

The land of AWE: Exploring the connection between walking and arts therapy

Bettina Evans

Abstract

In this article I am introducing my AWE practice (arts / walking / expressive arts therapy). I share my experiences of a daily walking practice, which is sense-based and may include play, rest, art-making, connecting to other sentient beings, close observation, collecting of natural materials and an aesthetic response after the walk. The creation of story maps became an additional tool to deepen this practice. I explore my evolving relationship to the natural world around me through paying attention to particular details as well as engaging with larger existential questions of belonging and connection. This practice has resulted in an increased feeling of connection and belonging to my environment, as well as an increased sense of self.

Keywords

Nature-based expressive arts therapy, ecopoeisis, decentring, story mapping, walking

I walk under rain-drenched trees – this feels special, as rain in Christchurch, the driest city in New Zealand, never lasts very long. My body feels alive, awakened by the staccato drumming of the drops on the leaves and the liquid elixirs of eucalyptus and pine trees in the air. I feel raindrops land on my hand and when standing very still I can hear the sound of a single drop falling on a leaf. As I walk on, the raindrop orchestra's drumming changes subtly depending on whether I walk under thick or thin canopies of broadleaf trees or under needle trees. I follow one drop, then many, channelling into the deeply grooved bark of a pine tree, gathering with other rivulets in wooden pools and puddle lakes, formed between the gnarled roots of the trees. On my last walk here I enjoyed the roots' polished feel under my bare feet; glancing down, I had seen the sun light up patches of golden dust. Today the roots provide the walls for silver lakes, where pine needles float like miniature tree trunks, and gather in outflows, creating tiny beaver dams. Further along the path the hazy light and dove-grey horizon start to envelop me. Instead of listening upwards to the rhythm of clapping raindrops and leaves, I become aware of the gravitational pull of

rain; I become heavier, more earthbound, my shoes get sucked into the mud, splattered dirt creeps up my trouser legs, even my hair is pulled down by the weight of water – time to walk back home.

When I have dried off and am writing about my walk I am in the midst of it again, giving voice to the multitude of experiences.



Figure 1. Bettina Evans, *Before the rain*, 2018, photo.

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