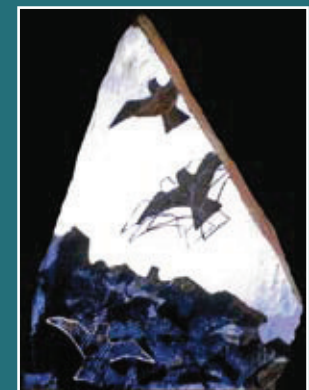


# Beyond the Storms



Reflections on Personal Recovery in Devon



# Recovery and Creativity

Malcolm Learmonth

*Stone made for the mountain path, but never sited. Given to a friend who had helped. Slate, screen print and acrylic, 1984*

When it comes to the human conditions of love and loss, attachment and distress, madness, sadness and gladness, there is no 'them' or 'us'. No-one gets immunity from feelings, no-one 'owns' distress, or joy. A 'mental health problem' is usually an extreme expression of some aspect of the human condition. 'Madness' may be more a measure of what the people around you won't put up with than anything else!

Neither the mental health workers, nor the people who talk to them, are a 'them' when it comes to delight, despair, and Bad Things Happening. Some of 'us' undoubtedly have a **lot** worse occurrences than others. I can't, thank goodness, compare my experience with the trauma I know many people have survived. Yet being a mental health worker doesn't get us off the hook either.

In Greek mythology, the patron of healing is Chiron the centaur. His human half is a wise, knowledgeable healer but his horse half is wounded and kept hidden from sight in the cave he consults from. Chiron is a 'wounded healer'. His wounded-ness is inseparable from capacity to heal.

The desire, and hopefully the ability, to work with wounds, and their survive-ability, is often rooted in the worker's own story. Like Chiron, the worker's wounds are not usually for display. If workers disconnect from their share of 'wounds', from experiences of Extreme Human Conditions, (EHC) bad things can happen. If 'mental health problems' only belong to a 'them', unhelpful things have tended to happen to 'them' such as: over medication, institutionalisation, de-personalisation and more. And the workers, as an 'us', have different difficulties like: being frightened by distress and disturbance; failing to sort out our own issues; being bad at our jobs, burning out, and so on.

If a mental health problem comes to define a person's identity, to themselves, the people near them, and their workers does that mean the worker in turn becomes a 'them', who doesn't understand or know what helps?

In this account I'm trying to bridge that gap. I'm saying we are all like Chiron, most of us wounded, most of us healers. The painter Braques said, " 'Art' is a wound turned to light". As an artist, an art psychotherapist, and a person with a pretty normal dose of 'EHC' I believe it can be.

Every life has deficits, and losses. Many have real cruelties and traumas. Perhaps if things don't fail a bit, we can't grow up, but if they totally fail we can't either.

While 'everybody hurts', my hurts were comparatively minor cuts and bruises rather than broken limbs: a displaced nomadic childhood..., Calvinist pleasure-hating cultural shadows..., family secrets.... I could go on....

I painted and drew intensively as a child. None of this survives: there's a family tradition of destroying artwork. My grandfather's 19th century glass plate photographs were smashed to make hardcore for a new cellar floor; my father's paintings were mostly burned by his mother, as was everything I did before the age of 20 by mine.

There is one photograph, taken by my brother, of my long drawing of a battle on Hadrian's Wall. I'm holding it up so the wall and battle, is right across my chest. I'm about 8. There was already a kind of war going on in me.

About 15 years later I was walking down my street, distressed and exhausted. I caught my reflection in a shop window and quite clearly saw the skull inside my head. I mean **saw**. It felt like the pavement turned to ice beneath my feet and I was skidding...

This drawing from the time tells it pretty much like it was.



*Slipping Glimpse. Indian Ink, 1982*

It was the time of the Falklands War. I couldn't tell the difference between the war 'outside' where an antiquated ship sailing away from the war zone has just been torpedoed by 'Our Boys' drowning 323 men, the war in my head, the war in my marriage and in my art-making. I was buying several copies of the papers every day. 'GOTCHA!!' said the headline.

I drew a drowning man over the front page, copied it, and fly-posted this alternative news across town. I kept up a running commentary right through the war. But which war? During the Falkland's this whole country seemed mad to me. Which made it hard to tell if the madness was mine or not. Art making does tend to join up the inside with the outside. This isn't always good.

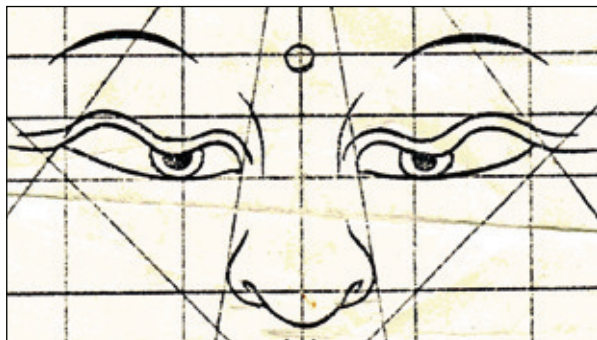
My wife was emotionally unwell. I had two young children, very little money, we were homeless, (six temporary accommodations over the second pregnancy) I was completing an 'Art and Design in Social Contexts' course, and I wasn't feeling that well myself. I was breaking up.

For about 6 months from that point I should certainly have activated 'The Services', had I come to their attention. I am profoundly grateful to the friends and family who gave enough sanctuary to make that unnecessary.

It's often thought that 'art therapy' is necessarily and always 'cathartic'. It's all about 'Getting It Out' and expressing your anger etc. Sometimes though, it's just the opposite: a safe place. One of the things that has kept me, just about, sane was Tibetan Buddhist Thangka painting.

It is a meticulous discipline. Buddha's left eyebrow goes exactly 'so'. This isn't just a precise mark, it's not technical drawing, it's precise grace and feel, too. The teacher takes your painfully clumsy

eyebrow, and with one sable line of red Indian Ink, shows you it right. Off you go and try again. 'Cathartic' it wasn't. Ordering and calming, it certainly was.



*Buddha's eyes: Drawing template*

Since that time, I have been intimate with depression, suicide, bereavement, an eating disorder, drug and alcohol problems, psychosis, sectioning and Alzheimer's in my closest friends and family. At several points I've been a carer too. When you're carrying the label, the role, of mental health professional, one's own wounds are usually, and appropriately out of sight, like Chiron's. That doesn't mean they're not there, just that it's not usually helpful to share them overtly.

I experienced serious depression again in the mid 90's, and resorted to an SSRI anti-depressant. It worked for me, not because a medication can cure sick souls, put right mistakes or solve a difficulty in living, but because it can buy you time and energy to tackle the problem.

I have been to the borders of depression since. If necessary I self medicate with homeopathic remedies. But mostly when the signs of depression start I check out these possibilities:

It's winter:

I'm overworking:

I'm not being creative enough:

I'm not getting enough exercise:

I'm not getting enough nature:

I've lost something or someone:

It's an anniversary of something sad:

People have let me down:

I'm taking life and myself too seriously!

Then I try and correct, or at least acknowledge, one or more factors. Some factors aren't correctable, and have to be grown through. Carl Jung said, 'Problems are not solved they are outgrown'. Sorrows and losses aren't illnesses. Sometimes they even help us taste life more sweetly.

So what's all this to do with 'Recovery'? Well, from the viewpoint of the kind of art therapy I trained in and love, the recovery principles are mostly what I call 'SOBOs' - Statements of the Bleeding Obvious, which sometimes makes it really important to spell them out, especially when they have seemingly not been obvious in large areas of the mental health system.

The arts have a survival value. They are one of the few tools we have to work with our vulnerability to malignant sadness and madness. Even more importantly, because images can 'mean' many things simultaneously they help us to explore the paradoxes and ambivalences that run right through our emotional lives.

The myth about art therapists delivering single, simple 'interpretations' about images to their makers is nonsense, at least in my practice! Most feelings are mixed feelings. Words tend to go in straight lines: images enfold, unwrap, digress, and walk





*One stone from the mountain path: because it was in Wales, it is bi-lingual.*

around their subject. They open new feelings, possibilities, and understandings.

The act of making shows us that we are autonomous, choice making creative beings. And that feels good. The creative process makes suffering meaningful. And perhaps it is meaninglessness that makes us saddest and maddest of all.

When I broke down in 1982, I had at least in part painted my way into cracking up. By tackling war, injustice, homelessness visually in the way I was, while deep in my own distress, I was digging myself an ever deeper depressive hole. And I had to 'art' my way out again too. Much of the following year was spent working with what heals me most: art making in the mountains.

I made a path with words and images printed, carved and painted on local slate up a remote hill in North Wales. A stone circle on the summit was orientated to the Spring equinox sunrise, and amazingly, worked. A great thing about being an artist, or an art student, is that you can do out of the ordinary things, without being seen as mad. The whole work was destroyed by someone within weeks because, I later learnt, it was suspected of being Magic. In a way it was. The living effect of the art-making upon me was not destructible though. I literally gave a physical and symbolic form to a journey from the dark valley up to a sunrise. I came back to life in the process.

In this process, I had also, partially unknowingly, embarked on the journey to becoming a therapist. Out of inner necessity, I'd invented a kind of art therapy. It was a joyful discovery that this approach was known, understood, and could be learned about.

The learning itself, when I got there a few years later, was an initiation. (I was honest about my own mental health, and wisely

advised by the college to give myself another year's recovery time). 'Terror', it has been said, 'is the essence of true initiation'. Working intensively with the issues of psychotherapy and image making is guaranteed to reach deep into one's own, and other people's, distress, understanding, creativity and resilience. Now being in personal therapy is mandatory for trainees, for good reasons.

Practitioners need to understand the destructiveness of vicariously working out our own woundedness on others. Understanding the potential vulnerability of being a 'client' and our own motivations for wanting to 'help' are also critical. Then, therapy wasn't mandatory, and I couldn't have afforded it if it had been. But as soon as I was working I embarked on what turned out to be six years of art therapy and Jungian analysis, with a wise and compassionate man: one of the originators of art therapy in the 1950s.

Towards the end of this work, I had several important dreams: in one of which I met Chiron.

*It was the Second World War, and the air defence of Malta. The Fascists were coming. There were only three, antiquated aircraft left. (This much is pretty much historically accurate). We couldn't get them into the air. I had to consult the centaur. I went to see him, with my dog. My dog had to go into the cave, and lick his wound clean. Understandably, he didn't want to, but did. Chiron told me that 'the air was too heavy' over the airfield. We had to fly the planes **off a cliff** to drop them under, then round, the 'heavy air'. The dream ended as I flew the first plane into this insane gamble. It worked.*

I don't want to 'interpret' this dream, any more than I 'interpret' other people's paintings. But in turning its multiple meanings of woundedness, healing, kindness and fighting back, risk, vulnerability

and resilience around in my mind, my therapist was able to point out that the real planes on Malta were called 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity' (the latter from 'Caritas' meaning 'Love for all people'.)



*Getting Air-born. Graphite and mixed media, 1992*

That's 20 years ago now. I have worked with many people in art therapy; often the abused, the traumatised, the marginalised and the silenced. When we talk about 'Recovery' it can be easy to slip into glibness about just what people

are recovering **from**. Hurts, fears, sorrows, angers, oppressions, discriminations, neglects, distresses and disturbances are real, and have real causes.

Yet it is still the creative resourcefulness of us human creatures that moves and amazes me most. I have continued to make art: for me it is a condition of wellness that I do. Most recently, art making has been at the heart of how I've been recovering, from being present at the (awful) death of my father. I'm also getting help: I'm not afraid of 'taking my own medicine' on the counselling front as well as the art one when necessary.

'Recovery' isn't about everything coming up rainbows and daisies. The best definition of 'health' I know is this one:

Health is 'a process of adaptation. ... to changing environments, to growing up and aging, to healing when damaged, to suffering and to the peaceful expectation of death. Health embraces the future as well, **and therefore includes anguish and the inner resources to deal with it.**' (Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine*, Marion Boyars publishers, London, 1976, p 273.)

This 'recovery story' is also a mini 'personal art history'. Birds have appeared, been trapped, flown, danced and parted throughout my art and recovery story. I'd like to finish with three of them. The first goes back to my most disintegrated phase in the 1980's. The title is from Blake.



*'How can a bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?' Acrylic, 1983*



*Stone made for the mountain path, but never sited. Given to a friend who had helped. Slate, screen print and acrylic, 1984*



*Parting Dance. Found objects and digital photograph, 2009*