

## A green referral

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*This is about my journey finding meaning after loss. It is a personal account and though I refer to fellow travellers and facilitators I am speaking from my point of view, and my peers will have their own observations. I have been a teacher, parent, partner, carer (and, many years ago, an artist).*

My normal life's journey ended when I lost a child to suicide towards the end of the pandemic. Since then, I have been 'lost in space'. I have the same name and live in the same place, but the signposts and aspirations I followed have fallen away; redundant. I tried to return to work but seemed to be in a different time-zone or speaking a different language. Near to retirement age, I decided it would be better to put myself and my colleagues out of misery and walk away. (I'm still navigating the finances of 'walking away')!

I did sensible things: my doctor was helpful, I had good friends, but it was all unreal. Frozen and pointless. My doctor suggested a Green Referral. Neither of us had much of an idea what that would be, but what did I have to lose? I was to wait for a text ... instructions followed: beside the 'care bear shop' in Ocean Terminal Edinburgh – It looked busy – a shop (but not a shop) full of people. Walking in was hard. Loads of people, coffee, attempts to direct me to the vaccination centre (which is what strangers usually want, or The Royal Yacht Britannia)! For all that, it felt strangely familiar, an echo from a previous life?

My 'green referral' was met with some confusion (it was weeks later I realised I had mis-read the date and arrived several days early)! Decades ago – in the era of 'arts labs' - I had worked in similar settings. Then I realised this was Artlink. I had known of Artlink since the beginning of my working life in the early 80s. Recently, I had heard of Artlink projects providing destinations for young neuro-diverse adults. Artlink projects are established in many hospitals and outreach facilities across Edinburgh and the Lothians, but this felt different. I wasn't a worker, I wasn't responsible and could not see the limits or pressures of the organisation. I was simply swept along on a generous tide of amazement that something so open ended, free, welcoming and trusting still existed. In today's world, how can that be? It took me a few weeks to attend regularly.

I usually attend twice a week, and there are also random trips to galleries, theatres, bird watching/drawing trips to East Lothian, visits with other projects. There are between seven and twelve regular members on the days I attend, and between one and many ‘facilitator Artists’ who work across Edinburgh and the Lothians. They are artists, musicians and makers with different interests and areas of expertise. Sometimes we work alongside one another; we listen and are curious - and that’s our name ‘Curious Roots’ (a mental health group). There are other groups with different names across hospitals and communities throughout Britain.

There are twelve projects on the website for Edinburgh and the Lothians. These differ in size and venue; they have health funding and collaborate with other creative organisations across the city: Care for Carers, The Book Trust, Creative Scotland, to name a few. Each project creates and presents its work in pop-up galleries and community spaces, presentation is professional and aspires to establish working links for any participant wishing to enter the community/working/learning world through their creativity. Each group is like a portal – leading to other groups and events. <https://www.artlinkedinburgh.co.uk>

I was a teacher, on and off, for about forty years. Art trained, I had not made my own work for at least thirty years. I had worked extensively with learning disabled and neurodivergent young people but was burnt out; the wrong age in the wrong place. Making art was not on my agenda. Art felt like a long-discarded part of my youth. I could appreciate art and it informed my life and choices, but I did not want to make or be an artist, or anything really. That first day, there ‘just happened’ to be some wood-cutting tools and chisels. I was surrounded by other makers who were using fabric, ceramics, collage and drawing materials. There was a friendly interest but also an awareness of the need for space.

I cut into the prepared black painted wood and a golden line began. I held my breath, turned the wood – it was like a dance, peering into the surface and myself, looking for a thread of direction. It was really satisfying, making curves. You could even hear the soft, slightly gritty cut of the golden rings of smooth wood grown through seasons of temperate weather, then the knotty resistant bits slowing the flow of the cut. I was lost, in something not me. Initially, I had planned to make a woodcut and some prints (and that might still happen) but I have been distracted by the in-between world of two and three dimensions – so what would have been the woodblock is now the piece. Touch, learning to use and care for tools, source wood: the

physical realities of this medium have helped establish new habits. When I look, I see differently; in layers and patterns. I have included a photo of what I call my practice block - like a sketchbook in wood - where I try out and learn different effects and processes.



There is usually music. Food, we bring and sometimes share. Curiosity is shared between us: what we make, and how, a focus beyond oneself. A good way to get tired. Negotiating space is an interesting part of being here. We currently use an ex-hairdresser's shop (it still has the tipped chairs for hair washing!). Some people have established regular workspaces and corners, materials piled or stored neatly. Some of us float around as space appears. There is a sensitivity to working practice. We watch each other as we become immersed in the process, or finish what has been a big project sometimes over many months and then rest-talk-play and explore. Artists working with us have different materials and skills: using a tufting gun, an angle grinder sewing machine, plaster, wax, chisels or internet (photo shop) and the logistics of showing work.

The most refreshing part of being here is the apparent lack of a plan and time schedule. Despite this, there are continual exhibitions of work, sometimes highlighting individuals or a group response. Our current space is half exhibition space/half studio. Group members are consistent. Some have been involved for a few years, some for decades. As artists, we are varied. Some participants find this an introduction to the art world, moving on to full-time professional study. Others use it to gain skills and working relationships based on production. Others come because they like working outside of the house in a different community. There is an informality here which engenders a feeling of possibility and mutual acceptance.

As an organisation, Artlink re-presents to the community, stretching participants' images of who they are and what they can do, while making alongside others. It feels like a natural process to be part of this. If I compare it to things I have known, such as teaching, I can see there are probably similarities, but the pathway appears uncluttered by a need for evidence. I watch as we learn what we need at the time (this can be using a sewing machine in a particular way or making a mould or cutting wood) or the logistics of showing work. There is group learning and transmission of how to do things, I wonder if it is more like some of the learning we do as children in the home and in the community.

I have come from a background where everything was measured in words before it was made; intentions and outcomes clearly marked. This is obviously necessary for formal learning, leading to eventual mastery, responsibility and work. But, in retrospect, this can be a very narrow experience. I feel (can't prove) a lot of pearls are lost along the way.

Still musing on these different processes and pathways I watched a programme on TV (The Magic of Mushrooms- BBC 4 <https://www.bbc.co.uk>) about fungi which exist between plants, and improve the transfer of nutrients between soil itself and the host plant. The finished piece of work, the fruit of the host plant and 'the mushroom', is just the tip of the iceberg in a web of nurture and communication; well, that is how this appears to be. It's a loop that exists for everybody's benefit. When you look at the fungi – its reach is huge – this feels a little similar to the different groups which are like portals to other possibilities. Obviously, I don't want to sound too idealistic: there are one or two fungi who appear to be just as helpful but slowly, very slowly, starve the host plant of water (the honey fungus). Fortunately, these are rare. Scary, though. I wouldn't want to end up in one of those groups!

The members of our group are all adults: probably late twenties to eighties, mixed sexes and diverse ethnicities. Some found the project through a Care for Carers experience or responded to a call for artists for a one-off show. Mostly, we thought this was something we would do for a short period of time. In today's world, where the short quick fix has become the norm, this project is unusual: as long 'as a piece of string'. People come and go, sometimes self-referring again after years.

Artlink directed me towards a community that wanted a carving/plaque as a commemoration, Then members of my family and friends wanted things made. A potential workload gathers. It feels possible to imagine a different rhythm to my life. I still and will always suffer the loss of our child and our family as it used to be, should be. It is still a daily walk beside a chasm but, for me, there is now a rope bridge across that space (I like to think this is made up of the thin white tendrils of fungi). The bridge looks so fragile but is resilient and flexible: the result of new friendships, learning and the ambition to make more - to go forward - which has come from a Green Referral.