

# What's the Story?

The Sixth Exeter Arts & Therapies Conference, Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2007

## Conference Report

This conference was sponsored by Insider Art and The Self Heal Association.

The EATc events aim to open up dialogues across the neighbouring 'worlds' of health, mental health, the arts, psychotherapy and the arts therapies. Among the 80 participants at 'What's the Story' were: psychologists and trainee psychologists, art therapists and trainee art therapists, researchers, lecturers, support workers, drama therapists and drama therapy trainees, music therapists, service users, a priest, artists, art students, community artists, psychotherapists, mental health workers, counsellors, creative writers and writers in residence, storytellers and filmmakers.

Among the groups that participants identified themselves as working with and/ or belonging too were: offenders, vulnerable prisoners, and ex offenders, bereaved children, special needs, autism and learning disabilities, people with brain injuries, survivors of torture, adult mental health, the elderly, disaffected young people, foster carers, service users, carers, student counselling, survivors of abuse, acute psychiatry, dementia.

With the range of creative approaches gathered together including story making, print making, painting, music, drama, glass painting, textiles, ceramics and sculpture, story telling, story making, film, we feel that the extent of both 'crossover' the events aim for was achieved, and that with the range of professionals, trainees and service users present, the event should have a real 'ripple effect', both into healthcare and engaged arts practice.

The speakers, without exception, delivered stimulating, thought provoking, and often moving perspectives on the why narrative and story making are at the heart of both creativity and mental health.

Michael Edwards brought his unparalleled range of experience as one of the originators of British art therapy, and as Jungian analyst to identifying why, as he put it in the title of his presentation, we need to see 'The image as its own best explanation'. (Michael's notes are generously available from 'Conference Downloads' below). Susie Needham, whose stunning photogram work was also exhibited as part of the event, gave an account of the personal and creative process that led her to them. More of Susie's work can be found at <http://www.pencilofnature.co.uk/>



'Infanta': Photogram, Susie Needham. Copyright Susie Needham.

Mark Hayward spoke hugely engagingly about his work with narrative as a psychotherapist. He generously shared his 'tips for externalising' as an approach to helping people to dis identify from and create new perspectives on troubling areas of their lives. Mark's notes on 'Externalising and Exceptions' are downloadable below.

Caspar Walsh brought his own experience of offending and the criminal justice system in to a sharp focus on his work with prisoners, most movingly his work with creating stories from imprisoned fathers to their children. Caspar's leaflet is downloadable form the 'Conference Downloads' below.

A splendid lunch was helped down with the musical condiments from South West 'So What', (<http://www.sowhatjazzcool.co.uk>), who were, like all the contributors and organisers, offering their skills for little or no reward. As the Chair said in his summing up, the day was proof that 'paying peanuts didn't *always* mean that you got monkeys'.

Pauline McGee brought from Scotland her passionate commitment to working with survivors of abuse, and more than that, by sharing her own extraordinary paintings, nailed the myth that artists somehow cease to be artists if they study psychotherapy. On this showing, they can become better artists. Her paper, and, with great generosity, her extraordinary images, are available below.

<http://www.insiderart.org.uk/UserFiles/Pauline%20McGee.%20Time.%20place%20form%20and%20space.doc>  
<http://www.paulinemcgee.com>



Dreaming I Was Drowning. 1987. Oil Pastel and Gouache. 30cm x 25cm.

Copyright Pauline McGee

The conference chair's job was made easier by the clear threads that ran through all the presentations and art work. The thread being that, as the neurologist Oliver Sacks put it, *'each of us is a biography, a story, a singular narrative constructed continually, unconsciously, by through and in us...'*. The arts and psychotherapy revolve around this premise. The implications for mental health are clear: creativity and meaning-making, and therefore the arts therapies, should be near the heart of preventive, treatment and recovery aspects of services.

Carole Pembroke, a former Chair of the British Association of Art Therapists, agreed to be our 'mystery shopper' for the day, and to start the process of drawing out the 'Conference Findings' with the participants, which she did beautifully with her personal responses to all we had seen and heard. Carole's observations are downloadable below.



*Presenters at 'What's the Story'. Left to Right. Michael Edwards, Pauline McGee, Malcolm Learmonth (Chair), Mark Hayward, Caspar Walsh, Susie Needham.*

The 'Findings' included the observations that:

- the contributors, while presenting in 'non academic' ways, and full of soul, showed a great deal of learning, just worn lightly.
- understanding and 'turning around' early life experiences with story making increased dignity and self worth, and was of enormous value.
- art nurtures us.
- attending a gathering with no protocols, no policies, no discussion about budgets was refreshing!
- the speakers level of self disclosure was exemplary of the conference theme. It was complete confirmation that 'the personal is professional'
- 'in art we lay our life out'
- the event 'put in a nutshell what we have always known'
- 'mending broken things and making them beautiful again' is part of the work of art making, and of therapy.
- working with 'live' art and music helped affirm the conference theme, and a trust in ourselves as artists, workers, and as human beings irrespective of label.

The organisers feel that this event was possibly the most successful of the EATc events so far. Participants who had attended previously, (about a quarter), seemed to agree. We were particularly gratified to see so many young and committed people. Our thanks to the sponsors who made the event affordable and possible for so many people to attend, and to Sara Hurley, for her particular support to Karen Huckvale in making the event possible.

Over 75% of participants gave very full, and overwhelmingly positive, feedback. There were also constructive criticisms and suggestions, which we take seriously, and will inform future events. We were touched that so many people wrote to us and sent feedback forms for several weeks after the event: very unusual in our experience. There was considerable demand both for longer events, and for ones that include art making as part of the process. We're working on it. Here are just some of the feedback comments.

*All speakers were very inspirational and thought-provoking*

*Excellent, uplifting and gives me hope.*

*Hit the spot.*

*Heartening. Invaluable. Enlightening, actually.*

*One of the most entertaining conferences I have been to in a long time.*

*The most refreshing, nutritional brain food I've had for a very long time*

*Because everyone spoke as human beings from their hearts and with conviction, it was real. Not a matter of ticking boxes and targets, which I'm so fed up with*

*Should be longer and there should be a party!*

Malcolm Learmonth & Karen Huckvale

Conference Organisers.

[Carole Pembroke: Conference Mystery Shopper Notes](#)