

quake destruction/arts creation: arts therapy and the canterbury earthquakes

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Abstract

As an arts therapist working in Christchurch, New Zealand, from 2010 my client body has consisted of those affected by the swarm of earthquakes that struck the Canterbury region. I explored my experiences as quake-arts therapist using arts-based autoethnography and was awarded a doctorate by Auckland University in 2016. In this summary, I demonstrate and present some core ideas about my arts-based a/r/tographic and arts therapy-informed research process. Following this, I outline seven core insights regarding the use of arts therapy and arts-based research that may have traction for others working within similarly unsettled contexts.

Keywords

Arts-based research, autoethnography, soul-based research, trauma, earthquakes, liminality.

I lie in the chill early hours, the darkness a crushing weight. Sweat-slick and tugging for breath, I desperately reach out past the fear. "Mum," I call to my dead mother. "Mum..." She (or my imagination of her) is quick to respond: "You weathered my cancer when you were a child, you survived the murder of your father and paralysis by gunshot of your brother, my death from cancer, your first husband's suicide, and you endured a swarm of earthquakes... but now you're responding to the public release of your PhD as if it's a life-threatening event!"

Her words sting, even though her tone is more curious than judging... "Distress is like that," I snap back, "it takes root in your body, creates deep grooves of patterned response..."

"I know," she cuts me off, "I'm a war survivor, among other traumas... And I walked beside and inside you as you created this thesis."

We both fall silent.

I notice how getting annoyed has shifted the fear from a sense of paralysis into something more usable. I check-in with my

senses – awakening and grounding my taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing in the now... before I drop-into this felt-sense of fear-fueled pissed-off-ness. At first it's swirling rotten-egg olive-tinged mist, but as I stay present and accepting, the fog thins and there...

("Oh so predictable..." whispers my dead mother over my metaphoric shoulder)

...is a scummy swamp-pond inhabited by my Crocodile. My age-old companion and symbol of chaos, calamity and fear-fueled contraction.

And yet...

I feel my mother smile as she interprets my fertile hesitation. "So," she says, "could this be you remembering you've carved out new, more life-affirming patterns as alternatives to the old trauma-riven ones? How about seeing the arrival of your reptilian-self as you inviting yourself to activate the same approach you used to craft this research from the chaos of your lived-experiences..." She looks about the cavern of my inner-self. "So, where are the rest of the Rogues' Gallery?" she asks fondly...

...and out of the mist saunter, dance, flutter and somersault the animangels that I crafted to companion me as I strove to make useful sens/e of my experiences as arts therapist during the Canterbury earthquakes. The Creative-Cat and the Controlling-Crocodile; my TeddyBear-Sage and Trickster-Magpie; the Threshold-Orphan and my Wild-Child – all creative embodiments of aspects of myself and my journey. Together we take our places at the Round Table within my soul where all shards of post-postmodern me, those in the light and those crafted from shadows, come present and converse.

Immediately, the cry goes up, “So what are you afraid of?”

“Umm... that I have revealed too much, that people will disagree or take offence or think me shallow/self-centred/silly... that what I thought was a multi-layered, complex, tangential research creation will be unveiled as a messy mockery.”

“Shhhh... breathe... you can only stand gently with your work,” soothes my dead mother. “First, create a container for this chaos...” So I inhale deeply and begin to identify the cornerstones I will lay to ground this summary of my entangled creation: my research context and focus; my research intention; my research approach; some thoughts about my structure and process; and the essence of what I learned.

I notice I’m breathing more easily...

“That’s my girl,” I hear my mother whisper...

So...

In 2010, while I was completing my clinical arts therapy qualification, earthquakes began striking my home province of Canterbury in New Zealand’s South Island. We endured four major quakes, countless aftershocks and – to this day – the seemingly unending, grinding aftermath of natural disaster. This cast many of us into a situation of enduring liminality. We became threshold people, living in twilight amid the ruins and road-cones as we awaited the rebuild. In this liminal situation, I offered arts therapy to my fellow quake-shaken Cantabrians. Between September 2010 and February 2014, I facilitated

group sessions with more than 300 school pupils and 80 adults, and worked in continuing one-on-one quake arts therapy with 70 clients between the ages of 5 and 75.

In doing this work, I faced several quandaries. My clients and I shared embodied knowledge of the quakes and for many of us, these distressing experiences re-opened older wounds. We thus required a therapy that acknowledged that I was both quake-survivor and beginning arts therapist providing trauma-therapy for fellow quake-survivors, that my clients and I were prey to multiple layers of old and new distress, that I was not distant and objective, and that there was no end in sight.

But I had not been trained to implement such a therapy.



Figure 1. Deborah Green, *Kite-in-the-rubble*, April 2011, pastel on paper, 500 mm × 300 mm.

My dilemma found expression in an artwork I created shortly after the most destructive quake of February 2011. This *Kite-in-the-rubble* image (Figure 1) symbolically anticipated the quest I embarked upon to craft an arts therapy that laced a linking string between my sense of being simultaneously tumbled in the rubble and hovering above like a kite.

This image again assumed a prominent role in 2013 when I embarked upon a doctoral research journey with the intention of making useful sens/e of these paradoxical experiences.

My intention to make-sens/e was not solely a scholastic activity. I disrupted and fragmented making-sens/e to reveal multiple meanings. I used my five physical senses to know things more fully in embodied ways. I befriended what Rappaport (2008) calls my implicit 'felt-sense' and evoked my sixth soul-sense. Drawing on Levine's (2009) use of the French word *sens* for direction, I embraced therapy and research as creating life-forward direction. And I used these sens/ual processes to make-meaning and render new knowledge. Through this enquiry I thus sought to understand how I, like the string linking kite and rubble, responded to the quakes as quake-survivor/therapist, and to identify some things that may be useful to others in similar situations.

For this multiplicit sens/e-making quest, traditional research methods felt inappropriate. I therefore embraced arts-based research, and engaged in what Chilton (2013) terms 'artistic behaviour' as a way to gain access to tacit material, such as our embodied quake-trauma and my intuitive therapeutic process. This involved using language, images, materials, situations, and space and time in multivocal and multi-layered ways to do what Sullivan (2006) describes as 'create and critique'.

Under this broad umbrella of arts-based research, I magpied and interlaced aspects of autoethnography, a/r/tography and arts therapy.

Autoethnography is the study of the culture-of-self, or of others through self. I took up Richardson's (2013) call to reflexively explore myself and my practice through a postmodern lens that views truth and reality as local, shifting and co-constructed. This opened the way for my fractured multiplicit sense-of-self to find expression through Denzin's (2013) process of multi-voicing – hence the vociferous presence of my dead mother and animangels, my use of many arts modalities, and my continuing creative conversations with various theorists and their texts.

A/r/tography, pioneered by Springgay, Irwin and Wilson Kind (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008), engages in living inquiry by juxtaposing art-creation and writing in reflexive, challenging and dynamic ways. I borrowed the three focal areas of artist/researcher/teacher – the a/r/t of a/r/tography – and transposed 'therapist' for 'teacher'. I then construed these roles as

questions to orient my inquiry. As Artist, I wondered what art would emerge when I applied arts-based research to my quake experiences. As Researcher, I wondered what form of arts-based research would emerge if I married my preferred arts therapy processes with aspects of autoethnographic a/r/tography. As Therapist, I hoped to express useful arts-therapy-for-trauma practices that may have emerged from my quake experiences.

Arts therapist McNiff (1998) calls for **arts therapy** research to mirror the therapeutic and transformatory process of arts therapy itself. I thus applied my emergent quake-arts therapy practice of 'dropping-in' as a research process. 'Dropping-in-to-find-what-soul-is-doing' combines core principles and practices from Rappaport's (2008) focusing-orientated arts therapy, McNiff's (2004) images-as-angels, and Hillman's (1983) advice that our images reveal what our souls are doing.

I used 'dropping-in' as follows: I began with a rhizomatic review of my quake-client session-notes and artwork, and texts relating to arts-based research, trauma, trauma therapy and arts therapy. I noted emergent themes as I meandered. Then, I dropped-in to gain a deeper sens/e of the compelling themes. Dropping-in entails initial present-tense grounding in the physical senses, followed by gentle inward focus to locate where the theme in question resonates within the body. This felt-sense is accepted and befriended with curiosity and without judgement. It's invited to reveal itself fully, before being asked to propose a way it may be presented through art. Once a symbolic representation arrives, this is checked for fit against the original felt-sense. When this representation resonates, it's carried back out into the room through a process of reconnecting with the senses in the here-and-now. This representation is then externalised by making art. While creating, I engaged in active imagination-based dialogue, treating the artwork as an angel or messenger, usually evoking further creation as the conversation moved to-and-fro between my felt-sense, the artwork and my roles as artist/researcher/therapist. I was accompanied on these explorations by my animangels and my dead mother – creative devices designed to multi-voice and multi-layer my enquiry.



Figure 2. Deborah Green, *Vampy-Croc*, 2014, paper-clay and ash, height 50mm.

A core theme that arrived via this process provided me with the guiding metaphor for my research. When I dropped-in to my always-there felt-sense of in-betweenness, which had been amplified by the quakes, I discovered my Threshold-Orphan. This shard-of-self manifested as a small, motionless child-of-the-twilight. She led me to explore liminality, which evolved into my conception of enduring liminality as a primary lens through which to view the earthquakes and their aftermath. This liminal lens helped me understand our sense of being precariously suspended between a previous 'normal' and something yet to emerge – juxtaposed with our heightened feelings of community and the tingling frisson of new possibilities. According to Turner's (1970) ritual structure, it seems we were violently separated from the everyday, cast into ongoing liminal instability and transition, with no identifiable endpoint or reintegration back into 'normal'.

I used this ritual structure as a way to frame my final write-up. In phase one: Separation, I describe the earthquakes, before providing preparatory points of orientation. In phase two: Liminality, I use key features of liminality – drawn from Turner (1970) and Sibbett (Waller & Sibbett, 2008) – to provoke investigation of my quake-arts therapy practice. Here I explore:

- the betwixt and between of liminality as my central metaphor;
- my grapple with soul-healing as central to my quake-therapy;

- the liminal archetypes of neophyte, shaman and liminal monster as ways to articulate my position as neophyte/shaman and wounded/healer;
- the value of liminal playfulness in my quake-therapy;
- chaos and control in our quake context;
- liminal communitas as an emergent intent in my quake-practice.

In phase three: Reincorporation, I reconnect with the everyday, offer some summative comments, and invite intersubjective sens/e-making.

Now, having outlined the what, where, how and why of my research, I'm left with the query: So what has come of this?

Have I made sens/e of my quake-experiences? I answer with a qualified 'yes'. When nearing the end of my study, I noticed how my quake-work had inadvertently echoed emergent, mindfully-embodied strands in current arts- and trauma-therapy – such as Levine's (2009) work. These strands view chaos/suffering as intrinsic to the human condition, thus requiring a therapy grounded in presence and intersubjective relationship that invites newness and builds soul. I realised – to my distress – that, had I been able to identify and absorb the appropriate literature during the quakes, I would have arrived at this place-of-knowing more speedily and with fewer bumps. However, I simultaneously concluded – to my delight – that via personal experience of wounding, healing and hands-on implementation of therapy for others suffering, I had fumbled my own way to these knowings; I've lived these in my bones, and their sens/e comes from a deep place of personal engagement.

Is this sens/e that I have made, useful for others? Again, I respond with a qualified 'yes'. Seven key concepts and practices feel as if they ascend from the rubble to propose tentative new insights – potentially offering other applied arts-based practitioners new, fruitful terrain for play:

1. I conceptualised post-disaster as **enduring liminality**. In this framing, the therapist's role is to companion clients as they learn to endure and even – to quote Levine (2009) – play in the ruins of this liminality. Setting aside notions of cure, together therapist and client craft bespoke ways to become flexible and limber enough

to ride the liminal seesaw of ongoing disaster-induced instability (as well as other forms of instability that may accompany the liminality of everyday life...).

2. I articulated the post-postmodern 'more-than' that lay at the heart of my quake-arts therapy. I named this way of being and working, '**both-and-and...**' This stance invites multiplicity, mystery, newness, and soul-as-one-and-many into the processes of art-making, research and therapy. It recognises that the outcome cannot be known in advance and this encourages the therapist to slide aside armouring formulas and models and become present to whatever may arrive. The therapist avoids translating complex processes and imagery into simplistic this-means-that rationalisations. She embodies the transitional by straddling dualities and opening these both-ands to the extra-*and...* of soul. And she befriends all by calling into the shadows, being patient, and accepting even the most prickly and poisonous parts of herself and her clients. In this way, she courts transformative newness. This orientation can, however, produce a vertiginous excess, calling for mindful containment... suggesting a new direction for further research.

3. I've claimed and reframed the wounded/healer archetype. I discovered all-of-me is communicating, often unconsciously, with clients in myriad tacit ways. It is therefore crucial that therapists accept and know their own wounding and healing. A therapist's continued ability to creatively be with her own hurt enables her to hold the space for clients to do the same. And her simultaneous continuing engagement with her own healing salvages this often-lost aspect of the archetype, foregrounding ways she may embody wellness for her clients.

4. My practice of what I call **magical play** came into focus when I interlaced ideas about playfulness, active imagination, poiesis and mindful flow. This mindful-playfulness emerged as especially suited to the chaos of enduring liminality, as it helps clients to stay with formlessness until new order emerges. Magical play invites clients to experience various manifestations of play by interlinking calm-mindfulness with energetic-playfulness. This facilitates flexibility, increasing the client's nimble-limberness and ability to remain supple

in the face of forces that may induce unhelpful contraction and/or dispersal.

5. My grapple with **chaos and control** lurches throughout my art, research and therapeutic practice. In confronting my own will-to-power, I experienced how new ways-of-being that are better suited to the chaos of disaster and distress cannot be imposed, but rather need to emerge from the formlessness. Clients often cannot initially tolerate chaotic formlessness in productive ways and the therapist plays a key role in helping her client embrace this by establishing a containing relationship. She then enables clients to engage with arts-making and media across the spectrum, from chaotically messy to easily controlled. This helps clients explore, and increase their endurance of feelings evoked by the chaos/control paradox. Within this, the therapist is mindful of ways in which her own anxiety could prematurely foreclose this containing transitional space and the arts-processes.

6. My study recognised the therapeutic value of liminal *communitas* – in groups, between client and therapist, and between the internal alters within the individual. The intensified relational pleasure of dyadic *communitas* between client and therapist encourages them to stay with chaos until new order emerges. It may also create the grounding for **internal communitas**. This desirable state of heightened inner-acceptance and inclusiveness invites all shards and splinters of self to be present and welcomed, and thus expresses the post-postmodern soul at its zenith.

7. And finally, an innovative, arts-based research method arose when I interlaced aspects of a/r/tography, autoethnography and arts therapy. During this inquiry, my quake-arts therapy process of 'dropping-in-to-find-what-soul-is-doing' emerged as a robust and intricately-detailed mode of data gathering, generation, amplification and analysis. I thus propose that this eclectically-derived arts therapy-based process of dropping-in is a compelling way to make art, a powerful quake-trauma arts therapy process, and a practical research tool. And, by emphasising the arts as expressing a mystery, this opens arts-based research further to the deliciously juicy but nettlesome notion of **soul-based research**.



Figure 3. Deborah Green, *HeARTful-me*, February 2011, photograph.

We – my motley crew of imaginal animangels, the shade of my dead mother, and I – emerge tattily triumphant from this attempt to summarise into an itty-bitty article my PhD of 95,000+ words and 80+ images.

We breathe...

“But,” says my dead mother, “it still needs something...” And thus I turn to pondering the core value of this research escapade. For me, it’s been personally harrowing, illuminating, frustrating, and ultimately deeply enriching. As artist/researcher/therapist I’ve come to my sens/es and made sen/se-able my quake experiences. But for other arts therapists...?

We hover in itchy silence.

My TeddyBear-Sage finally speaks up: “Remember your beloved philosophy professor, who stated: ‘If you can’t summarise it on a postcard, it won’t have traction for others?’”

So, we prick our ears, bristle our tails and give it a go:

By using creative, self-focused research (soul-based research) to explore my tacit quake-experiences, I point to several practices useful for arts therapy in situations of continuing instability (enduring liminality). By becoming mindfully present to her own wounding

and healing (wounded/healer), the therapist may use an open, present-focused playfulness (imaginal play) and an inclusive, multiplicit view of soul (both-and-and...) to companion clients as, together, they creatively cultivate vital engagement with the contradictions of chaos and control. This helps both therapist and client nurture a flexible, cohesive sens/e of internal connectivity and acceptance (internal communitas) – a soul in full communion with the fragments of itself manifests the highest embodiment of soul-healing, it is limber and buoyant, can endure and self-acclimatise, and it can call “Yes!” to life.

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