

Day in, day out: A contemplation of daily practice

Bettina Evans, Deborah Green, Kathrin Marks, Hilary Tapper

Abstract

The impetus for this article was born out of the joy and gratification the first-named author experiences when engaging in her daily practice of journalling through drawing. This led to an invitation to three other arts therapists/arts therapy lecturers to write about their experience of daily practice. Their writing and art forms the heart of the article, around which themes of self-care, mindfulness and ritual are explored. The daily practice of each author was based on a different modality, yet all agreed on the personal, professional and therapeutic usefulness of being involved in a daily practice.

Keywords

Daily practice, self-care, mindfulness, ritual, multi-modal practices

Bettina Evans

It is evening and I sit in front of my sketchbook, thinking about the afternoon I spent in the garden, about the seeds I sowed in little pottles. I can still feel the tiny, dull specks dropping from my fingers into the soil, which will eventually grow into lettuces, sunflowers, tomatoes. I pick up my pens and start drawing seeds. I draw them much larger than their true size and give them vibrant colours – pink, lilac, orange – to express their potential. My hand moves rhythmically across the page as I fill in the spaces around their shapes, my eyes enjoying the colours growing on the page. Each seed starts to glow as it becomes surrounded by earthen hues. I give each seed a white halo, sketch in energy lines pulsing around them. I look out of the window into the darkening night. I draw the first leaves sprouting above the soil, light beams shooting into the sky celebrating the power of seeds, celebrating life and growth.



Figure 1. Bettina Evans, *The power of seeds*, 2022, ink on paper, 195 × 195mm. Collection of the artist.

I had always wanted to be one of those people able to greet the day through a sunrise meditation or chanting, but always had trouble with daily practice (DP). Over the years I had tried different practices. I love nature so I thought a daily nature observation would work – it did not. I work as a lecturer in creative arts therapy (CAT), so I hoped an artistic endeavour such as clay work or stitching would engage me. As a person who loves movement, I thought yoga might be it. But every attempt at a new practice petered out after a week or two. I was not alone in finding it difficult to establish a DP; psychologist Eric Maisel (2019) lists a variety of reasons why people do not continue with their DP: busyness, lack of time, distractions, high expectations and lack of motivation.

I finally found a practice last year which not only suited me but also enriched my life. This made me curious about whether my colleagues at Whitecliffe College, Aotearoa New Zealand, had similar troubles and/or similar practices. To my delight, the three CAT lecturers I asked were happy to share with me their DPs – activities they had developed based on their needs and personalities, encompassing dance, yoga/gratefulness, and walking. Each of our DPs are simple, and need minimal materials or preparation, which helps the practitioners stick to the practice (Maisel, 2020a). The DPs described below vary from a few minutes to longer than an hour and are practised at different times of the day. Three of us practise alone, one with a companion.

The differences between those DPs are obvious, but I was interested to see what characteristics the practices had in common as well as how they relate to our profession as CATs and CAT lecturers. At the heart of this article lie the written accounts of my co-authors as they speak more deeply and authentically to the power of DP than any of the sparse academic articles about DP I have found.

I refer to myself and my three CAT colleagues when I use the pronouns ‘we/us/our’ in my writing below. Other arts therapists may have different experiences when engaging with DPs. I also decided, in agreement with my co-authors, to use their first names, deviating from the academic norm of using last names. The use of first names expresses more accurately the personal nature of the practices described, as well as the relationships we share with each other.

Eberhard’s and Atkins’ definition aligns well with the ways we practise, suggesting that DP is an activity “done on more days than not”, allowing “some gentleness... while still supporting the importance of a regular ritual and grounding practice” (2014, p.80). Maisel (2020b) talks about time carved out from each day where we pay real attention, as opposed to daily habits where the main purpose is relaxation or entertainment, such as a cup of coffee in the morning, or watching Netflix at night. Hyland Moon writes in the same vein about “looking for poetic possibilities in everyday objects and occurrences” (2008, p.51). Each DP encompasses elements of mindfulness, which Kabat-Zinn (2017) describes as follows: “We practice through relating to the environment and self by paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment in a non-judgemental way”. Aspects of this are alive in Deborah’s description of her DP:

Deborah Green

It began over three years ago when difficult times arrived in our home. I realised I could only continue to hold space and provide compassionate steadying if I cared for the me that was doing the holding. The resulting practice came together quickly from activities and knowings that I had gleaned from my dissertation and PhD. This ritual rooted deeply in my soul and every morning since then I have stepped into this calming and gathering space. Most of the time I’m in my own home looking through the windows at Mt Herbert rising across the water from the caldera that forms Lyttelton Harbour. But even while travelling for work or holidaying, I have carried this practice into these different spaces. At its birth, it held me as we wrestled monsters in the shadows. Once the light began to return, I leaned into this daily ritual to replenish, nourish and ready me for my creative therapeutic work with clients, students, supervisees and colleagues and for my playtime climbing, biking and paragliding.

In the early morning, in my living room, I begin by standing in mountain pose, eyes gazing out to the hills, taking three deep breaths. On each inhale I raise my arms and I feel my spine crackle open. I then roll down and hang, heavy, feeling my spine further unravel. I move into a simple sun salutation, including downward-facing dog, stepping into warrior, revolved side angle, bent triangle and tree pose.

Then I orientate towards the day to come. I begin with those no longer in the flesh. Breathing in and out I raise and lower my arms and greet and thank my mother and my father. Another breath, I thank my first husband and my beloved cat, Sebastian. Hands together down my centreline, I call to all the lovely humans and critters who have shared and shaped my life and then I stand for a moment feeling the presence of

my ancestors warm and firm at my back. Breathing in I raise my arms again and orientate towards myself. Setting intentions, I touch my steepled hands to my forehead calling for clear thinking, my eyes for clear seeing, my lips and ears for clear speaking and hearing. I drop to my heart and soul calling for creativity, imagination, wonder, whimsy, magic, mayhem. My hands move to my belly calling for clarity and purpose of spirit. Raising my arms in a final deep breath I call to mind others sharing this living experience. Sometimes I single out a specific few and hold them a little longer. I then expand to the more-than-human, imagining mycelia/tentacles/cobwebs rhizoming out and connecting me with all. I breathe golden light out into these entanglements with the world and then draw golden light from the world back into my being. I finish with my hands cupped over my beating heart, as my gaze rests on the water and the hills.

I read back over this description and feel a nipping cramp at how serene it all sounds. And yes, sometimes I swim smoothly through, flow-state arriving and buoying me along. But mostly, I wrangle, reminding my reluctant and petulant self that I always feel better afterwards. My mind skitters every which way. Sometimes I don't feel grateful. Sometimes I'm acutely aware of how I failed each and every one, a tangy guilt permeating my practice. Other times I feel resentful, flooded by the harms they've caused me. Sometimes I have little gold to share and the gesture on my outbreath is tight. I hold all these wayward sensations gently and do it all anyway. And each day I emerge grateful, a little more limber, a little more connected inwardly and outwardly.



Figure 2. Deborah Green, *Harbour views*, various dates, digital photographic collage. Collection of the artist.

A common theme in all four descriptions of DPs is the element of self-care, of creating a calm and gathering place. As I write the word ‘self-care’ I realise that I often shy away from using the term, as nowadays it is often associated with consumerism, used to entice people to buy bath-bombs and manicures, advocating retail ‘therapy’ as self-care.

I became curious about the history of the word and what I found cast the concept of self-care in very different light: the first person to popularise the word was Black American writer and activist Audre Lorde, in her 1988 book of essays *A Burst of Light*. She describes using self-care as a way of coping with her cancer, but also to cope with the structural trauma of racism as a Black woman: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988, as cited in Porteous-Sebouhian, 2021).

Lorde, a queer feminist and community activist, was aware of the limitations of self-care. She knew that care needs to flow in many directions – from self to self, from self to friends and family, into the wider community, and, importantly, care needs to also flow back to self again from the community, creating a circle of care (Porteous-Sebouhian, 2021). Her message holds true even more so in our age of individualism.

Even though Deborah, Hilary and I conduct our DPs alone, ‘the other’ is always present: for Hilary through the immersion into the living world; for Deborah through communing with ancestors, the living and more than human; and for me the inspiration for drawing comes from the beings I share my life with. Kathrin’s practice is done in community with one other:

Kathrin Marks

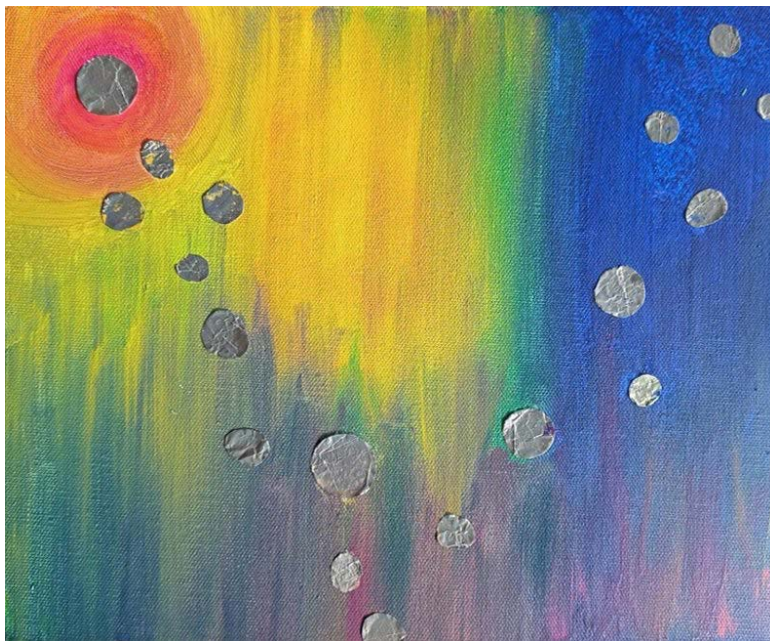


Figure 3. Kathrin Marks, *Untitled*, 2021, acrylics and paper on canvas, 300 × 250mm. Collection of the artist.

*Colours joining on the canvas,
Green mountains
leaning against a blue-violet ocean
Gold held by yellow
Reflective circles
Inviting
A pause
A breath
Amidst the up and down of life*

I come to

feel

I come to

be

I come to

rest

Looking at the canvas in front of me, I am amazed. My partner and I created this artwork while listening to some of our favourite 6.30 dance o'clock tunes. We playfully moved the paint to the rhythms of glorious artists such as Harry Belafonte, MEUTE, Marina Satti, Baaba Maal, Fat Freddy's Drop, Iggy Pop, and Darude. We didn't have a plan, we dived right in, choosing colours at random, adding and blending, leaning into the poetic unfolding. We stopped here and there when the music cheekily beckoned us to move our bodies rather than the paint brush for a moment, inviting us to connect with our physical selves, our senses, each other. Contemplating the artwork, I see what 6.30 dance o'clock feels like for me: playful moments at the end of the day, acknowledging dark and light, and gifting pauses to feel and be. I see the dancing, the connection, the magic – the artwork reflects it back to me.

6.30 dance o'clock started in our whare, our house, on 15 August 2021, two days before Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland went into a 107-day lockdown.

107 days of *staying home, sheltering in place.*

In our whare, this meant...

107 days of dancing before dinner for our 6.30 dance o'clock, to just one song.

107 days of welcoming all our feelings and shaking off the day.

107 days of connecting with ourselves and with each other.

107 days of dancing, at times experiencing moments of rest and at other times being gifted fresh energy after a long day.

While daily practices have never come easily to me, 6.30 dance o'clock feels somehow different. Pondering why that might be, I reflect that both my partner and I are committed to it. We take turns choosing songs, surprising each other with something that might gift us just what we need that particular day. We have had sad-exhausting days where all we could muster was lying on the floor, letting our hands and arms do the dancing to a slow piece of music. We have had challenging days where we released our angry-hot energy by dancing to fast tunes, stomping and jumping, smiling and connecting. We have had great days where we found the most ridiculous songs, laughing while engaging in silly movements and for a moment forgetting about the crazy world out there.



Figure 4. Kathrin Marks, *Untitled*, 2022, photographs. Collection of the artist.

Some nights, we don't dance. And we are gentle with ourselves when that happens, knowing that that's OK. 6.30 dance o'clock is still a/our (almost) daily practice. It is our moment for stopping and breathing, for being with our bodies and with whatever we might be carrying or whatever we might seek to let go of. It gifts us with connection to ourselves and each other.

All four of us engage with these practices in our private spheres, away from our work as CATs and CAT lecturers. Traditionally, the dominant paradigm in psychology is to create and maintain a strict boundary between the personal and the professional realm, whereas in the arts therapies work and life often complement and enhance each other (Hyland Moon, 2008). The work of CATs means engaging with intra/interpersonal relationships, connecting authentically to the world and ourselves through making art. Ideally this extends beyond the studio or classroom (Hyland Moon, 2008). We expect our students in the postgraduate CAT

diploma and Master's programmes to keep a creative/reflexive journal throughout their three years of study. Our own engagement with the DPs, which includes struggles and challenges, creates a realistic model for the students, allowing for brokenness as well as joy and beauty.

DPs are teachers. Each practice throws a beam of light on a small part of self: comfortable places and uncomfortable places, hidden places, places we know well. Aristotle's three ways of knowing are *theoria* (knowing by observing), *praxis* (knowing by doing/acting) and *poiesis* (knowing by making) (Levine & Levine, 2017). Our DPs include those different ways of knowing, and through these we deepen our understanding of self. Each of the practices engages the body and the senses: Deborah's through movement and breath, Kathrin's through dancing, and mine through immersion in colour and form. Hilary's DP leads her into the living world:

Hilary Tapper

Sand between our toenails, salt on our hot cheeks, our squeals eclipsed by roaring waves: this was how we started the day, this was how we ended the day. I grew up walking along the edge of the Pacific Ocean, with my mum, dad, brother and sister. Walking together as a family was perhaps the closest thing to tradition and ritual in my childhood; we walked every day, often twice a day. Sundays were extra special because we'd sometimes walk the whole day. This rhythm, of walking into each day, and walking out of each day, walking into and out of the week, hand-in-hand with the ocean, mountains, rolling hills, starry skies, forests and gardens, has become a daily practice gifted by my parents, which maintains me still to this day.

My work resides within the arts, and these creative endeavours offer endless experiences of timelessness, immersion, passion, and flow, and as such, I increasingly find myself dependent on walking as a daily practice. Walking every day offers all those nourishing aspects which neuroscience does so well at evidencing – rhythmic breath, moving in the body, exercise – all helping to regulate my nervous system, process the day's work, and preparing me for what is next to come. But the treasures and gifts of this daily practice are not limited to my nervous system alone. From the perspective of creative arts therapy, the arts can be powerful tools for helping to regulate our nervous systems and self-soothing. The possibilities and offerings of creative arts therapy, however, are not limited to the causal workings of our neural pathways. In creative arts therapy, we also have the generative act of the arts, the material manifestations and externalised movements of imagination, and the coming-into-being of what was perhaps previously dormant. My current daily walk involves a placing of one foot in front of the other, swinging my arms, and breathing into my body for a good hour, but I am also walking in(to) relationship with the world around me.

My daily walk takes me to the base of the foothills near my home. It involves an initial twenty minutes of weaving through Christchurch suburban streets before I arrive at the base. For twenty minutes I am in great anticipation before I finally arrive to what (or who) has come to increasingly feel like a refuge, and a friend. The Port Hills in Christchurch are magnificent,

rolling bosomous beasts. I've felt at home here because of their presence. Every day I walk to greet them, be held by their presence, and let my spirit take off in their long golden grasses and dark pine forests. This ritual is not merely a fulfilment of a recommended daily exercise regime, but also a living relationship to a place that ever resides on the horizon – visible from the driveway of my home, and from the window at my work. I watch those hills in the burning sun, in the flat grey, in the wet and the wind, at dawn and at dusk. My daily practice of walking keeps my nervous system moving – breathing, exercising – and, furthermore, gifts me with a sense of embodied belonging, imaginative inspiration, and kinship.



Figure 5. Hilary Tapper, *Golden rolling plain*, 2020, digital photograph. Collection of the artist.

Our DPs share aspects of the ritual format: the threefold phases of preparation, immersion and re-integration. The preparation and re-integration/closing phase for our DPs is similar each time, providing a containing frame: preparing by choosing music for the daily dance or finishing my drawing by closing my sketchbook, putting the pen back into the pouch and clearing the physical space. The immersion phase is always different, sometimes unpredictably so, which means each DP stays fresh and alive through the change in weather, movement, music, mood and image, opening the possibility to new and different experiences and expressions.

Ritual helps me to find my place again and again in the wider context of the world (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). Being a CAT and a citizen of this world, it is easy to become lost, harried, stressed, disillusioned, and tired; the ritual space of the DP provides a helpful boundary, gifting both generative and restorative possibilities (Levine & Levine, 2017). DPs, like CATs, share the same focus on process rather than on outcome, there is no rush towards a goal or a push to make meaning of the experience. DP is an embodied, expressive response to all that is alive around us and within us, each day re-created anew.

Bettina Evans

Last year I felt that my life was running away from me: days, weeks and even whole months hurtling past, my life being subsumed by my work. When I looked back over those 'lost' days they seemed to form one homogenous mass, with little to set them apart from each other. This fast passage of time frightened and depressed me, and I desperately wanted to find a way to 'slow down time'. In the summer holidays I took part in a short online course in 'journaling through drawing' and now, over a year later, I am still engaged with this practice.

From the very first day I loved everything about this process – buying special brush pens and a notebook felt like a gift to myself. I sewed a pouch to keep the precious pens together. Every night when I unroll the pouch on the coffee table and open my book on a new page, I get a little thrill of excitement in anticipation of what will arise. I choose a colour, uncap the pen and a little bit of my day flows onto the page. Sometimes a few words arrive too, but mostly the image is enough. During the day I often leave the book open on my desk, so the presence of the art radiates through my life until I start on the next drawing.

I live in a beautiful place, situated between the hills and the sea, so just looking out of the window, or going for a walk provides me with plenty of aesthetically beautiful things worth drawing. However, I found quickly that the most meaningful drawings were the ones which expressed some of the emotions I had felt on that day. Now I walk through my day guided by a physical sense, a sensation in my gut. I know an experience resonates with me when I feel this tug, which translates into those joys or sorrows flowing into my drawing.

Since having taken up this practice, I have become more aware of the shape of my day, of the different objects in my house, the seasonal changes of plants in my garden, landscapes and beings I meet in my day, light and shadows, colours and scents. I can walk through the last year by leafing through my sketch books. The simple drawings viscerally take me back to the day when I created them. I love every image, be it sparse, crooked, bland or glorious. Each is important to me, as I took the time to sit down and illuminate a moment in my life.

I spend a lot of my day on a laptop, and when I finish with work in the afternoon I need some physical activity like walking, gardening or yoga to fully inhabit my physical body again. In the quiet and darkening of the evening I feel able to slow down again. Drawing before going to bed gives me the opportunity to close my day gently. The disadvantage of making art in the evening is that I am sometimes too tired to engage with it – but the book and the pens lying on my desk are patient, quietly waiting for me to pick them up again another night.

One of the teaching resources we use in our postgraduate diploma in CAT and in our Master's programme at Whitecliffe is the emergent CAT net. The threads of the net are presence, poiesis, process, partnership, pixelation and playfulness, all signifying the orientations and activities we consider integral to an effective CA engagement. Each of the DPs described above connect with those threads to differing degrees. At the heart of all the

DPs, as at the heart of CAT, lies a deepening of poietic presence and an awareness of importance of process. The only ‘end products’ of any of the DPs are the images created by my journaling, yet the value of those images lies not so much in their physicality, as in their ability to connect me to the flow of my days and the emotions I experience. Each image is a pixel. Alone each of them may be ‘out of focus’, but together they form part of the greater whole of my life. This is mirrored in CAT practice where we have to be able to look close in as well as zoom out, to be able to concentrate on small, intimate moments and details as well as appreciate the wider arc of a client’s or student’s journey.

Partnership – the ability to connect to another, be it to a client, art materials, the environment or different parts of the self – is a core principle in CAT and in DP. Becoming attuned to ‘the other’ through DP continues to hone the crucial sensitivity a CAT needs. Playfulness is most obviously displayed in Kathrin’s photo of herself and her partner dancing enthusiastically. However, when the definition of playfulness is widened to include passion, pleasure, humour and delight, then each of the other DPs can be included too. The CAT all of us are engaging in is one suffused with playfulness. Malchiodi (2020) states that “an ability to play, whether with music and sound, movement, enactment or art materials, is at the core of self-expression” (p.293).

The last addition to our CAT net has been the word and concept of ‘punga’, the Māori word for anchor. This was gifted to us by Heleina Waimoana Dalton, our Pou Atawhai/Cultural Sensitivities advisor. Heleina introduced us to a cast she created from an ancient punga as well as to the different uses Māori had for punga: they were used to stabilise a waka boat in rough seas and to let a waka drift slowly when harvesting/fishing (Waimoana Dalton, 2022). As CAT practitioners we are tasked with being flexible, responsive and able to face complex and complicated situations with equanimity. The engagement with DPs can function as a punga in of our lives, sometimes to help us find a calm moment in a busy day, sometimes to help us harvest treasure.



Figures clockwise from top left:

Figure 6: Bettina Evans, *Despair*, 2022, ink on paper, 195 × 195mm.

Figure 7: Bettina Evans, *At one, floating. Motu-kauati-iti Corsair Bay*, 2023, watercolour on paper, 195 × 195mm.

Figure 8: Bettina Evans, *Monochrome, Tapuaeharuru Evans Pass*, 2022, ink on paper, 195 × 195mm.

Figure 9: Bettina Evans, *Freedom Tauhinu Korokio Mt. Pleasant*, 2022, ink on paper, 195 × 195mm.

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Bettina is a Whitecliffe Christchurch PGDip CAT coordinator, supervisor and lecturer. She came to arts therapy after working as teacher and community facilitator. Before this she trained and worked as a gardener and her experience of the healing effect of nature on herself and others has influenced her practice as a CAT.

Deborah Green

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Deborah is Head of School and Research Coordinator for the School of Creative Arts Therapies (SoCATs), Whitecliffe, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her academic/practitioner career encompasses educational/community theatre, adult education, community development, lifeskills/AIDS education and counselling (South Africa 1990–2004), and creative arts therapy (CAT) (New Zealand 2006–) including gaining a doctorate using a/r/tography to explore her practice during the Canterbury earthquakes. A passionate therapist, educator and arts-based researcher, she has published and presented in several international journals/books and at several conferences/symposia.

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Kathrin is the coordinator of the PGDip CAT at Whitecliffe in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland as well as working for Hospice West Auckland as a CAT, both in a part-time capacity. Kathrin approaches arts, therapy, and teaching with a combination of curiosity and serious playfulness.

Hilary Tapper

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Hilary is the year coordinator Year 2 of the Masters of Arts in CAT (Clinical)(MA CAT) at Whitecliffe and also works in private practice. Additionally, Hilary illustrates for picture books and is ever-dwelling in the philosophical realms of the arts, therapy, religion and yoga.



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