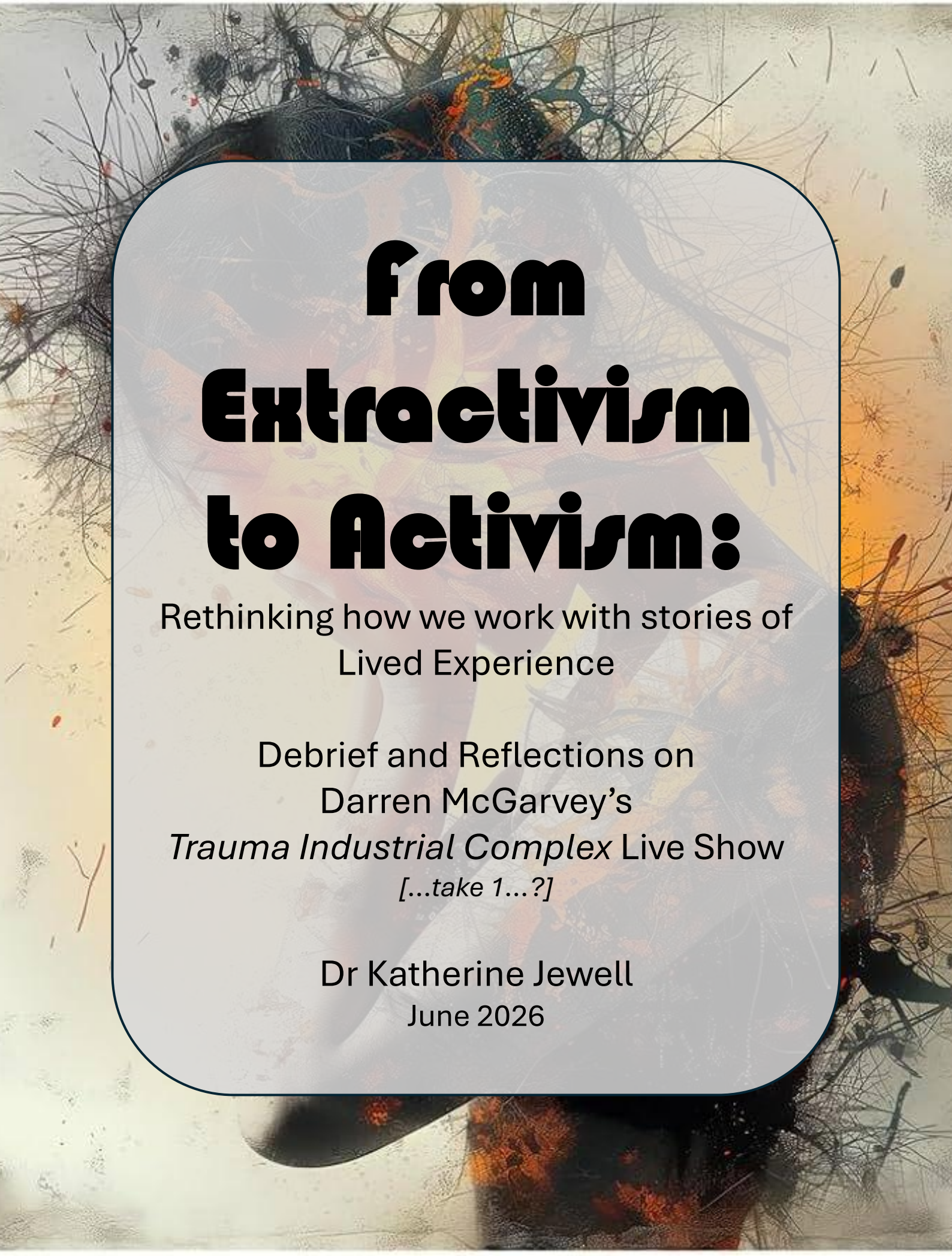




from Extractivism to Activism:

Rethinking how we work with stories of
Lived Experience

Debrief and Reflections on
Darren McGarvey's
Trauma Industrial Complex Live Show
[...take 1...?]

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Contents

[take 1: Katherine Jewell]

Preface	p3
Chapter 1: The beginning of the night before.....	p4
Chapter 2: The rollercoaster journey.....	p5
Chapter 3: The next morning.....	p8
Chapter 4: The intimate encounter.....	p10
Chapter 5: The denouement.....	p16

Friends of Connected
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Preface

The vision for this event grew from an aspiration to build in an element of giving back to the community through the projects being undertaken by the University of Lancashire's Social Inclusion Team. Suzanne Wilson used her personal links with Darren McGarvey to negotiate the inclusion of Whitehaven in his book tour, the only English venue he visited, and the team assisted with promoting Darren's *Trauma Industrial Complex* Live Show which took place at Rosehill Theatre on Thursday 21st May 2026.

We also organised a 'debrief' discussion session at Westlakes for attendees to continue the conversation, both with and without Darren present, held the following morning on Friday 22nd May 2026 at the Westlakes campus. Ten free tickets for the Live Show were sponsored by Connected Communities for Change (CC4F) project for community members of the Friends of Connected Communities network, and registration for the discussion event alongside the live show was encouraged as a community learning opportunity.

Although it was agreed that this event would not seek to produce any specific outcomes or actions as such beyond the immersive learning experience shared by those who attended, it was felt that some sort of record should be produced to reflect the show and discussion contributions in a way that could be shared with our networks.

Darren's live show was an accomplished work of art, so in response I have tried to write a more narrative account of the show and discussion event rather than a standard report like we have often produced in the past. This is a subjective account, 'based on a true story', which is taken from my own reflections and recollections, as well as notes I took during the discussion event on the day. Any mistakes or inaccuracies are my own, and the ordering of some content has been deliberately changed for narrative purposes.

Others who attended either or both events will have different recollections and have identified different elements as notable and important. Therefore, I invite contributions with reflections from those who were there which can be added to this narrative as additional chapters to form a living, communal story of the experience: let's experiment with making this account simply 'take 1'...

Chapter 1

The beginning of the night before

The audience began arriving well before Darren McGarvey's *Trauma Industrial Complex* Live Show was due to begin at 7.30pm on Thursday 21st of May 2026, a rather damp evening that felt cool for the time of year.

Unable to catch a lift and not wanting to get too wet in the weather, I'd arranged pre-booked taxis to and from the event. By the time I arrived at about 7.00pm, people were already mingling around the bar area of Rosehill. It was a friendly, communal atmosphere, in a comfortable space. Most seemed to know each other, but as time went on I saw many encountering friends and colleagues that they were used to seeing in very different settings and circumstances.

No one seemed quite sure what to expect, or entirely sure what they would gain from the event. Some came as a Friend of Connected Communities, or because they knew Suzanne Wilson and the Social Inclusion Team's work. Some had been at a previous talk Darren gave locally two years before, in May 2024, as part of a series of events put on by the West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum. Most had either a direct or indirect connection to Suzanne or Westlakes Research Limited (who fund our research) in one way or another.

Orderly queues formed for pre-event drinks. Darren had requested a latte earlier, so the bar staff had turned on their nicer coffee machine (which they wouldn't normally have done). Polite conversations and greetings took place, underlined by a hushed collective anticipation and curiosity about the event. Comments could be overheard speculating as to what the show would be about (not having been familiar with the book), or suggesting that it was not the sort of thing they would normally have thought to attend.

Eventually the bell rang for everyone to find their seats. We all slowly assembled in the historic and intimate theatre and settled onto the red velvet seats. A disembodied voice from off stage accompanied the last few stragglers as they finished organising themselves: '.... please welcome.... Me.'

Laughter ensued as Darren took the stage.



Chapter 2

The rollercoaster journey

Darren begins the show, reading from a laptop screen propped on a lectern, or maybe a music stand, towards the right-hand side of the stage from our point of view. On the left side of the stage is a chair, and in the middle a tall mic stand. Behind him is a screen with a large projection of the book title. Content is challenging, but delivered in a way that was familiar and comfortable – this is a book launch after all.

Very slowly, music creeps in underneath the prose which is becoming more personal, gradually gathering in intensity and almost seamlessly segueing into a performance of hard-hitting rap poetry. The audience now realises this will not actually be an ordinary book launch.

Following the musical performance, Darren retreats again to the screen and, still reeling, the audience is presented with an articulate and passionate presentation of his critique of the exploitation of lived experience and trauma – what he calls the trauma industrial complex. Secrets of the trade are candidly and ruthlessly shared: the weaving of the narrative ('based on a true story'), the dramatic voyeurism ('soap opera' quality), punctuated by tactical humour, calculated to release tension at key points ('pressure valves'), making the narrative journey entertaining and even enjoyable despite the trauma.

Darren moves back to narrative, sharing reflections on a typical day living with trauma in the context of his family home. Ordinary household chaos, feeding the cat, getting the kids ready for school, fury at missing items, subduing feelings of genuine distress, needing to take time out to recover from the morning in solitude. Feelings of empathy and personal connection amongst audience members are palpable and heavy in the atmosphere. Few notice the tactical humour.

Darren moves into more prose, and another musical performance. This is followed by a projected video of himself, whilst he sits with his head in his hands on the chair on the stage. The audience is accosted with a visceral presentation of Darren's personal experiences and recollections of the trauma of his childhood, somehow made all the more heartrending through the use of the recording in place of live presentation.

More social commentary breaks the emotional tension, and Darren shares how much he resents people who have 'recovered' from trauma – their calm manner undermines the perpetual anger at the world that he would prefer to nurture and cherish, the hurt that continually reminds him of his experiences. After all, this is how he makes his living. Most of the audience is now submersed in the ebbing and flowing performance, the wildly undulating but utterly controlled emotional and intellectual waves. Many seem to almost enter a trance as they are taken along Darren's journey.

Then the bombshell: that emotions had been deliberately manipulated throughout the show via the storytelling techniques that were outlined right at the beginning. Details of the trauma that had been shared might not even have been totally accurate. Some feel shocked, deceived. Despite the admitted and now realised emotional manipulation, others feel a powerful personal connection, kinship, even validation. Some took to heart the trade secrets shared earlier. These few had been able to remain consciously critical through the performance (which is what it was), but still appreciate the adept artistry and skill of Darren's construction and delivery and continue to reflect on the intellectual, psychological and social issues raised.

Following a truncated intermission which saw a largely zombified audience members shuffle out of and then back into the theatre, Darren opens a question and answer session to help everyone settle and start to make sense of the intense experience.

He remains the performer, eloquently but openly answering all questions with professionalism and sensitivity. Someone shares appreciation and personal experiences. Someone asks a more technical question about how one begins to heal or learn to live with experiences, or how to work with lived experience in their own careers. Another expresses a very personal desire: 'I would love to be like you', showcasing their own trauma through performance.

Darren's thoughtful answer includes advice to examine the personal motivations for doing this and become comfortable with their own emotional relationship with their trauma before embarking on such a journey.

Despite the shortened interval, the questions and answers continue past the published two hours. I realise I had mindlessly sat at the far inward side of my row following the interval, forgetting I was reliant on a pre-booked taxi to get home (or perhaps caught up in the collective experience more than I wanted to admit). As it approaches 9.45pm, 15 minutes after the scheduled end of the show, I have to leave to catch my lift. Pushing past the entire row, right in the middle of Darren's answer to the next question, with countless apologies, I make my way sheepishly out of the theatre wondering what I might miss with having to leave before the end. Although I manage to help screen the movement of at least one other person with pre-scheduled transport who had suffered the same lack of seating foresight, the vast majority of the audience seems free to stay to the end without concern about getting home.

I arrive home after the short, chatty taxi journey, but cannot settle straight away. Like most I imagine, I need time to relax and clear the emotional fallout before being able to sleep. I realise how lucky I am to have a husband who enjoys talking late into the night, but I also think about others who might not have this loving and supportive comfort blanket to return to.



Chapter 3

The next morning

There was an early start for those who participated in the follow-up discussion, considering the previous evening's event likely did not finish until around at least 10.00pm with audience members presumably mingling and reflecting on the show for some time after, both at Rosehill and at home. We arrived at Westlakes to check the room arrangements and set out the drinks, pastries and fruit before guests began arriving just before 9am.

The atmosphere was surprisingly calm and appropriately reflective, and it felt like this was a collectively unconscious, instinctual response to the intensity of the previous evening. There were obligatory technical issues, this time with accessing the guest wifi, but for the most part solutions were found and thankfully the arrangements for online attendees worked as expected, even if we could have been better at involving them more actively in the conversation. We started a few minutes after 9am to allow for slightly late arrivals, but it did not take long at all for the discussion to begin weaving its way equitably around the room like a colourful tapestry...

*I felt discombobulated, upended. It was such a white-knuckle ride, but it felt so **alive** in the room last night.*

I COULDN'T SLEEP, I WAS UP AT 3AM. So was I. BUT IT'S GOOD, THIS FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE. BECAUSE IT BREEDS CHANGE AND GROWTH.

It's like, it's not about his life, but what it mirrors in my life and what I thought I dealt with. I feel knackered but alive.

I'd not heard of Darren, his book, or even the idea of 'lived experience' before yesterday. I feel like a fraud because I don't have any personal trauma experience.

BUT WHAT ARE PEOPLE GETTING OUT OF HIS SHOW? CATHARSIS?

I liked that the complexity was left and not entirely resolved.

It took me so long to sort through my thoughts and emotions, but eventually I realised that there's a contradiction in what I was feeling. I remember someone telling me about how trying to describe your feelings in three words can be a good coping mechanism. I felt: *uncomfortable, challenged, empowered.*

IT WAS A META-VERSION OF TRAUMA, HE KNEW WHAT HE WAS DOING. *He told us every trick in the book, and then did it - and everyone still bought into it! He even suggested he embellished the story...* HE WAS SO GOOD AT PUTTING US THROUGH THAT ROLLER COASTER, HE KNEW WHAT HE WAS DOING.

Darren *chose* to be a disrupter but then *we* have to put ourselves back together after the collective experience. Sure, he gave us the disclaimer, but then what? He was manipulating his audience, not getting up there as a vulnerable person. How were we *supposed* to feel after the show!?

It feels like society is broken. I saw Darren baring his soul on stage and I saw someone who seemed broken again. It's made me reflect on what I can do to help prevent another Darren standing there on the stage...

Darren is in a position of power, that means that people want to hear his story.

Is the performance a strategy for coping? Maybe for some people, but I mean, sometimes even being asked if you are 'ok' can be triggering...

IT'S INTERESTING THAT DARREN CALLED IT 'LABOUR' WHEN HE WAS TALKING ABOUT PERFORMING HIS TRAUMA.

I think people need to express their trauma through creativity, but we need to think about this in a wider context. Anything could be creative, gardening, cooking, even something light highways could use creative problem-solving. It's about making meaning.

Darren was good at recognising people's strengths during the questions and answers. This is important because for me it's about finding your own strength and not letting yourself be defined by the trauma.

I have a job where a lot of my time is spent having deep, on-camera conversations with people one-on-one. But this event has really made me realise that I've not spent much time thinking about my audience or how they might be feeling when they listen in.

We have a 'fear' of (re)traumatising people when using lived experience in our work. There seems to be a fine line between using experience to shape services rather than to make us feel 'good'. It needs to be used for the right purpose, I mean we shouldn't just roll people in tell us how horrible your life is and now I'm going to write this policy. That was flippant.... we don't actually sit people down and grill them but I am starting to think about how we could do things better.

Is it possible to get enough information from third parties rather than risk retraumatisation? I think it's important to give people the choice. I mean, if you ask for my medical record you would think I'm an unhealthy person because all you would see is information about me being unwell.

It's a big problem because funding is so often based on proving people have shit lives using their stories or case studies. There has to be a better way than having to 'lay it on thick', with the more shit or sick you are, the more help you get. We need to shift the balance towards prevention, and health interactions that avoid trauma.



The door opened.

Chapter 4

The intimate encounter

When Darren joined us, the focus immediately returned to him and it took us at least five or ten minutes to realise that we'd forgotten to take the comfort break that was planned. He started by explaining that

some things in the show feel more provocative than they do in the book, but this is a result of the medium. In person can be artistic, you can lean into the situation, using comedy to break tension. People turn up expecting an author to talk about the book, but I make a point of breaking the expectation and taking away the safety by introducing music. All of a sudden it's not the book reading you expected. There's no frame of reference for what I'm doing, I've not even told you it's a show! Healing has become a trope - it's like training or a diet. Discomfort is where the magic happens. We use intellectual language to make people believe that you can be healed by just talking about it. During one of my shows, even just talking about trigger warnings caused someone to dramatically run out of the venue! But there is no healing without challenge.

I've heard of something called a 'ritual performance', which involves extremely personal content and represents a one-off that shouldn't be repeated because of the intense emotional experience of the performer. How is it that your performance is psychologically safe to repeat?

There is a paradox of victimhood, in that it is enabling as well as requiring accountability. It is a necessary mode to be in after something happens before it starts to be worked through, but eventually you need to move out of that. The problem is that there is a positive validation associated with victimhood that makes it challenging to move out of - the higher the vulnerability someone has, the less they will be made subject to personal accountability around their behaviour. You can overcome this by reaching a point where you become 'teachable' or open to advice and support. Other people think about it like faith, but this doesn't have to be religious - faith can be understood as being a commitment to a course of action without having a guarantee about the outcome.

The local Pupil Referral Unit is where kids that society rejects go to school, kids living what you talked about last night, and the numbers are increasing. Are we just better at recognising trauma or are the kids' experiences actually getting worse? We try to deal with this by keeping a really clear line between teachers and pastoral support staff, where teachers are asked to assume that something is going on but get no details. We also use the Mike Tyson story as a sort of blueprint: the more traumas the more risk factors, but one positive role model and lots of training can undo all of that. What do you think about this in the context of your experience?

Compliance at school used to be ensured through the threat of violence, now we have the language of care but it is not adequately resourced to be effective. I like the Mike Tyson example, but it can be controversial because he is the root of trauma in other people's lives as well. Yes, he's emotionally vulnerable, but then gets offended when people point out the hurt he's caused to others which tells me that he's not yet moving beyond his trauma and accepting responsibility for his response to it.

I also don't really like labels, or the idea of being 'experts by experience' because this devalues the reality of being an expert through study. Also, it can be bad for discourse because the person with lived experience can dodge disagreement by playing the victim card - it's important to realise the limits of your own knowledge and experience.

I've got lived experience of being lived experienced, in terms of the way people are used for their trauma. My position is, if you want to exploit me then you need to pay me for it. I can see that you are trying to be diligent about the potential consequences of visibility and telling stories publicly.

A lot of the conversation around trauma focuses, understandably, on individual behaviour and personal responsibility. But I'm interested in whether the lack of accountability higher up the chain is itself part of the traumatic condition people are living in. For example, when political leaders, institutions, corporations, perpetrators of war, or even major actors driving climate destruction are never meaningfully held accountable for the damage they cause to lives, communities, and futures, does that create a wider culture where accountability becomes fragmented or distorted at every level? Do you think trauma can become socially organised in that way, where people at the bottom are expected to account for every personal failing, while those responsible for large-scale harm often evade responsibility entirely? And if so, what does real accountability look like in a society where so many forms of harm are collective, systemic, and often treated as inevitable?

The systemic root arises around the lack of material resources and connections that put strain on relationships and needs not being met. This creates space for 'big' traumatic events to occur. You can't individuate and concentrate on building personal resilience because the world is what it is. But at the same time, you can't outsource the hard work of looking at the pain by just saying it's systemic - this is a leftist disease. Systems have to be balanced with personal agency. You can see examples of accountability at the top (like Epstein), which tells me there is more than just Marxist systems. Life will never be fair, but there is room for building resilience. Self-awareness underpins effective activism. Revolution is Hollywood.

Are we retraumatising people by asking them to share their lived experience?

The idea of 'retraumatization' is too strong - someone in the throes of active trauma will not put themselves forward to talk about it. The real question we should be asking is, will we cause further harm? There is a risk that people can be exploited, which is just as offensive. You can offset that by educating yourself on the risks of that type of storytelling and your duty of care both on the day and after, that is being more aware of what the labour of sharing trauma feels like and what it involves. Negative consequences can be ok, if they are anticipated and foreseen, and if you can ensure there are no absences of safety. My book tries to be a manual for people with lived experience, for people who work with them and for policy-makers, but balancing the audiences is difficult.

Before sharing your story you need to consider other people. I have a right to tell my story any way I want - that is true, but it can also be considerate because the story is never yours alone. Make sure you aren't playing the victim card to get your own way. Get yourself and your own identity in order first and realise that oversharing is always a risk.

The imagery of your dog being dug up is disarming, contrasted by your choice to get up out of bed and feed the cat, get the kids ready and then sit in the aftermath. I liked the intimacy of that vignette. I wondered, though, how do you feel after your show?

There is a deliberate artistic performance technique being employed here - I actually designed that bit to be the most pleasant so it is not surprising that it was your favourite. That doesn't make you superficial, because it's not about you darlin'!

There is a measure of being good at your craft, manipulating the audience. Does that make it not genuine or inauthentic somehow? Not really. You are guided to seeing a topic through art and that's what it means to be an artist. It should make you think. The fact it is manipulated just means that the content has been processed before you encounter it.

You mentioned on a few occasions doing the hard work to heal from trauma, and suggested that we all find other (easier) things to do to avoid that 'hard work' — I've also heard this said by others. However, it's not always obvious what the hard work actually is, where to start, or how to approach it; it can feel quite abstract and nebulous. If someone is keen to take the path of hard work to heal, do you have any insights into how a person might figure out where to begin?

There is no 'balloon release' aspect to healing. The hard work is the daily management of your own reaction to emotions that arise within you. For me, this often manifests as the dichotomy between needing order to avoid stress, and avoiding micromanaging everyone this brings its own stress. Trauma robs us of our ability to meet other people's needs. You need to admit your mistakes and shortcomings, owning any hurt you have caused. This is accountability.

Through my work role, I often get approached by people looking for lived experience stories from people who have certain problems. Do we actually have a responsibility to make data more interesting and accessible through lived experience stories?

This is like someone pushing a shopping trolley around Costco looking for someone who has been a victim of homelessness to use for their purposes. We have so much data, you can definitely ask how much we really need the lived experience story. But the problem is, people usually don't care unless they have the story to get sad about. People aren't moved by facts, they're moved by skilful manipulation of their emotions. As was brought to the fore through feminist theory, people who have relevant experience are often very well placed to point out policy failings, for instance. Ask yourself, what people would people say about having worked with your organisation? Was it the Costco trolley or a proper connection with mutual respect? Lived experience is a subjective understanding of something – that doesn't devalue it, but it means that you need to manage expectations and try to understand and appreciate that it might not be reality.



With the depth and intensity of the subject matter, any end to the conversation would have felt abrupt and like it was cutting discussion short. Darren's contribution to the event was scheduled to finish at 11am and by 11.30 it looked like he was in danger of spending all day with us. Darren took his leave of us amidst of appreciative and heartfelt good-byes.

Chapter 5

The denouement

As soon as Darren and Suzanne left the room, it felt like someone had switched off a light – not in a deflating way, but as if we moved from working with heavy machinery under fluorescent lights to sinking into a comfortable sofa in a candle-lit snug. The event was over, but not over. We had collectively experienced something that challenged us, and then united us in a new emotionally-safe communal space. We had intended to continue facilitated discussion until 12pm, but no one was interested in that plan.

A few people had other commitments and also had to leave, but at least half of the group stayed. We got second, third, eighth cups of coffee. We finished off the fruit and pastries. We organically extracted ourselves from the larger unit and formed smaller conversations. It felt like we were at an afternoon house party with old friends who knew each other very well and felt ‘at home’ in the company – except few of the people who stayed had ever met prior to the event. Slowly, one by one, our number gradually decreased and by 1.30pm it was time to tidy the room.

As people left, I received universally positive feedback, that it had been a valuable and enriching experience for all. I found myself promising we that we intend to host future events, but warning that it would be realistically impossible to recreate the unique quality of this session. However, we will do our best to try, and you can judge for yourself when you receive details of our next event by becoming a Friend of Connected Communities:

