

Transcript of talk on the Artist and Wellbeing given by Emma Gregory, July 2020

With references

Hello UWE peeps. My name is Emma Gregory and I'm a local artist, living in Bristol. I've been asked to talk to you today about the experience of being an artist in relation to wellbeing.

I'm a trained printmaker but I use a lot of drawing and ceramics in my work; I write sometimes; I do a lot of collaborative work, sometimes with people who work in different disciplines - so dancers and musicians - and the work I make is mostly about people, feelings, instincts, connections so I might make a series of things about myself as a mother and how I perceive my 'performance' or I might make a series of things about adolescence. That would be the kind of thing.

I'm freelance, as are 77% of artists in the UK at the moment - that figure has come from the A_N website - and I earn my money through portfolio working, which is to say that some of it comes from teaching, sometimes I'm a technician, sometimes I make theatre sets, I've also written for a living... what else have I done, loads of things, made stuff. Another thing I do is that I teach.

I tend to work with adults; they tend to be at about MA level. The things we work on, usually in small groups, are things like how you might talk about yourself as an artist or what your research practice could really look like. How to make it more robust. How to plan towards your goals. What your work's really about, looking at themes, motifs, subject, that kind of thing. I guess I would say I'm genuinely interested in how people develop and the idea of lifelong learning. More interested in that than anything else, certainly more interested in individuals than in an art scene.

I like to build small communities that work together over a period of time so for example, last year I put together a bunch of 8 artists who came together to do 5 days' work on drawing as a tool for continuing professional development, CPD. We took it in turns to come up with the questions and then we answered the questions we were going to address using drawing.

I think I've been asked to do this talk partly because of that work and partly because I'm not someone who is robust in terms of well-being. I've been mentally ill a number of times with depression, psychosis and a severe head injury and this has left me very empathetic. I would say that's a key feature of my personality, currently.

I'm going to start by looking at what it might have looked like to be an artist living in Bristol pre-Covid and then I'm going to look at what it's like now, we're in the midst of it, it's July and then I'm going to look at how one might address the difficult task of building resilience in this situation. I'm going to bring in what other artists have done and a couple of useful tools that I thought might be of interest. Here goes...

Back in February, pre-Covid, the average artist in the UK was earning around £6k per year. An established artist (self-declared established artist) was earning around £13k per year. In

my case I was earning around 80% of that through earned income and around 20% through grants. Typically, I was getting grants from the Artists' Newsletter and the Arts Council of England although the Arts Council of England's success rate for an individual had fallen. I'll give you some figures: 17 years ago, in 2003 for Grants for Arts the success rate was 52%. In 2019, for the equivalent fund – Developing (Your Creative) Practice – the success rate had fallen to just under 13% - so that's just over one in ten. It was getting much harder to fund the grant end of things. It was also getting harder to find the work, mostly, I think, because of the lack of money in the sector.

On the flip side, ArtNews reported on a study which Yale had done on artists and resilience which threw up some interesting observations. Let me just read you a bit:

'In 1963 the pioneering creativity scholar Frank Barron wrote that "the creative genius is both more primitive and more cultured, more constructive and more destructive, occasionally crazier and yet adamantly saner than the average person." Researchers at the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence recently took Frank Barron's ideas and tested them... using 309 artists on faculty at US art schools and a similarly sized sample of workers who had no training in the arts.'

Both groups were asked about their crazy sides, which we might call their psychological vulnerabilities, and also their saner sides, their psychological resources if you like. So, under 'vulnerabilities' I would put vulnerability to stress; vulnerability to anxiety; vulnerability to depression and under 'resources' I'd put ability to grow – personally -; ability to make positive relationships; autonomy; hope; and the resilience of one's ego.

What was interesting was that most of the time individuals who had more vulnerability also had fewer resource. It makes sense that if people experience more symptoms of stress, anxiety or depression they're less likely to have hope or be psychologically well. Only 10% of the people they looked at had a higher degree in both areas and that interaction, on a moderate level, tended to predict creativity or creative achievement.

So, artists are, in fact, as Frank Barron wrote, both crazier and saner than the average person. I identify with that.

I find that really interesting of course because it means that although the artists are dealing with higher levels of anxiety and depression they also have the tools within themselves to deal with it, as long as they've got faith, and I don't mean religious faith. I mean faith in what they're doing and that's what the article went on to say. I'll put that reference at the end of this little bit of film.

Let's get back to March and think about what happened next. We went into Lockdown and there was a huge shift in the change of my role as a freelance teacher and maker of stuff and that, for me, I experienced as a loss of identity. It's not the first time in my life that's happened, because of the head injury principally, and also my experience of giving birth was pretty much like that. However, I also lost my income and I'm sure a lot of you have lost out financially over the past few months and will continue to do so well into the future. I lost an exhibition opportunity and I'm sure most of you will have lost an exhibition opportunity or

two. Projects started falling through. Basically, it's a very slippery slope down which we have all fallen and as a result we are probably all feeling fearful, perhaps grieving, perhaps we're feeling a loss of control and, on top of that, some of us have lost actual people to this virus, which is terribly sad.

Many of us feel isolated, having been in isolation, and the strange thing is that although we are physically isolated, we've all been through very similar sets of experiences, one way or another I think, and we are more connected than we believe.

So, let's look at resilience and the question of well-being in relation to where we are now, where we find ourselves currently. For some artists the turnaround was absolutely instant, for example with Matt Burrows and his creation of the Artist Support Pledge, which is an extraordinary achievement. Keith Tyson, who launched the Isolation Art School, in collaboration with Matt, and individuals who went online immediately creating toolkits for artists, such as Alec Finlay and teachers who were immediately sharing their resources such as your own Sarah Bodman.

Frankly I'm much in awe of these individuals who seem to know immediately what their purpose is in a given situation regardless of what they're feeling and their personal circumstances. For me it just wasn't like that and I've kind of fallen through the past twelve weeks but here, for what it's worth, is how I've approached looking after or caretaking my own wellbeing.

I asked my husband who is a psychologist and is working with staff up at the BRI – the Bristol Royal Infirmary – 'Jonnie, what can I do about my resilience during this period?' – and he directed me to two websites. One was MIND and the other one was the American Psychological Association. Both of them have a list of five points you should look at about building resilience and the five points are:

Your connections and connectivity, your relationships. That's number one.

Number two is fostering your own wellness, body and mind.

Number three, finding purpose, and learning and reaching out for new things.

Four, embracing healthy thoughts.

And five, seeking professional help.

Let's start with an inventory then of the connections that have kept me going through this period. Obviously there was the obligatory weekly family quiz, which I'm sure lots of you have been trying to get your heads around. Ours is a very good family for... it's good at Christmas time and playing games. So that quiz has been a really fantastic valuable thing to be part of every Saturday night.

And then there were two groups really that came to the fore for me and I wasn't expecting either of them to become as important as they have become. The first one was the participants of the Press Play course that I've been running since... well I've been running it for four years but this group has been together since September 2019 so they knew each other very well at the point at which we went into Lockdown. However, it could have gone either way because everybody was facing something different in terms of the challenge of Lockdown and some people completely freaked out.

There were ten of us initially, which quickly boiled down to nine, we did lose a person in that first week. We carried on meeting in what would have been our session time slot, on Zoom, and we are still meeting in that time slot, Tuesday morning.

We started off by looking at our value systems - really, really in depth - and built from that into writing documents about belief which we shared. You have to remember that these people really trusted one another by that stage and had nothing to lose by sharing. Then we did some training on what crit's might be; how to make a crit a really positive experience and developed a system for critiquing one another's work online, which has really worked. We've been through the whole of that process twice with two different sets of work and it's been really fabulous both times.

Now we're working with Tash MacVoy, who's an artist based in Dursley and she's leading sessions on writing applications for funding bodies and commissioning agencies and curators, which brings me to Tash.

The second group, Tash is a part of, Tash and Helen.. Helen Acklam who runs The Garage in Clifton. You can look it up online and it's on Instagram as well. I think she calls it 'atthegarage'. These two I started working with through an initiative that Tash created. She's another person who creates groups when she feels a specific need. So she creates them around a theme or a question. She put together a group of people – eight of us there are – to examine death in order to live life more fully or with more positivity and Helen and I were in that 'club' with Tash, meeting once a month. Helen and I live in Bristol but everyone else lives in Dursley. However, Tash, Helen and myself have been meeting once a week on Zoom to discuss what's come up in our own work, because we have all managed to keep making things for ourselves. Only very recently have I stopped, which I will go into in a minute (and that in itself is going to be a challenge).

So, Helen Tash and myself have grown very close through this period of extremes and we've been very frank with each other about the challenges which each of us are facing. We've drawn a lot of support from each other and I'm terribly lucky to have them. And just in time because I moved to Bristol seven years ago and I have found it very hard to make good friends, coming down from Liverpool, which is where I was before.

So those are the three groups I've been connected to and now I'm building a connection with the online seminar group which happens every Thursday. It's open to absolutely any artist who wants to get involved, through TAPS, which is also known as The Artist Project Space. So that's giving me access to a whole other peer group of artists about my age I reckon.

Next on this list – number two - is fostering wellness, which could be divided into looking after your body and looking after your mind. In terms of looking after my body, my mum, bless her, 78, stepped straight into the fray and she offered to run Pilates every other morning for twenty minutes. Myself and my daughter, whom I'm in isolation with, have been doing that throughout. On the day between we've been doing the 0 – 5k challenge or Couch to 5k, I think it's called – an NHS app. We're only on Week Five although it is of course week 13. We keep repeating weeks. We don't push ourselves. We just do it. The

reason these have been so good is that they create a sense of purpose, they create a sense of pride and they've contributed to our endorphin levels, so positive chemicals, all the way through. Which reminds me to talk about negative chemicals. I've been really trying to stay reasonable in terms of consumption of white wine. I'm still on one bottle a week, which I'm quite proud of, although it has been going up.

In terms of looking after one's mind, everybody says 'be mindful'. I didn't really understand what that meant until Lockdown but now I can see that it means being in the present and also having the ability to refocus on the positive. What I've been doing to do that is reconnecting with our tiny little garden. It's not beautiful and it's not clever in any way, our garden, but it has given me enormous joy and real proper solace because I totally zone out when I'm in it.

So, let's move on now to 'Finding a Purpose' which, for me, is learning. I thought I was going to learn Spanish in Lockdown and also how to use social media with more effectiveness. Hell, I haven't done those things of course! Instead I've learnt enough to keep that Press Play course going and I've learnt a lot about what it takes to operate online, on Zoom principally. More recently I've volunteered to be on the steering committee at The Garage so I'm learning about the people on that committee and that project. And I've applied to be part of the BRICKS – Reaching Resilience in Bristol project. Although I haven't heard back from that yet so perhaps that's something I'm going to have to be resilient about, i.e. a rejection. I feel ok about that. Currently.

Tash said, vis à vis looking for opportunities for self-discovery, which very much comes under this learning and finding purpose thing, Tash said even if you don't find time to work, why don't you start recording how you feel about the situation you're in. So, I've started doing free writing at the start of every day just to keep in contact with myself I guess. Because while I've managed to remain on an even keel throughout these twelve or thirteen weeks, other people around me have not, which brings me onto another area of learning. I've learnt a lot about anxiety and stress and emetophobia and early onset OCD. That's a lot of learning crammed into a small space I can tell you. Which brings us straight onto number four: embracing healthy thoughts.

I've tried very hard to keep things in perspective. I've tried very hard to accept change even though it's been thrust upon me and I resent it like hell. I've tried very hard to maintain a healthy outlook and I'm only managing that because I'm taking every half hour as it comes. I mean that. I don't mean every day or every week. I'm literally in the half hour. And I'm looking back at my own past and all the shit that I've ridden and I'm thinking 'You've got this Emma, you can do this.' Which brings us rather neatly I think onto point number five, which is seeking professional help.

What if I haven't got this and what if I can't do it? Or what if the people around me haven't got it or they can't do it? Well then I will seek professional help.

If I'm honest I wasn't surprised by the findings of that Yale study. It seems an obvious thing to say but artists are in the business of self-expression as are composers, choreographers

and directors and self-expression is exposing. It has the potential to make you vulnerable, it leaves you vulnerable. You are out there.

Sadly, I've had to stop making the big clay platters I've been making for the time-being at least because their subject matter is too close for comfort. It's as though they were predicting what was going to happen next in my small family and now is not the time. But I'm not worried because I'm imaginative so I can come up with multiple ways forward and be flexible about how I go forward and I'm not panicking about my practice and the relationship with that either because the umbilical cord between myself and it is very strong, I've been working on it for years. Something will come up. I will probably go back to making something very process-led and see where that takes me. I hope it doesn't just bring me back in a circle and dump me where I am now.

If you're interested in any of the resources I've mentioned in this wee talk I'm going to publish a list of links for you and I'll somehow link it to this film. Also, if you think you might be someone I could be collaborating with or you'd like to collaborate with me or work with me in any way please get in touch. You can do that through the emmagregory website or through Instagram: @emmagregorymakes.

Good luck to all of you and have a good summer, what remains of it, in whatever way you can.

If you're listening to this you have self-selected as a creative and it is your creativity that's going to get you through. I believe in that.

Bye.

Links referenced above:

Mind website:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>

NHS website

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>

Artists' Newsletter's Covid-19 impact study:

<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/covid-19-impact-survey-a-stark-reminder-of-precarity-in-the-arts/>

A short introduction to the Yale study:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creativity-the-art-and-science/202004/the-apparent-paradox-creativity>

The Yale study:

Ivcevic, Z., Grossman, E., & Ranjan, A. (2020). *Patterns of psychological vulnerabilities and resources in artists and nonartists*. Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340612764_Patterns_of_psychological_vulnerabilities_and_resources_in_artists_and_nonartists

Artist Support Pledge:

Instagram @artistsupportpledge

Matthew Burrows:

www.matthewburrows.org

Keith Tyson:

<https://keithtyson.com>

Isolation Art School:

<https://www.instagram.com/isolationartschool/?hl=en>

About Press Play:

<https://www.spikeprintstudio.org/courses/1-year-press-play-4/>

About Tash MacVoy:

<https://www.natashamacvoy.com>

About The Garage (in Clifton, contact = Helen Acklam):

<https://atthegarage.co.uk>

TAPS – aka The Artists’ Project Space, online seminars at 1pm every Thursday:

<https://theartistprojectspace.com>

How to access UWE’s Wellbeing Services if you are already registered:

<https://www.uwe.ac.uk/life/health-and-wellbeing/get-wellbeing-support/contact-us>

How to access UWE’s Wellbeing Services if you’re a new student, i.e. how to register:

<https://www.uwe.ac.uk/life/health-and-wellbeing/get-wellbeing-support/wellbeing-service/register-with-the-wellbeing-service>