

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Covid-19 or Collapse: A Note

Arnell Etherington

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It is autumn 2020 now, following more than 16 weeks in a total lockdown last spring. Then hopes, more lockdowns, closed borders, and dreams that Covid-19 would be treatable soon. In week one of lockdown, I began the Art Therapy at Home Project - with 12 at risk primary school children. This enabled their school-based art therapy to continue every Friday. We began a new era, but no one knew that at the time. We used all the materials at hand to make art– newspaper, sticks, rocks, aluminium, home-made glue, waste paper; we borrowed family scissors and staplers; then painted, drew, and sculpted. Children drew llamas after taking a virtual tour of a Llama farm, wrote poems, drew a hot air balloon trip to anyplace you wanted to go. We learned to use the white board together online. The children looked forward from their altered week to art therapy. Some made art every day. Academics online was limited; they must work alone at home on those aspects. Life was boring to them. Their loss of contact with grandparents and peers was palpable. From dining rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and dens, they concocted, shaped, and sometimes dismantled their creative pieces. Hopefully, there was some modulating of anxiety, depression, and the beginnings of this global grief. It was a long four months.

The children returned to summer school in June for a few weeks and we continued in situ with art therapy, but some continued self-isolating and those children could only zoom in for art therapy. Zoom had become a verb that everyone recognized. The children were like race-horses behind the gates, waiting for 'normal' and the gates to open. We were all waiting for a cure. There was a settling into a different level of anxiety for many.

In July, the continued police brutality in the USA brings civil disobedience forward in people's minds around the world. Black Lives Matter put forth a strong reaction and similar situations globally were on the edge. Millions protested this violation of human rights. Kamala Harris (2020), Vice-President candidate at the time, stated multiple times in her presentations that there is no vaccine for racism. Black Lives Matter became more and more a front-page issue. The pandemic saw thousands more dying daily. The children prepared to be at home with little support for the coming month of August. Circumstances were terribly worrying.

My friends and relatives in my previous home of Northern California further suffered with dry lightning storms that lit 650 fires across that area in August due to the ongoing climate crisis. In late autumn, the fires were still burning for miles underground, the earth was

transforming. Many people died from the fires and other individuals had severe health problems due to poor air quality. I mourned their fate.

By autumn we all saw 'normal' slipping through our fingers. Children returned to classroom 'bubbles' in isolation, corridors were marked 'one way', and communal spaces were seen divided amongst specific groups with no overlaps. As the art therapist, I worked across 'bubbles,' so wore PPE. The gates had opened, a little. The children were back still depressed or anxious, grieving their usual school experience but extraordinarily resilient. Just being kids at times and in a funny way that was refreshing.

As an American, who lives in the UK, my eyes and heart were fully on the election by October. I could not watch the media; yet I had to watch the media. Politicians pretended and lied. It was a very unpleasant game. Leadership in the USA was at an all-time low. It was sometimes difficult to sleep. The British children may have been shielded from these issues.

My safe space was and continues to be the studio and I went there much more that autumn and made art. (I went to the kitchen and made jam too!) But like many autumns, the young children I saw talked about the change of seasons and the leaves as emblematic of this change. The vivid colours poured out on the streets surrounding us as leaves fell. The young artists created autumn trees, ironed leaves, visited campus trees to have a closer look, touched, and smelled them. The talk was of growing and natural rhythms, things they could count on. They have seen it last year and the year before and they may count on seeing it next year. I began my series of tree artworks alongside this school-based art therapy work in September and am still continuing in December.

Week by week as I moved through my emotions, the security that seasons, and particularly the dependability that trees will change seasonally, had a steadying effect. The rhythm of this change was so different from the other changes and adjustments we have had to make. Watching nature proceed and noting that beauty through art, despite the pandemic, the political unrest, the racial tensions, and fires of global warming has been a little miracle. These months have been a remarkable time of resilience and strength.

Following is a selection from the trees I made during this period, done in tissue paper and inks (figures 1 – 5).



Figure 1: *September*. Etherington, A. (2020) Tissue paper and ink on paper



Figure 2: *October*. Etherington, A. (2020) Tissue paper and ink on paper



Figure 3: *November*. Etherington, A. (2020) Tissue paper and ink on paper



Figure 4: *November*. Etherington, A. (2020) Tissue paper and ink on paper



Figure 5: *December*. Etherington, A. (2020) Tissue paper and ink on paper

About the Author

Arnell Etherington Reader, Ph.D. is an Art Psychotherapist/ Practitioner Psychologist in the UK and USA. She is presently an art therapist in school-based programs, lecturer, supervisor, and has a private practice in the UK.

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