

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Anchored Together in the Storm

Aisling Fegan

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'By the crowd they have been broken; by the crowd shall they be healed'

(De Maré, 1975, p. 149)

The covid-19 pandemic is a global trauma, threatening our lives, livelihoods and sense of safety. Together, we are experiencing prolonged periods of uncertainty and powerlessness. The pandemic has exposed inequality, racism and a neoliberal ideology that puts the health of economy before citizens lives. We are engulfed in a storm of political and social constructs that at times feels lethal.

During the pandemic (since March 2020 and ongoing) I have attended weekly online large groups. Large groups give us the opportunity to explore cultural, political and social matters. Patrick De Maré, one of the founding members of the Institute of Group Analysis, says: 'the problem for large rudimental groups is its mindlessness'. He wonders how to think in such a group, suggesting 'Where chaos was, there shall be matrix' (De Maré, 1972, p. 57). The matrix, a term coined by Foulkes, the founder of group analysis 'can be understood as the common shared ground which determines the meaning and significance of all that happens within the group' (Barnes, et al., 1999, p. 26). My reason for joining such a group was to find some common ground and a way to begin to think about my experience. De Maré, equates the reason for attending a large group 'in the fact that psychoanalysis in deliberately isolating the patient from a social to a psychotherapeutic frame is a psychology of the individual. Small groups, on the other hand, involve the psychology of the family. It is only in the larger group that cultural dimensions can be comprehensively explored' (De Maré, 1985, p. 80). It was this cultural dimension that interested me, in particular to have a dialogue that involves 'sharing cultural and religious norms and values and reflecting upon social political forces of oppression and discrimination' (Woodger, 2015, p. 84).

Beginning in the Spring of 2020 with over 100 members, these online large groups are underpinned using a group analytic frame. Groups are accessed from different locations around the world, by people who have internet or a phone. The online large group does not pose any physical covid-related risk. We can see facial expressions; almost

everyone's. We have the choice to be seen or not and are free to chat, speak, move or mute as we wish. I feel safe and I am more relaxed than I would be in a face-to-face group. Sometimes, I make art in the group. On a couple of occasions my two-year-old toddler has joined me.

In the online large group, I am thinking about trauma (current and transgenerational), intercultural politics and the impact of covid-19 on communities around the globe. With these themes in mind, I am curious about what is seen and unseen, online and offline. What can be said, felt and witnessed in this type of online group? What is and isn't collectively accessible for the group? What are we not talking about and why? I wonder what belongs to me, to the group and to wider global society. The empty chairs are harder to see in an online group, but they are striking.

Whiteness and privilege stare at me on the screen. Issues related to diversity, equality, authority, legacy, power and oppression are present. The trauma mauls. It can feel raw. At times, it arrives as a spontaneous bolt into the group. It can be silent, and it can be silenced. Deeply safeguarded underneath consciousness, trauma can be hard to make sense of, particularly when it is transgenerational and cross-cultural in nature. Sometimes it is too dangerous to reach with words alone. I made the sculpture, entitled 'Locked Inside', as a creative response to the online large group (see Figure 1 below). Captured as a group of conflicting ideas under my skin, they are suffering and suffocated together with limited space. There is terror, ignorance, assault and a desire to escape.



Figure 1 Locked Inside, (Sculpture, 2" x 2" x 2")

The online large group has created space for me to think about my relationship to a world infected with helplessness, hierarchy and lack of accountability. For me, large groups are about human rights. Engaging in a large group is an act of political and social activism. They demand me to think more broadly. This has a positive impact on my capacity to think about, hold and contain difficult thoughts and feelings evoked by the pandemic. The online large group has enabled me to hear and see my own voice. This has given me the confidence to be more vocal in other arenas as well.

Being a member of an online large group during the pandemic has helped me get in touch with many complex and uncomfortable feelings, reduced my isolation and enabled me to relate better with others. These groups have helped me to feel inspired, creative and more attuned. They help orientate me away from paranoid-schizoid thinking, full of volatile and polarising conflict, towards the depressive position where there is ambivalence and hope. (Klein, 1952). With others, I am creating new meaning. I feel anchored and I am not alone.

In writing this paper I hope to raise awareness about the use of large groups. The pandemic is likely to be stirring up all sorts of underlying distress associated with times in the past when we felt frightened, unsafe or powerless. Art psychotherapists are not immune. There will be no vaccine for the emotional trauma we are experiencing because of the covid-19 pandemic. And so, we must actively maintain the capacity to think and relate in a meaningful way. I believe that online large groups can create a potential space for us to do this.

About the Author

Aisling Fegan is an artist and HCPC registered art psychotherapist. She conducts art psychotherapy within private and charity organisations; including a specialised group programme for adults in Central London. In private practice, Aisling facilitates online art psychotherapy with young people and adults across the United Kingdom.

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