

The Power of a Paradox - Inviting the Potential of a Collective Occupational Futurity

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ABSTRACT

This spoken word piece reflects on the paradoxes, tensions, and possibilities within the profession of occupational therapy at a pivotal historical moment. Written and performed for the centennial conference of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy in Montreal in 2026, the poem emerged from the author's experiences as an occupational therapist, educator, researcher, and learner navigating the contradictions embedded within contemporary occupational therapy discourse and practice. Positioned at the intersection of celebration and critique, the piece responds to the profession's 100-year milestone by questioning dominant narratives of progress while simultaneously holding hope for more responsive and relational futures.

Through poetic storytelling, the work explores the coexistence of pride and nature within occupational therapy. The poem interrogates professional ideals of holism, inclusivity, and client-centredness alongside the realities of colonialism, ableism, individualism, systemic inequity, and institutional constraint that continue to shape education, research, and practice. Drawing on themes of paradox, positionality, and collective responsibility, the piece invites listeners to move beyond binary thinking and toward a "both/and" orientation that makes space for multiple truths, tensions, and ways of moving forward.

The piece engages metaphors of waves, dance, movement, breath, and discomfort to consider what it might mean for occupational therapy to evolve collectively rather than defensively. Rather than offering solutions, the poem centres reflection as an occupational and political act, asking how the profession might better align its sphere of concern with its sphere of influence. Ultimately, the piece argues that embracing uncertainty, contradiction, and discomfort is necessary for occupational therapy to meaningfully respond to contemporary social realities and cultivate more accountable, imaginative, and justice-oriented futures over the next century.

Keywords: power, paradox, poetry, metaphor, dance

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Paradox is plentiful in our profession.
What a beautiful thing,
to have strong stances,
challenging dances,
each with our own idea
of where OT should go next.

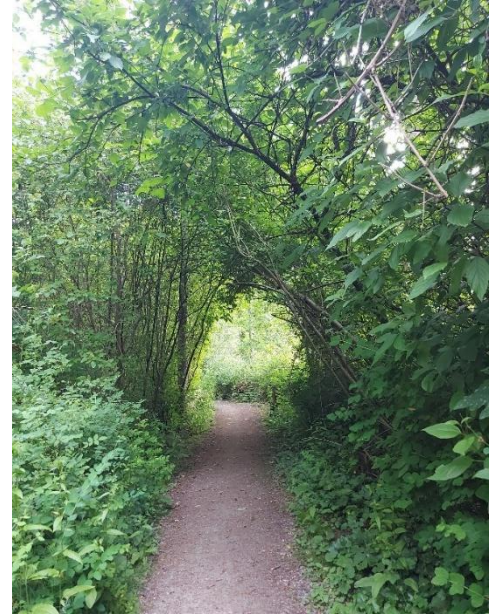
As we look back and ahead,
I invite you to pause
and shift away from the
black or white,
my way or your way,
this or that.

We are being a bit binary...
and I know a thing or two about binary.
When really,
the future of OT demands us to embrace
the both/and,
the paradoxes,
contradictions,
positionalities,
realities.

We need the
“OT is the best thing to ever happen
to healthcare and clients”
energy,
as much as we need the
“knock OT down from its pedestal,
it is individualistic, patriarchal, colonial, white supremacist,
ableism in action is OT,
call it what it is”
energy.

Yes but we are problem solvers, we do it all.
The ‘you can do it, we can help’ profession.
How altruistic we are! Look how much good we are doing.
Aren’t we?

If we take a stance,
risk defiance,
refuse to administer another assessment
that decontextualizes people from place, and community.
Be brave enough to ask “why?” just enough times to make
a little more space for multiple realities.



But we are self-reflective,
lifelong learners,
invested in growing our profession.
We generously share our power with others.
We see the immense value in supporting our students.
We are trustworthy,
we are the good ones,
we always put clients and occupations first.
Don't we?

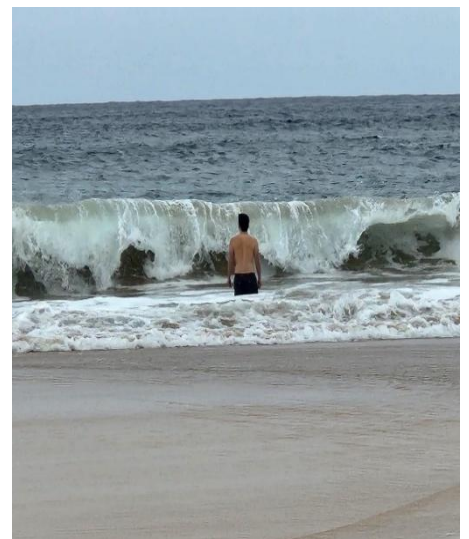
Meanwhile classrooms see case studies
written about prototypes,
infused with stereotypes,
promoting categories over nuance.
The letters that stream across the page
telling a story so distant from the reality
of the person being occupationally analyzed.
We use our words to describe their lives and call it truth.

The truth? Is that occupational therapy can be anything, to anyone.
We make the most from what we have access to.
We are collaborative team players who see the whole person.
We are inclusive and progressive and
is being holistic possible
when there are still holes in the same systems where we
'live, work and play'.

We still research in silos,
Teach in programs that are expensive, competitive and inaccessible,
And practice in clinical settings that are under resourced.
As for OT, if the profession went to a therapist, I am pretty sure we
would be asked when the people pleasing first started.

Neutrality is a safety mechanism
employed when not wanting to rock the boat
in an ocean that has waves that cannot be avoided anyway.
So we have a hard time naming our role in systemic oppression.
But herein lies so much opportunity to truly grow,
evolve,
and learn to ride the waves, some of which,
we have to have the courage to create.

Looking at our profession's next 100 years
can we learn to move with the inevitable waves
that feel as though they are crashing down on us,
as much as we have mastered riding the celebratory waves



of progress, growth and connection?
Are we ready and willing to accept
the both/and in occupational therapy?

It is in this place that true reflection becomes possible.
Fortunately, there is not just one way of moving forward.
There are multiple, many, pushing up against each other.
What would happen if we observed occupational therapy's sphere
of concern and how large it is.
And then look to our sphere of influence, which is also large.
How do we align these?

To find out, we must listen with more than our ears,
feel our fears,
and do it anyway.

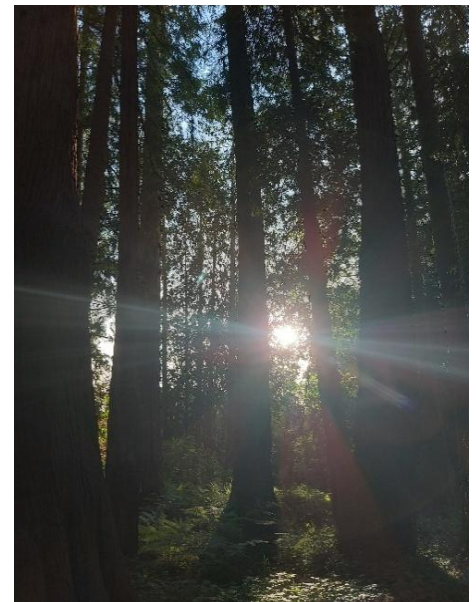
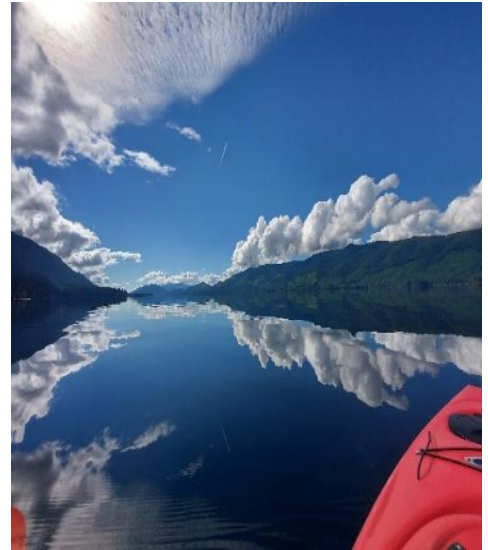
"Find the edges of your discomfort zone and then stay near those
lines."

Hearing this changed my life,
over decades of my own therapy.
I think we have done the work to identify
the parameters of our discomfort zone.
And now...

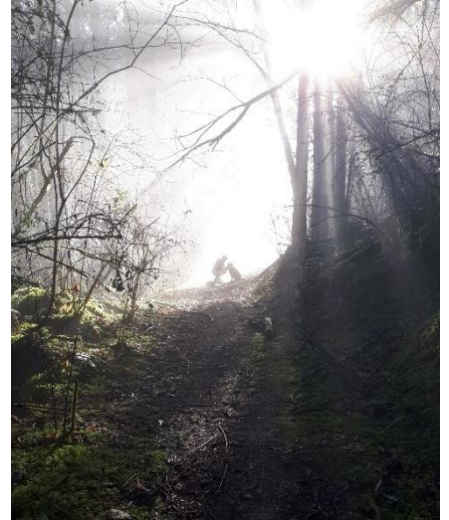
Can we work collectively to push these edges?
Moving toward shared goals can involve different paths to get there.
It can mean both finding the common ground...
and naming that ground as the stolen land that we are on.

We have to be unfaithful to the systems.
Have an affair with uncertainty.
Let's flirt with discomfort.
Push against the rules and processes
that silence and censor voices that need to be heard.
How much more effective it would be
to walk, wheel or move in the same direction as each other,
with both our heads in the clouds and our feet firmly on the ground.
Think of all that we would stand to notice and gain.

We could invigorate the profession.
Be as open to influence as we are influential,
as rebellious as we are predictable.
This demands embracing the hard truths
and facing the paradoxes in our own lives.
I see the future of OT not as a simple one,
but as one that needs to be stripped down,
destabilizing the black and white to dance together in the grey.



This dance involves noticing
where we have stepped on toes,
been out of sync, out of rhythm.
And pause.
Pause to imagine what 100 years of progress would not only look
like,
but what it would feel like.
Advancing our profession has involved many steps, moves and
strategies,
and still we don't fully invite the grey.
And so now, we pause.



We can then notice the spaciousness that swells inside our collective
rib cage,
as we exhale decades of fighting against the same people and systems
that we need to move with, not away from.
We can breathe out a long-awaited exhale,
and feel
the relief that washes over us,
as something quietly stirs inside of us.

We can notice the butterflies that tap against our stomach as we speak up,
reminding our colleagues that "this is how we have always done it"
isn't good enough anymore.
We can name the limitations of language, land acknowledgments and positionality statements,
while not being totally sure what the next best move is.
But knowing that being still, stagnant, is not it.

Turning directions to face the wind
might at first be uncomfortable, irritating, or distracting.
But it invites a new angle
that carries the floral scent of a blooming
flower,

as the profession too blooms.
This perspective shift presents us with
a plethora of new options for our future.

It is these reflections that lead me to be excited
to face the wind alongside colleagues, mentors and students,
and move forward as a collective.
I trust we will witness a more responsive
and aligned profession
that moves in new ways, rides new waves and learns to trust
the power of the turning towards each other and embracing the grey.



Post-poem reflections and inviting a collective futurity

This piece was written when I was invited to be a closing ceremony presenter at the annual Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy conference in Montreal in 2026. When I was first asked to speak to the topic of celebrating how far the profession has come in 100 years and how we envision the next 100 years, I hesitated. Not because I did not want to be part of such an event, but because I knew I could not, in good faith, stand in front of my peers, students, colleagues and friends and solely boast about how much progress has been made. Doing so would have made invisible the realities, stories and teachings that I have had the honour of being

witness to over the course of my research career thus far, and through which myself and my communities have tirelessly raised awareness about. Further, I would have been abandoning the emerging critical scholar within myself, having spent the last several years being mentored by critical thinkers and theorizers. Speaking to the successes and celebrating advancements is of course important. But it felt equally as important that if I was to take the stage, that I name the ways our profession continues to harm many communities through limited perspectives and positions of epistemological dominance within our research practices and classroom contexts. Further, prior to accepting the invitation I inquired about who else was part of the closing remarks, because that too sends an implicit message to the audience about whose voice matters and who might be tokenized or left out altogether. Ultimately, I decided to accept the opportunity. As a PechaKucha style talk, I knew that I would have 6 minutes and 40 seconds (e.g., 20 seconds per slide for 20 slides) to convey my message. With all this in mind, and given

the theme of what the next 100 years of OT might look like, I started daydreaming and feeling out a direction. I knew I wanted to do a performance piece and was encouraged to do so by multiple trusted mentors. I also know that poetry is a method of expressing ideas that oftentimes lands differently, and more emotionally. It may come as a surprise to hear that I did not write the piece until just prior to the conference, and spent majority of my preparation time creating space for the piece to take shape within me before turning it into words and images. Ideas came and went like clouds, while I sat and observed them in the contours of my mind. Once I started having similar ideas bubble up daily, the poem began to take shape. I ran these ideas past my mentors, let a few ideas go and the final focus was ready.

As a non-binary person, I have become pretty good at noticing when things are portrayed as black and white, this or that, good or bad. But from the lens through which I view the world, I also see a lot of nuance and appreciate just how dynamic people and concepts really are. How things are right now will almost certainly not be how they are a week, a year or a lifetime from now. And yet, when we talk about directions for the profession, we speak with such certainty that our vision for where we should go and how we get there is the right one. I started my OT career as an optimistic, energetic and uncritical young adult who knew just how impactful our work can be under ideal circumstances. As a recovering idealist, it took me some time to learn that circumstances are rarely ideal. I was a responsive OT who did what I was told and was grateful for the opportunity to carry out my work. Then I began having more questions and was met with “no” or told to “follow the process” so often that I began to wonder why no one else was bothered by the

red tape or enforced limitations to our practice.

And so, when I envisioned stepping onto the stage and addressing the audience, I knew I wanted to contrast the black and white and draw attention to the paradoxes within our personal lives and the profession. If we want to advance a collective occupational futurity, we need to remember where we have come from, acknowledge where we currently are, and consider not only where we could go next, but how we can go about getting there. Ideally, we will lead with empathy, humanity and love (Lee et al., 2026), though I cannot say that there is a best way forward. Rather, my hope with sharing this piece is that readers will feel stirred, uncomfortable even. From there our collective discomfort will lead us to move forward, in some way, and thus continue challenging the bounds and borders of occupational therapy.

Acknowledgements

At the time of the daydreaming and writing of this poem, I was living on the lands of the W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, on so-called Vancouver Island. The piece was performed at the conference, on the lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nation, where I was an uninvited guest, or perhaps more accurately, a trespasser.

I want to also acknowledge the people who helped me bring this piece together. I am especially grateful to Ryan Lavalley, Suzanne Huot and Katie Lee Bunting for their feedback during my initial brainstorming and helping me to shape the piece, though the support from many meant so much to me. Lastly, and perhaps most impactful, were the comments and feedback I received after presenting. People with diverse intersectional lived experiences shared about themselves with me, opening up about why my words

were impactful for them. The idea to publish this piece came as a result of these conversations, and I appreciate each person who took the time to speak with me.

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