



Report: Exeter Arts and Therapies Conference (EATc): 'Nature and Nurture'

This seventh of our annual conferences convened at a new venue: Stoodleigh Court, near Tiverton in Devon. A trip to the country fitted the theme!

EATc events have always aimed to bring a focus onto the relationships and areas between art, creativity, mental health, wellbeing and therapy. This theme brought out creative responses to fundamental questions in all these areas: to what extent are we who we were born, (genetics and chemicals), and to what extent are we who we have become in adapting to a particular environment? What is the balance between choice and acceptance? As people, what is our relationship to the 'natural world'? What is our own 'nature'?

The chair used metaphor throughout the day to explore the theme. He began with that of acorns which can only grow into oaks, but the kind of oak may well be very different if the acorn were to fall on Dartmoor as opposed to in Sherwood Forest.

We had a total of 65 participants, amongst their number artists, arts therapists, doctors, counsellors, students, mental health and children's workers..... the range of diversity and common ground that we hope for, and

that facilitates the cross currents of the event. One of our few disappointments of the day was that this time, unlike previous events, we didn't have service users attending. We wondered if the change in venue had had an effect on this.

The opening speaker, Peter Randall Page, delighted and amazed with his sculptural work. This work embodies the aspect of human nature that is pattern seeking and meaning making, and its relationship to the evolved patterning, and randomness, of the natural world. From the work that one may joyfully stumble on along Devon paths, to the truly monumental pieces like the Eden Project 'Core', where the work of artist and architect have become a seamless whole, Peter provided an exemplarily emotionally, aesthetically and psychologically informed opening.



Carol Harvey & Peter Randall Page

Carol Harvey's work is intimately scaled: her photographic portraits of childhood 'familiar': those sources of comfort and adventure, the teddy bear, related directly to some of the themes of psychotherapy, and she used some psychotherapy concepts to explore it. The work itself was hung in the main conference room for the day, and attracted a lot of quiet looking.

Maggie Crosby and her team at 'Subtext' work in a different world to leafy Devon. Through literature forms, from poetry and play writing to rap, 'Subtext' engages the young people of the East End of London with creative articulation, with some stunning results.



Liz Sanders & Maggie Crosbie

Joyce Laing, a pioneer art therapist, once commented that 'Vandalism is the art of the dispossessed', and this work seemed to allow transforming experiences of the energy and frustration that underlie youth violence. Young people speaking in the film Maggie showed were in no doubt that it had been a life changing experience. This was arts practice at a definitively 'sharp end'.

Our first three, arts based, presentations ranged then from the visionary scale of the Eden Project's 'Core', to the intimacy of relationship and imagination in childhood, to the rap being mightier than the knife. If ever there was demonstration of the interwoven nature of the arts, society and personal and collective change, this was it.



John Wright, as a psychotherapist, had some hard acts to follow, but did so splendidly with his vivid account of work with a young racist. The animation of the clinical vignettes of this young man's journey from experiencing the other as hateful to recognising the conflicts as being rooted in his relationship with himself, was courageous and moving.

John Wright

For those unfamiliar with how psychotherapy works, it was in itself a primer of key concepts and practice. Here, the creativity was in the dance of therapeutic relationship, and the outcome as transformative as the work of the artists. It was journey from 'inner terrorism' to self acceptance, and acceptance of difference.

The last session was with Martin Whitley. Martin is a falconer. His relationship with these wildest of wild creatures embodied, before our eyes, the intimate interrelatedness of humans, nature and human nature. Martin has, literally, taught an owl to fly. His relationship with his incredibly beautiful birds held not only an aesthetic, but so much about attachment, relationship, learning

and the adaptability of nature. It was perfect full circle: from Peter Randall Page's literal 'setting in stone' of pattern and meaning, here the patterns were flight paths: utterly in the moment.



Martin Whitley & Merlin*



Audience participation: Becky Shaw

From a possibly foolhardy premise, that working with mental health as a discipline both has understandings to offer, and things to learn, from fields as diverse as sculpture and falconry the day successfully illuminated these connections from many angles. The event feedback confirmed that participants left excited, motivated, stimulated, and in a few instances very helpfully puzzled, with new questions raised.

Art therapy is an exemplar of working 'between the worlds'. By not having an art therapy presentation as such, but chairing the day from an art therapy perspective, we hoped to paradoxically embody something of where art therapy itself often sits: frequently invisible, but holding a basket full of the threads that connect.

The meaning of an event like this is never in the day itself: it is on whether it achieves a ripple effect. We are confident that the ripples from this seventh conference are still moving outwards, and changing thinking and practice in the invisibly connected communities of art and mental health practice.

Malcolm Learmonth, Conference Chair.

Snapshots from the day



Entrance to Stoodleigh Court



Bookshop browsers



Sara Hurley (organiser) & Debbie Manson



Sian Hutchinson



Our youngest delegate with Mum, Deborah Bailey



Another EATC pudding!



Jess Tomlinson & Jenny Fell



Ann Cullum



James Stracey Smyth



Malcolm Learmonth & Martin Whitley



Malcolm Learmonth: Chair



Karen Huckvale (organiser)**

(All photos by Karen Huckvale except * Juliet Prentice & **Carol Harvey)