

AHSW Spring School 2020 – a personal reflection.

Alex Coulter (Director of AHSW)

The Spring School was a world away from where we are now, a distant time and place. On March 10th, we all arrived at The Mount, a beautiful old house high on the hill above Swanage Bay, sixteen of us in total. Some already knew each other well but all of us forged a strong bond through the shared experience of cooking, eating and working together. Paul Dieppe, AHSW trustee and Professor of Health and Wellbeing at Exeter University, helped plan and deliver the programme, and Sue Isherwood, our Chair, held the space on the first evening, leading a discussion on shared ground rules. She also tempted us with an amazing vegan chocolate mousse. Avocado is the secret ingredient. Another one of our trustees, Dr Louise Younie, a GP in Bristol and a medical educator working with students on [Creative Enquiry](#) processes, facilitated reflective sessions based on her teaching. Our General Manager, Hannah, joined us to support our Advisory Group participants with lived experience of ill-health. They de-camped each night to Anvil Point, a wild and windy outcrop within the grounds of [Durlston Country Park](#), to the lightkeeper's cottage.



Ruth Davey facilitated our first day's activities exploring mindful photography. She has a photograph from the Spring School on [her website](#) home page at the moment. We were asked to slow down and look closely and carefully at our surroundings. I photographed this shell with a plant growing through it.

Then we joined the [Sheddies](#) in Durlston Country Park to explore, look at and photograph trees. Reflecting on the experience, Paul said he hopes we can work more closely with the Sheddies next year as they could teach us a thing or two about life, art, creativity and meaning. Like Brian, a man with severe physical

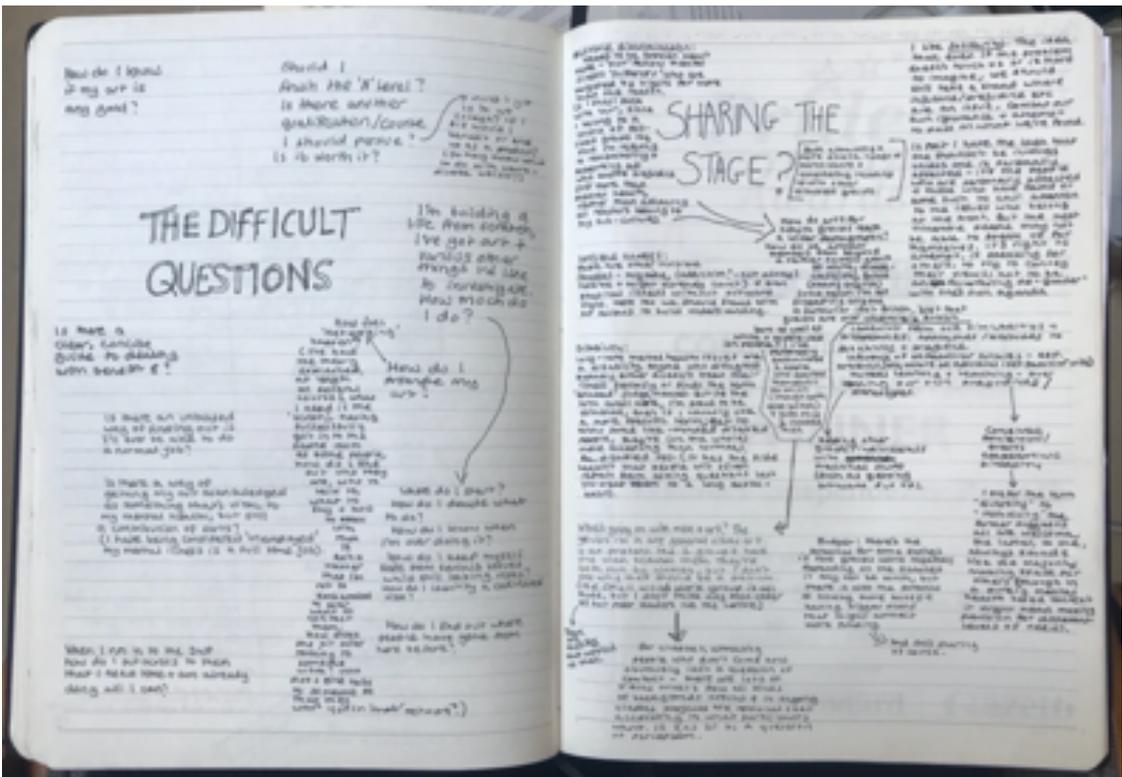
disabilities, who was keen to share his Pagan world view with Paul.

We were there to consider mental health and making meaning from illness. Natasha and Gavin, two members of our Advisory Group, brought an extraordinary sensibility to everyone's lived experience of the Spring School. Natasha's condition means her heart is a fragmented and re-constructed thing, but how can you separate the physical heart from the soul? Louise had asked us to bring an object that was meaningful to us. Paul brought a broken plate, re-constructed with Kintsugi, a golden glue.

We are all fragmented and re-constructed. On the second day, Natasha asked us to 'cloud walk' with a mirror in our hands, and then to stop and make marks to capture the sounds around us. That evening, a spontaneous music making session, with Natasha conducting our sound scores, was both hilarious and beautiful.



Gavin's indomitable spirit was an inspiration to us all. Some of you may know his work from the cover of our Alternative Visions [project report](#). One of the Advisory Group who couldn't attend, Max Frances, gave us an extraordinary book of thoughts to inspire and challenge us. Here's just one page of it.





At the end Paul asked us to find something to take away from the landscape that symbolised how we would move forward. I took the shell with the plant growing through it and, back at home, I used gold glue to seal a tiny, dried Japanese flowering quince inside it. It made me think of the Emily Dickinson poem you can see in the photograph.

We've asked the participants to send us a story about their experience. They also took some time to reflect on how they would plan a future Spring School and their ideas will inform the next one.