An Internship in the Forest – Trudy Meehan

In December 2024 I was invited to speak at Experience 2024: An introduction to Arts, Health and the Older Person. The programme was led by Age & Opportunity and Réalta. It outlined some of the essential elements involved in working with older people in the arts and health context. Getting to know more about Age & Opportunity and witnessing the encouragement and celebration of older people's engagement with the arts in the Bealtaine Festival, inspired me to put my keynote talk into an essay. It struck me that there are some useful parallels between some metaphors I have been playing around with, and Bealtaine's strong commitment to the value of older people's participation in the arts. I wrote this essay thinking about those artists who work with people in the community, but much of the key metaphors can be applied by artists working in formal care settings too.

This essay is written with the intention of supporting the work of artists who bring art with them as they cross thresholds and greet people in their homes. For those of us who make the link between the outside world and the private internal world of the home. I would like to share some stories, in the hope of providing an image to carry forth and support your energy and purpose when you work with people in the community. The image I offer is one of 'an internship in the forest'. Let us start with the idea of the internship. It is always challenging to position ourselves in relation to those we work with and to consider the power relationships within that. We can too easily feel in a one-up position if we see ourselves as the skilled helper and the other as in need of help or lacking. It is important to remain vigilant on this pitfall and remind ourselves to respect the skills and knowledge that both parties bring to the encounter.

I learned a lot about power imbalance working in South Africa. I worked for a US based University, which sent students to Cape Town to study as part of their education, to engage in a practice called Service Learning. In Service learning the idea is that students bring their skills and knowledge to communities in need. By being in service to those "less fortunate", students learn to apply their knowledge in those settings and in return the community should receive help from the skills and knowledge of the students. However, this became model problematic in South Africa. Many students felt they were unwittingly embodying the trope of the white saviour. The dynamic was leading to an othering and diminishing of the people in the community's humanity and abilities. Most of the staff at the centre were South African themselves and knew there was no need for anyone to be saved. There is an abundance of resources and capacity within South African communities.

We initially changed our practice to Community Engaged Learning, shifting the emphasis from 'service' to 'engagement'. However, long-standing stereotypes and biases made it difficult to shift the power dynamic. We found that communities and individuals on the receiving end of this so-called help were often jaded, exhausted, and bewildered. You may find that some of the people you work with will similarly be exhausted by a litany of well meaning 'experts' who have taken too much authority and ownership over their lives and day to day decisions. As we age, there are multiple opportunities for others to step in and infantilise us. Many of those you work with will be vigilant and guarded against any signs of this in your interactions with them.

In South Africa, we needed to rethink our approach and so we changed the emphasis of our work to 'internships'. It took about a year to reorient and shift power dynamics. The change recognised who had most of the knowledge, ability, and resources: the individuals and

communities in Cape Town. The interns (our students from the US) needed to engage with a learner's mindset, open mind, and a sense of questioning rather than certainty. Similarly, when working with people in the community as artists here in Ireland, we need to approach them with humility and a certain level of awe and wonder about their unique lives and capabilities. We must be careful not to go too far ahead of the person, not to come with too much expertise, and to honour that the person is the expert in their lives. We do of course have specific skills, such as in my case as a psychologist, it is asking good questions, but I also recognise my limitations. We come with skills while humbly acknowledging the vast history and experience of those we work with, which we can never fully understand. We are always interns in their world. This is particularly relevant for artists working in the community.

When you enter someone's home, you approach a new ecology and landscape. You sense their being, through the smells, photographs, and artifacts that show what is important to them, their hopes, dreams, and ways of being in their lives. The person's home is their private, unique world – a mythical forest. The person you meet is the master of their forest, usually a keystone tree, familiar and steady and needed in their landscape. Where did that image come from for me? Why did I start to think about the people we work with as trees? Let me start with a story based back in Ireland. Some months ago, I was going into a local hospital for a check-up. I passed two men in the car park, and one man said to the other, just the normal kind of niceties that people exchange when they have known each other for some time: "Hey Jimmy, good morning! Lovely day, isn't it?" "Gorgeous it is. Hard to believe it is the first of November. Just like a spring day. It's hard to believe, very strange." They nodded and went on their way. I did not think much about it until a few days later when I realised that we could all register that the first of November was unseasonably warm. We knew there was something up; all the reports of global warming were in the media. But there was something those two men exchanged that was more profound and important. The man who noticed the unseasonably warm November day was not relying on media reports or thermometers or weather apps. He was reflecting on his lived experience and drawing on decades of first of November's past. In stating his observation, he was showing his importance as a sentinel to us, someone who could sound the alarm and say, "This is not how it should be; something is wrong, something is afoot." He became someone who had witnessed the passing of time, who had logged experiences within his memory, essentially becoming a big data processing machine. As we gather experience and knowledge, we become adept at noticing patterns, especially changes in them.

I had a powerful sense of this man as a witness, someone who was watching the passage of time and holding account. This role is especially important in our society for all of us. Suddenly, I was gripped by waves of grief and recognition of what was happening in my own family. You see, both of my parents passed away in the past year, within six months of each other. I've been struggling to grieve my Mam and Dad, Eileen and Sean, partly because they lived their lives to the fullest, into their 80s, and died peacefully at home in their sleep, a way that very few of us get to die. They had a 'good death', and as individuals, there was truly little left to grieve. I struggled in the last year with how to feel their loss adequately. I did not have a metaphor or a story that made sense of what we had lost. However, in reflecting on that man as a witness and a keeper of time and stories, I realised that in losing our parents, we had lost our witnesses, our timekeepers, our logger of events, our holder of memories, and our keystone people in our family.

An image of the mycorrhizal network in the forest came to mind. Many of you may have seen and heard about this mycorrhizal network that comes from fungi, connecting organisms underground so they can communicate and pass resources between each other. In addition to the mycorrhizal network, there are also keystone trees. There are most important trees that are hyper-connected to other trees in the forest. One of the most well-known studies on these trees, mapped a tree which was linked to forty-seven other trees. The pattern goes that the more mature trees tend to have the most connections. This image of course reminded me of Mam and Dad. They were keystone trees in our family forest, and in their passing, what died were the connections. That mycorrhizal network between all of us in our family, and all the people they touched in their lives, began to shrink, and die away. In losing our keystone trees and our mycorrhizal network, we failed to be a forest anymore and were thrown into being individuals. We were grieving losing our parents but also losing our wider, more complex interconnections.

As an artist going into someone's home, my image of all of you is that you are reconnecting the mycorrhizal network in the wider society. You are bringing connections in, allowing the connections to flow back outside. When you work with someone in their home and make a connection, you are not just healing or helping an individual; you are laying down the network through which they may hopefully reconnect with the social ecology around them. In so doing, you save all of us. We need people who have the maturity of keystone trees, with depths of roots and decades of life to help us, to tell us, to remind us, to populate our lives with difference, diversity, and richness. If we do not have those kinds of deep variety in the people in our environment, our social ecology becomes thin and homogenous. Every social group needs diversity to thrive. We know we need biodiversity, but we also need human diversity. We need our keystone people for the health of our social ecology. Ageing in place becomes not just about helping people stay in their homes but about ensuring the health of the interconnections between the individual and their external environment. Cultivating connections as you cross the threshold of the home and practicing art to symbolically support these connections is hugely important work.

Working with people in their homes, the paths you walk under your feet re-enliven that interconnected network between all of us. The artworks, artifacts, songs, stories, dances, poetry, and images you create together with those people are the evidence of that network. When you make art with people, you instil imagination and hope, reminding them of the interconnected network of which these artifacts are just the fruiting bodies, the mushrooms that are visible evidence of the underground mycorrhizal networks. A crucial part of conducting artwork in people's homes is connecting these diverse individuals back into the ecosystem, acting as the mycelium. When you enter their homes, you bring the outside in, and when you leave, you take the inside out. You become a bridge and a connector, and this connection often lasts through the power of the artifact that stays with the person after you are gone.

We know from Art Therapy practice that the art object we make with someone can function as a transitional object. Like a teddy bear reassures the child and reminds the child of their connection to their primary carer, the artefact can stay in the home as a reminder of the connection between the person and the visiting artist, and more broadly the world outside the home. When we create something with someone, we produce an artifact that serves as evidence of our relationship with each other and with the outside world. The artifact acts as a witness, reflecting our inside-ness, individuality and selfhood and our interconnection to the outside world. By weaving in and out of people's lives, you support their sense of self as seen

by others, ensuring that they feel recognised. By walking the path and crossing the threshold, you weave the mycelium of existence and connection, witnessing people into being and connection.

The story does not stop here, we have reflected on the forest and an internship mindset, but we also need to talk about ‘forest time’. Time is not as simple as it seems. It is not always linear. It is often quite relative. In the forest, being 80 or 90 is not necessarily old; for a tree, that might be quite young. There are rocks, boulders, and trees that are hundreds of years old. Our sense of time is very relative and culturally specific. I have lived this sense of time.

My most memorable experience of spiralling forest time happened when I was first training as a clinical psychologist. I was on placement in a psychiatric inpatient unit. I was only 21, full of my own importance. I had the key code to the locked psychiatric ward. As I left each day, it was my job to ensure that those who should be inside stayed inside. There was a lively 25-year-old woman, an inpatient hospitalised, who was having a psychotic episode. She was keen to get out because she was feeling well, and we often had interesting discussions at the door. She challenged my logic and my self-importance, rightfully so. There were moments when I had to say, "I'm sorry, I cannot let you out," and walk past her, double checking the door was locked. On one occasion, she stopped me and asked, "How old are you?" I replied, "21." She paused, reflected, looked me in the eye, and said, "There's still time yet for you to be on the other side of this door." She was right, there’s peaks in the onset of schizophrenia and one of them for women is in mid-life, there was indeed plenty of time for me to develop schizophrenia or to experience some other calamity with my mental health. Her comment taught me a significant lesson in humility and grace, helping me understand the knowledge that the people we work with possess. I acknowledged her correctness, probably looked flabbergasted, and embarrassed, and walked away, but I never forgot her or her timely reminder.

Now, at 45, having experienced my own version of a breakdown—a mix of medical, psychiatric, and spiritual—I realise she was indeed right. There was plenty of time for me to be on the other side of that door. In the forest of our lives, time bends and turns, and there is always time for us to be on the other side. We often change sides, and if we adopt an internship mindset when we enter the forest, we do so with a sense of humility. We become open to the lessons that the forest and the people we work with offer us. We are less likely to ignore their wisdom or step over them. We avoid being seduced into simple frameworks about time or what it means for the people we work with. We keep a forest mindset working in forest time.

Staying with ‘forest time’ allows us to recognise a more complicated story about memory too. The Mythologist Martin Shaw said that there are three types of memory: skin memory, flesh memory, and bone memory. Skin memory refers to the passing stories, songs, or podcasts you listen to. Flesh memory encompasses recent illnesses, traumas, or momentous events that have occurred. Bone memory delves into the deep history of your life, your place, your ancestors, and those who have come before you, the known and often unknown baggage of the deep past.

It is essential to be conscious of all these types of memories when working with people, especially those who have lived many years and experienced multiple lives and roles. In the forest, we can become aware of this. So, when we listen, we do not use our everyday human ears; we must listen with our ‘heart ears’. We engage our senses. Words are less important

than feelings. We feel our way in the forest. We pay attention not only to what is happening at our ear level but also to what is occurring beneath our feet, underground. It is silent, almost imperceptible. You feel it rumbling, and it resonates in your heart.

As interns in a forest, we need to keep our heads down and be humble, pay attention to what is under our feet, be gentle, and nourish the interconnected network that connects us all. We should honour the mushrooms in all their wonder, as they represent the fruiting bodies of our interconnection. We must look out for the keystone trees and do all we can to help them stay connected to the rest of us because we need them. Allow our sense of time to expand and soften. In your work, remember you are path layers of interconnectedness, working in forest time, and bone memory, listening with your heart ears.