

Arts & Health South West Spring School 12-15 March 2019

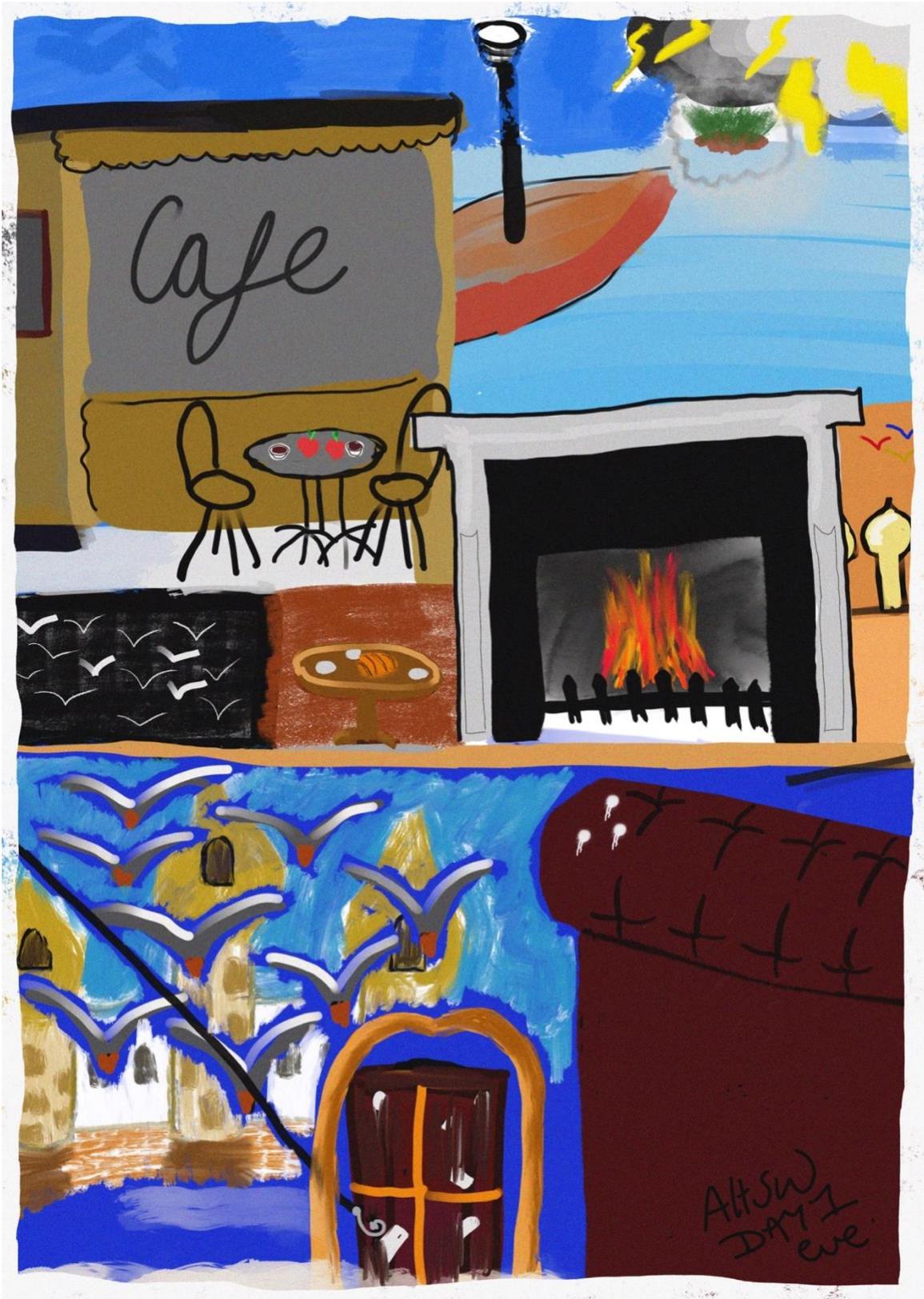


Illustration by Hazel Pitre, Spring School 2019 participant

Letter to our young

by Elspeth Penny, Spring School 2019 participant

Take a breath, because

This moment, this pause,

Is for your body,

To remember,

To inhale,

The returning waves,

Who told you, "Rest, rest, rest".

If you stand like a tree,

how can you make it stronger, more bold?

If you balance on one leg,

how can you become more stable?

Breath to keep steady?

Move to find stillness?

How can you feather drift into a stretch?

Soften,

Send warmth into hardness,

To reveal and release those sharp corners?

How can you listen better,

To your singing animal body?

Which part have you neglected,

Not provided for?

Let breath feed you,

This is the most magnificent truth you can hold,

It is vitamins and minerals...

Nourishment more than a vast feast.

And the Dorset sea still says "Rest, rest, rest".

Stay with the body

As long as you've agreed,

Don't rush,

Give your token of respect for the work it does,

Ply gratitude,

Love,

Onto its dry surfaces,

It's tired masses,

Notice

The snap crack of a dry stick

in lonely crevasses.

Let the uncomfortable be with itself.

Fold into what you're resisting

Holding back,

And honour what it holds

And needs to keep safe.

Can you fit an ocean inside of you?

Do you have such depth?

Your body is here.

Pour safety into its fear,

Bridges over treacherous rivers,

Step ladders down to abandoned mines.

Notice lime sherbert moss,

And deep red berries, ready to germinate.

Wisdom waves

crash in and out,

If you let them,

Power breaths,

Shelter in the cave,

Reminding you to

“Rest, rest, rest”.

Introduction

The 2019 Spring School built on the experience of the 2018 Winter School. We changed some of the format, in particular it was longer, and used the evaluation from 2018 participants to inform the planning.

The focus in 2019 was on young people's mental health and storytelling. We considered the questions:

How can the art of stories support healthy young minds?

How do we help young people tell their stories?

What is the embodied significance of storytelling?

This was an intensive residential school for health professionals, researchers and arts practitioners in a beautiful location in Dorset. We stayed in a lovely house together, The Mount in Swanage, and spent our days in the wonderful coastal nature reserve, Durlston County Park. The location is an important aspect of the Spring School and the natural environment provides a backdrop, stimulus and inspiration for the creative exploration together.

There was an open submission process for attending the Spring School. We aim to have a balanced mix of people who identify as being researchers, artists or health professionals. Inevitably many people wear more than one professional hat and also bring their personal lived experience of health and creativity. The following participants were selected this year:

Susie Atterbury

Jules Ford

Clare Heath

Veronica Heney

Elsbeth Penny

Hazel Pitre

Paul Fitchett joined us from Durlston Country Park

The facilitators were:

Alex Coulter, Director of Arts & Health South West

Paul Dieppe, Trustee of Arts & Health South West and Emeritus Professor of Health and Wellbeing, University of Exeter

Sue Isherwood, Chair of Arts & Health South West and consultant for Leading Learning, a leadership programme for the National Culture Forum

Kate Massey-Chase, PhD student at University of Exeter working on Applied Theatre in mental health, examining the skills and capacities young people need to successfully manage the transition between Child & Adolescent and Adult Mental Health Services

Visiting Practitioners contributed to the Spring School programme:

Dr Steve Killick <https://stevenkillick.co.uk/>

Lucy Voelcker <https://www.hortusheart.co.uk/about>

The Spring School was for two and a half days and three nights. Participants and facilitators cooked and shared meals together and everyone contributed to shaping the experience. The focus of the Spring School is experiential learning, from and with each other, and with our invited practitioners. A volunteer from Durlston Country Park, an experienced mental health support worker, joined the Spring School to inform future projects in the locality.

Participants contributed £100 towards accommodation and food, if they were able to afford it. The 2019 Spring School was funded by the Fine Family Foundation.



Still from 'My Mum's got a Dodgy Brain' ForMed Films, former winner of the AHSW Prize

Context

The focus of the Spring School in 2019 was young people's mental health and storytelling. Arts & Health South West is developing a collaborative regional strategy with stakeholders across the region. Mental Health has been identified as a regional priority and we are exploring ways to learn from each other and will be developing resources and learning activities to support the development of collaborations and partnerships. The Spring School is an opportunity for participants to share experiences and learning together, as well as an opportunity for AHSW staff and trustees to build and develop our regional work.

What happened

Most of us arrived at The Mount on the evening of Tuesday 12th March and shared an evening meal together.

"Arriving at The Mount, I realised that I was in for quite a treat. In a beautiful location, this comfortable, spacious home provided a fabulous container for the amazing cooking, eating, connecting, processing, sleeping, dreaming and creating that was to take place over the next few days, and it's close proximity to Durlston Country Park enabled the added luxury of not having to use a car, but instead to enjoy a walk to start the day."

On the morning of 13th March we walked from the house to the learning centre in the middle of Durlston Country Park. Lucy Voelcker led a session in which we explored the natural environment and our own stories, finding personal metaphors in the landscape, the weather and the plants and land, and bringing our stories back to share with each other. This process helped ground us in the place and we began to get to know each other and form a trusting and safe space where we could explore our own narratives.

“Curious about what I had signed up for, our first mornings experiential session was perfect as it was how I want to be working with people and the direction in which I'm moving. It also gave me an opportunity to process some deep conflicts I have within myself, so a powerful, reassuring, and beautiful start to our time together.”

In the afternoon, Steve Killick led a workshop on storytelling and helped us to contextualise the work in the wider world of storytelling practice and its uses in mental health services. He used examples of iconic stories that repeat across different cultures and eras, and talked about different forms and approaches such as hearthside, bardic and applied storytelling. That evening, Steve, told us a story by the hearthside!

“The evenings by the fireside were delightful, and I could easily have gone to sleep in the chairs! This is unusual for me as I find it hard to relax in strange/unfamiliar places, which should be a testament to how welcoming and relaxing the environment was.”

On the following day, we returned to our base in the learning centre and Paul Dieppe led us through a process in which we made drawings of our instinctive responses to the word ‘healing’ and discussed the shared metaphors that emerged. Kate Massey-Chase then used a wide range of theatre and storytelling activities to help us explore practical techniques that we could use in our work. In the afternoon we did a joint activity to plan a project and consider the challenges and opportunities of using storytelling with young people experiencing mental health difficulties. This led to discussions about Durlston Country Park being the location for such a project.

On the final morning, Paul Dieppe led a reflection on what we had learned and this was followed by a closing ceremony with Lucy Voelcker.

“Although it wasn't always obvious how the different sessions or parts of the experience would directly relate to my research or to my work, I think that this was significantly less important than the fact that the whole School was clearly organised in a holistic, explorative way, seeking to make connections and create space for potential and expansive thinking, rather than just instrumentally teaching or completing problem-solving exercises. I have faith that even when the relation isn't yet obvious, the benefits will emerge with time.”

Feedback from participants

We invited the participants to submit a story and any other feedback they would like to give, rather than sending them a questionnaire. The quotes above are extracted from the feedback. Other quotes are:

"I particularly valued the opportunity to connect with the other participants - I very much hope to collaborate with several of them in the future, but even if projects do not emerge, the chance to discuss, to talk, and to share was really valuable. I think the School did an excellent job of creating an open, supportive, caring atmosphere in which people were able to share experiences and stories. I would add that the chance to cook and eat together was probably valuable in creating this atmosphere - it was certainly fun!"

"It was stimulating and challenging in the best possible ways at times too, with a wide variety of voices, tones, delivery and age which I liked, and I imagine that there will be many threads that come out of it for me one way or another."

"I feel a lot of momentum from the Spring School, and I will be using it to full advantage in the coming months."

"I feel confident that, although I'm now sure how as yet, this opportunity will have contributed to expanding my work and maybe clarifying a slightly new direction. I am grateful to all those who put this programme together, facilitated and my fellow participants, all of whom taught me so much. The learnings were rich and deserving of a deeper reflection."

From our Durlston Volunteer:

"Telling stories is a relatively unfamiliar activity for me. There were not many adults around in my childhood so there were not many stories told within my family, and those which were tended to be sad and about wishing that things were different. I have always found it difficult to concentrate on reading, but fondly remember stories being read at junior school and continue to love listening to short stories being read on the radio. I tend to be a serious and shy person and do not feel I have much imagination and have therefore found that I seldom have many stories to tell.

Despite this I believe I am a good listener and am good at letting other people talk and helping them consider different steps on a different story. I have recently been visiting an Uncle who has terminal cancer who has just wanted to tell his stories. It has been a privilege to listen and learn some fascinating facts about my grandparents' and how these shaped how my mother viewed the world.

As I reflect back on my first experience of the recent Spring School I can recognise some familiar struggles with being new (and feeling less skilled than others) and feeling a heavy responsibility for being the person who should learn the storytelling skills that could be used at Durlston Country Park as a therapeutic medium. I can also recognise learning some simple but powerful tools such as exploring different memories and hopes through employing the structure of an outline of a hand, and valued hearing people's stories as we cooked and ate together.

Having spent more time with the Rangers and other volunteers over the last few months and heard the stories that have occurred naturally as people work together on shared projects, I have felt more confident in allowing storytelling to develop naturally as the Shed and wellbeing project opens and grows and remain keen to help less-included people to access the opportunities that the Park offers. I continue to reflect and value this learning and the fellowship I experienced in such a wonderful place."

From our Team

“Last week, I had the utter privilege of spending most of the week in woods and on cliff tops in Dorset, co-leading an exploration into storytelling and young people's mental health with an amazing group of artists, researchers and health care workers.

In the last session, on Friday, I scrambled down slippery fields, in the wind and wet, to the edge of the cliff. Huddled against the rocks and staring out at the sea, at the waves crashing on the rocks - some bigger and some smaller than I expected, as they made their impact in foaming white spray - I thought: 'The world is so big. How can I think I'm too much for it?'

I negotiate my way through the world with a background (sometimes foreground) fear of being too much, asking too much, taking up too much space. But the world is *** massive and powerful and dramatic. I might be approaching six foot, but I'm actually really tiny. Maybe it's OK to stretch out a bit.”

The Sea <http://bit.ly/2WzihOZ>

“I ‘know’ about the importance of connecting with others, and with nature; I talk about that to others, and it is a part of my understanding of how the Universe works. But ‘knowing’ something in an intellectual, left-brain way, is quite different from ‘experiencing’ it.

At the Spring School I experienced connecting. That was wonderful. I was a bit sceptical about being encouraged to connect with the woods, and the plants, and the sea, but once I was able to ‘let go’ and be my real self it worked, and I felt the power and the glory of the natural world. And I was also able to connect with some of the other people there, again in a deep and meaningful way, not only through conversation, but in those ‘moments’ of connection, which are hard to describe or understand.

What a privilege it was to be there.”

“Once upon a time there was an old woman who was a very busy person. She immersed herself in other people’s issues and went to countless meetings. She’d always had a tendency to do this, but she now did it compulsively as she didn’t know any other way to swallow the enormity of her grief. You see, her husband of many years had died swiftly and painfully just two years before. They had loved one another very much. Stopping to feel and remember was too dangerous she thought.

But then she went away with twelve other people to explore story telling. They met in a beautiful part of the Dorset coast where the wind stirred up the air mightily and the sea spread out a glistening cloak. The place and the people called for attention and reflection.

It was very hard for her to allow her grief to surface in company, but the setting demanded it. And she heard many other stories than her own, some painful, some joyful, some just funny. She was able to have her grief accepted for the all-consuming thing it was/is. She understood that although living happily ever after could never be part of her story, living and connecting to the natural world and her fellow humans became a source of some acceptance – of hope even. The three days allowed her to remember how fortunate she had been to love so fully and to be so loved in return.”

And finally, to wrap things up.

I could write an essay about the Spring School, but I'll try not to! It has deep roots for me. I first met Sibyl, our patron and funder, when I was arts coordinator at Dorset County Hospital. She has a long-standing commitment to the arts and to the natural environment. She supported me over many years in developing the 'Room with a View' project which brought a live view of nature into isolation rooms for cancer patients at the hospital. We forged a bond of friendship too and Sibyl has gone on to support my work at every stage, for which I am extremely grateful. She also invests a lot of time and money in the Jurassic Coast and one project was the restoration and development of Durlston Castle and Country Park. So our choice of location for the Spring School is very much about Sibyl.

But I also have a strong personal connection with the place. My mother was born in Swanage and as a child I spent every summer in a small cottage on Church Hill. My aunt is in a care home there. The Mount, where we all stay for the Spring School, was my grandparents' home during the war. My grandfather was Vicar of St Mary's Church. I recently helped my aunt to gather her poems into a book. This is one:

Ballard

I will remember this lying
on grass at the cliff edge
seagulls flying

their game on the updraft wind
sheer from the rippled morning-
You and I free

from a ritual Monday float
feathered as silent
grey-winged birds

held at the edge of time
between hollow sky and
shimmering sea.

This year, I found the Spring School experience particularly meaningful. Lucy Voelcker, the artist who led the sessions at the beginning and end, is a friend from my 20s. She helped me feel nature at a deep level, enabling me to draw on inner metaphors and my imagination to create a richer, more connected narrative about myself and the world.

The Spring School uses co-production and experiential learning approaches, and that is of value in itself to the individuals involved, as we can see from the feedback. But we also hope to build on, develop and expand the approach. We will be reflecting on the feedback and planning our next Spring School soon.

We are very grateful to the Fine Family Foundation and Durlston Country Park for supporting the 2019 Spring School.