



Members of the Wednesday Wanderers on one of their wanderings

A very sensory journey in making a tea bowl...

Helen Lee, May 2018

That this journey has involved The Leach Pottery in collaboration with The Sensory Trust could scarcely be more apt as it has involved sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Here I am, at the end of this latest journey in making, sitting in The Clore Learning Studio of The Leach Pottery, sharing the powerful taste of *matcha*, or finely ground Japanese green tea, with a beautiful group of people known as the 'Wednesday Wanderers'. They are tasting the tea in beautiful tea bowls each of them has carefully and skilfully made over the last few months.

The Wednesday Wanderers is 'a creative walking, nature and ceramics project' for people with dementia and their carers. They meet once a week with the support of volunteers for a walk and a coffee, feasting their senses on the local Cornish landscape and finding joy and support in each other's company. They also walk in order to find inspiration for making things in clay – often seeking out natural items found on the walks such as pampas grass to make brushes and

seed heads to make stamps – because once a month they come to The Leach Pottery for a studio day under the creative direction of Jackie Clark. When I moved down to Cornwall from London last year I wanted to find a way to combine my love of ceramics with my background in psychotherapy and volunteering to help on this wonderful project's studio days has allowed me to do just that.

Why make Japanese style tea bowls in the heart of Cornwall? Well, The Leach Pottery is deeply connected to Japan and had an exhibition of Japanese tea bowls – famed for being embedded in an ancient appreciation of the senses – and their *wabi* or simple, imperfect design fitted well with the Group's interests.

A visit to the tea bowl exhibition started the making journey, followed by a YouTube demonstration of a Japanese master potter making a tea bowl using a traditional coiling method. Jackie and I brought along some examples of tea bowls for people to handle,

and we explored their feel, classic dimensions and the possibilities of decoration inspired from the Group's walks. Coiling is quite a quick method of making and one studio session was enough to make the bowl, and then the following month a foot could be cut in the base and the walls thinned as necessary. The bowls were decorated using incising techniques, slips and oxides, and were glazed using The Leach Pottery's celadon glaze.



The acquiring of new skills in a group is a wonderful thing to witness. It takes nerve – courage to make mistakes in front of others – and inspires encouragement, support and much humour in the shared learning. Research has shown that the bonding this results in is incredibly helpful for people facing various mental and physical challenges because it creates an expression of implicit solidarity around the overarching reason the group comes together, without the need or pressure to talk about those challenges. (For a more detailed discussion on the positive effects of group learning see: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/89bd/8ff20556ffd6956829111e6fd879f1c82bc0.pdf>).

There is also much healing and wellbeing to be gained from working with the hands. It stimulates large areas of the brain encouraging an almost meditative state as one shifts focus to the detailed sensory feedback in the fingers and leaves behind thoughts and worries that can drive much of

our stress and anxiety. It is also worth noting, particularly in relation to dementia, that memory is not just in our brains. Neuroscience is now recognising that 'receptor cells/specialised neurons' that are found throughout the body – particularly in the fingertips, the gut and the major organs – can be understood as a kind of brain cell holding memory and intelligence; as this sensory memory is stimulated so other memories flow. This is important because where words and details might be frustratingly difficult to find, self-expression and a sense of autonomy can flow more easily through the hands by making something. (For an illustration of the intelligence and sensitivity of the hands see 'The incredible human hand': <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01plw7l>).

And working with clay in particular can be very helpful – it is a very sensory, natural material which can take us back to childhood memories of pottery classes at school, and even playing with mud. Going back to early memories stimulates brain plasticity (see <http://psychology.about.com/od/biopsychology/f/brain-plasticity.htm>) allowing new skills to be acquired more easily, and stimulating old, long buried memories to bubble up to the surface.



Back in the studio one month on and the tea bowls have been fired. The gas kiln firing has given the bowls a rich green finish, the white slip and incisions showing through underneath, some with highlights of a deep blue oxide.

Everyone is studying their finished bowl – its design, how it feels in the hands, its weight, its glaze and surface decoration, the feel of the rim on the lips, and noting how to feed this information back into the making of their next piece. And with the inspiration of the Japanese aesthetic Bernard Leach brought to St Ives at the beginning of the last century, we are recreating the Japanese tea ceremony as best we can. Jackie has fitted a Japanese door curtain above the entrance, sourced beautiful squares of fabric to rest the tea bowls on and has even recruited someone to make a small Japanese flower arrangement in the middle of the table (I think she has used one of my example tea bowls for the purpose!). I have sourced the tea. Each member of the Group then takes it in turns to try the bitter, powerful and fresh taste of the very green powdered tea! There is much giggling and apprehension at trying something so different and new.

The challenges dementia brings are many and the diagnosis often comes with descriptions such as ‘devastating’ and ‘heart-breaking’ and it is important to appreciate and honour the loss and pain that it can bring for both those with the symptoms and their loved ones. However, my work as a psychotherapist has taught me that we can be incredibly resilient and resourceful and with the right strategies and support we can be at our best when facing our greatest challenges. So dementia can also teach us how much we can achieve, how strong we can be in the face of grief and loss, how precious life is, and how caring and sharing and joy and fun are what really matter in life. To watch each member of the Group contribute so much love and care for one another makes it a huge privilege to share time with them. What The Leach Pottery, The Sensory Trust and the Wednesday Wanderers have achieved through this project is a sharing of much pain with much joy and I take my hat off to them and thank them for allowing me to share some of that journey with them.

