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Reflective practice on land and sea!

Four seasons of outdoor group supervision

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Introduction

"All important ideas must include the trees, the mountains and the rivers. To understand many things you must reach out of your own condition". These lines from the poem 'Leaves and blossoms along the way' by Mary Oliver (2014, p. 18) seem appropriate to begin this piece. I have been reaching out to the land and sea and all that dwells within them for many years, both personally, and professionally as a psychotherapist and supervisor. Over the last ten years I have explored stepping outside the usual frame of the therapy room. I have worked outdoors with one-to-one clients and supervisees, and I have facilitated many outdoor ecotherapy workshops. Working indoors or online we cannot separate ourselves from the living breathing planet. Therefore, the tree-hugging, bird-loving part of me is integrated into all aspects of my professional life!

Detail on my supervisory philosophy and some of the theoretical foundations underpinning the development of my eco-supervision practice can be seen elsewhere (Hanrahan, 2024). To set the scene for this article I would like to highlight that there is an increased recognition, in recent literature, of the importance of viewing therapy and supervision through an ecological lens. Hawkins and McMahon (2020, p.107) suggest a wider perspective in supervision to include:

the ecology of the 'more-than-human' which is shared by all parties. The need for a healthy awareness of the ecosystem is increasingly important and is likely to grow in importance over the coming years, as is the mourning for what we are losing, as the environment around us becomes more degraded, volatile and in crisis.

With this in mind, in 2023 I envisioned a creative way to engage with group supervision that included body, movement and place. At this point I had only ever done one-to-one supervision. I had never held a supervision group, let alone been the supervisor of a group outdoors, but I had plenty of other outdoor experience and felt called to try it. I decided to form a group who would meet monthly in a hybrid fashion. This would involve online sessions, including natural reflection, and once every season we would meet in the outdoors in County Clare in the west of Ireland. The group

consisted of three supervisees, all psychotherapists, and me. While one of my supervisees lived reasonably nearby the other two drove approximately two hours each way to attend our outdoor sessions. I chose two different areas of one site to hold our nature supported supervision. One was a quiet wood, and the other was in a glen with a river running through it and a public walkway. Our outdoor sessions were two and a half hours each, while our online ones were one and a half hours. All three supervisees attended every session and were very committed to our year's work.

In this article I will give an outline of, and some reflection on, the experience of the outdoor seasonal component of my work with this group. I have given my supervisees flower pseudonyms.

Summer

The first outdoor seasonal session we embraced together was Summer. Full of promise, magic and childhood memories, we met in May in the 'woods'. It was a beautiful bright day. Sunlight bounced off the newly-leafed trees, their splendour replacing that of the bluebells, whose dancing heads had just faded. I chose this quiet, empty part of the site for our group to have space to land into this new way of working.

We gave time to arriving silently into place, exploring our sense of safety in our bodies, and setting intentions. As we sat in a small clearing on a fallen tree trunk and camp chairs, I offered ideas to my supervisees about how they could 'bring' the parts of their practice they wanted to focus on in the session. Movement in connection with the environment in the form of mime was one, engaging with the environment to connect with symbolism and creativity was another, or simply, talking through a case, or dilemma with their clinical work.

The first supervisee, Daisy, said she straight away had her eye on a rock; "the elephant in the room" which represented the heaviness of the work with a particular client. A leaf reminded her of the light, relational, processing side of the client and a stick was all that had been "stirred up" by the therapeutic process. After some reflection on her work with this client I encouraged her to pick up the rock, which she had initially barely moved and only glanced under. This helped



her to explore the "murky underneath" and deepen her awareness of her own process around this client.

A second supervisee, Lily, told us about a client she had seen outdoors and she wondered about some challenges she had encountered. I am an ecopsychologist but I was becoming aware that simply relaying my experience would not be the best way to foster learning and growth in this forum. I was acutely aware that my role as a supervisor was not the same as workshop facilitator. I was cautious not to fall into advice giving and had also been encouraging the other group members to try to hold back on doing the same. Instead I hoped to approach our work with curiosity. When it comes to outdoor practice I feel there is no right and wrong way, and that each eco-therapist needs to find their own rhythm, guided by their client and the more-than-human 'wild team' (Fortina Santin 2024) around them. I wondered how best to work with Lily's piece.

While I tried to navigate my unease about handling the formative part of supervision in a way that prioritised Lily's agency, embodied learning and reflected my own developing approach to group eco-supervision, something in the environment was also calling my attention. From my viewpoint, but still out of view of the group, I could see a class from the local Steiner primary school and a couple of their teachers approaching. While I had met some children with teachers before in this part of the woods they were usually busy with activities and my own work with one-to-one clients/supervisees felt safely contained.

This time, however, we soon found ourselves in the middle of a birthday party. Children skipped and played around us, with a couple even jumping between us over the fallen

tree we were sitting on! I was aware of myself becoming increasingly dysregulated but managed to breathe into it and stay present.

Rose chose to present her client via mime – attracting some interested attention from the children, who had since moved out of our immediate space. Telling one of us how to behave as her, the therapist, she acted out her client. Playfully skipping, flicking her hair, hiding behind trees, sometimes fully and other times peeping out, she approached us at times and then moved away. Finally she approached rubbing her hair vigorously. This felt like a powerful piece for all of us to witness. After ensuring Rose de-rolled and came back to herself she was visibly moved, identifying that she now felt like she had a much greater understanding of her client. With the noise from the children now getting louder, I decided to move to a quieter space where we could process what was happening for Rose in her work with this client. She also completed this presentation with a movement which seemed appropriate for her in the present.

After this session I had a lot to process. Things had certainly not gone according to plan. While I had navigated the children's arrival into the space as well as I could, I wondered how my supervisees had experienced it. As I reflected on the session as a whole I was really struck by the fact that each of the supervisees presented something that was related to a difficulty or an obstacle they had in connecting to a client. It seemed as if we had had a live enactment of that experience as we worked on the clinical material through the unavoidable distraction of the children's presence.

In the next session, which was online, I gave some time to review our first outdoor experience. The supervisees seemed to have gained a depth of experiential learning. They agreed with my observations about the children creating a form of parallel process between the obstacles they were presenting related in their work and my difficulties in attempting to connect fully with them. However, their feedback suggested they had felt held and not disturbed by the children's invasion, so I came to the second session more relaxed and with a much looser structure in mind.

Autumn

Our next outdoor session was on a bright September day as the leaves began to fall. I decided to bring our work to another part of the site along the riverbank.

Despite having quite a tight structure and plan for the first outdoor session, I had been thrown by the children arriving in the space. My outdoor practice over the years had taught me that the environment could send anything my way and to welcome this as part of the process. My dysregulation around my lack of control seemed to mostly stem from the fact that this was my first outdoor group supervision and part of me needed to appear like I had everything in hand! However, given the positive feedback from my supervisees and my own reflections, I was open to just seeing what emerged in the second outdoor session.

We started our time together as we walked in pairs to our sit spot with a suggested chat theme of autumn and thresholds. I chose a place for us to sit by the side of the river and just off the riverside pathway. While we were in view of walkers, a



fallen tree between us and the pathway seemed to provide us with a sense of security and safety to explore and reflect in confidence.

After we had our check in it was agreed that Lily, Rose and Daisy would wander a little with the theme of thresholds and their practice in mind and gather offerings from the environment that they felt drawn to. They returned with leaves, conkers, twigs and flowers. Daisy and Rose lay their pieces on the earth while Lily arranged hers in a bouquet. What struck me was that this slowing down and connecting with our surroundings, on this occasion, brought all three into personal rather than professional reflection. While Daisy had had a recent bereavement, the theme of loss, change, grief and letting go was common to all. Tears were welcomed and Lily's bouquet, which she described as a bouquet of things that she wanted to let go of, was set afloat down the river.

When we had worked through this symbolic piece I realised we still had an hour to go and I had a moment of wondering how I would keep things going. Again I learned that I didn't need to do anything except get out of my own way and see what happened.

As we spent time with ourselves, each other and place there seemed to be a real sense of comfort and trust developing in the group. While some practice related topics came in, as we sat under falling leaves it was nature, the seasons and all that it teaches us about the cycle of life and death that was with us as we continued to explore the fragility of life.

I was reminded of a line from the song 'On Raglan Road' by Patrick Kavanagh which is close to my own heart, and myself and Rose sang it together to close our circle.

"And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day".

Winter

Our winter session was held in November and yet again our little group was blessed with a beautiful bright day. Under crisp blue skies, with some consultation we decided to go back to the spot where we had held our autumn session. The short walk there was a delight with the pathway being a complete blanket of multi-coloured leaves. Getting to our sit spot was the beginning of the session, so I again suggested a theme for our paired walk and talk. The Celtic festival of 'Samhain' and our experiences past and present of this time of year and stepping into winter seemed appropriate.

After setting up our camp stools and sharing a little of our conversations I invited them to, like each of our other sessions, take some solo time to connect with themselves and the land. This time there was no real prompt bar to see what was calling them in the environment as they gradually arrived into their bodies. I didn't ask them to gather items on this occasion.

Daisy returned with a number of leaves and twigs. Arranging them before us she had great energy as she explained that something had *"happened out there"* and it brought a client to mind that she had not planned on talking about. She started into her presentation. While I usually would check in with the others about what they wanted to bring and decide on a rough time schedule, I decided not to interrupt Daisy's natural flow. The natural pieces, or 'wild team' that had spoken to Daisy provided a depth of meaning and symbolism to her and really helped her explore aspects of this client along with her own projections onto the therapeutic process. In an easy and present way we all offered our observations without giving advice. Daisy mentioned that while wandering she had seen muddy water and had a sense that fitted with this piece of work. Before finishing I invited her to put her hands in the muddy water. This, she felt was a "good call" and completed this embodied supervision experience.

Rose, next showed us the treasures that had caught her eye. These helped her reflect on her practice, stage of her career and changes she wanted to make. During Lily's solo time she had noticed a sign on the pathway saying 'Danger: Caution beyond this point'. She had decided to go past the sign up on an embankment looking down on the river and there she delighted in the warmth of sunlight out of the shade of the riverbank trees. This experience brought her own process around challenge into her awareness, along with a client, who had been avoiding challenge and suppressing his anger. Movement in Lily's body was obvious as she described her frustrations about this client. Rose suggested throwing a stick into the river but Lily decided a rock seemed better. We passed the rock around the group and felt its weight before Lily flung it into the gushing water. It felt like we were doing something for Lily's client, and we held in our awareness that he was not yet ready to go past what he perceived as a danger sign.

We finished our session with one more short solo stroll and supervisees were encouraged to reflect on what they would like to nurture, metaphorically what seeds they would like to germinate over the winter for themselves professionally. With great enthusiasm all three shared ideas that were

beginning to take root. This ended another very fulfilling group supervision session.

Spring

We completed our year-long work together with a Spring outdoor session in February 2024. This closing session focused on ritual and thanksgiving. We walked to our adopted spot by the river again. We reflected on our time together, the clients we had brought to the group, and the place that had held us in our personal and professional exploration. This was not just a closing of our group but an important time to honour the environment that had welcomed us. We brought awareness to the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. We lit candles and laid new daffodils from my garden on the wet, rain-sodden leaf carpet. I brought water from a local holy well. Now devoted to St Bridgit, this well, in the village of Liscannor, predates Christianity and is a place of worship at the beginning of spring and the Celtic festival of Imbolc.

When we had finished our goodbyes to the trees, river and all our more than human hosts, our group drove to the nearby beach for our planned final nature immersion. Over the course of the year I had realised that two of the three supervisees occasionally engaged in winter sea- or lake-swimming and the third seemed open to try it. As a year-round sea-dipper myself I had a sense that this may be a fun and ritualistic way of taking our final steps together. In a similar vein to the indigenous rites of passage our coming out of the water would symbolise the newness of what we would bring back into our practices. So, celebrating our year together we moved from land to sea and jumped screeching and laughing into the freezing cold waves of the Atlantic! What a joyful delight to close our year of connection.

Conclusion

This creative hybrid group supervision felt like a truly meaningful and worthwhile experience. The nature supported supervision was, obviously, the highlight. From the beginning I was eager to avoid getting into giving advice or too much information about my experience of ecopsychotherapy practice. As I had hoped, just by holding the group outdoors the supervisees had enjoyed experiential learning about outdoor practice. They noticed their own nervous system regulation, and dysregulation in

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relation to the environment. They navigated boundaries associated with working in public places and interestingly were able to bring their own vulnerabilities and tears too, despite passers-by.

Slowing down and really giving time to connect with self, others and all in the environment was fundamental. Our beautiful surroundings felt like a rich cushioning, ever changing blanket. Held in her embrace we made meaning, let go, grieved, moved through, grew, learned lessons, noticed safety in our bodies, connected with unconscious material and saw with new eyes. Shared experience in the outdoors, I feel, enhanced bonds and trust in the group. Also, over the time there was an increased sense that the group were respecting the reciprocal relationship with nature. Through feeling embedded in the more-than-human world, they had the embodied experience of being part of, not separate from, the greater ecosystem. As Lily so beautifully reflected our years' experience was *"bookended by bluebells and daffodils"* and we all felt enriched by it. Rose's written feedback summed up the feedback received from the others:

I felt you offered a unique supervisory experience through immersion in nature. The outdoor sessions were held in such a beautiful place and despite it being outdoors I really felt totally safe and held by the group. I loved the use of the changing seasons through the cycle of spring to the following spring; the changing environment; the symbolism of growth from birth to death as a metaphor and a means for reflection on our practice. I loved using nature's bounty of rocks, trees, river, leaves, sticks, flowers etc as a means of expression. I loved the readings and the poems. Above all it has confirmed for me the importance of being in nature for self-regulation, something we could embrace as practitioners and share with our clients.

I totally loved our celebratory immersion in the invigorating sea on the last day of the group. We went out with a blast!

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