

# Rite to Freedom Impact Evaluation Report 2023

Rite to Freedom is a charity based in Devon, offering support to those in established recovery from addiction through mentoring, self-empowerment, wilderness experiences, and the power of personal stories. The **three pillars** which guide our recovery programme are: creativity, nature connection, and mindfulness. These play a central role in the residentials which the storytellers in this project have all attended. More information about our programme and recovery services can be found on [our website](#).

The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings of an evaluation project conducted in order to understand the impact of the work of Rite to Freedom. The methodology utilised is the Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique, which involves the collection and analysis of stories from programme beneficiaries in order to discern their experiences and feelings. This personal and meaningful insight attained offers a more accurate evaluation than alternative quantitative and qualitative methodologies. When using this research technique, the word “storyteller” is used to refer to the research participants. While reading the analysis and main findings, the reader can refer to the full stories from each storyteller for context, which are provided at the end of the report.

This evaluation project seeks to address the following aims:

- To transcend existing measurements of the work we do and gain a deeper understanding of its impact on participants.
- To adapt and target our work according to the experiences of our participants in order to maximise its effectiveness.
- To determine how best to support participants in achieving more from their experience with Rite to Freedom.
- To look at the complex nature and benefits of participating, and to make a case for more lateral thinking across Rite to Freedom’s multiple areas of work – particularly in relation to tackling addiction.

## Report Structure

The first section of this report outlines Rite to Freedom’s main activities - providing context for the story analysis outlined in the rest of the report. Individual sections of the report can be accessed by selecting the section header in the table of contents below.

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## Programme Details

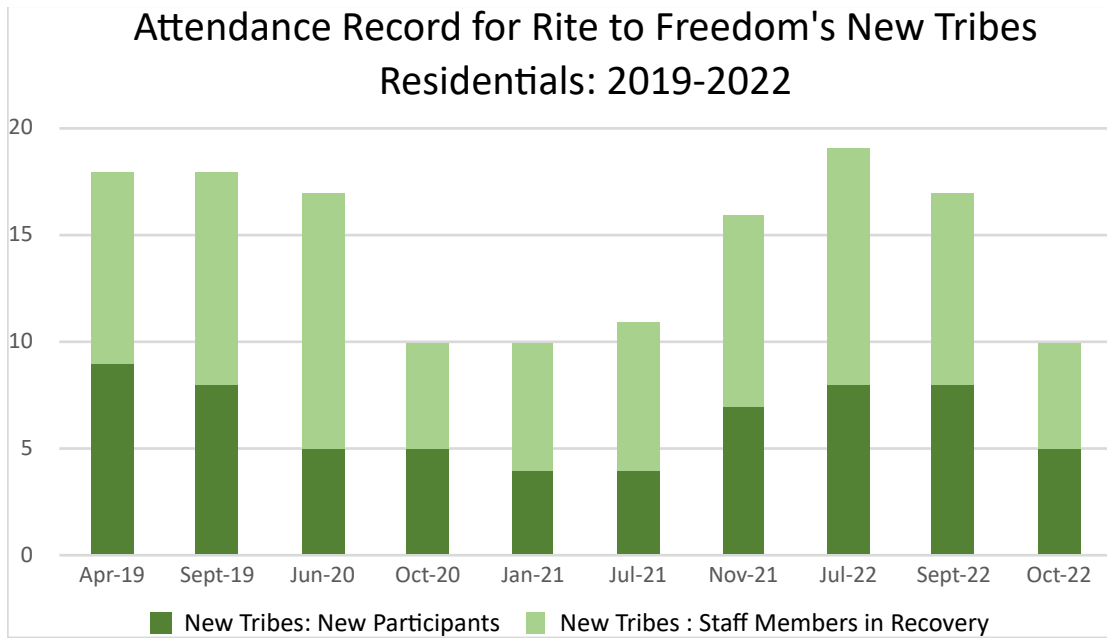
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### New Tribes Residential

Our **New Tribes Residential** - offering a unique three-day experience on the moors - is **the main entry point into the community of Rite to Freedom**, and the main component of the experiences described by the storytellers in this research project. Access to the residential has been established at six months free from addictive behaviour. Traditionally, drug and alcohol services discharge from their treatment programmes by this point, and we have found that people are more stable and ready to focus on the next part of their healing journey. We offer entry into a supportive community for as long as the person wishes.

Time is spent individually and collectively on the land, focusing on the three pillars of nature connection, creativity and mindfulness. Weaving in story and myth, **we explore our inner and outer landscape**. With many years of recovery and residential experience, the staff and volunteers aim to skilfully guide the participants through their time together, encourage curiosity, and offer new tools and resources to strengthen recovery and life opportunities going forward. Our community volunteers can apply the new skills attained on the training residentials, thus allowing our community to grow, and its members to establish new skills and a deeper understanding of what we do as an organisation.

After the residential, participants are buddied up with a member of the staff/volunteer team until the reconnection evening some weeks later. At this point, they are welcomed into the community and have access to all that we have to offer.




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## Creative Pathways

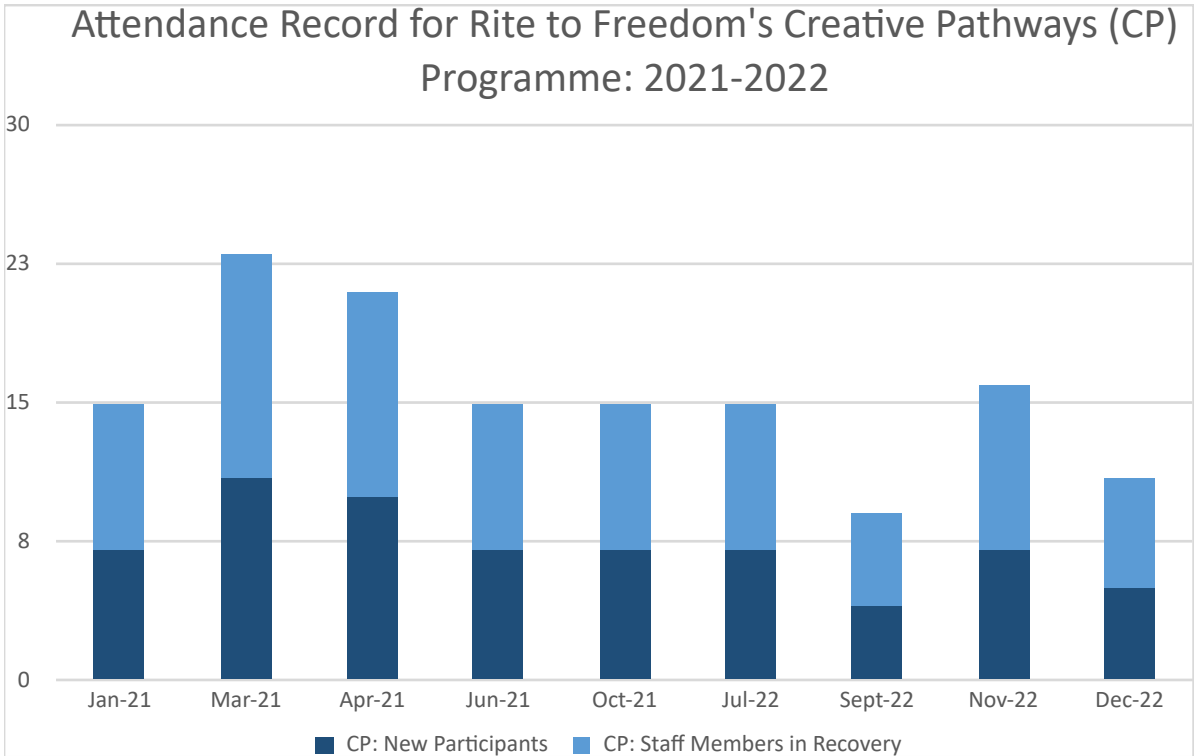


**Creative Pathways to Healing and Meaning** is a recent addition to our delivery programme. Through nature connection activities, mindfulness and creative expression of all kinds (including text, film, sound, and photography), **the recovery community is supported to explore more of who they are and what makes them ‘tick’**. This exploration uses an archetypal map, giving the participants access to an internal compass – helping them to navigate and move forward toward ever deeper healing and meaning. An informative and **interactive manual** has also been written, including poetry by Caspar Walsh and illustrations by Philip Harris, to guide participants on their creative journey with the archetypes. This is now available on our website alongside video resources.

The Creative Pathways programme is open to both new participants, and those who have participated in the New Tribes residential. **The suggested time away from addictive behaviour is 12 months, which reflects the depth of the work involved.** It is also recommended to have an established recovery programme as primary support (such as Recovery Dharma, 12 Step Fellowship, SMART, and therapy/mentoring). The first in-person day was ‘An Introduction to the Archetypes’, held in March 2020. This was well attended and instigated a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm for the next steps. However, when Britain entered lockdown two days later due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Rite to Freedom responded to the needs of the community, and successfully delivered the Creative Pathways programme online.

In-person days were then offered when the opportunities arose. Additionally, in response to the wishes of the community who felt that a *residential* would be the better way to embed key learning and achieve an in depth understanding of the archetypes, our first Creative Pathways residential was held in July 2022. The event was fully subscribed and all those in attendance had been key volunteers in our New Tribes Residentials. They therefore had the opportunity to get something back from giving their time, and to augment their healing and recovery journey. After the Creative Pathways residential, participants are invited to further develop their creativity by participating in an event – the first of which was a Recovery Cabaret at the Phoenix Arts Centre in Exeter, which was a huge success.





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## Celebration Event: Ashburton Recovery Conversations Weekend

This recovery event took place in February 2022 at Ashburton Arts Centre, in the heart of the community. It consisted of two days of **Recovery Conversations**, with an evening cabaret event. **The intention behind the weekend was to celebrate our work; to open the doors to the whole of the recovery community and reach out to the wider world; and to build bridges and new connections.** In a direct response to the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on our community and the wider world, it marked a desire to connect in person and celebrate the joy of being alive. There was a huge commitment from the Rite to Freedom community coming together to help run the event, from organising catering, taking tickets on the door, selling merchandise, and welcoming and looking after our guests. 11 members of Rite to Freedom gave up their time to staff the event over the weekend, two members of the community were part of the cabaret event, and 95 people attended in total.



**The conversations that we had with members of the wider community really gave us a chance to change some perceptions around addiction and recovery.** The calibre of our guest speakers was remarkable - Gillian Burke from BBC Spring Watch, Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa, Robin Harford to name a few. Each guest had a speciality in one of our three pillars. The interviews between Caspar and the guests opened into the bigger conversation around the many types of addiction and what support is needed. For those who could not physically attend there was a Zoom link, accessible for speakers and guests. **The success of this event was evident in the boost of our profile locally.** As a result, we saw new faces at our multi addictions meetings, increased residential attendance, and more guests for our Recovery Conversations.



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## Exeter Recovery Cabaret

Our Recovery Cabaret took place at Exeter Phoenix in November 2022. The purpose of this event was to **celebrate and amplify the voices of the addiction recovery community in Devon**. Weaving comedy, spoken word, performance, music, and film into experience and raucous honesty. The Recovery Cabaret took a bold look at the light and dark of life in recovery. The original live work was devised by our Creative Pathways programme participants, led by South-West artist Charice Bhardwaj. **With 50 audience members, the event was sold out with a waiting list.**



(Words from our audience members)

*“I thought it was really moving... really vital, juicy, alive, funny, and real.”*

*“Thank you all so much for last night. I'm going through a really tough time at the moment and found this event by pure chance. I've been sober for two and a half years and am finding it really hard to relate to other people's experiences. Hearing that I'm not alone and not bonkers for having such strong emotions has made me feel so much more positive and able. Thank you to everybody.”*

*“I would say there was a lot of energy, enthusiasm, and a real bond between everyone.”*



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## Family and Friends Programme

Creating and developing a programme to support family members has been in progress for some years now. Families and friends are usually the first to feel the far-reaching impacts of addiction, and often provide support to navigate the crooked path into freedom and healing.

After researching locally, it became apparent that there was very little support available for family members. This discovery was a major driver for us as an organisation to provide a space that acknowledges all the complexities of being a family member or friend of someone in active addiction and/or recovery.

Our in-person and online events began in 2022, offering a sanctuary in which to gather; share stories; connect to other like-minded souls; and find new inspiration and meaning inside an often confusing and painful journey. We are building towards a residential experience based on the needs of the community that we are serving. The events are held by two of our most experienced facilitators: Ali Chapman and Caspar Walsh. Ali and Caspar are in long term recovery and are both family members of those impacted by addiction.

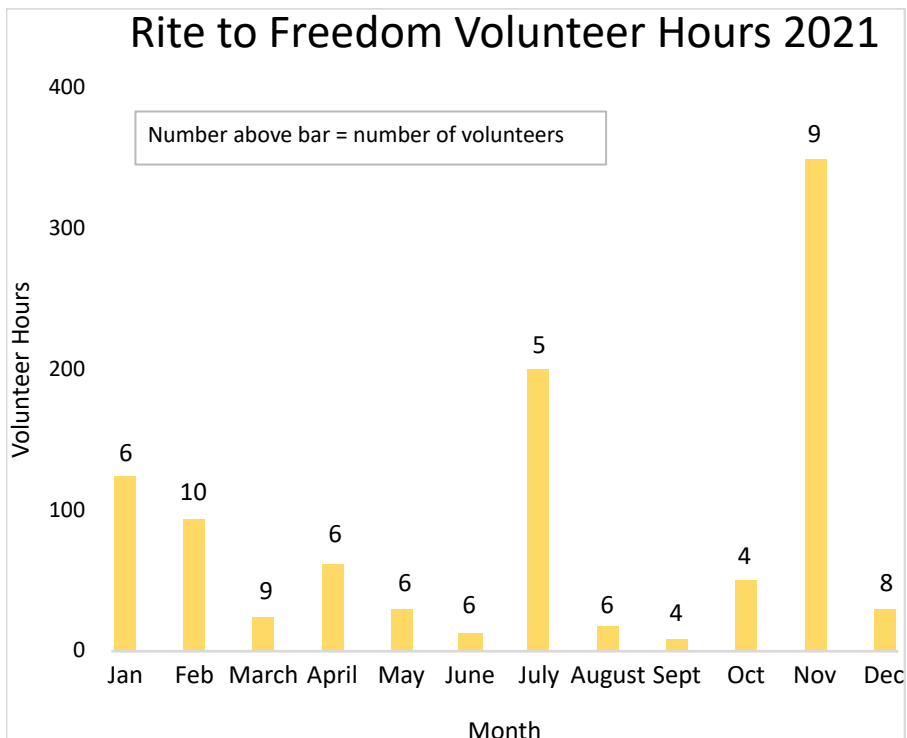
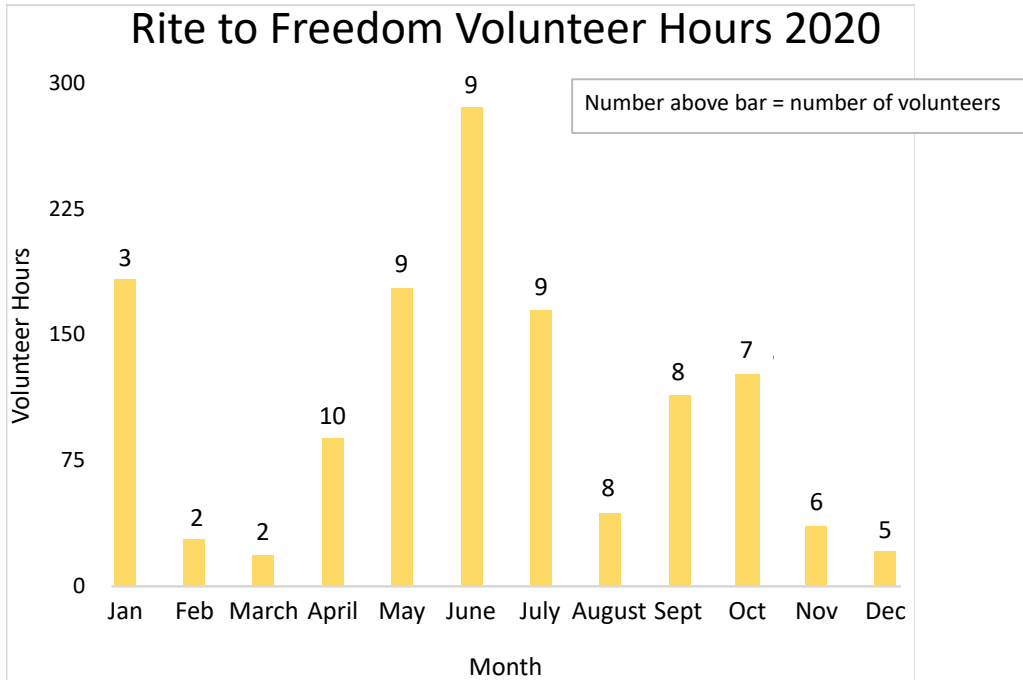
*“The family members who are dealing with the everyday chaos that addiction brings are often left unsupported. Rite to Freedom offers a deeply restorative and healing place where those family members can come together and spend nourishing time with expert addicts in recovery, who share lived experiences of relating with addicts, and all the traumas that come along with it.”*

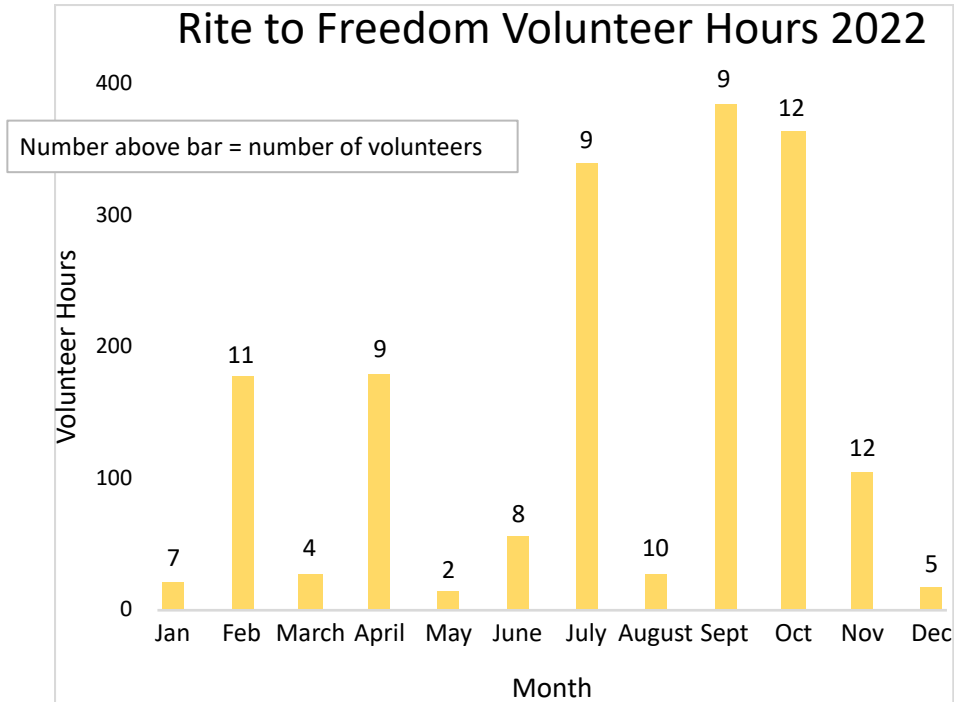
*(Ben Ford – Lead Facilitator and Psychotherapist)*

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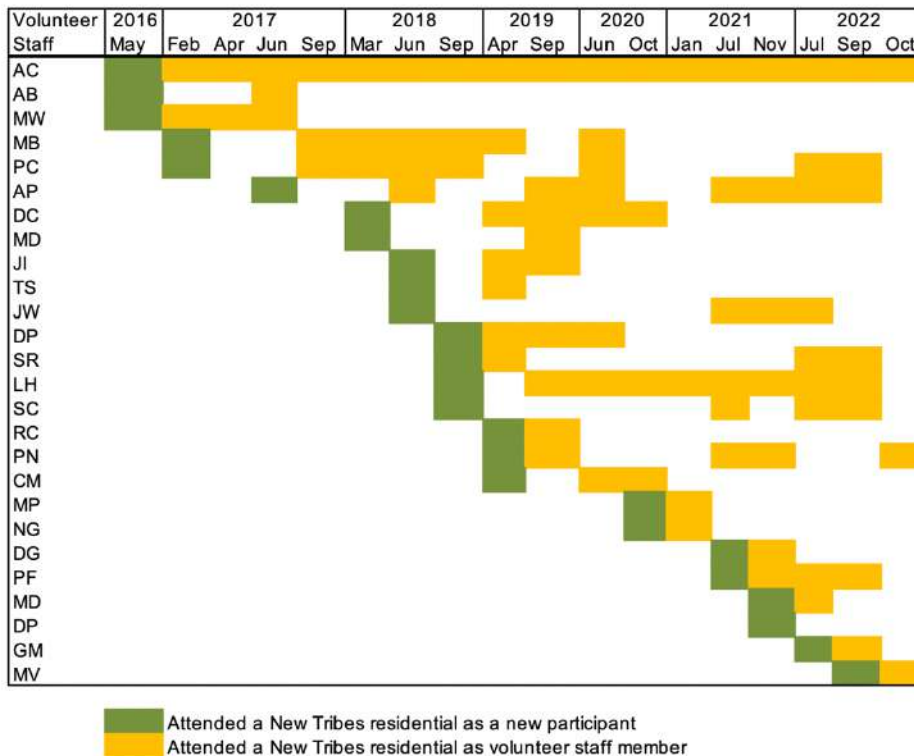
## Volunteer Hours

The following graphs illustrate our total volunteer hours over a three-year period (2020-2022). Please note, the variation in the number of hours and respective volunteers varies due to the diversity of our programme delivery, including our live events (which require more support).





The table below illustrates the journey of our volunteer staff from 2016-2022. The green blocks indicate when the individual completed their own residential as a new participant, and the following yellow blocks indicate the residential volunteering and staffing that they have undertaken since to enhance their recovery journey.





## Impact Report: Summary of Findings

In these stories, it is evident that the Rite to Freedom Pillars: nature, mindfulness, and creativity, are extremely effective in supporting the participants through their recovery journey. It is insinuated that these pillars in many ways have a symbiotic relationship, as addressing one can directly actuate another. In conjunction with other aspects of the programme, the pillars have instigated several significant changes in the storytellers, which are briefly explored in this section. These changes have been instrumental in augmenting the addiction recovery of the participants. This is in part attributable to the longevity of the changes, as the skills and progress attained have continued to grow over time.

The importance of connection and community was accentuated by a storyteller, who described them as the “antidote” to addiction, because they counteract isolation. The term “connection” can be interpreted in the context of people *and* nature – both playing a vital role in the healing and recovery process. Thus, the first change identified in this research is the development of **Human Connection**.

Despite the storytellers being asked to talk about themselves and their own experiences, many also talk a great deal about their “tribe”. This was evident during the group discussion session as well – collectively indicating the significance and impact of the support exchanged between participants, and the programme’s capacity to facilitate such important human connections. As stated by one participant, “it’s like a journey you go on *with* people”, not *alone*.

The creation of a safe and open space enabled the participants to exchange support, feel comfortable to share, and identify aspects not only in themselves, but also in each other. Participants learn to feel accepted and accepting, helping them to establish a lasting bond and support network. Several storytellers expressed their desire to maintain contact with other tribe members. Building this bond, and a strong sense of trust in such a short period, highlights the effectiveness of the activities and design of the residential. Improving the ability of participants to communicate and maintain relationships within the tribe has directly enhanced these abilities with friends and family; participants have developed patience, tolerance, and learned to “communicate with love”.

The second change identified is a **Nature Connection**, which emanates strongly throughout the stories, and directly augments the recovery process. Words spoken in relation to nature include: “openness”, “peace”, and a connection to a “higher power”. Some participants described being “energised” by the wind and the rain on the moors and receiving “nourishment” from the Earth. One storyteller experienced such a connection with nature that they likened themselves to a tree – which has a sense of belonging, is part of nature’s support network, and depends on the Earth for its survival. Nature was also described as the “bedrock” for creativity and mindfulness. Thus, by integrating regular contact and connection with nature in their everyday lives, the participants are more likely to practice mindfulness as well, and/or enhance their creative capacity.

**Instigated Creativity** (the third change identified) occurred primarily in the context of music, writing, and short film making. Being surrounded by creative individuals provided a “creative boon” – enabling some to become closer to their dreams. This creativity and passion were thought to have been “killed off” by addiction, but were in fact just “hibernating”, and resurfaced during the residential. The participants are encouraged to be expressive and their unique, authentic selves. As a result, one participant explained how they no longer feel required to wear a “mask” and be a “superwoman” who hid behind substances. Instrumental in achieving this **Reformation** is the process of **Self-discovery** – the fourth change. Through internal reflection and exploration – facilitated by the residential activities and mental space to “let go”, participants learned how to set internal boundaries, deal with challenges, and process and manage thoughts/emotions. One participant in particular communicated their newfound love of learning more about and becoming a better version of themselves.

This reformation has been integral to the participants’ ability to be more forward-thinking, ambitious, and see a future which is both positive and achievable. Another important factor in this is building confidence – which many participants experienced during the residential. With this confidence, several have undertaken a **Vocational Change** (the fifth change), such as volunteering with Rite to Freedom; staffing residentials; volunteering with external institutions to support the addiction recovery of others; and integrating the three pillars into pre-existing roles. The interdependence between the participants’ lives and the programme galvanises existing recovery efforts, as it “meets

you where you are”. For example, the creative opportunities and emotional support offered by Rite to Freedom played a major role in one participant completing their music degree.

Through providing this individual support and offering participants the opportunity to volunteer or work with Rite to Freedom post-residential, they are supported in taking the first *step* towards long term recovery - as opposed to a first *leap*, which may be overwhelming and unsustainable. A reinforcing feedback effect has also emerged through this research; as participants develop confidence, they are more likely to take on responsibility and leave their comfort zone. This has been met with success, which consequently boosts confidence – thus encouraging them to take on more responsibility. The practices and principles taught by Rite to Freedom have evidently had a lasting impact for the storytellers, who continue to learn more about themselves; connect with nature, practise mindfulness, improve their communication skills, develop their confidence and self-belief, and pursue creativity. This indicates that the programme supports the participants in developing their capacity and capability of recovering from addiction *independently*. As a result, it was stated by a participant that their “addiction just fled”.

This report also explores a reflection on Rite to Freedom and the programme’s aspects. In particular, participants expressed their appreciation for the exploration of the archetypes, Creative Pathways, Recovery Conversations, the comprehensive website content, and the general post-residential support. The online residentials were also deemed a success, and participants were able to connect with each other despite the distance. During in person residentials, a participant with a disability felt extremely included and cared for, was able to rest, and then return to the group without feeling behind/left out.

Our staff and volunteer teams regularly seek feedback from our community and identify “Even Better Ifs” after all of our events. This report outlines the issues raised by the storytellers, and ways in which the programme can be improved. Examples include a reduction in the number of volunteer staff members during residentials, and the distribution of regular emails with bitesize information about programme updates and upcoming events. This feedback is addressed in the report, and efforts towards programme improvement are explained in detail.

With regard to our future evaluation methodology, we plan to take a different approach to the MSC Technique in order to understand our impact on more regular basis. This will involve the programme participants and event attendees describing the most significant change which they have experienced or recognised since becoming involved, as opposed to an external researcher identifying the changes in the transcript from a storytelling session. In recognition that this will potentially limit the depth of the evaluation, our current storytelling methodology will also be conducted, but less frequently (at the end of a large project for example). This combination will greatly enhance the understanding of our impact at multiple levels, and consequently, our ability to improve and develop the programme.

# Methodology

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## The MSC Technique

The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique is a storytelling methodology invented by Rick Davies (1998). The technique involves the collection of stories from programme beneficiaries, which are then used to understand how people discern the world around them and certain events within it. Unlike many research techniques, MSC is participatory, meaning that central to the process are those with a first-hand experience of the groups and their activities. In this research, the storyteller is anyone sharing a personal account of their experiences during the evaluation process, while the collector listens to and records the story.



Source: Clandinin & Connelly, 2000

People have been described as “embodiments of lived stories”, as a story is:

*“A portal through which a person enters the world, and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.”<sup>1</sup>*

This statement highlights the personalised nature of the MSC technique, and how it is characterised by interpretation and personal meaning. This contrasts with the fact and ‘hard truth’ which are sought after in many quantitative research techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Clandinin, J. Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. P43.



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## Main Steps

There are six primary stages of the MSC methodology<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) Story collection
- 2) Transcription, analysis and editing
- 3) Storyteller review of edited stories and feedback
- 4) Group discussion and evaluation
- 5) Creation of a summary report
- 6) Sharing the stories publicly

Stories have been collected from 8 participants of the Rite to Freedom residential through one-to-one online sessions. All participation in this project was voluntary. The story collecting sessions were semi-structured, using the following broad guiding questions:

- Thinking back to your time on Dartmoor and your first residential, how would you describe your experience?
- Regarding the three pillars: nature connection, mindfulness, and creativity, which one do you remember the most?
- In what ways has your experience impacted your life?
- Is there anything you experienced on the weekend that you feel could have been better, or done differently?
- Do you find the website useful?
- Has it been beneficial being contacted personally to stay informed about our activities?

The transcripts from the discussions were edited and condensed into 1-3-page narratives. Upon their completion, a group discussion day was facilitated in order to identify any recurring themes or points of interest. 19 participants attended the 6-hour session, which took place in Exeter. Those in attendance were Rite to Freedom participants, who have been involved in different aspects of the programme for various periods. The stories were distributed ahead of time for the participants to read, accompanied by the following questions to consider while reading:

- Which story/stories struck you most strongly and why?
- Has anything surprised you in the stories?
- Are there any threads/themes emerging in the stories?

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<sup>2</sup> Dart, J. Davies, R (2005). *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique; A Guide to Its Use.*

The session comprised of both whole group discussion, and separate smaller group discussion. The smaller groups were given 2-3 stories to discuss, while answering the following questions:

- What internal/external benefits can you identify?
- What changes can you notice?
- What makes the Rite to Freedom recovery programme different to other recovery services and why?
- Which phrases stood out to you and why?

At the end, the participants were asked to reflect on the session, and to summarise some of the ways in which Rite to Freedom should proceed in order to improve its recovery programme.



Source: Clandinin & Connelly, 2000



## Connecting with the Tribe

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From the stories, it emerged that the support from others in the tribe, and the human connection developed, play a key role in the recovery process:

*“The word tribe that we use... that’s a big factor... sort of coming into the fold and feeling the family aspect of it all. The safe space to spitball ideas, to feel wanted and loved, to be able to bring other people into that fold, and being the person to hold others.” (Steve)*

“Tribe” is a word used in Rite to Freedom to refer to the residential participants. It was also used interchangeably by the storytellers with the word “community” and “family” (David), who referred to each other as “brothers and sisters”. During the group discussion session, it was posited that the word implies longevity and the growth of a bond. The creation of a “safe space” indicates a degree of trust, which was a word used by many storytellers, such as David who described never having felt trust or fitting in before attending the residential. The development of this trust made him feel good about himself. Similarly, Sarah described feeling “trusted to do the job” when she returned to staff her second residential and followed by saying “what a difference from who I used to be”. Trust in this case appears to instil confidence and the development of a feeling of self-worth and being valued.

While the programme aids the recovery of *individuals*, the trust and bond shared between the participants engender a “sense of being in recovery *together*”; as stated by Phil, “it’s like a journey you go on with people”. Within this journey and collective recovery process, David identified how the residential gave participants the time, opportunity, and space to evaluate not only themselves but also each other:

*“You guys identified something in me... some good that I couldn’t identify myself, and this gave me a sense of purpose and direction.” (David)*

This statement accentuates the positive outcome which emerges from these residentials - a kind of self-improvement, which could not easily be achieved if the participants were involved solely as individuals. The ability to establish this bond and sense of purpose in just a few days may be attributed to Sarah’s conclusion that it is all about “exchanging love”. Love implies support and acceptance – things which Sarah felt strongly while on the residential. Due to her disability, Sarah sometimes had to leave the activities to rest. However, she explained that she still felt included, and that it did not negatively impact her experience, or her connection with her tribe:

*“I’m already accepted and there’s no weirdness because I haven’t been around.” (Sarah)*

This connection with the tribe is in many cases what perpetuates the involvement of the participants with Rite to Freedom. This suggests that it is the way in which the residentials are run – the selection of activities and opportunities for connection – which increases participant retention. Finishing his story with the words: “send my love to everyone”, Nik accentuates the lasting connection with the others in his tribe, and consequently, his continued involvement and interest in the Rite to Freedom programme.



*conflict avoidant, or right in there. Seeing other people negotiating that territory has made me look at the way I communicate and the way I hold or haven't held boundaries in the past. And you know, you can love someone and disagree... that's adulting. That's not been part of my life, but it's the truth. I think when you come in and you put all the substances and the patterns down, what you're left with can be quite different to what you think is going on.” (Naomi)*

*“I don't know if I relate to people differently... not consciously at least. But I've learned to communicate better over the last few years with people close to me, and with the other people I deal with. I suppose I've learnt to be clearer and a bit more assertive through speaking my mind on the residential.” (Phil)*



Steve describes his realisation of the importance of communicating with love, and states that he is better at dealing with resentments and disputes:

*“I think what it comes down to at the end of the day is learning to communicate with love... in forgetting and remembering that the majority of the time, you love the person you're talking to. So, the benefit is the love grows bigger, right? The benefit of resolving an issue is that most of the time you've then got a bigger bubble to be inside. We are all in it, and it's about making the bubble bigger for us all.” (Steve)*

This description of an inclusive bubble accentuates the participants' acceptance of others, and desire to connect, as a result of their involvement in the programme – which is prevalent in Jill's story:

*“I am more patient and tolerant with people than I used to be. They used to annoy me all the time, but now I'm much more relaxed about other people having opinions, being themselves, and making mistakes.” (Jill)*

This proclivity for openness was also integral to David's recovery, who valued his time and connection with Caspar:

*“Developing a connection with Caspar over the last couple of months has made me more comfortable with speaking about childhood issues around sexual abuse. Because of this, I've started having trauma counselling. After talking more openly, I feel I can move forward and that a load is lifting off me, although it still pushes me down a bit. It was beautiful that Caspar offered me this support. Even talking about this with you today... I feel comfortable around you. I mean we're all aware of the fact we've got these addiction problems and issues around our mental health, and not one of us are scared to open up with each other. When we sit around that dinner table or when we're doing movements on the moors, it feels like we are sisters and brothers doesn't it? And that's what we call each other. So yeah, It's a beautiful community, a family. We always build and become stronger within Rite to Freedom, but also within the other activities and groups outside.” (David)*

Through attaining the trust needed to receive responsibility; establishing boundaries; communicating with clarity, assertion, and love; becoming patient and tolerant; or feeling comfortable enough to open up to others - the storytellers have overcome substantial and challenging barriers associated with human connection. This is attributable to the Rite to Freedom programme, and the foundation of openness and trust which is created.







As well as befriending nature, Jill likened herself with a tree, which needs a connection to the earth to survive:

*“It’s almost like I’ve put down a deeper root and I get nourishment that comes back up again.”  
(Jill)*

Jill’s connection with nature and the trees around her possibly helps her to avoid isolation and is part of the antidote to her addiction. Even away from the tribe and her community, she now has a sense of belonging in nature’s support network, which may be an integral component of her recovery process.



Similarly, viewing nature as a source of life and energy was apparent in Massimo’s story, who described being “energised” by the cold and rain (two of his fears), as well as Nik’s description of receiving something that we need from nature:

*“It’s a special place... something magical up there... a profound energy that we could tap into.”(Nik)*

All of the participants who attended residential in Dartmoor stated that the “grim weather” did not negatively impact their experience. Contrarily, as stated by Nik:

*“When there was an outdoor exercise and it was really blowy and wet... going out in it made me feel really alive, and the experience was all the more powerful for me.” (Nik)*

## Nature and Mindfulness

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Nik's powerful experience appears to have had a lasting impact, as water in particular is now an "integral part" of what he does on a daily basis – "being out and walking near water... crossing it, paddling in it, drinking it...". The importance of this connection with water is shared by Phil who stated:

*"The nature connection down by the stream – like an exercise in creativity and mindfulness, because I stayed present for a lot of it." (Phil)*

*"When I feel overwhelmed, low, or depressed... I've got the outside world to swim or I can go out in the woods. I'm going to keep coming back to that, it helps me stay a bit more grounded and adds more to life." (Phil)*

Phil's story accentuates the vital role that the nature connection plays in mindfulness – feeling present and grounded. This nature connection was described by Steve as the "bedrock" for the work done with creativity and mindfulness, which could be attributed to David's observation that "in nature, the madness is quiet" – the "openness" of the moors provides the space, peace, and opportunity for self-discovery. Massimo created vivid imagery of a moment when he used this "openness" as an opportunity to identify and connect with the warrior inside him:

*"At 5am the next morning, I went on my own to the moor... in the darkness where I couldn't be heard. I really, really shouted it out to the mountains. It was really very, very life changing... having done that weekend has been like putting a stick in the ground and saying "okay, this is where I want to go, so whatever the fears... I respect them" ... when my past wants me to disengage or stay on my own, I will say that "I will, I can". I can still hear my voice resounding in that canyon and in the dark. That helps me to take decisions... not out my fear, but it's the warrior inside. It is a real, genuine desire to belong and to serve." (Massimo)*

In this moment, Massimo was fully present and mindful of who he is and what he was doing. He simultaneously embraced himself and his environment, which enabled him to feel powerful and in control over his emotions and decisions. David was also able to feel present in this way, as he "found a freedom on the residential of having no sense of time". Thus, it could be argued that despite nature, mindfulness, and creativity being three separate pillars, pursuing the nature connection directly augments the other two pillars.



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## Instigated Creativity



*“Just this very morning, I have downloaded a piano playing app and left my canvases out where I can see them. I don’t plan to do anything, but if I can see them, then that’s the beginning.” (Sarah)*

Another significant change which emerged from the stories is instigated creativity. As shown in Sarah’s statement above, the residential has had a lasting impact regarding her ability and motivation to create. Sarah has found a sense of agency and motivation in pursuing her passions and creativity. Integral to this achievement was Sarah’s ability to “let go”:

*“Being involved let me... let go, which meant that I had more emotional and mental space for other things.” (Sarah)*

One of the residential activities is writing, and Steve stated that he “found this a really great idea for spilling out ideas and journaling what you’ve experienced, and then take it from there”. Jill also remarked on the positive impact that the residential has had on her creative ability, to the extent of saying:

*“I’m closer now to my dream of supporting myself with writing.” (Jill)*

Concurrently, as posited by Steve, there are other ways to be creative without writing, which he discovered on a mentoring day. Steve explained how he wove creativity into his Rite to Freedom experience by working with Caspar on some of the charity’s short films. Being asked to make some soundtracks for these gave him “a really good space and a kind of carte blanche to be creative”. This collaboration between Caspar and Steve supports an observation made during the group discussion

session regarding how participants can bring aspects of their life into Rite to Freedom, and vice versa. In this way, the programme ‘meets you where you are’, and provides effective individual and personal support:

*“If there’s something I’ve experienced in the wider world, then I can bring it in to Rite to Freedom, or vice versa.” (Phil)*

Through her involvement with Rite to Freedom, Naomi described in her story how the creative side of her – which she thought had been “killed off” due to her addictions – was in fact “hibernating”. She now has a healthier relationship with creativity and does not depend on substances for inspiration; she values being in “a community where people are actively creative and extremely talented”, stating that “it is a real kind of boon”. One particular recovery conversation between Naomi and an artist had a notable impact:

*“I stayed up until about three in the morning painting, which I haven’t done for years. I literally couldn’t go to bed, I had to paint because he was so inspiring.” (Naomi)*

This statement resonated strongly with the group discussion participants, who could relate to the experience, or wished to go out and seek a similar kind of inspiration. Therefore, while the programme relights the flame of creativity in individuals, having a group of people being creative alongside each other seemingly also amplifies each participants’ motivation and inspiration.





conclusions from his recovery journey so far, is that he needs to “feed, nurture, and be kind and caring” to himself in the future. Similarly, Massimo identifies the importance of him no longer being ‘angry with his wounds’, and to instead have compassion for himself.

Sarah also describes discovering that she adores “learning how to be a better Sarah and evolving as a person” as a result of becoming sober. Evidently, not only did the participants find benefit in self-exploration while on the residential, but it is an exercise which they have carried with them into their everyday life. Thus, the programme has a lasting impact and provides the tools for the participants in some ways to recover independently. The impact and effectiveness of the residential was highlighted by Naomi, who stated:

*“My addiction just fled.” (Naomi)*

An important component in this is identifying what is inhibiting the participants’ recovery progress. For example, Sarah describes her realisation that “there are many different ways of obtaining and maintaining sobriety”. This has not only enhanced her recovery but has also made her more open-minded and more understanding of the recovery of her sons (as mentioned during the group discussion session). Through working as a residential facilitator and “holding space”, Sarah learned that she “can be someone who helps to facilitate other people’s growth, and to find a path away from their suffering”, and is “not only useful, but also valued”. This positive outcome potentially engenders a reinforcing feedback effect, as it encourages Sarah to leave her comfort zone and continue to learn more about herself.

Massimo posited that by ‘softening his self-concern and absorption’, he can advance his recovery, and discussed in detail the importance of establishing clear internal and external boundaries:

*“I need to put a boundary with the part of me that wants an abuser.” (Massimo)*

Acknowledging and speaking openly about internal challenges such as this has required the participants to devise a structure and “process” through which to overcome and manage them. Steve, for example, expresses his desire to restrain unpleasant or undesirable thoughts or feelings:

*“I have this process – the overview of why I’m feeling that way, rather than just feeling it and then directing it straight at the target.” (Steve)*

*“I’ve got more thoughtful responses about how I feel about things now.” (Steve)*

This reformation has equipped the storytellers with the tools and confidence needed to be forward-thinking and ambitious. As explored in the next section, there are a variety of paths which the storytellers have followed since joining the programme.

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## Vocational Change



*“I now feel more confident about myself, and that I can offer more wisdom and advice. Out of what was carnage in my life, I'm now communicating to other people that recovery is possible, and the self-belief and self-worth I have found within myself helps me to do that.” (David)*

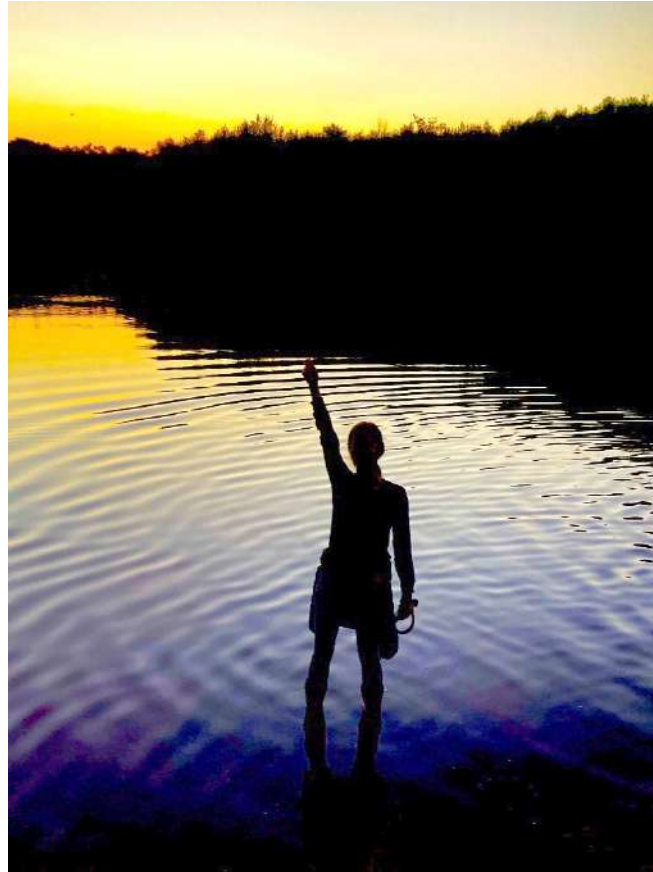
Since becoming involved with Rite to Freedom, the storytellers have pursued a variety of career paths and voluntary work – much of which are related to recovery support. For example, David’s newfound self-belief and self-worth (as stated above) have enabled him to progress to a career in rehabilitation and local volunteering, as a result of his participation in the programme:

*“I’ve also started volunteering in schools and have gone into local prisons where I can share the message of prevention and recovery from drugs and alcohol. I don't think I could have done this without Rite to Freedom.” (David)*

Massimo is now a trustee of addiction recovery in Bristol where he promotes the work of Rite to Freedom. Phil, Sarah, and Naomi also stated that they have joined the residential staff. These experiences accentuate the valuable skillset which can be attained through the programme - being confident enough in one’s own recovery, to then support the recovery of others. Since becoming involved with Rite to Freedom, Phil took the decision to leave his job:

*“I packed up my own business about a year and half ago - part of the lead up to that was realizing that there is more to life than work. I think getting involved with things other than work or 12 step meetings has sort of expanded my horizons and has developed my confidence. I have found that I’m getting more confident in how to do things after doing the different group*

*work on residentials, having a chance to lead or co-lead. I've stepped in at the last minute and it's never gone horribly wrong. I get a bit anxious beforehand, but it usually works out one way or the other. By being willing to give it a go, I find that there are some things I take to more naturally and others that probably aren't my thing."* (Phil)



Phil's decision was extremely effectual with the group discussion participants, who mentioned that while a change like this is not possible for everyone, Phil's bravery and confidence are admirable and inspiring. Naomi also mentioned a boost in her confidence:

*"I later volunteered on another online retreat and was so nervous. But afterwards, I was really grateful that I'd had that opportunity, and I think I held the space. I supported the facilitators and received really good feedback. That was great for my confidence because I used to do management back in the day, which is another thing I sort of just lost."* (Naomi)

These demonstrable progressions to a 'next stage' potentially stem from the development of ambition within the participants. The Rite to Freedom programme exists largely to help its participants in creating a future for themselves post-recovery, which evidently, the storytellers have succeeded in doing. It has created a support network which helps them to feel less isolated and keep them on track. Even if their involvement is not constant, they have something to return to. For Steve, his participation in the programme was integral to him completing his music degree, in part due to his work with Caspar on the Rite to Freedom short films:



*“The fact that it was right in the middle of my uni work meant I actually integrated one of the films into my Level Six project... at the end of the day, this basically helped me to get my degree - just having that, because it’s quite a lonely experience going to uni. You’ve got a lot of people around you, but most of the work you’re doing on your own. So yeah, all that was on the back of being mentored gently by Caspar and Rite to Freedom, plus all my studying alongside that, has got me here and helped me mature in that regard.” (Steve)*

It was not only the creativity boost which aided Steve, but as mentioned, also the company and support from his tribe. Acknowledging the value of these kind of relationships, Massimo has created a group meetup for “walking to freedom”, entitled “Nature Connection and Addiction Recovery”. Massimo acknowledges the challenges associated with this, which often cause him to retreat, but appreciates how it enables him and others to befriend new people.

In Nik’s story, he stated that the programme “galvanised” his existing recovery process, which has enabled him to shift towards his dream lifestyle.

*“My kind of career and the way I work was already aligned to our experience. So, in and of itself, has the experience changed anything? No. Did it galvanize and reinforce what I was doing then? Yes, very much so. I’m a counselor and I work with people either in a room or over Zoom - mostly because of the pandemic. I also do what I call ‘Walk and Talk’... a session of counseling in the outdoors, but in a safe environment where we wouldn’t be overheard... I would walk in nature anyway - it’s what I count as my meditation, and that weekend helped to reinforce that. There are aspects of what I did that enhanced my experience. That’s what I mean by galvanizing it. So, it really has helped build and solidify what I’m doing in my recovery.” (Nik)*

Overall, whether the participants have completely changed their career paths, or altered their current paths, the programme has been instrumental in establishing a more fulfilling path, which supports or is in line with their recovery processes.



# Reflecting on Rite to Freedom



*“Rite to Freedom comes with this kind of... burning heart of love at its very centre, and radiates through it.” (Naomi)*

The voice of our community is at the very heart of Rite to Freedom – it is what shapes our future development plans and informs any alterations to our delivery. After any event, our staff and volunteer team meet to discuss what went well, and how it could be even better. We have a volunteer assigned to writing notes on all of these “Even Better Ifs”, which are then discussed, and implemented on the next event if signed off by the core staff team.

Feedback from our community can come from other areas such as our impact and evaluation work, online group chats, general conversation, and our quarterly community council meetings (which give space for feedback/suggestions). We are also incorporating a new volunteer coordinator role into our future funding bids. Informally collating feedback will be part of the role, alongside the more formalised evaluation aspect. It is the responsibility of the core staff team to consider any feedback and to ensure that any changes are in-line with our aims and values.

The following section outlines the aspects of the programme valued by the storytellers, and some Even Better Ifs. However, we recognise that it takes time for new community members to understand how we operate and thus, are transparent in stating that not all feedback and suggestions will be implemented.



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## Valued attributes

As insinuated in Naomi's words above, the storytellers have an intense emotional connection with the programme and view it as more than just a dispassionate, utilitarian service. Naomi also describes Caspar as central to the charity and the effectiveness of the programme:

*"It is based initially on Caspar's love and his journey, and the people drawn to him are now part of it as well." (Naomi)*

The fact that the participants can relate to Caspar's experiences, and vice versa, potentially contributes to the healing process. It is in-keeping with the description of "a journey that you go on with people" (Phil), and the personal and intimate nature of the programme:

*"I remember Caspar reading... I can't remember which poem he read... but I remember crying, because he has this way of expressing things inside me that desperately need to be expressed. There's something about the way he... ooh I'm welling up now... the way he writes and the way he holds space. That is a real gift to all of us." (Naomi)*

Caspar's reading strongly resonated with Naomi, and her statement is indicative of the effectiveness of the programme's creative attributes. The Creative Pathways element in particular is appreciated by Naomi, Phil and Massimo. This potentially derives from the opportunity for participants to feel proud of something that they have created – a sense of progress and achievement. They are able to express themselves and have an output to share with the external community if they wish to.

The ability to build a community is another aspect of Rite to Freedom which is greatly valued by the storytellers – the "sense of family", and as stated by Phil:

*"It's that kind of common purpose and the like-minded people... that sense of a tribe and a culture... It's good to have a structure, and a purpose all together." (Phil)*

This "sense of a tribe" was also achieved through Rite to Freedom's online residentials, which took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. These were deemed by the storytellers to be extremely successful and impactful. The breakout rooms in particular were greatly appreciated and enjoyed, as they enabled participants to interact and develop connections/relationships. Following both the in person or online residentials, the continued contact and post-residential support offered is highly regarded by participants such as Nik:

*“The support which came after the weekend was just as profound, intense, amazing, and supportive as it was on the weekend. That must be said, because it wasn't just the weekend. There were lots of things afterwards, which was lovely.” (Nik)*

Massimo describes his satisfaction in being contacted and able to contribute post-residential. A route which David plans to pursue following the residential is working with Rite to Freedom’s partner organisations, which would enhance his personal development, as they present the opportunity to “explore different parts of your addiction and yourself”.

Something which facilitates the ability of participants to access and pursue these services is the Rite to Freedom website, which numerous participants mention:

*“I find the website useful. It's a lot of content, especially with the Archetypes and Creative Pathways. Recently I've seen the events and all the details.” (Massimo)*

*“I like keeping up to date with what's coming up and listening to the kind of odd stuff that I've missed. It's good to see what residentials are coming up and things with the Creative Pathways... so yeah, I do find the website useful.” (Naomi)*

Within the website’s content is information regarding Rite to Freedom’s Recovery Conversations, which – as mentioned previously in the context of a conversation with an artist – is mentioned by Naomi:

*“The recovery talks were really fascinating, with different people bringing different flavours.” (Naomi)*

Naomi’s story indicates her enjoyment of being surrounded by and working with a mix of people, and “being able to hold all kinds of conversations” – which is a major part of the work of Rite to Freedom. Working with a mix of people also necessitates accommodating for those with disabilities, which was crucial for Sarah’s participation. It was evident in her story that Sarah’s experience on the residential was extremely positive, and that she was given the necessary support:

*“The second thing that was really important was that I felt really loved, held, cared about, and seen. My disabilities were accommodated for in a way that wasn't showy or fussy. I was still able to just be part of the tribe, and it was all right if I needed to go away and have a lie down. If I had to go, I caught up easily when I came back, so I never felt left out. This is important to me because most of my life is spent in my bed because I'm so ill.” (Sarah)*

Nik also recognised the inclusivity of the programme and remarked on the fact that it is not ableist in any way; In Nik’s words, there is “something magical up there” on the residential, which he also describes as being well organised.

The archetypes: Lover, Warrior, Magician, and Sovereign are integral components appertaining to the Rite to Freedom recovery programme, the effectiveness of which emanated from stories such as Massimo’s:

*“I can still hear my voice resounding in that canyon and in the dark. That helps me to take decisions... not out of my fear, but it’s the warrior inside. It is a real, genuine desire to belong and to serve.” (Massimo)*



The purpose of the Warrior Protector archetype is “power and service through boundaries”<sup>3</sup>. Boundaries is a theme upon which Massimo places substantial emphasis, as he feels that this has been lacking in his life thus far. However, through identifying with this archetype, he has developed the ability to maintain boundaries and not act out of fear. The ability for the participants to relate to and connect with the archetypes, in conjunction with the three pillars, provides them with mechanisms through which to devise an effective and individualised recovery process. This guidance is embedded throughout the programme - as stated by Naomi:

*“There is joy and support in all the three pillars. They don't stop, and we don't cut them off. They're always there flowing... like a triangle.” (Naomi)*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ritetofreedom.org.uk/archetypes-resources>

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## Identified Issues and Solutions

While the experiences with Rite to Freedom described were largely positive, some issues were identified in the stories and during the group discussion day which have been addressed. However, we would like to clarify that while we do discuss each piece of feedback received, we do not always implement changes in response. Through a filtering process, we apply the changes which we think will best augment the progress towards our goals/aims and improve the programme for our participants.

- During the group discussion day, it was stated that there are too many volunteer staff members involved in the residentials, meaning that the participants were sometimes not sure who they should speak to.
  - Reflecting on the success of our smaller volunteer team during our residential in Ireland, we are reducing volunteer numbers in the future, and will regularly review the efficacy of this change. We will also discuss the potential benefit of adopting some kind of marker to identify the staff (e.g. a coloured stick or scarf).
- One storyteller requested an improvement in the comfort level of the residentials - in particular, the accommodation.
  - There are few residential centres in Devon that meet our needs regarding location, availability, pricing, and facilities. High Heathercombe is an ideal location, providing us with access straight onto the moors which is invaluable for our work. Participants are provided with the option to camp, stay in a van, or stay in a house. However, we are aware that the bedroom facilities could be of a higher standard and have provided this feedback to the residential centre. We will also aim for clearer communication about the basic nature of the accommodation in the future, and it should be noted that the price of the site is reflective of the facility quality.

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## Additional Improvements

The storytellers also offered the following suggested improvements or additions to the Rite to Freedom programme:

- Sending short, regular, informative emails about the programme, with links to the website. The general consensus was a desire for concise, bitesize chunks of information.
  - We regularly ask the community for feedback regarding information sharing, and the responses have been similar to those mentioned here. Therefore, we will be distributing monthly emails containing clear and succinct information about upcoming events, in addition to a quarterly newsletter (sent to the wider community as well).

- Organising another recovery festival, in which the participants could share the work of Rite to Freedom externally with the wider community.
  - We delivered a successful Recovery Celebration evening at the Exeter Phoenix as part of the Creative Pathways Program and are in discussion with EDP drug and alcohol services to be part of a wider Recovery Festival. We also hope to have a stall at the Exeter Respect festival. Capacity is an issue which we are facing; balancing the desire to be part of such events, while being mindful of our core delivery commitments. Building a larger staff team within our next round of funding bids would help to alleviate this issue.
- As the breakout rooms in the online residentials were such a success, it was recommended that there be more, shorter breakout rooms in the future, in order to speak with more people.
  - We do not have any immediate plans to deliver further online residentials post-pandemic. We have found in person residentials to be more impactful. However, our current online Multi Addictions and Family and Friends meetings provide opportunities for breakout rooms, meeting new people, and engaging in ongoing conversations. There are longer term discussions with our international connections and partners to offer resources and support online to the global addiction recovery community and the professional support it receives.

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## Next Steps

This evaluation has enabled Rite to Freedom to identify its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. However, in order to conduct shorter, internal, and more frequent evaluations of our work, we will also take a different approach to the MSC Technique. This will involve asking programme participants and event attendees to describe (written or spoken) the most significant change that they have recognised or experienced since becoming involved. We recognise that this method will not capture the same depth as the storytelling process. Consequently, we will use both methods in the future, but repeat the storytelling methodology less frequently and externally (at the end of a large project for example). This will enable us to continually understand the impact of our work at multiple levels, and discern what improvements/adjustments can be made, and how we can sustainably scale up. We are exploring current links with Exeter University and a number of partner organisations to obtain research funding for these methodologies. Additionally, all current and future funding applications will include a percentage to support this essential ongoing evaluation of our work.

In the event of using our storytelling approach in the future, the following methodological alterations/additions are proposed:

- Conducting longer and in person (if feasible) storytelling sessions. This would potentially engender a greater depth of conversation and enable the storytellers to make more connections between thoughts/ideas.

- Holding a group discussion session with external individuals (not current or past participants of the programme) in order to attain a broader perspective and increase awareness of addiction and the recovery process.
- Reading more of the stories aloud during the group discussion session to ensure that the messages and language used are fresh in the participants' minds, thus ensuring that they are less likely to overlook potential areas for analysis.
- Collecting stories from people who have attended Rite to Freedom events to understand how their involvement might have impacted them, their inspiration for attending, and whether it has influenced their view on addiction and recovery.





# All Stories

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## In Nature, the Madness is Quiet

### *David's Story*

The first time I went up on the moors with Rite to Freedom, I was afraid and very apprehensive. But **I learned more about myself in the three days up on the moors than I had done in the last two years of my recovery.** I believe this was because of the peace and tranquility of the moors and the openness of everybody within the tribe... the way in which I felt held. It allowed me to be myself more fully and is one of the best experiences I've had so far in my recovery. It's the nature connection that I've taken away with me - the calmness of the moors, so much so that I regularly visit the moors or the coastline now. It allows me to escape the daily hustle and bustle, to slow down and to be at one with myself and the land. This in turns allows me to appreciate what I've done and how far I've come. I found a freedom on the residential of having no sense of time without a mobile connection. **For the first time, I was able to just sit and be more present mentally, stop being such a prolific overthinker, and answer a lot of internal questions by allowing myself the time and space to do it.** When I was in the madness of drugs and alcohol, I never really appreciated the natural beauty of what's around me. But **in nature, the madness is quiet.**

On the first day, we went up to the land and asked to notice what we were feeling, to take in what was around us. I remember going back up there and giving an offering to the land, I've still got the stone I found with me now. It made me realize that for the first year and a half of my recovery - before I came into Rite to Freedom - I was very hectic around my recovery. But since the residential, I've started to engage in calming activities such as writing, mindfulness, and meditation to balance this manic side of recovery. **There is a sense of family and community with Rite to Freedom, where everybody understands each other... it's a beautiful thing.** I'm not in a job currently, but I'm looking at a career within the drug and alcohol rehabilitation service, maybe counselling. I've also started volunteering in schools and have gone into local prisons where I can share the message of prevention and recovery from drugs and alcohol. I don't think I could have done this without Rite to Freedom, because **I now feel more confident about myself, and that I can offer more wisdom and advice.** Out of what was carnage in my life, I'm now communicating to other people that recovery is possible, and the self-belief and self-worth I have found within myself helps me to do that.

**The program has allowed me to have a voice for the first time in a long time.** I feel I'm held as an individual and part of a community, which, on my own, is not always easy to do. I'm very fortunate that my family have helped me through my recovery. They have told me that I'm a lot calmer now and easier to be around and give me a lot more responsibility. It might sound silly, but I now go to

the shops for my mom and handle money, which wouldn't have happened when I was in addiction. I still bring back a receipt, even though she tells me there is no need. I have lovely strong relationships with family now, and it's a beautiful thing.

**Developing a connection with Caspar over the last couple of months has made me more comfortable with speaking about childhood issues around sexual abuse.** Because of this, I've started having trauma counselling. After talking more openly, I feel I can move forward and that a load is lifting off me, although it still pushes me down a bit. It was beautiful that Caspar offered me this support. **Even talking about this with you today... I feel comfortable around you.** I mean we're all aware of the fact we've got these addiction problems and issues around our mental health, and not one of us are scared to open up with each other. When we sit around that dinner table or when we're doing movements on the moors, **it feels like we are sisters and brothers doesn't it?** And that's what we call each other. So yeah, It's a beautiful community, a family. We always build and become stronger within Rite to Freedom, but also within the other activities and groups outside. We always come back together though, and every time we do, we've grown individually and as a group.

My anxiety levels were really heightened on my first residential. I was pacing up and down with the fear of the unknown. I've developed more since then, but heightening my senses probably enabled me to fulfill the exercise and feel more progress because of the sense of relief I felt afterwards. I remember one point when I couldn't find my coat. The staff tried to reassure me, but my initial gut feeling was that someone had stolen it. That's obviously because in my drug addiction, that sort of thing happened in my daily life. I mean, I probably would have done it myself back then. But when the coat was found, I felt very silly and awkward, and I made my apologies. I've never had any trust or fitted in anywhere before, so my anxiety level was massively heightened. But after sharing the weekend with you guys, **the trust that I developed brought me back to you guys again**, and that made me feel good about myself. I opened up more the second time I came to Rite to Freedom. I had my first real conversation about me and my experiences. **You guys identified something in me... some good that I couldn't identify myself, and this gave me a sense of purpose and direction.**

Rite to Freedom partners with other organizations and supports people doing work in specific areas so that you explore different parts of your addiction and yourself. The next stage in my personal development and my journey is hopefully to get involved with these partner organisations. It's very helpful that Rite to Freedom welcomes and talks about multi-addiction and touches on different parts of the recovery journey. I've taken a lot from Rite to Freedom, and now I use it every day - I volunteer in NA through Five Lives and over the next two months, I'll be giving talks to students in three schools. I'm also in the Jatis rehabilitation project in Torquay and will be buddying up with new people moving into the properties. I've been going into local prisons now as well, sharing the NA message. **I can do this work now because I have a bit more faith in myself and realise all the good that's in me – because you guys saw the good in me. It really is having a positive impact on my life.**

I'd like to see more things like the Rite to Freedom Recovery Festival. I found it a beautiful weekend and took a wealth of knowledge from all the different speakers. Up on the moors, Rite to Freedom is kind of a closed group; it's us, our family, and our community. **But I feel we can bring some of what we do to the local community.** Moving forward, this would be something we could do once a year and then take it to a different area - to get the message of Rite to Freedom across and share some of what we do as a charity. I think I'll be doing the Creative Pathways weekend next to learn more about the four archetypes. This will help with my development and build my knowledge on staffing for the next residential. **I've been clean for two years, and as much as I'd like to give back, I also need to nurture my own recovery process. I need to feed, nurture, and be kind and caring to myself when moving forward.**



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## I Hug Trees Now

### *Jill's Story*

I remember it really well... it was in the lockdown, an online retreat. It was awesome and I got so much out of it. **I didn't know what would happen or expect to feel so connected to everybody.** I loved the breakout rooms and the exercises and I did a real deep dive with a couple of people. It was so lovely to get those really meaningful moments with people in lockdown.

It's difficult for me to say which of the three pillars stood out for me the most, because they are things that I really love anyway. But actually... it's the nature connection because it gave me alternative ways to experience nature. I've been meditating and doing breathwork and yoga for years, so that felt familiar. I've also written stuff myself - poetry and things, so I love the creativity. It is sort of familiar and obviously, I love nature. **The different ways of connecting with trees and using the senses though... that was an incredible exercise for me. I felt really close to my environment.**

I still do some of the exercises when I go outside, **and I've made a friend of a tree nearby, which I greet.** So, it has stayed with me all the time. I think I've come to understand that it's a really important part of my recovery. When I'm sort of lost in my own little world and get into these slightly addictive patterns, I lose touch of these things. I know what reality is, but I'm not grounded. I live in my head too much and get into these weird thought patterns - quite depressing and anxious, and the release I get from nature is such an important part of my recovery. To have that extra layer of connection with nature has just really strengthened... It's just strengthened. **It's almost like I've put down a deeper root and I get the nourishment that comes back up again.** It's not a totally new thing, as I've always loved hiking and walking, but I have a different approach now. When I'm out there, I get more from it, and I don't just rush through. **I hug trees now, which I always used to think was just the hippie woo woo stuff, but I actually do it. I make sure there's no one around.**

Rite to Freedom has definitely loosened me up creatively, and funnily enough, I would say that **I'm closer now to my dream of actually supporting myself with my writing.** It's only by answering your question that I have traced it back to that actually. I'd sort of given up on that side of myself because I just thought, "I'm not going to be able to pay the bills doing this". But the training that I'm doing has made me realize that I can. That stems back from me starting to write again and getting back in touch with my creativity. I think it's all been part of the program. What I did has been part of this healing movement that's happening in my recovery. **I think now I'm more patient and more tolerant with people than I used to be.** They used to annoy me all the time, but now I'm much more relaxed about other people having opinions, being themselves, and making mistakes.

Rite to Freedom definitely made me feel that I'm part of a community. I've always felt like an outsider, like I didn't belong. But **Rite to Freedom made me feel like I actually do belong**. It's a tribe, and people are connecting with me. There's a lot of repercussions from the work I've done, and I really want to do more in the future. I feel both more accepted and accepting of other people - the two things, like a **healing spiral**.

Talking about what could have been better on the online retreat for now, I think it would have been nice to have done one or two more breakout rooms. It would be nice to get to know more of the people there. Maybe make them shorter though. I've always wanted to do yoga outdoors, but I don't have a garden. So, **I would love to do that on an in-person retreat as well, because it brings together the spirituality and the nature connection**. That would be amazing.

I don't think I received a newsletter. If I have, maybe it has gone to my spam folder. I haven't really been on the website much. Maybe a more regular, short, informative email would be better, not so much like a long newsletter, just the kind of little reminder to keep Rite to Freedom in your mind. That could then link back to the website, then I would probably visit it more if it's like, "hey, we've just written a thing about this, why don't you come visit?". Apparently, people check their emails more than any other thing, that's why I'm training in writing those kinds of things.



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## Internal Boundaries

### *Massimo's Story*

My reconnection with the moors was very important to me, although it was quite cold and stormy. **I actually fear cold and rain, but I was stabbed and energized by it in that context.** I really liked the connection with other people as well. It was an important milestone for me. **The highlight of my retreat was this ritual that we did at the water.** I was very open to the whole experience and got the full impact of the symbolism... not in my head, but my emotional kind of body. One of my main themes since my childhood - because I'm an only child - has been belonging to a family. In that particular retreat, I was given these swords - it was suggested to say that I am part of the family and I take my place at the table. It was so powerful. I always fear of disturbing and taking too much time from the other people, so I was just there for 10 minutes and then decided that I needed to do this properly. So, **at 5am the next morning, I went on my own to the moor... in the darkness where I couldn't be heard.** I didn't take the sword, but I had it symbolically... my body, my gestures. **I really, really shouted it out to the mountains.** It was really very, very life changing.

I yearn for a place of belonging and service. But at the same time, part of me avoids it because I fear others, disappointment, and being criticized. This is a polarized dynamic. So, **having done that weekend has been like putting a stick in the ground and saying "okay, this is where I want to go, so whatever the fears... I respect them"**. After that, I have been more mindful about maintaining boundaries. When my past wants me to disengage or stay on my own, I will say that "I will, I can". **I can still hear my voice resounding in that canyon and in the dark. That helps me to take decisions... not out my fear, but it's the warrior inside.** It is a real, genuine desire to belong and to serve.

The experience has made a difference because, as I said, I find myself wanting this connection of sitting at the table, but then I retreat on my own. It's unconscious. I say "Massimo, look, you're back in your house on the computer". Now I've become a trustee of an addiction recovery here in Bristol. Recently when I went back, I was the only trustee who showed up for a tea with the founder and I said, "I need to go". That's an example; I need to sit at that table and then I went and did it. I decided to offer to start contacting people who may be interested in the work of Rite to Freedom here in Bristol. I thought of creating a meetup group for walking... walking to freedom. 'Nature Connection and Addiction Recovery', that's the name. I thought that this was a good way to befriend people. So that's what I'm doing. Of course, it's not easy. You see a few people come, and I get all the range of reasons why I retreat because this is a failure within the public eye now.

For me, this is a matter of boundaries. I have not much of a problem with external boundaries, it's the internal boundaries. The voices inside me breach the boundaries and say, "I want to belong". These voices come in and intrude. I need to put internal boundaries around my voices and lead my internal family in a way that is not driven by fear, but by desire in the sense of wanting to serve. So,

**the part of me that wants me to retreat is a wounded part. I don't want to get angry with my wounds. This is a part of me that doesn't need anger, but compassion.**

I had to describe the retreats to my partner. Through this process, I think they understood how important it is for me, so that for sure contributed to the way we communicate together. For me, the way I put boundaries is through the lover, not the warrior. In my recovery, what I have seen is that the more I soften my self-concern and absorption, the better my recovery becomes. **My addiction has been self-obsession, love, sex, and co-dependency. So, there could be potentially a lot of boundaries involved.** But I learned in my recovery that the main boundary is internal boundaries, because when I don't have a boundary with another person, part of me wants something from not having boundaries. So, it doesn't help me if I try to put an external boundary. The problem is not the other person, it's the voice inside me.

If I get into a relationship that is abusive, it's not through putting boundaries between me and the abuser that I resolve the problem. **I need to put a boundary with a part of me that wants an abuser.** If I want freedom, space, and independence in my relationship and I pick a person that is obsessed with me abandoning them, it's not by putting boundaries towards this person that can solve the problem. The choice was mine. If I choose a person that has issues with abandonment because of their story, that is my responsibility. I cannot marry a black woman and then want them to be white. You know, it doesn't make any sense to put the boundary and say, "I want you to be white as a boundary". It's my choice that determines what happens next. I will set the limit. So, I think that boundaries is an important and healthy concept, but sometimes it's overstated. **It's not about boundaries, but the choice before it.**

On that particular weekend, I experienced some lack of information on what was going to happen in the day, with long waiting. I wasn't sure if there was a purpose for this, or if some problem had occurred. The space that you were left by yourself also had an edge to it, whether it was uncomfortable for good reason I'm not sure. Maybe it could have been managed better or with some more communication. I find the website useful. It's a lot of content, especially with the archetypes and creative pathways. Recently I've seen the events and all the details. I notice they change dates and so on. But that's not about the website, it's just about how they are. There is not a calendar of events anywhere though. I would like to have a simple page with one line for each event with a date and be able to click to see the details. On the WhatsApp, there are so many pictures that I can't see the important information. **I really appreciate being contacted though and being able to contribute.**

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## Burning Heart of Love

### *Naomi's Story*

I remember coming away from that experience and being quite **shocked by how strong it was, even through Zoom**. My daughter was one when the Covid pandemic started. I became incredibly isolated almost overnight, with a small child on my own. I remember seeing people's faces on the screen, and that sense of relief like “oh God... humanity is still happening”. People are still out there, in excruciating and difficult circumstances, trying to prioritize their recovery and - like they say in AA - “staying in the middle of the boat”. That whole time was really traumatizing and terrifying for so many of us on so many levels. **I remember Caspar reading... I can't remember which poem he read... but I remember crying, because he has this way of expressing things inside me that desperately need to be expressed**. There's something about the way he... ooh I'm welling up now... the way he writes and the way he holds space. That is a real gift to all of us.

I remember feeling so grateful that I had made contact with the community and the three pillars: creativity, mindfulness and the nature connection. **I was galvanized into thinking “okay, what can you do?”**. I put my daughter on my back in the carrier and thought “you know, I'm lucky enough to live not far from the fields”, and we walked the field every day, and then a bit further to the river and along the bank. Over the whole Covid period, **that piece of land has become really important to me, and the repetition of that contact**.

I practiced meditation for years back in the day, but because of my addiction, I found that I couldn't be in my own head, or bear just being present with myself. I told myself that it was self-indulgent to do this. But **seeing people at Rite to Freedom using meditation as an intrinsic and fundamental support for their recovery made me practice it again... it lit that flame**. I remember meeting really lovely people from that weekend on our WhatsApp group, who were really supportive. Getting to know people through that was strange to a lot of us, but it really worked, and people kept each other updated on how they were. If someone was struggling, you'd get this flood of support coming through and then later, **when you meet people face to face, it's so lovely because you already have that kinship and that relationship, a foundation**.

I felt a sense of relief... knowing that there was still support out there for me, and people that have the same kind of stuff as me going on. **My addiction just fled**. My kind of dysfunctionality and my fear feeds my addictive thinking, so it was really challenging when Covid happened. There's that Johann Hari book, I think it's called ‘Lost Connections’, which is all about how **the antidote to addiction is community and connection because we isolate**. I think Rite to Freedom beautifully offers community... nonjudgmental, supportive, kind. That's one of the blessings of recovery for me. **There is joy and support in all the three pillars. They don't stop, and we don't cut them off. They're always there flowing... like a triangle**.

One of my neighbors is taking us to a choir afternoon in Dartington, which is something that I've always been really passionate about - music and singing. That has all died away in my disease. But I



think **Rite to Freedom gave me permission that I didn't know I was looking for**, that I couldn't give to myself. It showed me that it's okay to follow these things and see where they lead you. Those parts of your life might have been hibernating, but you didn't kill them off. There's something painfully beautiful in that. It is healing in a way because as someone who was "creative", I always thought the way I behaved and the things I did to my body were fueling that creativity. I didn't realize that it was actually like self-destruction. **To be in a community where people are actively creative and extremely talented is a real kind of boon** because it's allowed me to see that it was all a lie. I bought into that lie like all my heroes... the people who died young and left a good-looking corpse. But that kind of thinking from 20/25 years ago doesn't serve me now and it doesn't feel genuine. It seems there's something very incongruent about it, and it doesn't feel creative anymore. If it's hateful and nihilistic then it shuts you down. I think we can connect to those things in another, more meaningful way. I think possibly the work that is generated is of a different quality to what is when you are off your head and miserable.

I remember a recovery conversation with an artist called Gavin. After that conversation, **I stayed up until about three in the morning painting, which I haven't done for years... like years and years and years. I literally couldn't go to bed, I had to paint because he was so inspiring.** I work for an ethical company and want to retrain as a therapist, to be of service to people. The therapists at Rite to Freedom come from very different therapeutic backgrounds, so listening and hearing about those different routes has been really fascinating and helpful.

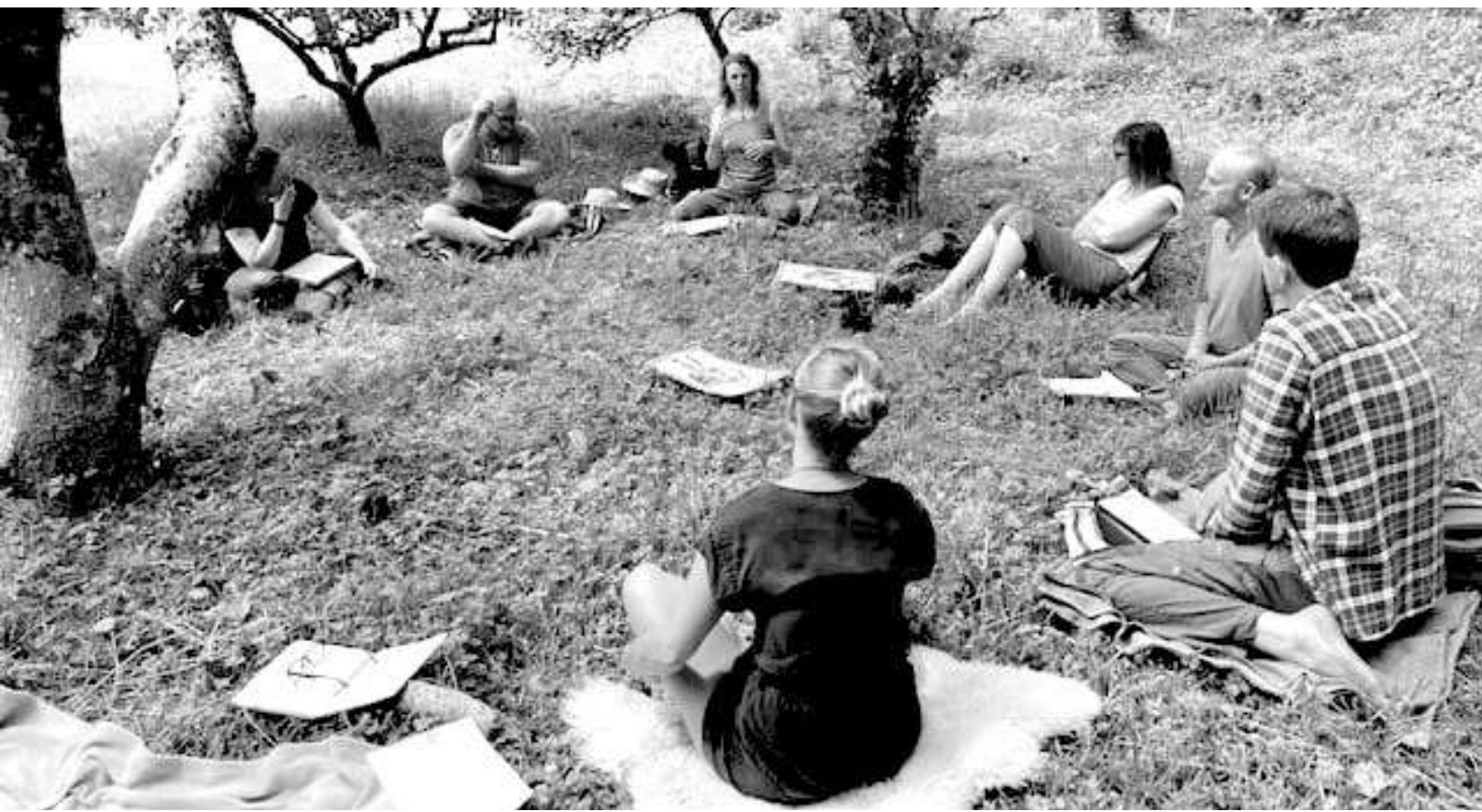
I communicate differently with my family, and not always to their liking. **One big part of Rite to Freedom is being able to hold all kinds of conversations.** I'm someone who's either very conflict avoidant, or right in there. Seeing other people negotiating that territory has made me look at the way I communicate and the way I hold or haven't held boundaries in the past. And you know, **you can love someone and disagree... that's adulting.** That's not been part of my life, but it's the truth. I think when you come in and you put all the substances and the patterns down, what you're left with can be quite different to what you think is going on.

I later volunteered on another online retreat and was so nervous. But afterwards, I was really grateful that I'd had that opportunity, and I think I held the space. I supported the facilitators and received really good feedback. That was great for my confidence because I used to do management back in the day, which is another thing I sort of just lost. I lost that side of me, or **I had to put a mask on, drink, and use in order to be this superwoman. But nobody now in my life wants that, they don't ask Superwoman to come out anymore. She's not required... I'm required!** Which is scarier in a way because if you're showing yourself authentically, then of course, you get met authentically. The fear of rejection is there as well. Supporting the facilitators and being of service felt really good and inspiring, because **I realized I can be someone who helps to facilitate other people's growth, and to find a path away from their suffering.**

I like keeping up to date with what's coming up and listening to the kind of odd stuff that I've missed. It's good to see what residencies are coming up and things with the Creative Pathways. **The**

recovery talks were really fascinating, with different people bringing different flavours. So yeah, I do find the website useful, and I get to see my friends and what they are all doing.

I've been around a couple of years and **a lot of the people I love most are part of the tribe, and that's my truth.** I might not see them as much as I want too because of personal circumstances, but the fact that they're in my life is of massive importance to me as a woman and a mother, and as a recovering addict. I'm always all three of those things now. I don't get to drop one because it's inconvenient. They are part of me all of the time, and I can't be anything if I pick up again. **Rite to Freedom comes with this kind of... burning heart of love that's at its very centre, and radiates through it.** It is based initially on Caspar's love and his journey, and the people drawn to him are now part of it as well. **It is a really special and unique group of people doing something really fucking big in the world.**



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## A Shift Toward My Dream

### *Nik's Story*

To put it very simply, I was really resistant before I arrived. I shared this at the very beginning. The resistance lasted not much longer than a few hours though, and **once I let go, it was very beautiful, grounding, and healing.** It was just a lovely experience. **Out of the three pillars, the nature connection was the most powerful thing for me, probably the most important in my own recovery.** The site was just beautiful. I didn't notice this straight away because the weather was pretty grim. **When there was an outdoor exercise and it was really blowy and wet... going out in it made me feel alive, and the experience was all the more powerful for me.** It was beautiful and didn't stop anything. You know the saying... "there's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong place".

In and of itself, my time up on the moors has not made a difference to my life. But as a part of the greater whole - out of the things that I've experienced and done over the last three or four years, then yes. **Yes, it's part of what helped me to engage in a shift toward my dream of a way to live... basically a lifestyle.** Rite to Freedom would have been a part of the things that gave me strength to make that decision, to take that leap. One part of the process - which, at the time I was really quite cynical about - was a form of cleansing using water and flow. I went from this place of resistance, of not wanting to give anything away, to now doing it regularly. When I was using drugs problematically, I used to have a recurring dream that was based around water. I didn't need to read any books to realize what it meant; it was really quite clear to me. Now in recovery, I have a dream that's connected to the water dream, but it's a very different, positive dream. So, **water, which I also experienced in many different ways on that weekend, is now an integral part of what I do on a daily basis. Being out and walking near water... crossing it, paddling in it, drinking it...**

My kind of career and the way I work was already aligned to our experience. So, in and of itself, has the experience changed anything? No. **Did it galvanize and reinforce what I was doing then? Yes, very much so.** I'm a counselor and I work with people either in a room or over Zoom - mostly because of the pandemic. I also do what I call 'Walk and Talk', which sounds quite ableist, but if someone wasn't as able bodied in the traditional sense, there are other ways of doing it. Walk and Talk would be a session of counseling in the outdoors, but in a safe environment where we wouldn't be overheard. Sometimes it's nice to be doing something and the talk and the dialogue seems to be a secondary thing. So it wouldn't be on a busy beach, but in a woodland... somewhere beautiful and inspiring, on the basis that not everyone is comfortable with sitting in a space opposite someone. I would walk in nature anyway - it's what I count as my meditation, and that weekend helped to reinforce that. There are aspects of what I did that enhanced my experience. That's what I mean by galvanizing it. So, **it really has helped build and solidify what I'm doing in my recovery.**

I'll be honest, I don't notice that it has changed how I communicate... so sorry. That's my honest answer. I can see how it would work for someone in early recovery – if someone was estranged from their relationship(s). But at that point, I was at the time in my recovery where those things had been already sorted. I was working for a drug and alcohol charity - that was part of the reason I was there, almost wearing two hats. What I would say is I let go of the so-called “hat” of the person that's employed by the drug and alcohol charity. I just kind of dove in and experienced it as a participant in that sense.

The accommodation felt quite claustrophobic, but I'm really digging deep here to think of something that could be better. There were tents available, so it wasn't really an issue. I stayed in the corner of the room two nights. That was cozy, but if I wanted something a bit more airy, there was a solution. I've got to be honest... it's a bit of a lame answer, but there isn't anything I would say. I think the way it was organized was great. The terrible weather did not get in the way at all. **I saw a really good response when someone wasn't traditionally able bodied and couldn't do exactly what I experienced.** They were given a good option, and I didn't see any complaints from them about that. Food was great, the journey down, the avant-garde location... there isn't anything that I would say could be better. **It's a special place as well... something magical up there... a profound energy that we could tap into.**

The support which came after the weekend was just as profound, intense, amazing, and supportive as it was on the weekend. That must be said, **because it wasn't just the weekend. There were lots of things afterwards, which was lovely.** I will definitely keep in touch, and I do. Ali has offered me an opportunity to do something, but it wasn't the right time for different reasons. I will see you around, whether it's you, Caspar, Ali... or whoever it is. Yeah, I'm sure I'll keep in touch. I do keep an eye out for what's going on through the newsletter and emails.

**Send my love to everyone.**



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## That Sense of a Tribe and a Culture

### *Phil's Story*

How was it for me the first time up on the moors? That's quite a big question. It was lots of different things, a new experience. I've been up from Dartmoor a fair bit, so that wasn't unusual for me. But being in that kind of space, with lots of people... I found that really rewarding and intimate. I also find it a bit overwhelming at times though... being around that many people. But I already knew some of the people in the group, and **I enjoyed that sense of being in recovery together**. Being up on Dartmoor - the openness and the wildness of it... I really enjoyed that as well. A couple of the rituals really stood out for me: the ritual down by the stream and the ritual with a chair... without giving too much away. **It was the nature connection down by the stream – like an exercise in creativity and mindfulness**, because I stayed present for a lot of it. The last ritual was very emotional for me. **It's like a journey that you go on with people**.

I was already in recovery and had been for five years or so before this experience, and Rite to Freedom just added to my recovery. On most days, I'll notice more - when I'm out walking out in nature - of what's around me. **If I'm going out for a walk with my dog, I actually go and experience it rather than seeing it as something to tick off a list**. I haven't been involved so much for the last few months. But overall, **I think it's that sense of community that keeps me connected to Rite to Freedom**. Like 12-steps, it's that kind of common purpose and the like-minded people... that sense of a tribe and a culture. I've staffed on a few residentials now and done some mentoring days. I've also done some of the creative pathway days, with the archetypes. I find that really interesting. **It's good to have a structure, and a purpose all together**.

**I think the nature connection helps me to keep a sense of perspective, which is part of my ongoing recovery. When I feel overwhelmed, low, or depressed... I've got the outside world to swim in or I can go out in the woods**. I'm going to keep coming back to that, **it helps me stay a bit more grounded and adds more to life**. I suppose it reinforces what was already there, but also has a bit of an effect on my work. I packed up my own business about a year and half ago - part of the lead up to that was realizing that there is more to life than work. I think getting involved with things other than work or 12 step meetings has sort of expanded my horizons and has developed my confidence. **I have found that I'm getting more confident in how to do things after doing the different group work on residentials**, having a chance to lead or co-lead. I've stepped in at the last minute and it's never gone horribly wrong. I get a bit anxious beforehand, but it usually works out one way or the other. By being willing to give it a go, I find that there are some things I take to more naturally and others that probably aren't my thing.

I don't know if I relate to people differently... not consciously at least. But I've learned to communicate better over the last few years with people close to me, and with the other people I deal with. I suppose **I've learnt to be clearer and a bit more assertive through speaking my mind on**

**the residential. If there's something I've experienced in the wider world, then I can bring it in to Rite to Freedom, or vice versa.** I had a relationship, and we separated two and a half years ago. That's been a lesson in how to communicate, and be respectful and civil, and it's worked out well. So, they kind of work alongside each other.

I stay connected through word of mouth because I'm good friends with some of the people in Rite to Freedom. I've been on the website a few times and it's quite well laid out. I've found a balance between getting involved and the other things that I've got going on in my life. I still want to stay connected. I think if there was ever a time where I didn't want to do that anymore, for me, it's important to say that. It's the same when I can't get to a residential or a shout out goes to say there's staff needed, it's important to say: "I've got stuff on, and I don't want to go to that one". **I can be accountable.**

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## What a Difference from Who I Used to Be

### *Sarah's Story*

My first time on the first residential was eye opening! **One important thing I got out of it was knowing that there are many different ways of obtaining and maintaining sobriety.** I got sober in AA and made some rigid boundaries about because I was frightened about my own recovery wobbling. So, it was good to come and learn that there are lots of different ways to get sober, and that it's safe for people to do things in other ways. **This has made me a better sponsor because I'm much more relaxed about other people's recovery. Being involved let me... let go, which meant that I had more emotional and mental space for other things.** The second thing that was really important was that I felt really loved, held, cared about, and seen. My disabilities were accommodated for in a way that wasn't showy or fussy. **I was still able to just be part of the tribe,** and it was all right if I needed to go away and have a lie down. **If I had to go, I caught up easily when I came back, so I never felt left out.** This is important to me because most of my life is spent in my bed because I'm so ill.

Which out of the three pillars, stood out for me? Nature, definitely! **I always feel closest to my higher power when I'm out in nature.** When I became ill 11 years ago, I went from almost never being at home to being in bed 90% of the time, pretty much unable to move for the first few years. It was terrifying because I felt like I'd lost my connection with my higher power, and I had to search hard to find it again. So, the fact that I was able to focus on nature on the retreat was really important to me. **I wasn't worrying about the ridiculous stuff I make up in my head, I knew I had my**



**higher power and that I could connect with these people.** When we did the little ceremony, people moved to a different place to accommodate my disability and make my path shorter and safer. This was amazing because I felt like I was just as important. **I'm really welling up now... thinking about how loved I was, how safe I felt, and I'd only met everyone the day before.** And the ceremony! I won't give anything away, but wow! That's an energy that I still carry.

When I was less ill than I am now, I was given the opportunity to come back and be in the retreat staff. The joy of being able to give back was amazing. I didn't feel like I wasn't good enough or that I couldn't do it because I felt like I'd been thoroughly shown. I could have complicated the hell out of that situation and then got anxious that I wasn't doing it properly. But **what I learned from when I was a participant was that it was all about exchanging love, which made it really simple.** It opened up my whole world to that simplicity. I had a lot of hooks that I was able to put down, thanks to Rite to Freedom. It didn't take me long to remember to go from, "that's terrible, I won't be able to do it", to "oh hang on a minute, I remember this... this is how it was done for me". **I felt trusted to do the job. What a difference from who I used to be.**

I feel like I got more out of the second time, particularly when I did the staffing. I was still part of the community and was able to do more then because I was less ill. At the time, **I started singing again in my house and got my equipment out,** and since I spoke to you last week, I have felt the connection again. It was my higher power that made me answer that phone when you called. I then had a very spiritual weekend with one of my offspring in which I was able to let go of a lot of weight that I've been carrying through recovery. I don't think you ringing me out of the blue and then my son coming were unconnected. I think they were part of the same thing... helping me to let go. **Just this very morning, I have downloaded a piano playing app and left my canvases out where I can see them. I don't plan to do anything, but if I can see them, then that's the beginning.** I'm hoping that now I've let go some of this emotional weight, I'll feel a bit better physically. **Rite to Freedom is definitely part of where I'm at now,** and speaking to you directly last week is definitely part of where I am today.

**I think one of the things I learned from holding space is that I'm good enough where I am.** Ever since, I have felt I don't have to punish myself as much. I'm finding it easy to put in boundaries because I've realized that I am okay and that I'm worth a good recovery. I don't need to be punished for the rest of my life. **Even as a severely disabled person, I'm not only useful, but also valued. Even though I haven't been in touch for ages, I'm not forgotten.** It's given me better self-esteem, which means that I'm able to look after myself. So now I deal with people in a different way - I take less shit and I'm much more open. It has had a big, lasting impact, and given me ambition. I want to come and give some more back. This means working on my physical health. I've been in a deep, dark, bad space emotionally and mentally for last couple of years... so I haven't felt like that. But now I feel that that's coming back.

What's great about Rite to Freedom is that it's already there, I don't have to take a run up. I can participate as much or as little as I'm physically able. **I'm already accepted and there's no weirdness because I haven't been around.** I feel valued and more confident about who I am as a



person, even though it's a few years later. For me, my entire life is about carrying the message, “practicing these principles in all our affairs”, and me evolving as a human being.

**When I got sober, I discovered that I adore learning how to be a better Sarah and evolving as a person.** Now that I've starting to go to Al-Anon meetings, I feel I'm on the threshold of another massive experience of learning. That's not unconnected to my time with Rite to Freedom. It has given me a different way of looking at myself... as somebody who is valuable, can learn, and is worth putting the work in. It's nice that other people benefit, but it's a selfish program; I benefit hugely, and the side effect is that other people benefit. **It's definitely made a difference to all my relationships and I'm relating to things differently.**

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## A Carte Blanche to be Creative

### *Steve's Story*

It was definitely a game changer, **I felt that as soon as I left... something had shifted in me.** It wasn't very noticeable from the outside. Everybody else looked like they had found a revelation, were very serene, or just lit up. I apparently looked stoic coming in and going out – exactly the same. But I think maybe I was different in some ways... it just took several weeks for it to leak in - it's like my recovery. **Around ten years ago, I made a marked decision in this recovery that I was in it for the long game.** This meant that any kind of sudden spikes in emotional responses, any kind of knee jerk reactions - all of that, I was ruling out and was just watching things unfold. I'm still doing this, but I've got more thoughtful responses about how I feel about things now. I think it was the same with the whole weekend with Rite to Freedom. **I just needed that slow burn afterwards because it was such an intense three days.** A lot happened, and my very slow brain needed time to compute all that, to sort of... break it all down a little bit.

I think I had been in recovery when I came to the tribe for around five or six years... I can't quite remember. I haven't got exact days from when I had my last drink or drug. All I know is that my recovery started in late 2012. I had a couple of relapses early on, but I don't know when the last one was. I smoked dope for a year as well, early on, thinking I could do that as the last thing... the last vestiges of the thing I could hold onto. I realized that was never going to work for me either. It isn't that long ago now – late 2018. Thinking about it in those terms, it feels like a lot of time, as a lot of things have happened since then. But we have had a pandemic, I suppose.

**The nature connection stands out for me the most, I mean, you can't escape it.** You're on Dartmoor for a start, and every activity we did had some connection to it. **It was a bedrock for what we did with creativity and mindfulness.** I felt the creative side of it was more based in writing. **I found this a really great idea for spilling out ideas and journaling what you've experienced, and then taking it from there.** I don't know if that was the best way for me as, although I can write, I'm not a fluent writer, and I didn't find that was my way to express myself. I found it more difficult and trying than other forms of creativity. Some were more attuned to that way of being creative than others. Last weekend on the mentoring day, for instance, there was a space to be creative, **and I found a way to be creative without the writing.**

**The word tribe that we use... that's a big factor... sort of coming into the fold and feeling the family aspect of it all. The safe space to spitball ideas, to feel wanted and loved, to be able to bring other people into that fold, and being that person to hold others.** All those things are massively grounding and important, and it's a nice safe bedrock for the other things that Rite to Freedom offer. The things that I've experienced with Rite to Freedom which have helped me are the

creative aspects, and it is a big deal. When I first went on the retreat, I was in my second year of university studying music production. I was just going into my third year where I was studying the film aspect and making soundtracks. So, in a very niche way, it's probably a lot different to other people's experiences. **I've woven that into my Rite to Freedom experience by working with Caspar on some of the movies.**

I've been asked to try making some soundtracks for the short films that he's created - scoring some music for them. **That has given me a really good space and a kind of carte blanche to be creative.** The fact that it was right in the middle of my uni work meant I actually integrated one of the films into my Level Six project, which was really interesting. **At the end of the day, this basically helped me to get my degree - just having that, because it's quite a lonely experience going to uni.** You've got a lot of people around you, but most of the work you're doing on your own. So yeah, all that was on the back of being mentored gently by Caspar and Rite to Freedom, plus all my studying alongside that, has got me here and helped me mature in that regard. I was actually moved by the last film. I was at a point then when I could really reflect on what was going on in front of me and try to have the emotional response, and then respond back musically.

**Rite to Freedom has definitely had an impact on my relationships, even when it comes to disputes.** I've got more of a template now as to how to deal with things, but I don't remember every time. Sometimes I just launch into complete psycho anger mode. Resentments are a big thing for everyone in recovery, me included, and the ability to bring them up appropriately. This is an add on almost to what I experienced on the weekend. It's more to do with how we've gathered since then as a tribe and dealt with resentments.

I suppose that's what I was coming to... asking, "what part do I play in this?". **Looking inwards first and working out what it is, who I'm angry at, or who I'm resentful towards, and really specifying that.** Getting to a point where I can identify what good it will do to bring up anything like that. What is it going to solve? To resolve? I have this process - the overview of why I'm feeling that way, rather than just feeling it and then directing it straight at the target. **I think what it comes down to at the end of the day is learning to communicate with love... in forgetting and remembering that the majority of the time, you love the person you're talking to.** So, the benefit is the love grows bigger, right? The benefit of resolving an issue is that most of the time you've then got a bigger bubble to be inside. We are all in it, and it's about making the bubble bigger for us all.

If you could change the weather, that would be great to make the experience on the weekend fricking perfect, right? That's one reason I keep going back to experience - the different weather on another day.

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