

The Un'not'ting

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INTRODUCTION

I have been considering art and wellbeing for many years. My interest in art as a tool of recovery from trauma, particularly childhood sexual abuse, and how it is useful to the most vulnerable to re/connect them with a community was the subject of my PhD, as well as being the foundation of my work with victims of abuse.

Today I am talking about the art programs I run at the South East Centre Against Sexual Assault and Connections Uniting Care in Melbourne. The program consists of 15 weeks mosaic-making that orients women to art, design and being in a group, followed by a 15-week clay group which begins by focusing on grief and loss, and ends in pure creative practice.

The program is set in a context of pain and isolation, the amputation of feelings and experiences, mental illness, and the transformations that are inevitable when a creative community forms to rebuild from the wreckage of a profoundly damaging past. The impact of these programs is deep and long lasting – grounded as they are in fundamentally shifting the way victims think - about themselves, their past, the world around them and how they choose to live within it.

Arts practice may not immediately spring to mind as a potent tool for enhancing coping skills and building resilience in victims – however, my research over many years has shown this to be a most transformative experience for women who were violated as children. So this is a vignette, a glimpse into art giving expression to feelings, and voice to that which can barely be thought and scarcely be spoken; into art revealing competence and vitality in those who thought themselves useless and unworthy.

I am showing you a selection of artworks created in projects I have facilitated, each of which through various processes and materials, contributes to meaning making and constructive living practices. In this presentation I will focus on three aspects of this work : desire, skills development, being part of a community. But first, about childhood sexual abuse :

CSA

A child or young person is sexually abused when any person uses their power to involve that child in sexual activity. Adults *always* have more power, a child is *never* in a position to give informed consent. So when a person uses their authority, either by using force or not, to involve a child in activities for sexual gratification then that is childhood sexual abuse.

Childhood sexual abuse wreaks havoc and despair. For years and often forever. The distress is not only about the sexual violation, but extends to include the loss of a sense of self and eudemonia, a Greek word meaning, "human flourishing". These children are located on a fault-line with few protective factors available to guide them through it, then into and throughout their adult life. The cost is a flat existence, distinguished by achingly negative after-effects.

Abuse distorts everything. Children pre-occupied with circumstances surrounding the abuse miss opportunities to learn and develop normally; education is especially effected, a deficiency from which is difficult to recover. As the child grows into adolescence, then adulthood, limited opportunities exist for higher education, and work; further abusive relationships and early parenthood often follows; poverty is common.

Coping skills, such as breaking tasks into manageable parts, conflict resolution, emotional regulation and finding solace from relationships with others, are absent or distorted. The desire to control every aspect of life is another significant barrier to coping. When this fails, as it inevitably does, victims turn inwards – harming themselves through self-destructive coping: isolation, addictive behaviours, self-loathing, suicide attempts are some, all consistently disclosed by participants and characteristic of this population.

It is difficult to overstate the toll childhood sexual abuse has upon a victim and difficult to find one aspect of their lives not in some way affected by it. It is also difficult to find one aspect of life that is not enhanced by their participation in the art program.

DESIRE

Victims seek help because they yearn for change. They join the group driven by desire, that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching. (paraphrase Obama).

Childhood sexual abuse is, by its nature, the imposition of one person's desires upon a child. Victims are known for being compliant and acquiescing to desires of others. Her own desires are irrelevant. So the child grows into adulthood ill-equipped to express her needs, and with little expectation that her needs will be met. Like emotions, especially anger, desire becomes internalized, although not extinguished. By the time women join the art group, something each keenly wants to do, all are ready to approach recovery by acknowledging and building on their desires and love of art.

A first step towards building coping and resilience is acknowledging, then acting, upon desire. But joining a group *can* be a really hard step. New participants are entangled in conflicting forces: the

desire to create, be a creative person, and make beauty, opposed by another force: an ever-present, belittling and fearful inner voice. It diminishes self-confidence whilst it arouses an indiscriminate fear of people, spaces, failure, danger.

I call it the **not**-ting voice.

Adult victims of abuse speak about thoughts that “go around and around” in their heads, a mess, a tangle of threads that cannot be unknotted. Thoughts and feelings that are present, but are without clarity and reason. Why am I **not** coping? Why do I **not** feel content? **not** got friends? don't feel human. These are some of the **nots** that enmesh victims of childhood sexual abuse.

Imagine then how strong the creative urge is that it can prevail against the negative forces that have impelled, or more truthfully, impeded, these women throughout their lives.

Arts Practice

The art program has creativity, artists, and learning at its centre. Its genesis is in centuries of arts practice, metaphor, materials and their transformations. It delves into the most human of experiences on a nuanced journey to wellbeing. Relying as it does on skill and intuition, calmness and vitality, control and release, thinking and restful engagement, art invites women to engage on a number of levels that stretches them in the process. They are introduced to the work of artists to expand a diversity of thought, and to understand how materials can be integral transmitters of meaning.

I was thrilled they turned white when you fired them. They're strong now, rather brittle still, but seem pure. How I turned out after all. I never considered myself pure, clean, white yet somehow, I knew keep inside I was. to have my whole self portrayed feels wonderful. The folded flowers allow me to cry for myself. My life was taken from me, I felt like dirt – yet from the dirt – I have emerged – not fully bloomed, at times withered, but still a beautiful flower. Thank you for allowing me to reach this insight through clay

I imagine some of you are thinking – she is talking about art therapy. Emphatically I am not. I am talking about art, creativity, imagination, the skills of artmaking, living a creative life, about artists, and art. I am talking about what blossoms when these fundamental experiences are in place and that this spills out to positively touch every aspect of life. I am talking about processes facilitated by practicing artists.

By way of contrast, art therapy is conducted by a therapist – often with no training whatsoever in

the arts. Art therapy is not about art. It is about therapy. And therefore, the process never can release in the same way as an arts practice can. This is important.

True creative practice not about purging, moving paint around or attributing universal meaning to colour, it is not about 'anything goes in art'. It is so much richer than that. Is it mode of thought, of looking at the world through different eyes and seeing it from a different perspective, it is a practice of curiosity, and inner inquiry. Creativity is an essential element of change, the means to transcend current boundaries.

Where childhood sexual abuse destroys potential, creative practice is alive, enriching and full of possibilities.

A mature and sophisticated visual language is critical to explore and express what is deeply personal and unique to each individual. Therefore we invest considerable time training participants to learn and practice techniques – such as working with materials, managing tools, and developing ideas and conceptual thinking. 1000s of years of arts practice and history inspire creative thinking and alert individuals to new possibilities. We start at the beginning and take small steps. As women delight in their first artistic successes, they also confront the beginning of a healthy self-esteem.

I found the first session of the art group to be fundamental in learning the basic skills required. We were given the opportunity to practice what was demonstrated and seek help. Participation in the very first session can play a big role in grasping vital skills needed in the coming weeks. It was this first introductory session that gave me the confidence to come back again and again.

It is, I believe, impossible to reach emotionally mature artistic expression unless the foundations of the practice are in place. As similarly it is impossible to write a piece of literature with the skills of a primary student. Therefore, the inattention to skill development and arts knowledge are, I believe, two significant deficiencies within art therapy practice.

Victims are very often overwhelmed by emotions; they tend to respond either by over-reacting to them or conversely, being rendered inert by them. Life long and detrimental practices of dissociation or hyper-vigilance have impeded full attention being given to any activity. But being easily distracted limits the potential to achieve goals. By contrast, the desire to create is powerful; and creative practice stills and focuses the mind.

I really love the clay. It is wonderful thing because it helps me stay in the present rather than confusing memories which make you feel like you are right back in the past. With the

clay you acknowledge that you are alive, able-bodied, safe and no longer at risk!

It is a mistake to believe that art is a distraction. It is the opposite. It is a purposeful, meaningful pursuit.

Another revelation that I gained from the art group was feeling equal to others because of my ability to finish tasks just like everyone else. If there's only one thing that the art group taught me it was that each and every person is as worthy as the next.

Group

"I was a lost soul before I joined the group" said one participant.

It takes courage to participate in a group that nobody would ideally choose to join. Although torn between the desire for company and their fears of it, each woman has made a decision to respond to her desire "to be part of something".

Healthy human connections are given a chance to flourish through a love of art and compassion. Much research tells us that social support shapes how an individual reacts to stressful situations. The intimacy of sharing art-making, sharing in suffering with others who know what it is to be vulnerable, is potent and comforting. In this safe creative space, conversations bubble up and evaporate as attention gently returns to the creative process. In this natural ebb and flow topics roam across a range of subjects, women can vent, can sympathise, some may choose to observe and not respond. Gradually as the guards are lowered, fears fall away.

"It's probably the first time in my life where I felt at ease with the people around me. My abuse had always separated me from everyone – but here, it brings us together."

The classes, with the continued attention upon artmaking, allows women learn to share about art first; relationships to develop slowly and therefore with some sensitivity and depth.

Art making can also be seen as a process of 'un-not-ing', of not accepting destructive interior and exterior voices of discrimination and belittlement. Un-not-ing happens when art reveals the truth. Un-not-ing allows individuals to flourish because in the art object a victim sees the past, present and their potential. Un-not-ing happens when women find comfort in community. Women talk, learn to be less fearful, build trust and relationships around a common interest then find other connections that are not wholly based on trauma. Art displaces despair and inertia in a process of unknotting.

Individuals integrate art into their 'outside life' demonstrate the positive value of creative practice, a developing sense of self esteem and a growing ability to cope. I encourage homework and give

participants materials, and sometimes a project, to pursue during the week. In this integrating stage, participants grow independent of me knowing they have the skills to make a satisfying work and importantly, knowing they have skills to cope when the artwork is not working well or they are having difficulties with technique. Women start to appreciate that creativity soothes and fills their life with purpose and meaning

Doing this art group has been one of the best things I've ever done. It helps me focus on things other than flashbacks and gives me hope that I will lead a purposeful life. I feel very supported and thoroughly enjoy doing the group. Participant

Women report being utterly transformed by art, achieving goals that have been elusive throughout their lives, and managing their emotions in ways that open them to eudemonia as well as enhanced and stable relationships. Research consistently reveals that talking is nebulous, the thoughts remain, and it is difficult to grasp any sense of resolution through it. Art, on the other hand, is seen as "reflecting the real me" enabling participants to "see myself in a whole different way – with compassion, and also "with a sense of expansion , "taking myself more seriously" and "released from fear". Words like empowering are often used to describe that process.

Letter from participant :

I hope you don't mind me saying I grew to love the classes. The objects turned out exactly as I wanted. For me, it was not just the making of the works and feeling the softness of the clay as I worked, but handling the clay gave me a softer view of my history. I feel more compassionate towards myself as at last I was able to feel gentle towards myself.

The soft curves with mounds and valleys represent exactly my sadness, experience, my life secrets gradually being unfolded and seeing the light for the first time. Unfolding of my pain and experiences in a slow gentle way.

I see now, myself as unfolding to the world. There is softness that was tightly folded – too afraid to relax, open up, in case the pain would be too much.

I often thought that in one way the folded flowers were withering, dying before they fully bloomed. Like me. I grieve I have lived so tightly closed to the world to avoid pain. Now opening little by little the folded flowers also represent a dying flower before it bloomed, or a budding child, before being allowed to bloom.

The figure with the wire was me at three years old – being raped. This was an act of brutality with long term consequences. I feel so sorry for me "for me at three". It allows me to be more gentle towards myself. I can learn to be less hard on myself.

I am always delighted to hear of women making art with children and friends, or neglecting the dishes in favour of finishing a mosaic! But I am especially impressed to hear of a spare bedroom or shed cleared and set up as a studio space. I see that as a step towards living her desires.

The more powerful our dreams, the more beautiful the transformations. Beautiful is art empowering women victims of CSA to step out into the world with a renewed vision of herself as a creative, social and competent human being. The perfect un-*not*-ting.

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