We are a spider's web:

Friendship in times of mental health crisis

by Frankie Hanman-Siegersma

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Abstract

Community responses to those experiencing mental health crisis and distress are important. However, in Australia and many other colonised countries, responses to distress have become highly medicalised, punitive, individual and privatised. Exploring friendship responses to mental health crisis may increase the possibilities for building on community connectedness and local support networks. The work described in this paper aimed to make visible the acts of care, solidarity, friendship and mutuality that friends and members of the community have taken up in response to someone close to them experiencing distress. The work was guided by intentional peer support and narrative practices including re-authoring, collective documentation and outsider witnessing.

Key words: friendship; solidarity; trans; queer; LGBTQIA+; peer work; intentional peer support; narrative therapy

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The context of individualism and the response of solidarity

Years ago, a close friend who I was living with at the time came into my room one evening with a very concerned look on her face.

I looked up from my book. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Alex. They are having a really hard time. Everyone is very worried about them.” My friend showed me a series of messages from Alex, which told of the different ways they were being called to end their own life.

The nature of these calls was not unfamiliar to me. Although I didn’t know the exact quality of Alex’s suicidal thoughts and ideas, I knew about the weighty presence such thoughts can take up in our lives. Just the year before, I had found myself in a similar predicament, making similar plans, sharing my life with an over-stayed visitor known by some as “die thoughts” (Kennedy, 2018). A close ally to die thoughts was isolation. In my experience, they worked closely together, often increasing in strength when combined. In that year, I was very isolated; the rest of the world felt so far out of my reach it was impossible to touch. What assisted in the possibility of one day touching the world again was friendship and connection. When I linked with my friend in her concern for Alex, I held this in mind.

From that evening on, a group of friends joined with Alex in their resistance to the suicidal thoughts. Alex’s responses included continuing to study for their exams even when die thoughts told them they wouldn’t make it out alive. Alex invited us to conspire against die thoughts’ lethal plans by having sleep overs, cuddling their dog and chatting with family members as a “buffer”. I shared with Alex how alone I’d felt during my own struggles, and how a partner had sat with me in silence for hours not knowing what to say but passing me tea and avocado toast. Alex and I ate potato gems together. While Alex was resisting these commands to die, they invited us to be witnesses and advocates when interacting with police and paramedics, clinicians and nurses. Our collective response against suicide looked like sharing memes into the morning, visiting the hospital for games of table tennis with Alex and other members of the community, and later, visiting the residential service where Alex was honing their skills on the electronic drum kit. The organising of this response was immediate, driven by a deep and resounding love for our friend. It was based in political values of solidarity, rather than rescuing or providing charity. As Uruguayan journalist and writer Eduardo Galeano said,

> I don’t believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people. (as interviewed in Barsamian, 2004, p. 146)

Our collective response filled a space that did not exist in mental health services: one of solidarity and friendship. As Bryn Kelly said,

> Solidarity is an act, a series of acts, a lifetime of choices and self-education, a deeply felt human compassion. (as quoted in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019b)

Before writing this paper, I interviewed Alex about their experience of this time.

Frankie: In what ways have you been sustained by friendship in difficult times?

Alex: At the time I met you, you were helping with a lot of the practical support and admin, because I was working my way through the mental health system. There was also a sharing of similar stories and experiences, which is probably what helped me the most. You had been through your own intense crisis the year before. I found those peer relationships, whether they were through friendships or through a peer worker in hospital, helped me realise, “Oh, you’ve had lived experience, and you came out the other side and you’re alive”. It literally helps you survive, hearing you’re not the only one, just knowing that you’re not alone … Because it’s the aloneness that is the most piercing, you know?

It was while collaborating alongside Alex to work through the mental health system that I was asked, “Are you a health professional? Are you sure you are qualified to be doing this?” This comment had me thinking of Dang’s (2018, p. 6) statement that “friendships are under-theorised and under-valued, and friends are rarely included in therapeutic ‘interventions’”. Mental health systems are steeped in the idea that responses to distress must be administered by experts with proper training (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993, pp. 73–105). Friends are no longer

deemed to be qualified to respond to the distress of their loved ones. Friends can't deal with "big feelings". I believe this exclusion of friendship is a practice of privatising social suffering (Jackson, 2013).

Each person involved in the collective response to Alex's distress held diverse qualifications of insider knowledge. These included having their own relationship with suicidal experiences; experience of familial conflict or struggle or financial insecurity; skills and knowledges of care obtained through histories of friendship; having a sense of what increases shame or loneliness and what enables closer connection; and inviting humour and silliness into difficult situations. All of us, alongside our friend Alex, also shared an experience of "not-knowing" and uncertainty, which located us in a perfect position to be comrades against suicidal experiences precisely because we weren't "experts". We knew our friend was always already responding to the suicidal experiences, and we could be alongside them in this resistance.

I have personally felt the devastating effects of the discourses of qualification and the professionalisation of care. These discourses leave individuals, their friends, families and communities stripped of skills and knowledges in taking action against the problems we are experiencing. The most popular responses to people who experience mental health issues are filtered through Western, colonial, individualistic frameworks that privilege pathologisation and othering (White, 1995b). Devaluing the support of friends only contributes to this. The challenge of "isolated individualities", which Michael White (1992, p. 38) described as the outcome of a "denial of community" through the project of essentialism, has created such strife and pain for so many of us. The strife of isolation can create a sense that we are severed from meaningful connection in times of distress. These isolated individualities shape psychology and psychiatry. They bring us the idea that "people who are disturbed need to be removed, put somewhere to be fixed or amended, and then and only then can they be brought back into society" (Volden, 2007, p.17). Although I have indeed benefited from treatment provided by psychiatrists and psychologists, friendships and solidarity and community are what have kept me alive.

The work described in this paper combined individual narrative therapy, collective practice and community organising to explore and document the contributions of friendship, community and solidarity in times of crisis.

Social location and relationships

It is important that I locate myself as a descendent of Dutch, British and Irish settler ancestors. I live in Narrm Melbourne on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung lands that are part of the eastern Kulin Nation. Birrarung, the sacred river songline that runs through this Country, has shaped the friend, partner, poet, daughter, sister and peer narrative practitioner who authors these words. I thank the custodians and Elders who have taught me about reciprocity, community and mutuality, which have been central tenets of this work. I am committed to anti-oppressive decolonial practices, not as metaphors but as material actions rooted in land return and justice-doing (Reynolds, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

I come to this work as an insider practitioner (Sather, 2021). I hold similar and vastly different lived/living experiences of mental health and crisis to the community members who chose to participate in this work. I bring an ethic of queering as a critic of professionalism in being with a process that is emergent, messy, shifting and full of possibility (Hoff, 2022). Queering helps me to question how power operates, who has the authority to make declarations about people's experiences, and what the effects are of those declarations (Hoff, 2022).

The community members who participated in this work had lived and living experience of mental health challenges. Some were my friends; others were colleagues in the lived experience workforce. Our stories spanned ages, spiritualities, religions, cultures, countries, genders, sexualities and experiences. Our lineages are from the lands, waters and skies of Aotearoa New Zealand, Rwanda, Portugal, Australia, Vietnam, Angola, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, the Netherlands and England.

I work as a mental health peer-support worker, using my lived experience of mental health challenges and as a user of the mental health system in my conversations with people navigating that system. Peer work shares ethics with narrative practice, including co-researching and examining with curiosity the problems that are affecting our lives, valuing people as the experts on their own lives, and double listening or listening for the untold story (Kennedy, 2018).

However, this work did not take place within the paid realms of peer narrative practice, but in a local community context. Brazilian narrative therapists Baretta and colleagues (2010) invited practitioners

to take up responsibility as citizens in responding to distress and suffering we see in our communities. The way that I experience community is through my fluid, life-sustaining friendships. Charlie, a collaborator in this project stated:

> Friendship doesn't have the traditional ties with family or blood, romance or sex. It's one form of relationship that isn't codified. We don't have the same scripts attached as intimate partnerships or parent–child relationships. There's a deep revolutionary love that's possible in friendship. We intentionally choose to have that bond in our lives.

And what is possible with revolutionary love? Perhaps friendship is a place where we can stand together against discourses of power.

A friend made at the guesthouse

During an experience of profound darkness that wound up with me staying at a "guesthouse for distress", as I have come to affectionately call it, I met a person called Renee. At the time, my experience of reality was very slippery. I had very loud voices commanding me to die.

After a dinner of spaghetti bolognese, Renee approached me and said, "Do you want to come outside and smoke with us?"

Those of you with insider knowledge of the mental health system as a "patient", "consumer" or "service user" might be familiar with the advice clinicians give against friend-making. I've pondered this strange practice for a long time. Perhaps it's a cultural phenomenon from the assumption that people who wind up in such guesthouses aren't in their "right minds" to form new relationships? Maybe it's a way of having clinical control over the intimate lives of those living with mental health issues?

Despite these precautions, Renee and I developed a very significant friendship over the course of three weeks together at the guesthouse. Upon leaving, I wrote a letter to her detailing how her friendship during that time had shaped my decision to stay on this earthly plane. Renee wrote in response:

> Recovery and moving forward with tides and healing of your experience.
>
> Is something I'm so proud to have witnessed and take whole heartedly the magic of your existence.
>
> I'll introduce you to a song by Billie Holiday
>
> "I'll be seeing you" and I hope this for some day. x

My experiences of responding to friends in distress, and receiving support from community members and friends in my own dark times, planted the seed for this project.

Crisis as a response to structural violence

It was my hope that this project would be community building and dignifying of the ways we come together as friends and in solidarity (Denborough, 1996, pp. 215–220).

In the spirit of co-research (Epston, 1999), I enlisted the help of two friends in the design of the interview questions. Both had been involved with coordinated community responses. I also spoke with a dearly beloved friend in relation to an experience of "crisis". They said it was difficult to choose just one, because for a period of their life, mental health crises were perpetual within the queer communities they were part of. Talking in this way about crisis, as one isolated emergency after another, brought pain, as these crises sometimes ended friendships. It also had the effect of collapsing crisis on to people's identities and ignored the effects of colonisation, homophobia and transphobia on people, friendships and communities. We came to agree that the person, the friendship and the community are not the problem. The problem is social and should be located as such (White, 2007, pp. 219–260). There can be a great diversity of crises; they can be profoundly personal and at the same time not individual or isolated. Crises are always embedded in broader relations of power. This dearly beloved friend said it was important to see crisis as a response to structural violence. The violence both causes and perpetuates crises.

This conversation had me thinking about how I could move away from holding "simple" stories of mental health crisis. I wanted to look further than the single-voiced, dichotomous and totalising idea of crisis (Decter & Buckley, 2006, p. 6). Looking beyond this single story, there was possibility of richer, more

complex understandings of people and their actions (Decter & Buckley, 2006, p. 6). I shaped the interview questions to focus on actions people and their friends had taken in response to a crisis, rather than the situation of crisis itself. The questions focused on the strengths and skills suggested by the responses (Wade, 1997; Yuen, 2009). As I was asking people to share very personal details about their experiences of crisis, these questions were also a way of avoiding this being retraumatising (White, 1995a).

The following interview questions were based on the re-authoring map (White, 2007, pp. 165–218); collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, pp. 26–49); resistance to sexual violence through friendships (Dang, 2018); the policing family violence project (Caulfield, 2021); collective responses to mental health stigma (Kalisa, 2022); Brazilian community therapy projects (Baretta et al., 2010); the OPROMAMER mental health advocacy group in Rwanda (Haragirimana & Denborough, 2019); and stories of collective resistance during COVID-19 in India (Anonymous, 2021).

- What does friendship mean to you?
- Has there been a time when you have been there for a friend during a time of mental health crisis? And/or a time when a friend has been there for you during a time of mental health crisis?
- What name would you give your/your friend's action?
- What does this action say about your/your friend's values, knowledges or ways of being?
- Were your/your friend's actions connected to, or supported by, broader groups or practices that you/they are part of? That is, are there cultural practices, family histories or particular social movements that supported you/them to take the action you/they did?
- Was there a song, poem, resource, religious text or piece of advice that was significant at the time?
- What meaning did your/your friend's actions have for you or what difference did they make in terms of their/your healing journey? In terms of your sense of belonging in community?
- Were there any things you would do the same next time? Anything you might do differently?
- Were there any things you learnt about friendship from this time of response to crisis?

Beginning with the question "What does friendship mean to you?" invited people to consider friendship as a relationship of sustenance. This allowed them to come into the process of storytelling from a "riverbank" position (Kaseke, 2010). From this safe place, they could look at the river of experiences of crisis in their lives without having to jump into the water (Kaseke, 2010).

Mandy shared this story:

> When I was 15, I was homeless. I came out as a lesbian, and my older siblings, who were looking after me, didn't want anything to do with me because they were very anti that. So I had to make do on my own. My friends that I developed along the way have been my family more than my blood family have been. My friends are my bloodline. They are my life.

Mandy described how cultural practices shaped her friendships:

> I'm somebody who identifies with my Māori culture, and the concept of whānau, which is family, which is really anyone. So my brother, my sister, my auntie, my uncle are not the only ones in my life. My family is not just blood family but kindred spirits as well. I have a lot of kindred spirits – like, a lot. In Aotearoa we have lots of gangs. I call my friends my gang. And you are in arms with each other. When one falls or one slows down, we say, "let's pick them up".

The two-part question about the meaning of a friend's actions was designed to rupture neoliberal discourses of "self-management" which emphasise "personal responsibility" for mental distress (Brown, 2019, pp. 155–158). Waari, a dear friend and participant, shared this in response:

> When I moved to this country as a migrant, I had to in lots of ways start all over again, and I could not take family with me. I learnt to shed a lot of those ideas that were culturally imposed – like that friendships are not important. I met kindred people, like-minded people with whom I sort of merged friendship and family into one thing. I think that's something that a lot of queer people do as well. Perhaps, we can't rely on nuclear family structure or the kinds of things that one is meant to.
>
> I think this place [Australia], compared to the societies I came from, is more atomised. Everyone's just a bit more apart ... whereas

> back at home, which is India for me, there's a lot of community involvement in everything and everyone's just sort of up in each other's business. The friends that I have here are conscious of not getting divided by capitalism. You've got to strive to be in each other's lives and show up for each other in a way that it seems "not natural", but actually, it is that you're trying to be as natural as you can in unnatural circumstances. The event which really defined friendship for me was the [COVID-19] pandemic. I think it really consolidated an idea of what showing up for one another would look like.

Friendship reflected people's actions towards "trying to be as natural as you can in unnatural circumstances". As a result of asking people to locate their experiences in relationship with others, and within culture, stories of standing against dominant society emerged.

Structuring safety, ethics and attention to power and privilege

Practices of cultural humility, such as avoiding assumptions of universal knowledge, engaging in self-reflection and inviting accountability, strongly guided this work (Dominguez, 2017). I wanted to co-create conversations that were "safe-enough" with the friends and community members I interviewed (Bird, 2000, 2006; Reynolds & polanco, 2012). Rather than the binary of "safe" or "unsafe", I approached my conversations knowing that power is constantly at play, therefore transgression is always possible, even with my social justice ethics (Reynolds & polanco, 2012). I was not interviewing my friends as a "therapist" positioning them as "clients", but as an insider practitioner (Sather, 2021), friend and community member. At times, my hope that friends would have a positive experience in the interviews, or experience the project as mutually enriching, invited self-doubt. In other moments, overwhelm settled in between myself and the person I was speaking to as I struggled to navigate the multiple relational responsibilities I was attending to.

Because of the responsibilities I held in my relationships, I was invited into accountability to repair after ruptures. As narrative therapist Julie Tilsen said in an interview (Hoff, 2022) about working with queer and transgender young people, these multiple relationships with people build in safety because you are accountable to community. In this context we are constantly negotiating and talking about how power is operating, rather than pretending it doesn't exist (Tilsen in Hoff, 2022). I was conscious to make space so that nothing went unquestioned. The feedback I received from friends has deepened my attention to power, and I have taken any ruptures as opportunities for reflection and growth in my practice.

It was my hope that through my seeking ways to resist replicating dominance and being open to a critique of the practices I was using, people would feel respect and care throughout the relationship. I did this by sharing the questions before the interview, and when in conversation, asking how it was going for them and creating a context where people could story their experiences of friendship rather than having me impose my idea of the kinds of stories that should be told. Reynolds' stance of imperfect solidarity and allyship (Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds & polanco, 2012) made possible practices of accountability in this realm. This included ensuring people could meet at a time and place that felt appropriate to them, giving them choice about whether the interview was recorded or not, allowing them to determine the length of the interview, allowing for a conversational style, and providing opportunities for adding to and making changes to their transcripts and stories.

Connection to histories of social change and transformative justice

I situate my work within rich lineages of community-based responses that hold a commitment to exposing social and political injustice and their effects on people's lives and relationships: the Fireweed Collective (2022); Project LETS (2023); Wildflower Alliance and Intentional Peer Support (Davidow, 2018); the Soteria model (Mosher et al., 2004). These lineages include peer support, collective narrative practice, community organising and campaigning, and transformative justice projects. There is a rich history of community-based efforts led by First Nations communities to respond to distress, harm or violence. These include community patrols (Yunupingu & Mununggirritj, 2007), police accountability, campaigning and justice matters (Ironfield et al., 2021; O'Donnell, 2022).

Consumer ex-patient survivor advocate and founder of intentional peer support (IPS) Shery Mead (2021)

described peer support as a culture of healing that happens when we build mutual respect and trust. As peer support becomes more integrated into clinical services, Mead says that we must not forget that peer support was never about making services more effective: it was about social change (2014, pp. 3–4). When queried about what she imagined social change to look like, she answered,

> I have always thought that IPS had the ability to change conversations and therefore relational dynamics … I had hoped this would eventually have an impact on my neighbours, so rather than wanting to send me to a hospital when I told them I was feeling suicidal, they might ask me what that meant for me and what had been going on. (Kennedy & Mead, 2019, p. 51)

The relational aspect of social change holds strong resonance with transformative justice practices (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Herzing, 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019a, pp. 136–149). Martina Kartman described the everyday practices of transformative justice:

> It might mean that we sit down and actually have the hard, vulnerable conversations with our friends about what it looks like for me when I'm going down a bad path, whether that's a shame spiral or mental health support that I might need. It means that if someone is having a hard time, that I'm showing up in whatever way that person has self-identified that they need. So, it might be not talking about it at all but I'm coming to do the dishes or I'm driving your kids to school. (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2020)

These everyday practices of transformative justice might seem incredibly ordinary. However, in the words of a collaborator in the project, often this solidarity and connection is actually "providing care in what might be seen as an extraordinary way in Anglo-Australian community". In the cultural context of colonial Australia, which privileges individualism over community and collectivism, we are pushing against dominant culture when we turn towards, strengthen and expand our networks of support. As Ejeris Dixon says, "violence and oppression break community ties and breed fear and distrust" (2020, p. 17). When we look towards our friends and community instead of an overreliance on professional or institutional response, we ask each other,

> What is the world we want? How will we define safety? How do we build the skills to address harm and violence? How do we create the trust needed for communities to rely on each other for mutual support? (Dixon, 2020, p. 17)

As with many transformative justice projects that are small, bold experiments, the Alternative Community Mental Health Project (ACMHP) carried out by Dulwich Centre is a rich example of community-based responses (Sue et al., 1997). The ACMHP brought together individual counselling conversations and community work, and challenged dominant ways of understanding mental illness. It sought not to locate the problem within the person, but to consider the impact of social and political contexts (Sue et al., 1997, p. 9).

Why does it matter to name, acknowledge and carry these legacies with me, with us? Because it is by being connected with these histories and ongoing struggles that I bring justice to the work that I do within the communities that I live alongside, and those communities where I hold membership.

A queer coven and trans solidarity

Alongside every problem story or experience of crisis is an alternative story, a *strong story* (Drahm-Butler et al., 2015). This strong story tells of the ways that a person has stayed connected to what's important to them and found ways to look after themselves and others. As I spoke to Judith, she told me about the ways she had found comfort and care within a queer coven at one of the most difficult times of her life.

> Mom was gathering money from her uncle, grandmother and people from church in Hong Kong to send me to university in Australia. But when I told her that I was trans, she had a period of disowning me and withdrawing her financial assistance. I was in a really horrible place for a while. The only thing that I really had to lean on at the time, and the only place where I felt truly safe and accepted, was in my queer coven.
>
> That was a space where I was able to just wear whatever clothing I wanted, and people would not bat an eyelid. I could present or say anything I wanted in that space. We had the idea of unconditional positive regard. There were other trans people there too, so I felt seen and held by that.
>
> I remember this one instance where we went down to the beach to do this ritual. There were

> no clouds in the sky. It was super late at night. I could just see the Milky Way above me and all of these stars, and the ocean was roaring, and you can scream and no one can hear you because it's masked by the sound of the waves. And I just screamed harder than I ever have. I burst into tears. Everyone was like, "Oh my god, are you okay?" I was weeping and trembling, screaming and crying, and everyone just held me. It was so beautiful. It showed me that there were people who would stand with me even when I was at the absolute worst.

Judith's story of a queer coven that would stand with her had me realise that friendship can be a witnessing and solidarity to stand in contrast to family disownment. As bergman and Montgomery (2017, p. 58) have written, "friendship and resistance are interconnected: when we are supported, we are more willing to confront that which threatens to destroy our worlds". Friends can "be the basis for community accountability and political action" (Dang, 2018, p. 5).

Billy described their experience of an accountability process to help a friend who was in distress:

> I was supporting a member of my community who was suicidal and was also someone who had used harm in his relationships. At this time, I noticed that our community responded with either a denial of his actions or a total rejection of him. This is how Pākehā punitivism teaches us to respond. Deny or dispose. A binary that dishonours all those involved when violence is being used and experienced. I was friends with the people who he had caused harm to. It was for these friendships that I showed up for him.
>
> We had conversations that were challenging and hard as well as allowing for softness and care. He stayed at my house before he was admitted to hospital. I was a person he could message or talk to when he was feeling like he wanted to die. I would be there to respond and just chat through the dark feels without freaking out, needing to fix or collude, just someone to be there and listen.
>
> I felt a sense of solidarity with him as a trans person, as a survivor, as someone with complex mental health and as someone who has been recruited into harmful ways of relating. I understood the shame associated with using harmful behaviours when we are living out of our wounding. You know, human dignity always matters. No matter how people are behaving or the violence that they're using, their life is important and deserving of care.
>
> When I look back on that time, it makes me think of the Te Ao Māori principle of manaakitanga, which is like caretaking for the mana of a person. Manaakitanga is when you hold someone's mana and you bring them in. The white translation of that would be hospitality. Manaakitanga is taking care of someone's mana. And it's active. Mana comes from the ancestors; it comes from our atua. Everyone has mana. And it's intrinsic to all beings. You can't destroy someone's mana, but you can degrade it. Sometimes we have to support people to feel into their mana – whakamana them, you know? You ever see a person rise when they are offered respect and belief? That's them feeling and accessing their mana.

Billy's story had me thinking that manaakitanga can be offered through trans solidarity. Friendship continues and strengthens cultural practices.

We are a spider's web: Collective documentation

After a series of individual narrative conversations, stories were put together through shared themes. The "We are a spider's web" collective document is double-storied, collectively recounting a variety of hard-won knowledges and skills alongside a rich acknowledgment of the contexts in which these had been developed (Denborough, 2008, pp. 26–49). My hope for the document was that people could experience the know-how they used, and witness the knowledges and skills being used by other people across different contexts and countries. Using collective documentation invited some important practical and ethical considerations. These related to:

- transparency about my intentions for the document, including public circulation
- issues of privacy
- providing collaborators with opportunities to provide edits and feedback, including of this paper, which includes extracts of the collective document.

Enabling contribution between participants felt especially important as this linked people around trans and queer solidarities, Rwandan and Māori

cultural practices, AIDS activism, and creating and sustaining community. The stories in the document were organised around the following themes:

- Friendship is this rock that's there to share the journey
- Responding to concerning times
- Alchemical processes: giving what we were not given
- Holding a spirit of friendship in all our relationships
- Honouring our seat at the table
- A collectivist way of responding: what we have learnt and where we would like to go.

These titles were words spoken by the people I interviewed. The choice of language and phrasing is important. Savouring people's expressions in this way was my attempt to join people in their experiences of the world, to see their insider knowledge as distinct and valuable (Ishikawa, 2014). It was important to honour the poetry in their expressions and meaning-making (Penwarden, 2020). This practice reflects my commitment to honouring how each person names their experiences of friendship and of concerning times in words that were "experience-near" (Freedman, 2012). This commitment is also reflected in the title of the collective document. Waari reflected on the support offered to them at a difficult time:

> I would say she, with so many other people in the community, that network, that spider's web, really saved me ... it was lifesaving. Absolutely. No doubt about it.

The image of a spider's web stayed with me. I asked Waari whether it would be okay if we used their expression for the title of the collective document. They were pleased with this idea. Paying attention to expressions, documenting them and then sharing them back through definitional ceremony made room for a re-experience of the alternative storylines (Newman, 2008).

Regenerating some kind of life force: Inviting outsider witnesses

It was important to create a context in which collaborators could experience the re-telling of stories they had told about friendship in times of crisis. We brought together a small group online and performed a reading of the document with participants in Aotearoa and Australia. This ritual of definitional ceremony, which included outsider witnesses, was intended to acknowledge and further develop alternative narratives about the actions people and their friends had taken (Myerhoff, 1986; White, 2007, pp. 165–218). As Michael White wrote,

> Definitional ceremonies provide people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of outsider witnesses. These outsider witnesses respond to these stories with retellings ... It is through these retellings that people experience their lives as joined around shared and precious themes in ways that significantly thicken the counterplots of their existence. (White, 2007, p. 178)

As I read out each person's story, there was a sense that this re-telling created a "forum for the creation of a social memory of resistance and sustenance" (Dang, 2018, p. 6). I invited outsider witnesses to offer a response to each person's story, based on the following questions:

- What particular words or phrases struck you?
- What is it about your own life that made these words stand out to you?
- What difference will remembering this make to your life, or your friends or community?

During this outsider-witnessing practice, Renee, shared:

> The friendships that you forge purposely, over those who may be connected to you by blood, are actually super imperative and super important. However brief or long those moments of friendship are, there is no judgement or ridicule in that time, there's just boundless unconditional love.

Another participant, Billy, shared:

> I held a big sadness around some of the friendships that I've shared in crisis. There was loss and pain surrounding those times. This project kind of helped me to reflect on actually just in those moments, how beautiful those moments of unconditional love were. Through this project, I remembered that after one very dark part in my life, where I had to navigate a hospital emergency room alone, friends bought me a plane ticket back home to Aotearoa. Remembering this has been very significant.

A friend, Leanna, was invited to respond to the collective document. Her response was read out to the collaborators at our gathering:

> The metaphoric spider's web image really resonated with me: beautiful, wonderous, natural, organic, yet engineered specifically for strength, protection and to offer sustenance. They're so common that sometimes we don't notice them. But if we pause to specifically look for them, we can see that they are everywhere. As I go about my daily, pedestrian activities at home, I observe myself looking with a fresh perspective at the many spiders' webs around my house and on my deck. These usually mundane activities are now extraordinary, sustaining and spiritual reminders of the strengths and unique shapes of my friendships and relationships. They represent my hopes and intentions for my friendships and for building more communities based on friendship.

Upon hearing this response, one of the participants said:

> It's really amazing to have our stories honoured. And to hear others share what they have been through too. So often those stories of friendship aren't celebrated, but here we are today, celebrating them.

I have gone on to share the document with many people, across lived experience workforces, those working in mental health crisis response, friendship networks and community. Amelia sent this response:

> Dear Spider's Web participants,
>
> I work in a lived experience position as a research assistant. I have been doing some academic research and to read something that continually refers to people as "one of us" rather than talking about "respondents" or "participants" finally made my eyes stop glazing over and made me want to pay attention.
>
> The phrase "temporary moments of unconditional love" has stuck with me. Remembering our own shared experiences makes me so proud and grateful, as being able to collaborate and respond (in an imperfect way) to a loved one in need feels so meaningful and purposeful in a way that is regenerative of some lifeforce in a world that is quite exhausting and extractive.
>
> I feel like some of the greatest lessons learnt have been forged out of these collaborations between friends to support each other.
>
> I resonated so much with J talking about how healing it is to give people what you wished you'd received. Once you have moved through some of the necessary grief around that, you realise that the support web is reciprocal and that it is not too late to ask for what you wish you'd received.
>
> The depth of experience and understanding from navigating crises is what grows our capacity to hold space in a way that feels truthful and respectful. We are always learning, but the cumulative experience makes me trust in each other further each time.

It is exciting that the spider's web of people's stories continues to be woven. I hope the practices shown through this project will assist peer workers, counsellors and therapists to re-honour friendships as places of sustenance, healing and justice. I also hope these stories spark new commitments for future friendship initiatives in your own communities and networks.

Now, you might remember my dear friend Renee from the guesthouse. Well, we did indeed see each other again. In fact, I invited her to take part as a participant in this project. I experienced our friendship as a site of resistance to oppressive systems (Dang, 2018). Renee reflected on our friendship and what it meant to her at a difficult time:

> When you're inside these institutions of mental health, like on inpatient units, they're always strict about "no making friends", but making connections and friends within such a vulnerable space can actually serve to promote collective healing and comfort and lights to the end of the tunnel of a hospital bed, of where the lives of those people could be after exiting that space. Because, as any hospital, it is not a place of residence but a sliding door. The friends that you make from there can be for understanding, for love and grounding in what collective emotions can bring anyone to that space.

The impact of the telling of the collected stories on the author

The telling of these collective stories had me reflecting on the ways that people within my friendship network and community are responding to "individualized and isolated positions" that reinforce "debilitating

conclusions of individual responsibility, blame, and shame" (Lee, 2023, p. 5). In speaking to close friends and my partner about ways we had moved towards community participation (Bracho, 2000) in times of crisis, I felt more connected to and enlivened by shared precious commitments, beliefs and values. Through these conversations, I had the experience of making visible the significant actions people had taken in shifting to "being with a community or group rather than alone as an individual" (Lee, 2023, p.7). These conversations have sparked future friendship initiatives, which are enabling opportunities for us to turn up in imperfect solidarity for each other (Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & polanco, 2012), and for us to join with others in similar projects, for example through meal trains, solidarity care networks, informal peer-support groups and mutual aid.

These collective stories had me reflecting on what it takes to locate ourselves in relation to each other through solidarity, rather than charity, by drawing from our lived experiences, rather than professionalism, to address the problems and struggles we are experiencing. The stories of my friends have reminded me that people's closest chosen community networks are in fact highly qualified to respond in times of crisis. My vision to radically change society involves joining, building and sustaining mass movements that are nourished by our friendships and community. As we seek to transform systems of domination, we will be the ones who keep us safe (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Norris, 2020).

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