

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

DAPHNE LOADS

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I'd been meaning to do something different for a while. Pottery or assertiveness, or maybe join a choir: I wasn't sure. So, when I saw the newspaper advertisement I was tempted.

“Mindfulness and Wild Swimming. Learn how to process feelings of anxiety and abandonment. Overcome the pain of not being given space and not being listened to. Deal with disappointment and sudden scary things. Move away from other people's versions of events and connect with your own experience. Compassionate listening, hot tea, cold water swimming and Wim Hof Movement. Meet by the promenade steps at Burgh Beach at 7.30 pm. Josie will be carrying a bright blue beach bag.”

I took a bus down to the coast. I must admit I was nervous. My swimsuit had gone a bit lumpy and grey over the years. So had I. And I wasn't sure if the water was clean. They used to say people don't swim at Burgh Beach, they just go through the motions. And I'm not very good with the cold. Anyway, I saw a group of women with bags standing on the promenade, so I asked them if they were waiting for a swim. They said no, they were waiting for a Chinese takeaway, and did I want to join them? I could have murdered a special fried rice, but I decided to stick to my plan. In any case I wasn't sure if they were friendly, or just drunk.

I spent ages searching up and down the beach, looking out for a bright blue bag, but Josie didn't have it with her this week as she hadn't bothered to bring the portable stove for the campfire. By the time I found the group, sitting in a circle on the damp sand, sharing had already begun. Josie told us about her tattoo. Then she told us about her sister-in-law's tattoo. After that there wasn't any more time for sharing, so we all went into the sea.

Shivering and shrieking, we stepped into the waves. Josie told us to be mindful. Then she told us about her gas boiler that's on the blink. Apparently, the thermostat has gone but she's not paying for a new one. Not after what happened last time.

Bliss. The water was cold and beautiful, and the sky was pomegranate- and mango-coloured.

Warm and comfy again in dry-robies and bobble hats, we sat in a circle with our eyes closed. Some passers-by must have been staring because Josie shouted, "Yes? Can I help you?" Then I thought it was time for sharing again, but she took out a golden bowl and whacked it hard with a stick: startled dogs barked and scattered; children cried.

There was no tea. Josie told us she had baked apple turnovers especially for us, with delicious apples from her garden. But they got burned when the Amazon man came to the door unexpectedly, so she handed round half a packet of Rich Tea instead. She asked how it had been for us, and we all said "Amazing."

The next day we got an email message:

"Remember our cosy campfire and the vastness and beauty of Mother Nature surrounding us on the beach. Close your eyes now and allow the feelings to come back."

I don't think I had a Wim Hof Movement, but it's hard to tell. I'm not sure Josie was really cut out for mindfulness. Perhaps her mind is a bit too full. So, I signed up for an extra-mural course, which I thought might be outdoors. As it happened, "Experimental Writing" was held in a basement in one of the University buildings. There were about eight of us. We arrived mostly sweaty and nervous about being late. The room had been hard to find. "Is this experimental writing?" "Yes". The tutor gave nothing away. With his leather jacket and his shaved head, he was making no concessions. No "Don't worry, we haven't started yet." No "Just take a seat and relax." No tea, biscuits, unconditional positive regard. Nothing.

He announced that the first writing exercise would take place in the dark. “No! You can’t do that! You haven’t made safe boundaries.” I was screaming, but silently. He switched off the light. He waited. He switched the light back on. Then we wrote what had come to us in the darkness. He asked us to read what we had written. Out loud. No get-out clause. No reassurance that there were no right answers, that we didn’t have to if we chose not to. We did it. It wasn’t bad.

The following week he told us about aleatory writing. That’s where you leave some things to chance. I couldn’t think how you could not leave some things to chance, because you never know how you’re going to feel when you try to write, or if your phone will ring as soon as you start. But he explained you have to do random things like taking someone else’s poem and Tippexing out every third word. Someone didn’t know what Tippex was, so he said you could also rip it up and put all the pieces in a bag, and then pull them out one by one and copy them down in the order they appeared. He told us David Bowie wrote some of his songs like that.

Week four was antitheticals. You had to take each word or phrase and turn it into its opposite. It was strange, because we were chatting to each other and coming out with things like “What’s the opposite of butter?” which made me laugh.

At the end of the course we had to choose one of the experimental methods and make a new piece of writing. I tore up a printout of Major Tom and put it together again. It turned out weird, but in a good way. I failed the assessment because using Bowie’s words broke the rule of plagiarism, which is a big deal in universities, apparently.

Daphne Loads is a 65 year-old lesbian who loves travelling, gardening, Zumba and trundling round the East Lothian lanes on her tricycle. She is a writer: something she has wanted to be ever since she stopped wanting to be a prima ballerina.

“She can handle a pen.” Arthur Loads, 1969.