

NICOLA LESTER

SILVER LEVEL:

Developing Trauma Informed Practice

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# CHAPTER FOUR:

## FROM DISCONNECTION TO RECONNECTION



# WHAT IS 'CONNECTION'?

*“The energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship”.*

Brené Brown, Atlas of the Heart (2021) p.169



whilst trauma informed practice is not concerned with rescuing, fixing, healing and problem solving, it is about forming connections in this place of darkness so that someone might just be able to reconnect with us, their families and their communities.

To offer 'reconnection' demands that we go beyond connection to first understand the experience of disconnection and isolation. It asks that we start where someone is, rather than where we think they are or should be or where we want them to be.

When someone becomes separated we rarely find them where they were left, instead we often have to travel further to retrieve them and to accept that the way back may take longer than we imagined.

# THE QUALITIES OF RECONNECTION

Kindness

Compassion

Empathy

Withholding judgement and extending acceptance

Bearing witness and holding space

Story stewardship

Understanding, curiosity and humility

Creativity

Commitment and courage



# KINDNESS

Kindness is our superpower. When our intentions are grounded in kindness our capacity for connection is limitless. Kindness knows no bounds and can transcend our differences in class, race, gender, ethnicity, political views and social circumstances.

Defined by the qualities of:

- Friendliness
- Generosity
- Thoughtfulness

“Nothing beats kindness”

said the horse.

“It sits quietly beyond all  
things”.

Charlie Mackesy (2014) The boy, the mole, the fox and horse

# COMPASSION

Defined literally as 'to suffer with'.

Compassion requires us to acknowledge and pay attention to the pain and anguish that someone may be experiencing and to respond and take action, even if the action is simply to sit and remain present so that they are not alone.

Compassion differs from other terms such as sympathy, pity, concern, condolence, sensitivity, tenderness, commiseration, even empathy in its demand for action.



# EMPATHY

Empathy is a tool of compassion, an emotional skill which enables us to understand what someone is experiencing and to reflect back that understanding.

As with compassion, empathy cannot occur at a distance and is only true empathy when we make a commitment to be present and bear witness through listening and hearing, seeing and seeking to understand, curiosity and humility.



# MYTHS OF EMPATHY

*“We need to dispel the myth that empathy is ‘walking in someone else’s shoes.’  
Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to learn to listen to the story you tell  
about what it’s like in your shoes and believe you even when it doesn’t match  
my experiences”.*

Brené Brown (2021) p.122 ‘Atlas of the Heart’

# WITHHOLDING JUDGEMENT AND EXTENDING ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance in place of judgement allows us to focus on what is, rather than what is not and perhaps most importantly to ask what's 'right' with someone instead.

Accepting how someone is and who they are is to ensure that they are seen, heard and valued, no matter what.



# STORY STEWARDSHIP

In trauma informed practice we do not need to know 'what's happened' to someone. However, if someone chooses to share their experience we must know how to 'steward' their story, after all there is no greater privilege than being trusted with this.

Key skills in story stewardship include:

- Listening and taking the time to 'hear' what someone is sharing with us
- Being curious, asking questions and seeking to understand (checking)
- Affirming and validating
- Believing (in trauma informed practice, it is not your intention to verify). The only truth is that which belongs to the person telling their story.



# UNDERSTANDING, CURIOSITY AND HUMILITY

- Empathy demands understanding which in turn requires us to be curious, ask questions, seek information and above all, to practice humility.
- To accept we may not know, to challenge our judgements and to correct our assumptions.
- In trauma informed practice there is no wounded and no healer.
- We sit beside someone in their darkness as their equal, no matter how experienced we are, in this place, we are learning how to be with them and what they might need.





*Reconnection* needs our ability to work creatively. We must practice beyond the limits which so often constrain our work and *explore new ideas*. We must find new tools, new approaches and learn from each other. We must *stay open, curious and hopeful*.



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Pte Dugos

# COMMITMENT AND COURAGE

*“Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage.”*

*“There is no courage without vulnerability”*

Brené Brown (2021) p.14 ‘Atlas of the Heart’

“What is the bravest thing  
you’ve ever said?”.

“Help” said the horse.

Charlie Mackesy (2014) The boy, the mole, the fox and horse

in trauma informed practice there can be no formula for reconnection, only a collection of the most intrinsic qualities of what it means to be human. The path from disconnection to reconnection will look different for everyone and no two journeys will ever be the same. We are not the guide who knows the way but the companion who joins them to work it out. This needs our kindness and warmth, compassion and empathy, our commitment and creativity, courage and humility. Above all though, it requires our acceptance of both ourselves and who we find there.

# NEAR ENEMIES OF A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH

Behaviours and actions which masquerade as forms of connection but in fact 'undermine' and create disconnection instead. For example:

- Pity and sympathy. Often delivered at a safe distance creating isolation rather than unity. According to Atlas of the Heart, 'pity' in particular comprises of 4 elements which disconnect rather than reconnect (p.120):
  - The suffering person is inferior.
  - A passive and self-focused reaction that does not include providing help.
  - A desire to maintain emotional distance.
  - Avoidance of sharing in the other person's suffering.
- Rescuing, fixing and problem-solving
- Comparison and identification
- Pushing gratitude

The language that we use matters, we can infuse it with kindness and meaning, creating an effect which lasts beyond our work. We can invite collaboration and exploration and test out new descriptors to give voice to thoughts and emotions which have been hidden and suppressed. We can name and claim our stories by paying attention and seeking feedback.

# NOT KNOWING AND SAYING THE 'WRONG' THING

The 'right' approach will take time to cultivate but kindness and compassion will catch us if we misstep and strengthen the relationship instead.





# 'SEE, LOOK, WONDER': PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

Shaun Tan



*'To the world he was a soldier.  
To us, he was our world'.*



Photograph by Derek Eland, 2011

# AN EXAMPLE OF COMPASSION IN PRACTICE

The gift of reconnection takes practice, so  
practice we must.

Shared with kind permission from John Lewis



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Our capacity to offer the gift of reconnection  
is something which all of us possess

**CHAPTER FIVE:**

**CREATIVE TRAUMA  
INFORMED PRACTICE**





# MAKING ART ACCESSIBLE

- Collage (using pictures, magazines, textiles)
- Mark making (swirls, dots, dashes, smudging)
- Using colouring books ('therapeutic colouring')
- Making your own tools (i.e. using sticks to paint)
- Using a non-dominant hand to work (often this alleviates the pressure for perfectionism, after all, it's not your fault if it's 'no good')

## The ingredients of creativity

- Courage
- Enchantment
- Permission
- Persistence
- Trust

Elizabeth Gilbert, 'Big Magic'



# USING ART, ILLUSTRATION AND IMAGERY EXPRESSION

Creating art, taking photographs and using illustrations can initiate conversations or represent emotions, explain feelings or express hope for the future.

Asking someone to select a card from a pack of illustrated postcards and to explain their choice can offer a unique insight into how they are, and where they wish to be.

Equally, encouraging someone to use their phone to take their own photographs to convey their thoughts, views and emotions can create a similar effect whilst prompting further creativity.



# USING WRITING, WORDS AND LANGUAGE

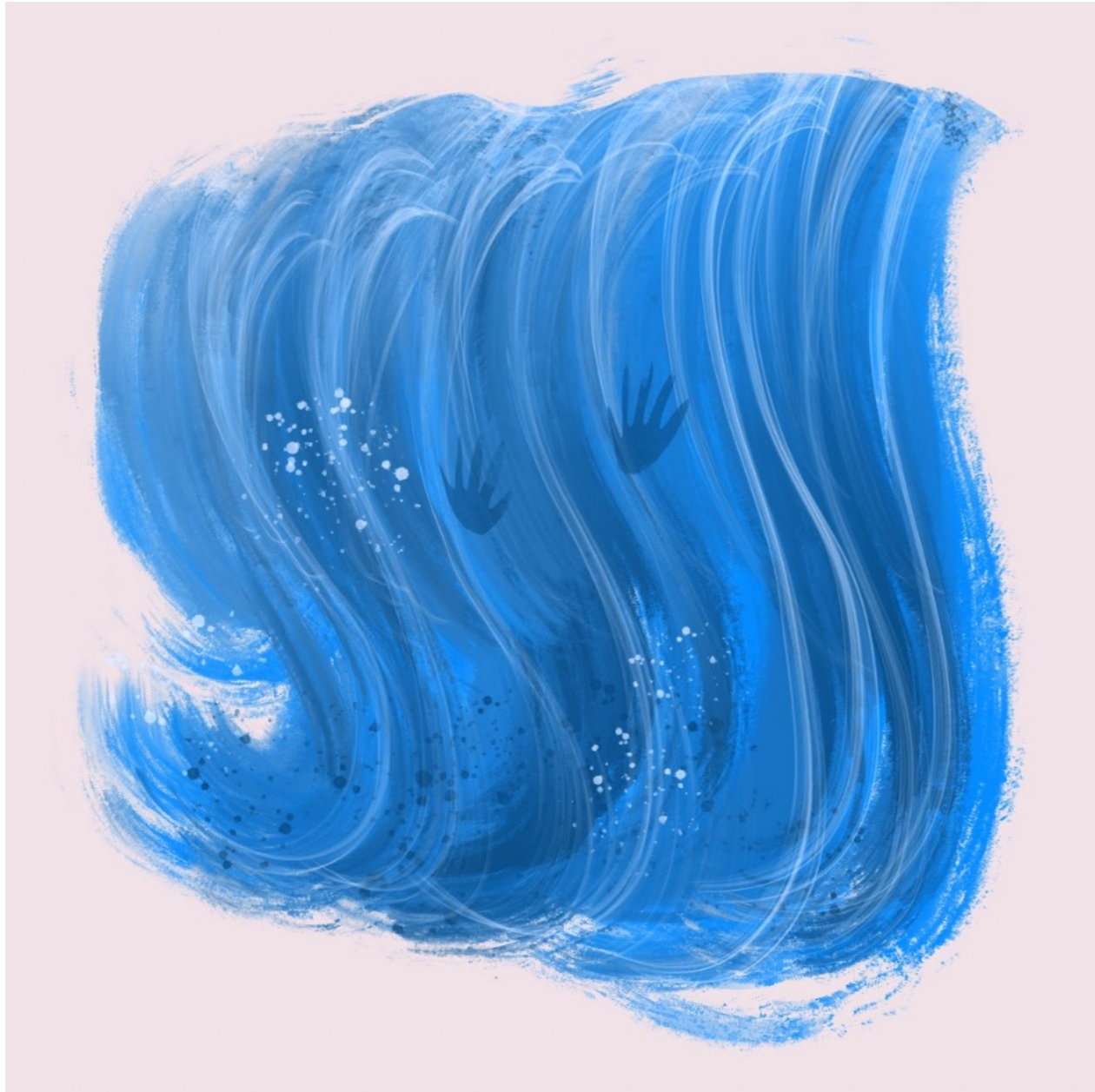
- Free writing
- Letter writing
- Worst, best and most likely scenarios
- Gratitude journals



CREATIVITY IN PRACTICE:  
THE STORY OF A YOUNG  
REFUGEE

Not all creations will showcase positivity or focus on resilience and recovery. Sometimes, what is produced in either art or written form reveals the true extent of the darkness and disconnection that is experienced. Whilst this can make for difficult viewing, it means that someone has been truly heard and seen.

# 'DRAWN TO THE MOMENT': CREATIVITY IN PRACTICE



'Controlling the uncontrollable'

# PLAY

7 properties of play

1. Apparent purposelessness
2. Voluntary nature
3. Inherent attraction
4. Freedom from time
5. Diminished self-consciousness
6. Improvational potential
7. Continual desire

Stuart Brown (2010)



# CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT: DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS

- Over time, as we encounter struggle, stress, adversity and face difficulty and trauma, our jars fill with the residue of these experiences. If we don't empty out these jars, they will only become fuller, narrowing our window of tolerance and creating a risk that they may overflow.
- Understanding how full someone perceives their glass jar to be can be extremely useful in creating a shared language.
- We do not need to know what is in their jars or how it ended up there, only how much is there.
- From here we can start conversations about what might help to empty it out or to ask how tolerable this level feels to them and what might help them to cope with it.







## CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT: MANAGING ANXIETY

### Using 'Worry Dolls'

- The indigenous people from the Highlands in Guatemala created Worry Dolls many generations ago as a remedy for worrying.
- According to legend, children tell their worries to the Worry Dolls, placing them under their pillow when they go to bed at night.
- By morning the dolls have gifted them with the wisdom and knowledge to eliminate their worries.



## CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT: 'WHO IS THERE FOR ME?'

When children, young people and indeed, adults, experience a trauma or loss, they become increasingly isolated and lonely.

This activity is designed to help them to identify those people in their lives who love and care about them.

- Start by asking them to make a list of 7 different people who care about them.
- Choose a different colour thread, yarn or wool for each person on the list.
- Tie these together to create a 'friendship' wristband.

# FACILITATING CONNECTIONS

Anything which strengthens relationships and enhances communication within these groups can be transformative.

For example, spending time watching a film, going for a walk or playing a board game,

Whenever I work with groups I always suggest starting by asking each member to explain to another what they find helpful and what else would help by identifying:

- I like it when you...
- You can help me by...

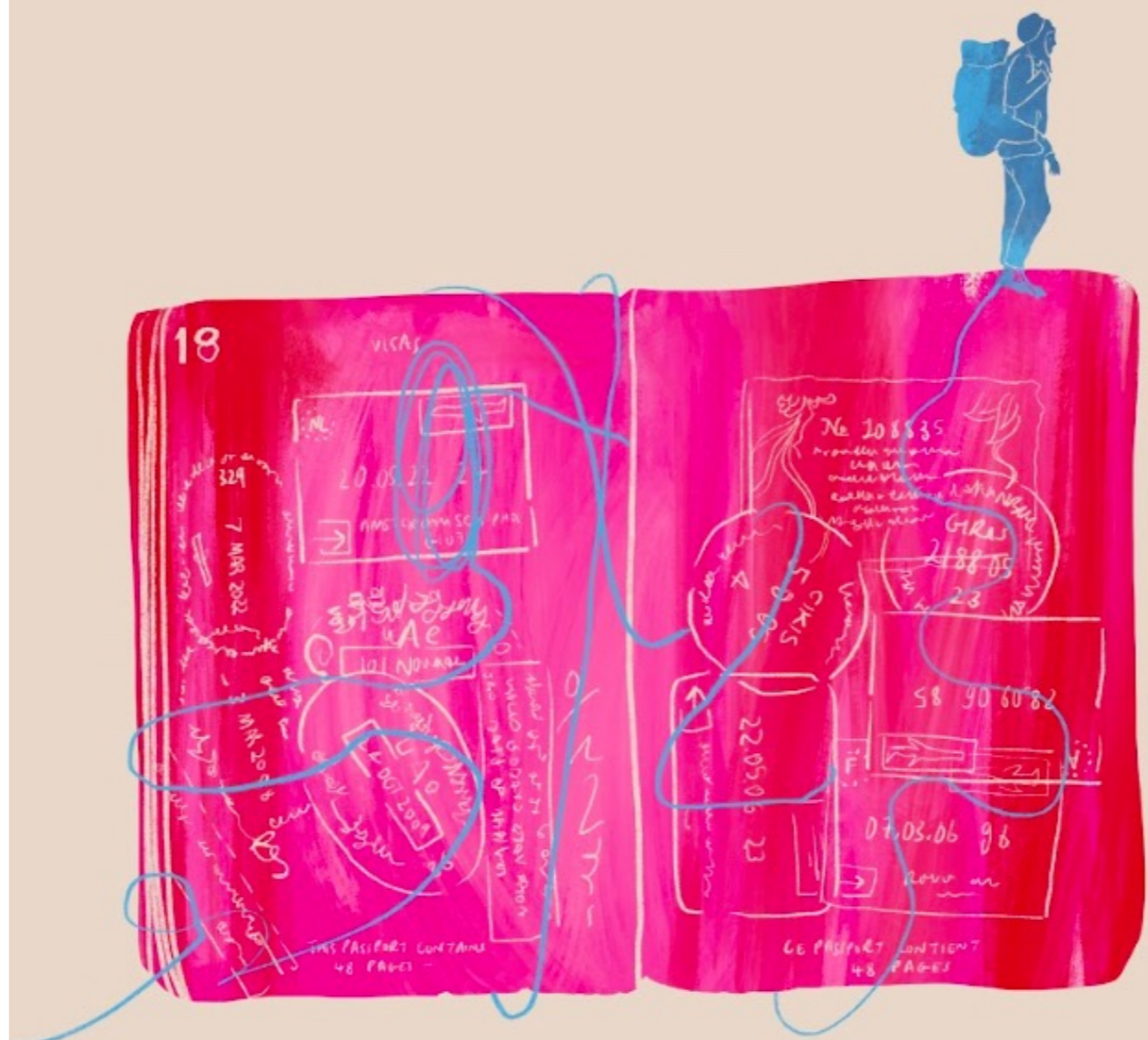


# WORKING WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

- Giving advice and offering reassurance
- Providing information and reminding them they know their child best
- Empower and support
- Ask 'what's right' with their child

# USING THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES

- Engraving stars
- Weighted blankets
- Memory quilts
- 'Trauma informed' brownies
- Illustrated affirmations



A well stamped passport can reflect life's trials,  
But does not represent the final destination.



THIS PROCESS DOES NOT DEFINE YOU.



*You Have MADE it THROUGH.*





It's NOT ME THAT'S BROKEN.



THIS TOO SHALL PASS.



There's more to me than the  
trauma I've experienced.



THIS is not your Fault.  
You are NOT to BLAME.



WHEN there's DARKNESS,  
there will be light Again.



SOMETIMES THE MOUNTAIN SEEMS TOO BIG,  
but WITH EVERY small step you'RE closer  
to THAT beautiful view at the top.



My Life. My Future. I'm in control.



SHine Bright.  
Be YOUR OWN guiding light.





The strength you HAVE inside,  
is Bigger than you think.



WATER your own garden.  
Nourish your own growth.



YOUR SUPERPOWER IS  
BELIEVING THAT YOU CAN.



BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND.



YOUR TRAUMA DOES NOT DEFINE YOU.  
YOU CHOOSE WHAT DEFINES YOU.



Take one day at a time.



YOU ARE SO RESILIENT.



YOUR VOICE MATTERS.





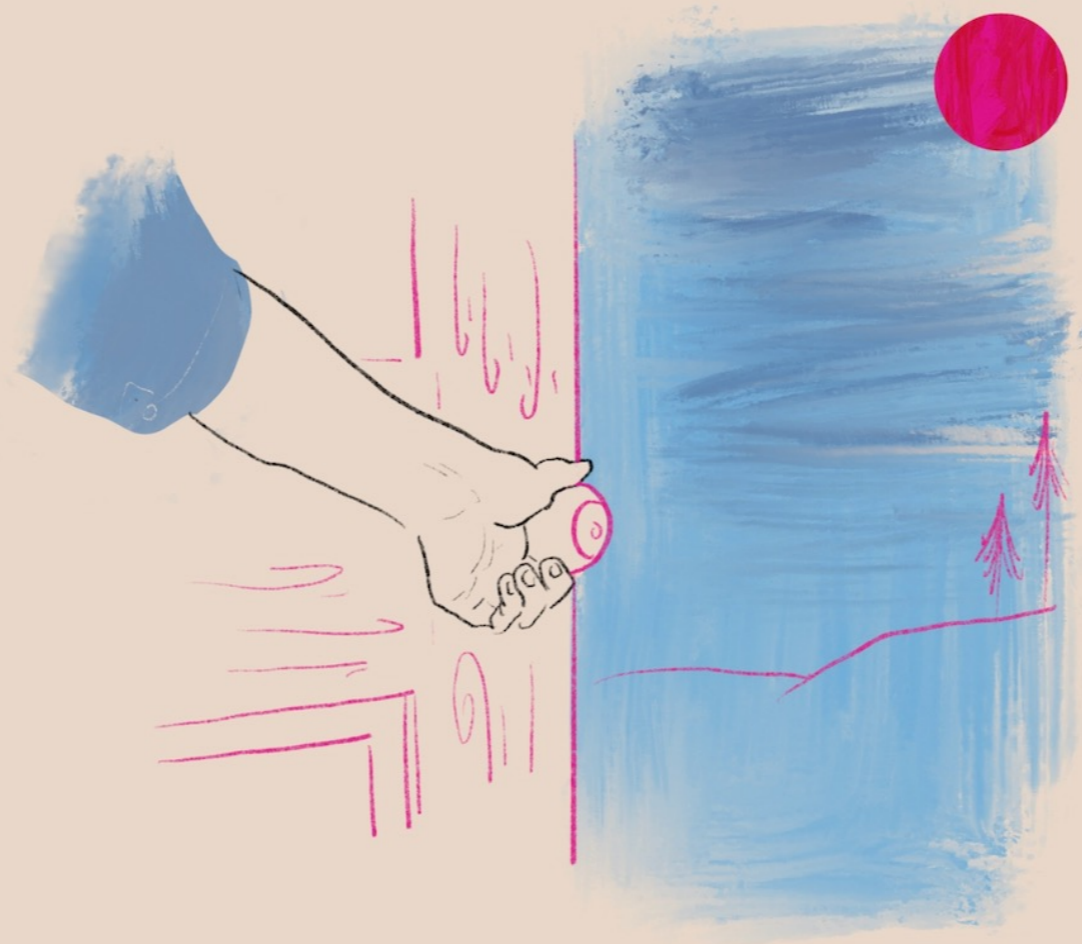
There are other forms of justice.



You are in control of your healing



PEOPLE MAY NOT REMEMBER YOUR WORDS OR  
WHAT YOU DID BUT THEY WILL REMEMBER HOW  
YOU MADE THEM FEEL.



WE KNOW HOW HEAVY THE DOOR IS.  
WE'RE READY, AND WE'RE HERE FOR YOU.



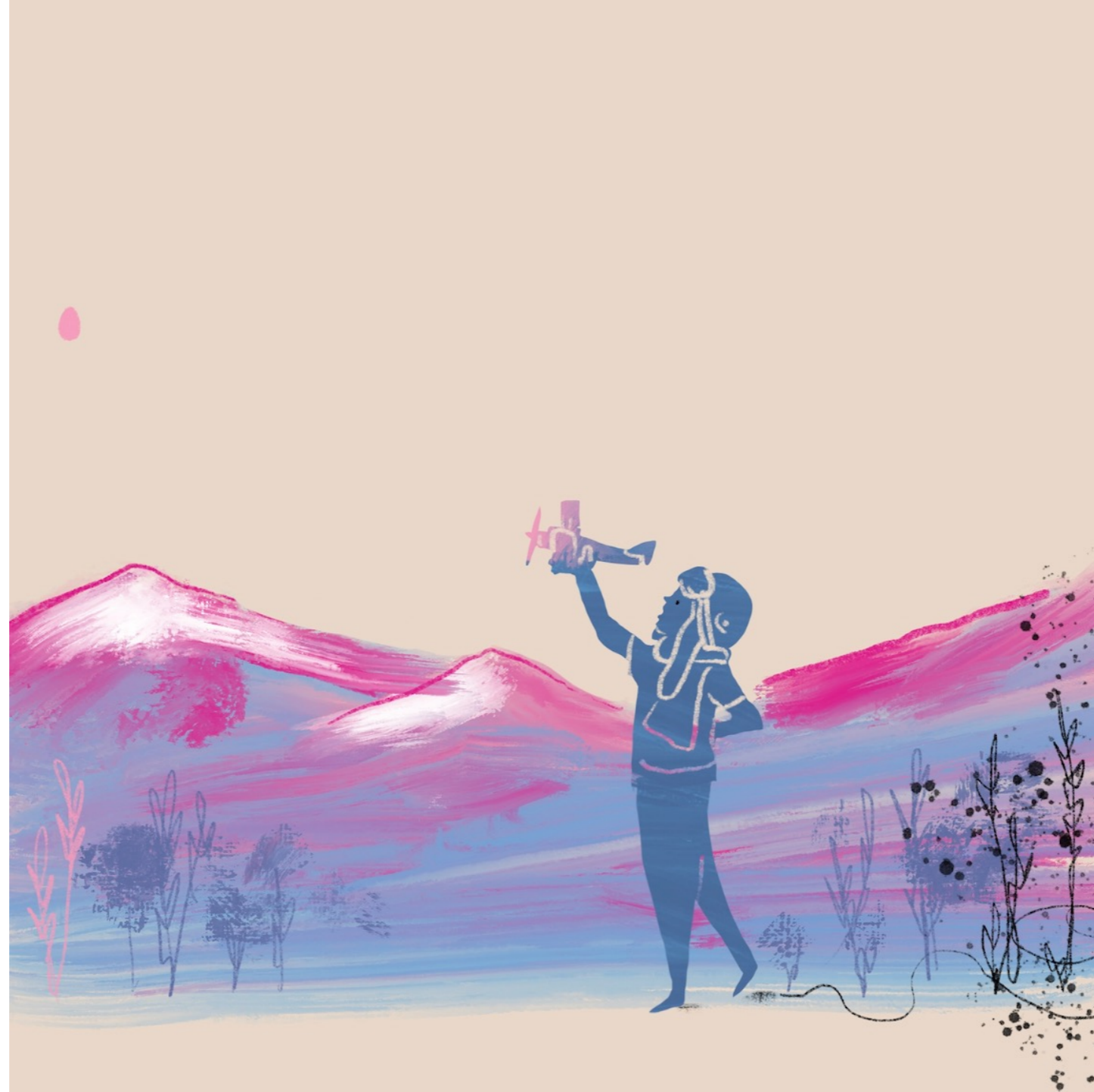
Each small win,  
is A really Big win.



You CAN shed the guilt and shame.  
You don't NEED to carry that burden.



ONE SMALL Act at A time.



THE PAST CANNOT BE CHANGED, YOU ARE IN  
CONTROL OF YOUR OWN FUTURE.





IT'S A PRIVILEGE TO JOURNEY WITH YOU.



I deserve to FEEL SAFE, comfortable  
and confident in this Body.



We ARE HERE For you.

This darkness does not have to remain dark or devoid of colour. It can be painted, graffitied with sprawling slogans, decorated with glitter. It can bear the words of our deepest fears or display messages of protest, defiance and resilience. It can sparkle with our ideas and insights and shimmer with our cautious dreams. Despair and pain will be mixed with faith and hope, etched onto the walls for all to see.

Creativity is not about production but process. It is to embark on a journey of exploration and curiosity with an openness to whatever we might find there. In doing so, demons are quietened and joy and pleasure are able to emerge instead as we reconnect with that 'big magic' which can be found in us all.

# CREATING GIFTS OF RECONNECTION

What enduring message do you wish to convey to those who you work with?

How can you accurately capture 'what's right' with them, using words and images to bring this to life?

You can:

- Use your own creations and your own words or allow yourself to be inspired by the writings and art of others.
- Use paper and pen, your laptop or your phone.
- Illustrate a post card, craft an affirmation, take a photograph, select a song.

It is your gift of reconnection to give and my gift to offer you the time to do this.

ACHIEVED



# READING LIST

1. Brené Brown (2021) Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience Vermilion, London\*
2. Stuart Brown with Christopher Vaughan (2010) Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul Penguin Group, New York
3. Diana Crossley and Kate Sheppard (2000) Muddle, Puddles and Sunshine Hawthorn Press, Gloucestershire
4. Glennon Doyle (2020) Untamed: stop pleasing, start living Vermilion, London
5. Derek Eland (2014) Diary Rooms: Being human on the front line in Afghanistan Big Ideas Library, UK
6. Elizabeth Gilbert (2015) Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear Bloomsbury Paperbacks, London
7. John Lewis (2022) Christmas Advert <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mi9-EIVB36k>
8. Charlie Mackesy (2019) The Boy, the mole, the fox and the Horse Ebury Press, London
9. Shaun Tan <https://www.shauntan.net/>



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