

Finding hope and freedom in lockdown: A therapeutic photo-journal

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Abstract

This article presents a photo-journal of an art therapist. It illustrates the power of photography, through imagery and metaphor to illuminate the unconscious thoughts and emotions that preoccupied the author during the Covid-19 lockdown in Singapore in 2020. Through a symbolic language of associative images catalysed by the photographs, the author began a dialogue with her unconscious through reflection and expressive writing. The photo-journaling involved both visual and verbal forms, and enabled an honest exploration of difficult emotions, including feelings of anxiety, helplessness and despair. Using photo-journaling to make meaning, the author gained increased self-understanding, clarity of thought, and integration, leading to enhanced emotional well-being and resiliency.

Keywords

Art therapy, photography, visual journaling, creative writing.

Introduction

A simple photograph can help us learn about the secrets that we keep, and the messages we wish to express. Every photograph has the potential to hold a dialogue with our unconscious mind, carrying deep meaning (Rutherford, 2002). Why did we take the photograph? What feelings did it evoke? Photography provides a safe way of expressing emotions and ideas through symbolic associations.

In my search for meaning and emotional expression during the Covid-19-induced nationwide lockdown in Singapore, I found instant photographs taken on my regular walks to be therapeutic, helping me cope with the ambiguity of living in times of a pandemic. Singapore, being one of the most densely populated countries in the world, became unrecognisable overnight with the lockdown, which lasted two months, between 7 April and 1 June 2020. City streets that used to host 5.9 million people were emptied overnight. People who lived in close proximity became fearful of one another as infection and death rates began to rise rapidly. The unfamiliar silence and stillness sent a chill around a once proud, vibrant, global financial hub, now suddenly deflated of life and deserted, with abandoned buildings. As I started taking photographs of the changing

landscape, the spontaneity of framing images using my mobile phone brought me a sense of coherence and control over my environment, even a sense of playfulness. It took me momentarily away from feelings of emptiness, of being lost in a world plagued by grave uncertainty. Each photographic image held rich metaphors and symbols from my unconscious mind, waiting to be uncovered (Weiser, 2004).

As my photography proliferated, I started writing an expressive journal to explore the stories hidden in the images (Rutherford, 2002). Exploring the images brought me on a journey of self-discovery. Journaling also served as a form of containment, as uncomfortable thoughts and feelings could be held safely in images and words (Hieb, 2005). The active dialoguing – negotiation through reflection – brought lucidity of thought, and a greater understanding of the emotions I was experiencing throughout the lockdown (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). The photo-journal combined both visual and verbal expression, creating bridges between my thoughts, emotions, intuition and actions (Beaumont, 2018). Stories catalysed through the photographic images were vivid, as writing allowed thoughts and feelings to be expressed more fully (Kopytin, 2004). Below are selected journal entries created between April and May 2020.

Photo-journal entries



Figure 1. Li June Han, *Shadows*, digital photograph.

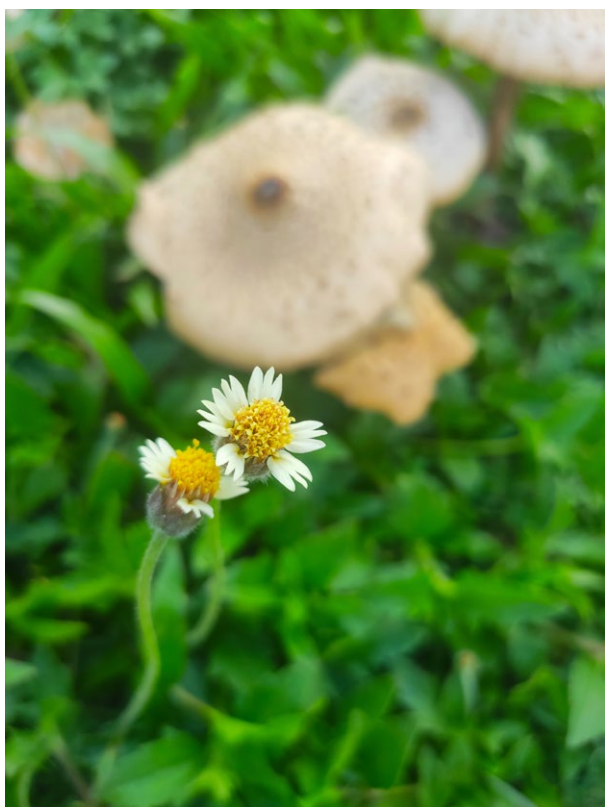


Figure 2. Li June Han, *Fragile*, digital photograph.

Sun amidst shadows

9 April 2020

It was sunset, and I was intrigued by the long shadows that were cast on the side of a deserted building. My own shadows were cast alongside the surrounding trees. Looking at the scene, I was immediately overwhelmed by the impending long period of social isolation that was coming with the lockdown, like the looming long shadows before me. Would this be a period without light, and of unknown lurking shadows? As the sun shone ever more piercingly into the horizon, it seemed so luminescent and ever so cheerful. Light pervaded the space around me, warmth emanated from within, and my sense of hope was restored as I snapped this picture. As the sun sets every day, surely it will rise again. (Figure 1)

Of mushrooms and wildflowers

11 April 2020

I was running past a forested area early one morning, and spotted a litter of mushrooms that had sprung up overnight after the night rain. Each mushroom was large and sturdy, though I knew they would perish shortly in the sun. The fragility of the mushrooms and surrounding wildflowers arrested me. They were so beautiful, yet transient and dependent on nature. Humans, too, are fragile and dependent. Living in a modern and technology-driven world, I often forget this frailty. When I shared this photograph with a friend, she said she saw two imperfect flowers leaning on each other for strength. For me, this photograph brought hope of abundance, life and renewal. For as the smallest and weakest can survive in harsh rain, sun and wind, so will I, the mere human. (Figure 2)

The blues before the light

18 April 2020

As the Covid-19 infection rates continued to climb, the situation seemed to grow dimmer each day. The first thing that captured my attention when I emerged from home before dawn was the darkness and stillness of the place. It was eerily quiet and solemn on the streets, with no one in sight, and no cars. My heavy heart loomed, and despair foreshadowed my gloomy perception. The sky was an abyss of midnight blue. As I walked further along, I was unexpectedly met by the unfolding dawn. Suddenly the darkness



Figure 3. Li June Han, *Blue*, digital photograph.

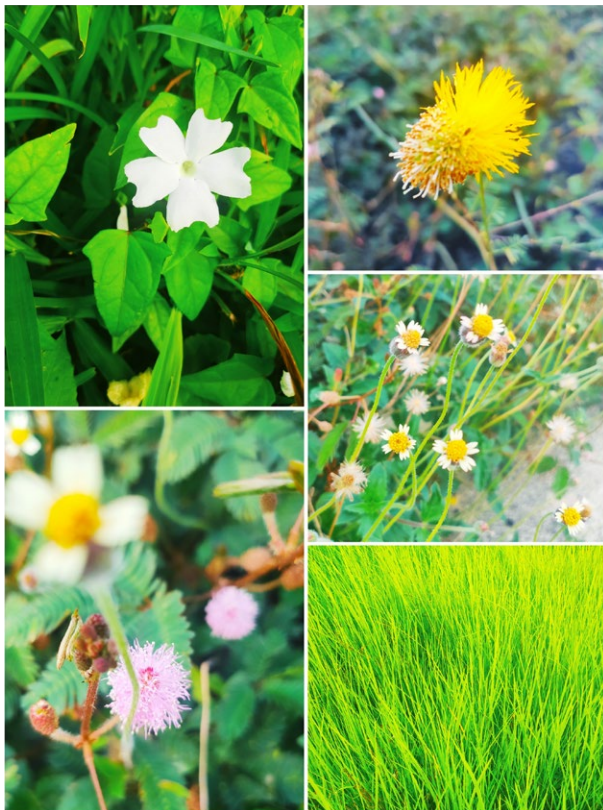


Figure 4. Li June Han, *Wild*, digital photographs.



Figure 5. Li June Han, *New dawn*, digital photograph.

began to fade, turning gradually from midnight blue to navy, then ocean, and finally to azure. I felt my feelings of heaviness lift with the sunlight that was brightening the skies. The blues may be overpowering, but so is sunlight when it breaks through the darkest night. (Figure 3)

Stories in grass and weeds

23 April 2020

The lockdown has been extended for another month. It was hard to describe the suffocating dread of anticipating more confinement. This morning I was fascinated by the mess of grass and weeds overtaking the pavements. Maybe they would take over the roads by the end of lockdown. The weeds were unwieldy and messy, but I took pleasure in being entangled in their midst, with buzzing bees and flies, looking for flowers. It was hard to get a good angle, but I persisted. I realised that the physicality of untangling weeds freed me emotionally and mentally from my feelings of entrapment. The more overwhelming the bees, flies and tall grasses, the greater the reward in finding the hidden gems. Finding these gems helped me locate the elusive peace that I dearly needed amidst my chaotic spirit. (Figure 4)

Touché

25 April 2020

I was rather exhausted by dismal events related to the pandemic, including news of job retrenchments from close friends, reminding me of the gravity of the lockdown globally. When life catches me at vulnerable moments, I can choose to avoid, to fret, or to accept. However, accepting change, even when necessary, can be painful. I was taken by this road sign as the sun was rising rapidly behind it, bringing it to my attention. It seemed like a new dawn illuminating a bewildering signage. I saw the converging arrows urging me to look inside. I heard: "Touché, mankind has been outwitted this time! Humans need to face the hard consequences of their actions!" From history, I have learnt that the greatest triumphs and innovations of humans are often preceded by failures, including periods of degradation and strife. However, humiliating defeats often fuel the resolve for a defiant comeback. Come back I must, with greater force and stinging bite! I must triumph over this temporary setback. (Figure 5)



Figure 6. Li June Han, *Space*, digital photographs.

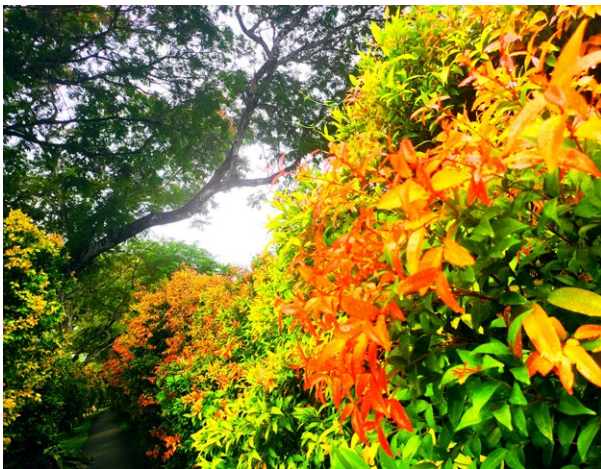


Figure 7. Li June Han, *Lush*, digital photograph.

Earth

29 April 2020

The sky was overcast at dawn, but, as daylight broke, blue skies emerged. The clouds scattered in the blue that painted the horizon, forming dreamlike patterns. I felt temporarily transported into space, wondering if these shades of blue and white were what astronauts saw when they looked at Earth from space. Astronauts often described seeing the blue Earth from space as a life-transforming experience, suspended miraculously in the deep universe – so fragile, yet teeming with life. This reverie gave meaning to the astronauts' arduous expeditions. This was in great contrast to the barren and desolate streets I saw before me as we entered the second month of the lockdown. Smells of decay and dereliction on this Earth felt so real in my spirit, but what a difference looking up made to perspectives. An overwhelming feeling of freedom swept over me as I looked up – a vision of liberation so precious in these times. (Figure 6)

Confetti after the rain

1 May 2020

The rains came in the evening, and continued overnight, stretching into the next morning. Sheets of rain pelted down, accompanied by rolling thunder. Like the heavens opened and tears fell in one long, gushing wail. How apt. I felt camaraderie in this wailing, as I had gnawing pangs of uncertainty waiting to be expelled. It felt like the wailing rain sloshed out the gritty and painful bits lodged in deep recesses within me. When the rain finally stopped, I sensed my heart skip and I burst out of the house. The sky was dreary, grey and overcast, with dark rainclouds still hanging. Leaves, twigs, branches displaced from the thunderstorm were splayed on the roads – just like the fragmented mess I was inside. Amidst the jungle, dark green accentuated and heavy with rain, orange and red leaves leapt out at me from a long row of hedges. It felt like a scene from a welcome party, decorations lining the streets, waiting for a celebration to begin on the first day of May. I felt fleeting joy as I walked through these hedges, lined with the confetti of colourful leaves. I was done with the wailing. Let the celebration come, soon! (Figure 7)



Figure 8. Li June Han, *Safety in two*, digital photograph.

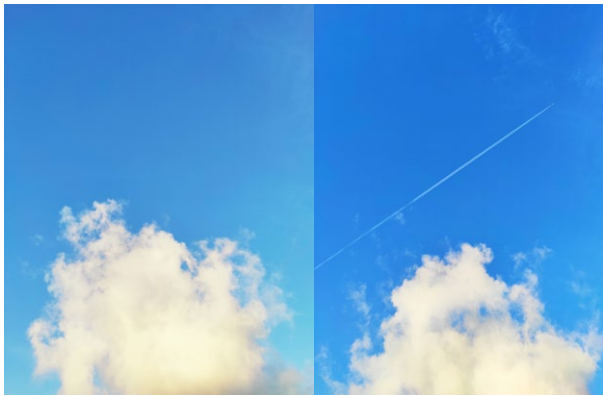


Figure 9. Li June Han, *White plumes*, digital photographs.



Figure 10. Li June Han, *Tall grass*, digital photograph.

Lean in!

3 May 2020

There has been a profusion of heavy rain and hence proliferation of mushrooms. I encountered a giant couplet (each as large as my hands) on my walk today. A rare sight in built-up Singapore. Mushrooms break down dead matter, recycle, and give birth to new nutrients. Given the increase in natural dead matter accumulating from lockdown, un-swept, I guess the mushrooms must be busy: busy contributing to their environment. They stand out starkly, like umbrellas of shelter and safety in the green of competing weeds that feed off the fats of the ground. I hope I am one of these mushrooms, as opposed to weeds in this lockdown – still working, providing nurturance, supporting others, and not exploiting the situation for personal gain. It is tempting to collapse in a heap and be emotionally and physically self-indulgent. I shall be reminded of my larger purpose and need for perseverance by these humble little umbrellas in the wild, braving the forces of nature so courageously. (Figure 8)

Writing in the clouds

7 May 2020

The sky has become bluer and clouds fuller since the pollution levels plummeted over the lockdown period. I was intrigued by the balloons of clouds billowing on the horizon. I imagined shaping them with my hands and blowing to scatter them. Just then, a plane flew across the distance, sputtering out white plumes, making a bleached line as it tracked across the sky. It was magical to watch this unexpected aerial performance – where I was likely the only audience. If one could write with clouds like ink in the sky, how fantastic that would be! What would I announce to the world? Perhaps my rising determination to be an artist-art therapist. At that moment I was filled with gratitude to be beholding a scene painted in cerulean, stretching as far as my eyes could see. The author of nature was clearly at work. I felt hope well up from within my spirit, just like the clouds floating up and away. (Figure 9)

Date with little things

9 May 2020

Walking through long grasses in an open field filled with wildflowers can be romantic, even when you are on your own. The act of cavorting with nature's abundance and being embraced seemed alluring.



Figure 11. Li June Han, *Blue & pink*, digital photograph.



Figure 12. Li June Han, *Oncoming*, digital photograph.

It is hence gratifying to see grass grow taller with the weeks. When the wind blows, the tall grasses sway in unison. Though, unlike the fields in temperate countries, these tropical grasses harbour many flies and other insects. One should certainly not be walking in their midst. Despite this, I remain captivated by the uplifting sea of chartreuse that is organically enlarging, covering over concrete. There is simple beauty in the tall grasses dancing elegantly, making whistling sounds as the breeze runs through them. Such a picture of life in tranquillity. I sense this tranquillity in myself too, being in resonance now with the plain rhythm of ordinary living. Being in love with what each day brings, especially the little things. (Figure 10)

Is the end near?

11 May 2020

There were three more weeks to go before the end of lockdown. For the first time, it seemed the end could be near. The colourful skies appeared to echo the quiet optimism that I was harbouring. Pink symbolises nurturance, giving and compassion. That the heavens would embrace our groans and sketch the colour of love and understanding in the skies. I will certainly miss these peaceful lockdown days, but look forward to what is in store when life resumes once again. I hope it will be irrevocably changed for the better after this episode – with a touch of balance and appreciation for the finer and quieter things in life. (Figure 11)

What's coming?

15 May 2020

I have grown to love walking on roads without looking out for cars. But today I was alarmed by an arrow sign on the road indicating oncoming traffic. My subconscious has perhaps started worrying about what is coming when lockdown ends. I have been experiencing anxiety about readapting. Our body and mind are made to cope with change and new routines. However, in this crisis, uncertainty has been the distinguishing feature. This is foreign to humans, who seek constancy and security. How do I find predictability in flux? Perhaps I can draw some lessons from walking. Though the body is constantly ambulating, the regularity of the gait makes walking relaxing. This is unlike being still in a moving car, where you are anticipating but not participating in the journey. When walking, we have control over

where, how fast we want to go, even if the world is zipping past at dizzying speeds. Metaphorically, I suppose I must continue my walking with the even pace that I have developed over these weeks. In walking at my own pace, I keep constancy despite motion, a useful armour against a world that keeps changing. (Figure 12)



Figure 13. Li June Han, *Green*, digital photographs.

The verdant soul

21 May 2020

The lockdown necessitated longer walks to get away from crowds, to the cradle of forested areas. Seeing nature undisrupted by humans, and flourishing, has catalysed a parallel process of blossoming in my soul. Witnessing the cycle of growth, death, decay and rejuvenation in nature reminds me of the immutable power of life. Humans were originally part of this same ecological world. Like my nature counterparts, I possess the innate resources to heal and grow. Grappling with the upheaval in the world has consumed and depleted all my energies. Nature recharges me and revives my body's ability to heal itself. In crisis, they say, there are opportunities, sometimes right under your nose. My unexpected relationship with nature was a surprise gain in these difficult times. My troubled soul was pleasantly fed and nourished by much-needed green. (Figure 13)

Conclusion

Walking and photo-journaling have been tremendously therapeutic, helping me cope during the lockdown period. Solnit (2014) writes that walking helps us traverse the complex landscapes in our minds, ironing out thoughts with every step we take. Photographing images along the way served to call out signposts, bringing to my consciousness the salient knots that ail the unconscious mind (Weiser, 2004). At different stages of the lockdown, the photographic images and stories highlighted unique messages from my unconscious realm. From sketches of nervous anticipation developed an awareness of human frailty, growing into projections of anxiety, helplessness and despair as the crisis deepened. At the lowest point, rain became a strong metaphor. Rain was evocative of an emotional cleansing and renewal. Thereafter, I began to look deeper into myself, drawing on strengths such as optimism and perseverance to find hope. As emotional resilience grew, the imagery began to reveal my aspirations for the future despite being trapped in a time-lock due to the pandemic.

The photo-journal has become a visual documentation of an inner growth journey, linking the varied fragments of thoughts and emotions collected over time into a more coherent narrative (Riley, 1997). A consistent dialogue with art and writing has enabled the release and transformation of difficult emotions, helping to resolve inner unrest, calling them out and redirecting energies towards larger meaning and purpose (Beaumont, 2018). As I approached the end of lockdown, I became more in touch with my original aspirations, spirituality and enhanced sense of self. The power of reflection and imagination has been crucial in challenging my perceptions, bringing the conscious and unconscious, dreaming and reality all together. This convergence brought meaning and caused my soul to stretch and blossom with hope. Photographs not only show where we have come from but also foretell where we could be headed (Weiser, 2004). I look forward to a more balanced approach to living after lockdown, one that prioritises time for regular contemplation and rejuvenation. I have learnt that visual journaling or photo-journaling can be a powerful form of self-care (Gibson, 2018), especially for art therapists, as it leads to a feeding of the mind, heart and soul, preparing us to be the best that we can be for our clients.

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