mindfulness of the moment was very soothing, and a relief from any stresses I had been feeling before the walk. During my third walk, this sense of connection created a space, which deep feelings of sadness filled, as I lamented the continuing degradation of our planet, and the resulting loss of species.

The artworks presented a level of insight and understanding outside the purely verbal. They enabled awareness of thoughts and states that are unconscious, abstract, and better articulated through metaphor. While on this walk I made



Figure 4. Martin Roberts, *Infinity*, 2016, eucalyptus leaves arranged on the bush floor, approximately 1000 × 400mm.



Figure 5. Martin Roberts, *Ceremony*, 2016, twigs and stones arranged on the bush floor, approx. 750mm diameter.

Infinity (Figure 4). Fallen leaves are arranged into what looks like a fossilised prehistoric creature resting on the forest floor. By looking through an eye with a different perspective, it brings to mind continuous cycles of life and death, and the infinite nature of the world in which we are placed. To me this artwork communicates a deep and unconscious understanding of all the elements that make up the entire universe and connect each of us to all other life and to the earth itself.

Spirituality

During my fourth and final walk, I revisited a track I had stumbled across during my second walk. It was rarely used and only navigable because someone had marked it with pink ribbons. This time, I ventured further than I had gone before and went deeper into the bush. The track went along the top of a ridge, and at the end was a small clearing before the bush dropped

down into a wide open valley. It was profoundly restful there; as I sat and took in the sights, smells and sounds while different birds came to enquire about me, I realised it held a spiritual significance.

The artwork I made in this place (see Figure 5) spoke to me of a place of gathering – somewhere that offered shelter from the elements and provided a formal space to honour our environment and us. This walk was the last of my data collection and a ceremonial essence marked the end of this stage of the project.

Discussion

Andrew and Krupka (2012) argue that, in the sociopolitical climate of our current times, the language and beliefs embedded in the concept of ‘self-care’ place responsibility onto the individual. The problems of capitalism and its creation of a consumer culture have been suspiciously avoided by psychology, due to its individualistic bias and nervousness about criticising a market-driven society (Fisher, 2013). Everyone is “tired... a bland catch-all, a personal-social summary of our physical, mental and spiritual existence” (p.42). In this fast-paced world, where there is so little time, even the creation of some space to practise the list of self-care strategies can add to the pressure that one is trying to relieve.

My schedule at the time of this study was extremely full, and I felt that my resistance to taking time out to practise the self-care strategy that I had conceived was born out of confusion generated from being stuck on the treadmill. The ease of communication arising from the advancement of smartphones, social media and other digital technologies adds a pressure to constantly respond in ever-shortening timeframes. This burden of endless commitments and a lack of time are not unusual, and have been frequently reported to me anecdotally by friends, family and colleagues. Along with the psychological effects of such technologies comes an auditory overload, intensified by the noise pollution of phones ringing, machines making noise, and traffic constantly roaring along our roads (Skovholt, 2001). Although quite a social person, I am nevertheless fairly introverted by nature. It is important for me to have periods of time alone, to recuperate and process whatever

may be going on in my life. However, a need “to nurture the solitary self” is especially important for all people working in the helping professions, because so much of their time is filled with intense interactions with people who need something (Skovholt, 2001, p.160). Spending time alone in the bush nourished that part of me that craves detachment. As long as a century ago, environmental philosopher John Muir said:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as fountains of life. (Muir, as cited in Louv, 2011, p.46)

Louv believes that when in nature we are self-medicating with nature tonic. In my study I was aiming to explore the essence of what makes up this ‘vitamin N’. The different perspective I adopted as soon as I entered the bush allowed me to focus on the moment. Humans are “made to fit a natural environment... When we are exposed to nature, our bodies go back to how they should be” (Miyazaki, as cited in Louv, 2011, p.51). Away from the safe, yet sterile, conveniences of modern life, I found that with heightened senses I was constantly scanning the bush environment with a vulnerability that can be felt only when closer to survival. This precipitated a lessening of preoccupations with inconsequential stresses on a cognitive level, to a much deeper sphere of instinct led by the heart.

The pillaging of natural resources needed for mass consumption is one of the factors responsible for our current environmental crisis, and the mourning of the resulting loss of species and green spaces has been anecdotally termed ‘ecological anxiety’ (Brymer et al, 2010, as cited in Greenleaf et al, 2014, p.168). During my third walk, this shift in state resulted in a profound sense of connection to the earth, and I wept for the deterioration of our environment caused by mankind. Existentialism examines our experience of being human and the universal questions we face, including life, death and how we relate to others (Iacovou & Weixel-Dixon, 2015, p.5). Our current collective relationship with the planet threatens our very survival, and an awareness

of the unconscious processes surrounding this underpins our work as therapists with clients, as well as our efforts to care for ourselves.

Adding the art-making process to this study enriched my interaction with nature. In searching out a suitable place to create my artworks, I embarked on journeys of exploration. Edith Cobb (as cited in Fisher, 2013) wrote that there is a time in “middle age childhood, approximately from five or six to eleven or twelve... when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of profound continuity with the natural processes” (p.144). This is a time when the child engages in free imagination and play and embarks on an exploration of the world full of discoveries.

Looking for private spaces away from possible interruption, down more secluded paths in the bush, I found myself transported back to previous, more innocent, times that were filled with joy and wonderment. Scrambling around on the ground looking for objects to use, picking up the earth and the leaves with my bare hands to build something new, I remembered making stews of mud, berries and rocks in the back garden with my brother when I was young. Begg (2014) too used her bare hands, to create yarn out of twisted grasses while making an effigy to memorialise her dead brother in the Great Sandy Desert. The closeness it instilled to the materials and environment offered her contentment and pleasure arising from the smells and feel of the grasses. As I touched the earth while creating my artworks, my feelings were of abandon and relief.

The artworks themselves spoke a language of their own. The metaphor and symbolism that were evoked upon gazing at them gave glimpses into a deeper understanding of unknown processes. Engaging in creative processes can be applied to making meaning in therapy. This process starts with a loose, open and unguarded phase that allows access to pre-verbal constructs (Harter, 2007). These constructs can then be refined and reviewed into tighter definitions of meaning. These constructs can be a valuable resource, as they are not limited to early childhood, because this construing happens throughout our lives and is part of the process of creating new meanings.

In the same way that it can help our clients, art can help us as therapists to understand concepts and thoughts that are difficult to grasp and articulate verbally. The artworks I made during this process of exploration in self-care remain present in my mind and body. Like a painting that hangs on the wall at home, the longer these works reside in my memory, the more different layers of meaning slowly reveal themselves to me.

Conclusion

I found my experiences of making art in the bush to be uplifting, and profoundly personal and spiritual. The landscape and solitude provided much-needed relief from the stresses and demands of studying, working and living in a hectic world. Touching the earth in this way brought me a level of connection to the landscape that I may not have achieved by merely walking in that environment, and I noticed a distinct lessening of cognitive stresses and a greater connection to my heart and soul. There was a regressive quality inherent in much of what I did, as I experienced a reconnection to the joy and imagination I had felt as a child. The artworks themselves facilitated a deeper, non-verbal insight, and left a lasting memory of each walk and what I had experienced, to hold on to after I returned home.

I have now come to the end of my current studies in becoming an art therapist, with my graduation this year marking the culmination of four years of intense learning and personal growth. As I move into this reflective and considered way of working with clients, I will draw upon these experiences in caring for myself. Indeed, participation in this type of activity would be beneficial to any therapist or healthcare professional. Although my findings revealed my need for solitude, meeting social needs could also be incorporated into this strategy. I would be interested to know what results a process like this would produce with a group of people, either as self-care and growth for therapists, or as a therapeutic intervention in its own right.

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