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# SQUARE PEG THERAPY

Carmen Ostrander MA

Annual Report - for the year 2018

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## Introduction

Dear Good & Gentle Folx,

I'm writing to you today having had a little but not quite enough time to reflect on the last year. All the things you had me thinking about and all the ways you shaped my practice and my person.

Holding the privileged position of receiving your stories, hardships, triumphs, knowledges excellent inklings, and wild imaginings, it seems wrong to keep all that good stuff to myself. So I'd like to take an opportunity to provide a bit of an overview. I'm drawing somewhat on the practice of providing annual reports to shareholders. That would be you in this case, given you have all invested significant time, trust and money in me and my development as a therapist and the building of this practice. I'd like to share some of the bigger picture with you, (which I guess would be the return on your investment), give you a sense of the therapeutic community that is taking shape and re-state my commitment to serve and be accountable to you.

Square Peg has been a home for sadness, for stillness, weirdness, joy and rage as we've attempted to untangle old and new challenges in your lives through our conversations. 2018 was a hard year just about any way you slice it. Our concerns, be they existential, political, environmental, social, personal and interpersonal have been tested by the trying times. I remain firm in my conviction that when it's hard to know what to believe any more, and nobody knows anything with certainty, that that makes your guess, and your ideas as good as anybody's. Many of you have excellent ideas and unique ways of seeing things.



**Maryam Elmoghazy**



**unknown (1930's)**



**Laura Owens**

I'm so lucky to get to spend time with each of you, and be part of your lives. The things you care about shine so brightly even in your hardest moments. The ways you resist being named in to and out of favour and existence at the whims of... (don't get me started)... it fortifies and inspires me in ways I won't explain here.

I'm proud to stand with you in resisting the many "shoulds" at work in our lives. To those of you who don't feel like you're doing enough, perhaps your existence is enough. Existence can be resistance too. Living a life you can live with, when it doesn't look like it's 'supposed to' is no small thing.

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## **THEMES & COLLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS**

While I will always keep your stories and your secrets safe, your strategies and ideas provide valuable contributions to collective conversations about the problems we share. This notion of collective conversation is one of a number of distinguishing features in my practice that many would consider messy, and some suggest lacking in professional distance and objectivity. I'm borrowing from a mentor (Vikki Reynolds) in the description of messy as an indicator that something human is happening. That the therapy is spilling out of its clinical container and into our community. I believe I can be messy and ethical at the same time, and acknowledge that these ethics don't always prevent me from messing up. Which has happened a few times this year. It is my hope to keep developing this approach as an extension of client centred counselling, into community centred counselling.

If I'd done a report for 2017 the themes would have been anxiety and depression. I learned so much about how differently people experience, understand and manage these constructs. This learning repositions them as valid human responses as opposed to isolated pathologies in them selves, (this doesn't fit for everyone's experience by the way).

In 2018 I noticed an upswing in the prevalence of judgement, perfectionism and disconnection in people's lives. Judgement is on the loose. It's everywhere, around us and inside us encouraging us to make all manner of assumptions about others and goading us in to being unkind to ourselves. It enlists the help of perfectionism to drive us to impossible ends, shame to silence us, fear to paralyse us, and righteousness to enlist us its service as we participate in the criticism, shaming and blaming of others. It is the weed in the garden of humanity and creativity, strangling encouragement and kindness when it is most needed.

### **Other collective conversations in progress:**

#### **Over thinking**

Always seems to lead people to the least helpful conclusions. How much thinking is the right amount then? It seems it's less about how much we think something over and, more about the kind of thinking taking place. Through conversation a spectrum of thinking has become apparent, with over thinking at one end, day dreaming/free thinking at the other and host of other kinds of thinking possible in between, that offer different perspectives on possible conclusions and courses of action.

#### **Self-medicating**

Can we minister to our own needs responsibly?

What changes need to take place in our thinking and our habits to change our relationship to substances from re-creational to medicinal. Rituals around usage play a big part in this, as do honest examinations of what it is we expect substances to do for us. These conversations have become increasingly political in nature as I learn about the ways people are hoping to honour their own values, agency and knowledges about what good health looks like for them.

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## Communication

There seems to be much more pressure on people to be 'effective communicators' these days. We judge our selves and others on a range of criteria such as seamless flow, articulate-ness, correct language, volume, tone, speed of thought, veracity of thought, and ability to take and then defend a given position; in addition to wanting to be perceived as interesting, original, entertaining, intelligent and or authentic. If you can do all this and be consistent with your personal brand across all platforms... you win!

## PRACTICE HIGHLIGHTS

I'm still working out where I fit and what I can do that exists in the space between art and therapy, as I test out different aptitudes in different places.

- Last year I was fortunate enough to curate a group show with the collective at **Gallery Gachet** (which I was a part of for a couple years) responding to the idea of acceptance.
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- Presented a research paper at a **social constructionist conference**, deconstructing the trope of the tortured artist, and considering many artists as a marginalised population in their own right, subjected to many of the same mechanisms of oppression found in other communities where stereotypes exist that romanticise poverty and glorify suffering.
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- Provided short term support to a diverse student population at **Vancouver Film School**
- Post show processing facilitator and emotional first aid officer. The Japanese Problem was a site responsive experience about the incarceration of 8000 Japanese Canadians in Hastings Park (PNE) in 1942. The impact of the work on audiences new to this history, on survivors and their families warranted the creation of a transitional post performance space, where audience members were invited to integrate the experience, share and respond in community before returning to their lives. This process was guided by the duty of care we felt towards the audience, who were variously moved and unsettled by the experience. My back ground in theatre informed my understanding of what it meant to tell this story, and as a narrative therapist the significance of witnessing the little known history of this well loved site.
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- I was fortunate enough to begin learning the art of supervision, working with the practicum students at **Qmunity** throughout 2018. This has extended into forms of support for new and established counsellors interested in narrative approaches. I offer back up support to counsellors at **CIEL Community Counselling** and will start a small practice group this year.
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- **Problem Circle**. Trialled and developed an approach to group work that doesn't centre vulnerability as the preferred form of participation. Exploring practices that respect privacy and reexamine ideas safety and confidentiality in group settings.

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## **Shadows**

I don't want you to think it's all gone perfectly. A number of relationships have ended this year in different ways. Some have fizzled out or fallen away, while others have ended more painfully. I've said dumb things I can't take back. I've said too much and too little at times. I've shared beliefs when I could have hidden behind neutrality, creating opposing perspectives and rifts that could not be smoothed over.

Despite discomfort and deep disagreement at times, the conversations have always been helpful to me, and have never turned unkind. I have a huge amount of respect for everyone who's engaged in hard conversations with me.

I know it's difficult but any feedback you are able to provide on anything you're not thrilled about is welcome.

## **Vouching**

I've worked with two excellent humans (in the context of peer supervision/support) in 2018 who are both moving into independent practice.

If you would like to engage in conversation with other folks with shared ethics on respectful collaborative practice I am pleased to recommend:

**Daley Lang** - Fireseed Facilitation - [fireseed.facilitation@gmail.com](mailto:fireseed.facilitation@gmail.com) (facebook & instagram too)

**Evren Salja** - [evren.counsellor@icloud.com](mailto:evren.counsellor@icloud.com)

I get so much from my conversations with them. I can't see why you wouldn't too. If you have non-binary, trans or disabled people you care about, that could use support from peers please consider them both. Daley is currently offering outreach on a pay what you can basis.

## **What Else am I Doing?**

**Leap Proteins-** A side project to address my climate angst working with cricket protein to reduce dependence on industrial beef and its associated agricultural practices.

A paper with two other collaborators on dual (overlapping relationships) in the Queer community. How counsellors navigate multiple relationships across their own communities.

**Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapy-** working with MDMA, canna friendly art therapy, and integration services for psychonauts. I'm currently working under limited supervision to develop community based protocols for the use of substances such as MDMA, & psilocybin. I'm also hoping to interview micro-dosers on their experiences. If you're interested in sharing your knowledge or participating please let me know.

**Birth Metal** - music project responding to pressure on women to make preferred sounds while giving birth. Just finished this!



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Artist support - working with local artist on the safe transformation of personal struggle in to public art.

## ONGOING CONNECTION

Please know that I'll always be happy to hear from you, no matter how much time has elapsed. The end of our working together is not a break up unless you say so. As the holder of many of your stories, I'm always delighted to hear of other developments and significant chapters. There are a couple of you who check in once or twice a year, as a kind of grounding practice that I've really come to appreciate. Counselling doesn't just have to be a response to crisis. It can also be a place you come back to, to add to the story of who you are and to generate possibilities for future acts of becoming. And for the artists that have shared their practice, I'm so proud to follow your careers.

I'd like to included some other mechanisms for keeping in touch, to accomodate looser connections. If you'd like to follow my progress and are okay with me following yours we can connect through the Square Peg [Facebook page](#), or [Instagram](#).

Being more visible in the communities I serve and am proud to be a part of has been a significant development that directly challenges ideas about how therapy is done. The closed model (that perpetuates stigma and fear) strongly recommends I pretend I don't know you when I see you out, that I remove myself from openings, from shows, demonstrations, ceremonies and parties. I certainly shouldn't date or show any erotically themed work I make publicly. The closed model seems to cover up a lot more than it deems to protect. By opening my practice in this way I am able to see people as they are before me, but also have a sense them through the eyes of other people who care about them. A sense of the person outside the reach of their problems.

I want to stand with you, and you with me in solidarity for things we care about. I want you to have a sense of who you're working with. I want to be able to say that I was proud to know you, and honoured to be a part of your life, without it feeling like a dirty secret.

This is my preference, this is what community centred practice looks like for me. If it's not your preference (some of you have already expressed this) that's okay too. I'll respect your wishes, I'm just changing my default setting to open instead of closed. My relationships with the people I work with are increasingly reciprocal and mutual. This is my attempt to bring some balance to the power dynamic inherent in the therapist/client contract, and to promote transparency. The ways you are connected to each other hold me in place, keep me accountable and allow me to consider the impact of our responses to hardship on the health of our communities.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Yours in deep gratitude,

Carmen