

Inching forward, lunging back. A duoethnographic poetic inquiry into practitioner experiences of health and ill health

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Abstract

This contribution is, in essence, a collection of poems that the two authors wrote over a period of four weeks. The temporal element is interesting. It speaks to a commitment to “go on” (Wittgenstein, 1953) at a time of illness and recovery.

Duoethnography, as collaborative activity, invites new meaning by layering what could be seen as separate narratives and creating a dialogue between the evolving stories. This enables new meaning to evolve and intertwine. Undertaking an inquiry through poetry was an important decision. The intention being to provoke and promote creativity, to generate feelings of wellbeing at a time of depleted energy. Writing to and with each other was both an act of generosity and an act of self-preservation. Mutual support, maybe one way to frame it, but it was also outward looking, connecting with how we practice as therapists, how we are in the world, the causes we care about, all part of the awkward dance of living with health challenges.

The poems provide their own context in a way but we have wrapped prose around the main body of the paper which is written in stanza. We feel the poetry offers a window into individual, seemingly separate experiences of ill health and a developing shared narrative of “going on”. Through the writing process, it has become clear that the poetry benefitted from the scaffolding of prose, to give the reader greater insight into the structure and sense making process.

The language of inquiry speaks to what we learnt/are learning about ourselves through the process, rather than describing a research project with particular anticipated outcomes. The reflections are contained within the poems and expressed through limited words but expansive feeling.

Poetic inquiry aims to humanise research with an emphasis on lived experience and researcher reflexivity. In this case the researchers and their research material could be seen as one and the same thing, an “entanglement of matter and meaning” (Barad, 2007, p. 1). But they might also be seen as separated by time and space. Since writing the pieces, new

space has developed between illness and life unfolding, life that includes our practices as therapists. And new space has developed between the feelings we experienced at the time, the words we chose to convey them and how we feel now, looking back. Time and space may offer differing lenses, but maybe not.

The paper as a whole is an example of writing from within lived experience, written in poetic form. The form supported the authors to write their way through illness and into new territory of living with and beyond life impacting health conditions.

Abstract (ion)

Together we have created
 A poetic writing style
 Duo-ethnographic
 Pieces to compile.
 Connecting over stories
 Of ill health and recovery
 Layering personal and professional
 Journeys of discovery.
 Along the way we decided
 With little reticence
 To write everything in stanza
 Inviting coherence
 Between the content
 And the method
 Disrupting status quo
 With rhythm and flow.

Introduction

To create a framework around the poetry we developed a method of inquiry that has strong connections with Julia's doctoral research. The method includes prompt questions that illicit "ripple" effects of relational writing. Though each poem is written by one author, they are in conversation with one another and speak to shared experiences and ongoing relationships with each other, and with long terms health conditions. They are written within the same time parameters and using the same prompts. The method and the layers or ripples of inquiry are woven into this alternative introduction written in stanza. We start with the question "what sense do we make of this new way of being?" and this prompts us to write a poem and send it to each other. We give ourselves a week but find that we respond much more readily when the prompts come, the speed perhaps speaking to a kind of urgency. The second prompt is the poem we write and send to each other. We write a response poem, written in quite an immediate way, with a relational spontaneity. The third layer is to write to each other, still

in poetic form, creating links between our experiences of ill health and the work that we do, as therapists. The final layer, captured in the discussion and conclusion is a kind of epilogue, looking back over the period of poetic writing and paying attention to new meanings that have been generated about our lives, our practices and ever-changing definitions of health and ill health.

Changed by illness

Lives uncertain

Much now altered

Both have faltered

A 'pebble' question¹

Illness new forms

What to notice?

Where now, the focus?

And so we start

Line by line

Type, delete

And email it on.

Challenging the idea

That rigour can't be found

In poetic format

No less sound

Than prose form at all.

Indeed, it asks of us

A certain kind of skill

Precision, less fuss

Choosing each word carefully

Some don't make the mark

Others fall in seamlessly

Forming a new arc



Method of inquiry

Three “ripples” of inquiry ¹

Working on a hunch

Creating a poem each week

Over the course of a month

Writing first in prose

We respond to each in turn

Dialogue creating

Opportunities to learn

Time to move on

A third ripple we employ

Turning to practice

New resources to deploy

Memories we draw upon

Reflecting on, in and through

This is a new way for us

To reflect on and attune

To all our ways of knowing

All our ways to be

Reflexive practitioners

And people who agree

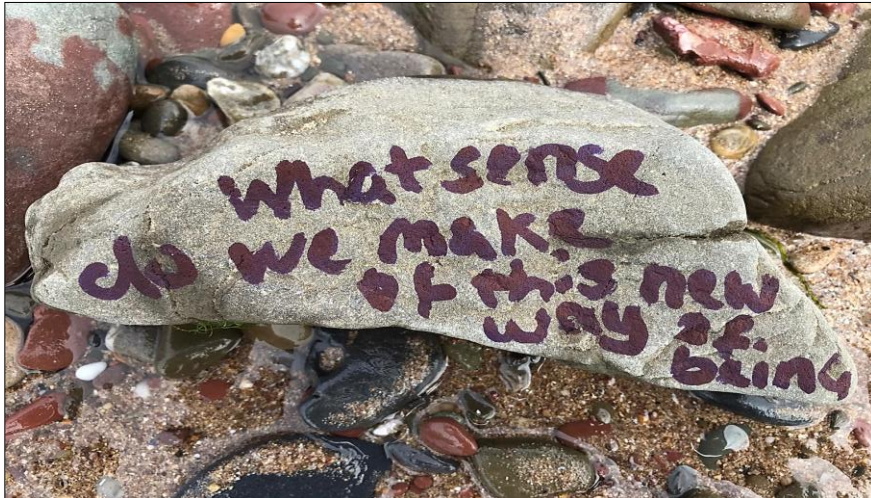
That we need to explore our own
Vulnerabilities and fear

If we are to stay “fabulous”²
In the work that we hold dear

Amplifying unheard voices
Becoming louder to the ear

Disrupting psychopathology
Ensuring we cohere

With systemic methodology
And elders we keep near



Poetic Inquiry. In verse.

In Poetic inquiry
Voices are found
Words for experiences
Once swimming unlanguage
Now Embodied.
Nestled between
language and sensation,
In harmony
Creativity discovered.

In poetic inquiry
 Energy pulses
 "Bounce in my step
 Skip in my stride,
 Pump in my swing." ³

Rhythm beating
 Emotion carrying
 Narratives animating.
 In poetic inquiry
 Freedoms discovered
 Voices represented
 Honestly, loudly
 Allowing anonymity
 Narratives fore fronted
 Words privileged
 "Finding my voice,
 In stanza form
 Is a revelation,
 A liberation" ⁴

In poetic inquiry
 Connections experienced
 Touching on Topoi
 Concerns of the 'everyday'
 Spiritual and social
 Imagination and achievement
 Freedom and time ⁵

In poetic inquiry
 Power is attended
 Living poetically ⁶
 Ethical stances
 Nests of relations intact ⁷
 Parallels between
 Interviewer and interviewee
 Increased horizontal reciprocity ⁸

First Ripple



An ode to cancer

Thank you for allowing me to choose
What to keep and what to lose
I choose to feel free
To care for me
And value the small things particularly

Coming Home

Home, where the heart is
Rib cage, a bony nest
For a fledgling recovery
Wavering, at best

Moving from, but not towards
Nowhere defined, as yet
Still in flux, aquiver
Stirring hopes unmet

Uncertainty, close companion
Walking side by side
Inching forward, lunging back
Ungainly kind of stride

Professional patient

Medical centre today

Hospital tomorrow

Letter in the post

Words hard to swallow

Protected characteristic

Equality Act

Medical opinion

Devoid of tact

Further diagnoses

Sinking in

Reassessing identity

Head in a spin

Professional patient

Nothing else to do?

No time to think

A career to pursue

Keeping appointments

Collecting scripts and notes

Don't know how

To stay afloat

Slowing down...

Could you just?

Would you mind?

Do you have?

Would you be fussed?

No I can't

And yes I do

No I don't

And I think I would

Time to say
I need to slow
And yes I will,
Just not today

My life's been turned
On its head
And now all this
Makes little sense

Time to focus
And to see
What's important
Now to me.

Second Ripple



Spinning

I relate to
the sense of speed
the "required" adjustments
thoughts out of date, I need

to pause, reflect, buy some time.
Left turn.
Right turn.
Is it a crime?
To ask people to slow, to help me out
I don't recognise myself
I am without
My usual skills
My thoughts are a blur
My head is a whirrrr!
Spinning!
Spinning!

Shifting Sands

We talk of a lack of definition
Times of flux
Uncertainty and indecision

Is this not actually
A shared human condition?

Sites of resistance

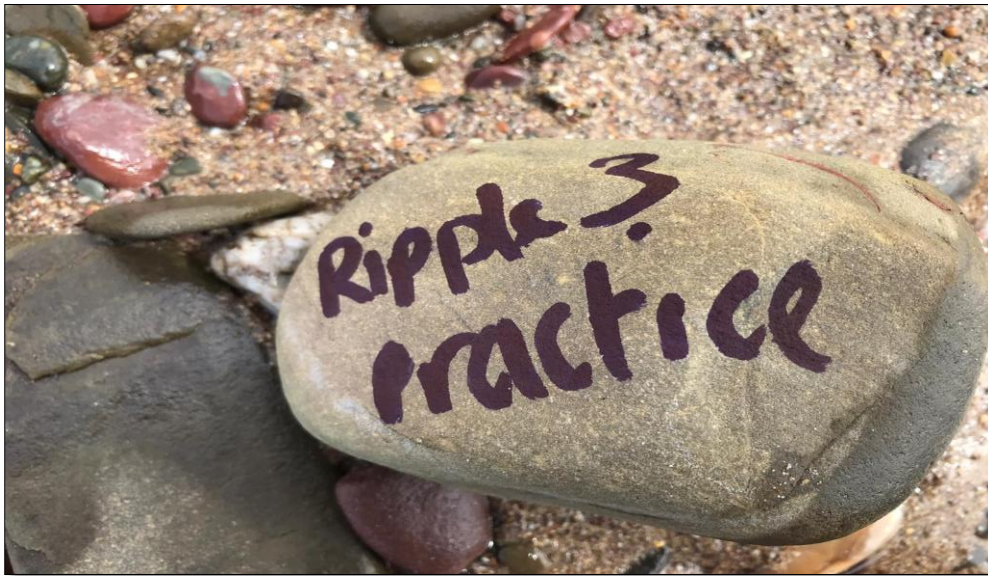
Life, reimagined
My mouth, my fingers form words
Creating new worlds

My Woman's body
Politically landscaped
Site of resistance

In The Gap

I'd like to pose a question
One for reflection
In the in-between times
Are we
Alone?
Or All one?

The Third Ripple



Esther's face (a response to "An ode to cancer")

I feel in my body
A memory, almost lost
In a room with a family
Sat together at a cost

Hard to sit together
Painful stories to tell
I remember what they said
Their hopes of Esther getting well

I remember Esther's face
Tired of anticipation
That somehow her experience
Was a figment of imagination

Or something she would get better from
And return "BACK" to normal
She articulated well
How that wasn't *her* goal

To return to a previous state
But to find something new

Something to live for
Something she could choose

Not something prescribed by
Her parents or a medic
Something unique and wonderful
But everyone's a critic

Some suggested college
Others a job
Some a new relationship
Get a cat, or a dog?

These ideas were not that useful
Cos they didn't fit for her
No-one really "got it"
Ideas became a blur

She chose to reject everything
That anyone else uttered
Not for individual merit
But because it was cluttered

What she valued most was space
To cry and laugh and falter
To find her own way through
What others tried to alter

We fear her coming home (a response to "Coming home")

Inching forward, lunging back
We'd allowed a little hope
Just a chink, a little crack
Nothing left, we just can't cope

What does it mean to go back?
Does life follow a straight line?
I'm not sure there is a 'track'
Life unravels and untwines.

It's just hard, always alone
Stuck deep in this no man's land
Really rude, her horrid tone
Everything now out of hand

I hear you say how stuck you feel
The impasse and despair
One step forward, and one back
Feeling alone, devoid of care

It's so hard when those around
Don't seem to have the same
Their hope apparently abounds
And we're caught in nasty games

I wonder if we just sit
In this painful lonely place
Together in the deep pit
of uncertainty you face

Conversation with a Mum of a child with additional needs. (A response to "professional patient")

I don't think I can find
My professional self again
She eludes me in the meetings
New unfamiliar terrain
My clarity now forgotten
Life's feels a big muddle
Everything is everywhere
What a chaotic kerfuffle.

Ooh pause a moment,
Who is speaking?
This harsh and critical voice
Diminishing your experience
Maybe once in work,
Things seemed a little clearer.

But now the meetings are personal,
The content feels dearer.

I just have little time to think
There are meetings everyday
No one seems to agree
I'm not sure I trust what they say
The outcomes are so close to me.
My little boy for whom I care
If only I could step off the bus
And find the clarity to share.

'Maybe it is ok' I say
To feel a little foggy
When you have been through so much
And life has been so rocky
I recognise her feeling
Of not being on 'top form'
But also see the benefits
Of listening to the storm.

First steps (A response to "Slowing down")

So, who are you anyway?
What is this all about?
Can I really trust you?
Will our time run out?

I like her already
Her presence can be felt
The referral full of diagnoses
The cards she has been dealt

Move further from my thoughts
As we connect together here
In this moment, side by side
Forging paths that we can steer

I am another professional
I understand the fear
We can work on this together
I will make the time to hear

I don't know what she wants from me
Her questions are so odd
Can you repeat that last one please?
I blink, I smile, I nod

But I'm not sure I can do this
Starting again from scratch
I need more time to get to know
If this is a helpful match

If I'm not heard yet again
That will be the end
Repeat, rewind, fast forward
It drives me round the bend

(In) discussion

What I notice the most
As I re-read this anthology
Is how the themes intersect
Without duality

Is it my story, or yours?
Is it ours or theirs?
Professional identity
Is opened up, laid bare

I'm learning through all of this
How much we have in common

With each other and with those
Whose voices get forgotten

Having time off work, unwell
Is not time out of living

Reflecting on what we have learnt
Itself, an act of giving

Looping back into practice
The themes that have emerged
Embodied, nuanced presence⁹
Through poetry, immersed

Political, personal, universal⁹
Writing into/out of life
"Urgency" embedded¹⁰
Within the "urge" to write



(No) conclusion**The in between**

In-between places
 Desolate spaces
 Neither here
 Nor there
 Waiting games
 Re-writing life's aims
 Practice reshaping
 With client's sense-making
 Finding connection
 And new reflection
 The liminal space
 A familiar place
 Neither Betwixt or between ¹¹
 Feeling unseen
 Changed identities, grief ¹²
 Beneath, extended or brief
 Together we sit
 Feeling the weight
 Of change and loss
 And even at times
 Looking across
 At vistas anew
 Admiring the view

Looking at the poems again, a number of months after writing them, the uncertainty of illness continues to present an uncomfortable feeling. Both of us are now back in our respective work contexts. Futures remain uncertain. We both refill our diaries. Often with a back-up option, uncertain as to whether this is necessary.

We started the writing of this paper purely in stanza form. Whilst the expression of emotion and sensation is carried easily in stanza, the absence of prose left structural gaps. We placed the paper to one side, uncertain as to how to make it flow and with life to get on with. On reflection, it seems there is a place for prose, and a place for poetry. A place for frames, back-drops and scene setting; and place for the embodied, the abstract and the emotive. Writing poems to each other brought new aspects of

relationship. We shared an experience of illness, with all its frustrations and losses, that was difficult to share with others. It brought commonality and difference, given the variance of our respective illnesses. Douglas-Fairhurst (2023) describes the descent into ill health through the metaphor of falling down Alice's rabbit hole. This disorientating liminal experience was one we both experienced. The writing of shared poetry also shed new light on the uncertainty our clients face. Their own experiences of being "in the gap" during their respective transitional states. Times of flux, connecting with others in their time of flux, all working to find new ways of "going on".

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