

# The Meaning of Art in Disaster Support: Stories from the Popoki Peace Project<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

Understanding ways people feel safe and unsafe after a disaster is important for developing better ways to deal with crises and creating more resilient and peaceful societies. One way to do so is with art and stories. Using examples of art-stories collected after disaster through the Popoki Friendship Story project, this article seeks to show that art is useful in disaster support work because it helps storytellers to tell and share their stories, some of which might otherwise not be told. Currently there is no methodology for collecting and analyzing art-stories. This article offers a provisional typology for the analysis of stories of disaster using art.

**Key words:** art, stories, storytelling, Popoki Friendship Story, safety

In the autumn of 2013, after a full day of drawing and stories in a town in northeast Japan that had been devastated by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, Popoki's friends and I sat down in a small, makeshift bar/restaurant for a meal. Out of curiosity, and feeling the need to make conversation, I raised the topic of a proposed fifteen-meter sea wall that would run along the roughly 650km of coastline affected by the 2011 tsunami. Our conversation went something like this.

Me: "I hear you are getting a really big wall."

Bartender: "Yes, that's what they say."

Me: "Will it make you safe?"

Bartender: "That's what they say."

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Me: “Will it make you feel safe?”

Bartender: “Absolutely not. We won’t be able to see the ocean. We won’t be able to see if there are any changes in the water. It will give us a false sense of security, too. Lots of people died in 2011 because they thought the seawalls were big enough to protect them. No, I won’t feel safe at all.”

Security, safety and peace are central themes in the disciplines of peace studies and international relations, although they may have multiple, and vastly different, definitions. Feminist scholars were among the first to identify the gendered basis for military security and to question the idea that safety could be ensured by the possession of sophisticated weaponry capable of mass destruction (Enloe 1990, Reardon 1996). The idea of human security as both freedom from fear and freedom from want has helped to broaden the focus of the security discourse, allowing for issues of poverty or health to become part of the security conversation. Yet as the current novel coronavirus pandemic clearly demonstrates, even human security around illness is defined and discussed first in the context of national interest, national security and national borders.

Few would question that security is about more than weapons and personal protective equipment, yet it is only relatively recently that peace studies and international relations have begun to identify the importance of the emotional side of security (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008; Ahåll and Gregory 2014; Crawford 2000; Lutz and Abu-Lighod 2008; Ling 2014; Mercer 2014; McDermott 2014; Sylvester 2011). Still less frequent is discussion of the ways in which being safe and feeling safe do or do not overlap, or of the importance of feeling safe as something independent of, and not necessarily a prerequisite or consequence of physical safety (Alexander 2018).

Physical safety is often, but not always, something that is measurable and concrete. In contrast, the feeling of safety is intangible, and can change from moment to moment. Feelings of safety are often invoked and manipulated in unsafe situations, such as when people are told that more and bigger nuclear weapons will make them safer; social norms, practices and discourses back up those assertions of safety. While security and safety are often discussed in simplistic terms, individual and collective understandings of physical and/or emotional safety are extremely complex, involving

socially constructed ideas of not only security but also of how it feels to be safe. While the ways that individuals do or do not feel safe may be of primary interest to psychologists, individual and collective understandings of safety/security are also significant for students of politics because, “Simply put, the inherent links between discourse and emotions both limit and enable what is possible in the realm of politics” (Hutchison and Bleiker 2017, p.23).

This article is concerned not with war and armed conflict, but with disaster, recovery and disaster risk reduction (DRR). It takes as a point of departure the idea that understanding how people feel safe and unsafe after a disaster is important for developing better ways to deal with crises and creating more resilient and peaceful societies.<sup>2</sup> Knowing how so-called high-risk groups feel about their individual or collective safety can certainly contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of that group. But learning from people about when, how and perhaps even why they feel safe might not only reconfirm established discourses regarding what is safe, unsafe and risky, but also add additional perspectives that might otherwise go unrecognized. In fact, it might even lead to new understandings of the relationship between being and feeling safe.

One way of learning how people think or feel is through the stories they tell.<sup>3</sup> Most people, when they think of stories, think of something that is conveyed through writing or speech, but stories can also be expressed without using words. Here we are interested in stories concerning, or born out of, disaster. We suggest that art is an important tool for expressing stories of disaster and that art, in conjunction with other modes of expression, can help to illustrate aspects of the experience of disaster that might not otherwise be easily accessible. This can be useful for not only individuals and care workers, but also for those responsible for creating disaster risk reduction policy and those working in the field of resistance building and disaster support.

Here we look at art as a method of storytelling, but also as part of a process of and/or opportunity for expression of disaster experiences. We are therefore interested in not only the process of creating and telling stories, but also in the ways the use of art creates opportunities for making and sharing stories. Art therapy is an established field and has a rich array of scholarship on the use of art in healing and recovery from trauma. Here, however, the focus is on art as a way of collecting and sharing stories of

disaster. As far as we know, there is not yet an established methodology for collecting, analyzing and using stories in this way. Therefore, one objective of this article is to contribute to the building of such a methodology. In particular, we hope to show some of the ways that non-verbal modes of expression interact with verbal modes to deepen and broaden our understanding of personal and/or collective feelings of safety or unsafety. A second objective is to show that art is useful in disaster support work because it helps storytellers to tell and share their stories. This sharing can contribute to, and perhaps initiate, building trust, connection and community. In addition, because art and stories encourage reflection, an important process that helps both the artist and often the audience to transform an experience or situation into knowledge, the stories can have an impact that exceeds the boundaries of the immediate audience.

In the absence of an established methodology, here we analyze examples of what we call “art-stories” that were collected in the context of the Popoki Friendship Story project.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of analysis, a provisional typology has been established that divides the art-stories into three categories: art-based stories, story-directed art and reflective story-art. While these categories are distinct, from the outset we suggest that an intersectional approach is necessary. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that these categories are overlapping in both intra-categorical and trans-categorical ways.

The article is composed of four sections. The first is a brief description of how the Popoki Friendship Story Project came to address “feeling safe”. This will be followed by a discussion of the meaning of art, stories and storytelling, particularly in the context of disaster support. The third section will introduce the art-stories from the Popoki Friendship Story Project. The article will conclude with a discussion of the implications for the development of a methodology for the use and analysis of art-stories in disaster support and in building awareness and resilience.

### **Gathering art-stories - Popoki Friendship Story**

The Popoki Friendship Story project began in early April 2011, not long after the 11 March 2011 earthquake, giant tsunami and nuclear power plant explosions known as the Great Northeast Japan Disaster. Today, after close to ten years, the form has changed somewhat but the concept remains the same. We are still offering

opportunities for drawing freely, generally on a long (500cm × 45 cm) cloth that has a picture of the cat Popoki on one end, sharing stories and sharing concerns. Popoki's spaces may not be located in evacuation centers or temporary housing, but they continue to be spaces to draw, talk, share, play, laugh and sometimes cry.

Popoki and his friends offer participants an opportunity to “draw freely”. In fact, drawing freely is not easily achieved. It may even be impossible. In this context, drawing freely means that no specific demand is made on the artist to draw a particular thing. However, drawings do not happen in isolation but in the context of a particular activity related to disaster support. The artist might consider unvoiced expectations based on interpretations of social discourses of disaster or disaster support. S/he might be influenced by other drawings, or by the presence of other artists, or by her/his feeling about drawing. Many factors influence what is drawn, and how it is described or perceived. Popoki's friends hoped that their activities would provide inclusive spaces where people could relax and feel free to express themselves. If they wanted to draw or to share their stories and their tears, they were welcome to do so. If they preferred to remain silent, that was perfectly all right.<sup>5</sup> With time and effort on both sides, it would lead to trust and connection.

In the early days of the project, there was no need to encourage people to draw or to suggest to them what would be appropriate. Simply saying, “Draw whatever you want,” or “Anything you feel like drawing” was enough. Some people, usually adults who were not staying in evacuation shelters or who were serving in helping roles such as volunteers, needed reassurance that they were welcome to draw and that it was all right to express themselves freely. Some even expressed anger such as, “Give back Otsuchi!” or grief, “Grandfather, I'll wait for you forever”. Children often spent time selecting which color to use, but usually seemed very eager to draw. Most of the time they needed little or no encouragement or advice.

As time went on, people began to have difficulty deciding what to draw. Children remained less reserved than adults, but even children, especially those outside of the areas affected directly by the disaster, had trouble. Since Popoki's ultimate goal is creating more peaceful societies, e.g. helping people to reconstruct their lives and communities in inclusive, peaceful and mutually supportive ways, we began suggesting that people draw something that for them symbolizes peace, perhaps some kind of

peace they want to share with others. This proved to be a difficult task, especially for children. At the same time, a topic we often found ourselves talking about with participants in our programs was feeling, or not feeling, safe.

It was at about the same time that the conversation at the beginning of this article occurred. We had already learned that for most adults, “something you like” or “something that makes you feel peace” was more difficult than “something you want to share with someone else”. We decided to try combining the idea of separating being and feeling safe with the idea of sharing something important. When people seemed to be at a loss as to what to draw, we began to suggest that they draw something they wanted to share with others that might make them feel safe. This proved to be successful and we soon were getting not only pictures of objects such as food or houses, but also pictures representing culture or other aspects of identity. We found that while physical safety is significant, respect for one’s identity, dignity and life experience are also important aspects of feeling safe. As a result, the idea of feeling safe and sharing feelings of safety have become a very important theme in our gathering art and stories of disaster. As mentioned above, it is our expectation that these stories will contribute to deeper understanding of what makes people feel safe, and that that will in turn add new dimensions to work for disaster awareness, disaster risk reduction and building social resilience.

### **Considering art, stories and storytelling**

Few people would challenge the idea that communication is essential for our survival and happiness, although there is debate as to what in fact constitutes communication and to what extent the ability to communicate defines intelligence and/or being human.<sup>6</sup> In social science, language as social practice or discourse is generally seen to be of paramount importance in communication. Recently, however, the importance of emotion in the social construction of discourse and the mutually constitutive relationship between discourse and emotion had received more and more attention (Crawford 2014; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014, 2017; MacKenzie 2011). In thinking about communication regarding disaster, both discourse and emotion are important, but these should not be limited to written or oral expressions. Non-verbal expressions can be extremely powerful. Philosopher Susan Langer (1953, p.40), for

example, believed that art, “...the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (1953, p.40) is an integral part of knowing and equally important as discursive ways of knowing. Building on Langer, McNiff (2004, p.4) discusses the importance of transcending linear speech and texts in order for people to know, express and transform their experience. Language is necessary in order to discuss our human experience, but we must also recognize and respect that which cannot be expressed in words (p.6).

Artistic expression is not always successfully communicated or understood. A well-known example comes from Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s classic, *The Little Prince*. The story begins with a description of Saint-Exupery’s frustration with grown-ups when they first could not see, and then did not accept, his drawing of an elephant inside of a boa constrictor. Later in life, he showed the drawing to people on meeting them for the first time to determine whether they were people of “true understanding”. To his disappointment but not his surprise, he found few kindred souls, and so most of the time he felt that in order to converse with people, he had to bring himself down to their level (Saint-Exupery 1971, p.7-9).

Saint-Exupery’s dilemma centered on two problems; what people were or were not able to see in his drawing and what those people considered to be of importance. The former is a question of skill and/or creativity on the part of both the artist and the viewer; the latter has more to do with what is considered as suitable content for expression. This dilemma resonates with many adults who as children were chastised for not drawing “well” enough, or for drawing rather than engaging in more “serious” pursuits, or for those whose could not get others to understand their stories and drawings in the ways they wanted them to be understood. The experience of “not being good (at drawing)” and/or of being encouraged to be more intellectual and less emotional or childish coincides with Western notions of gender and knowledge production that valorize objective and logical masculinities over emotional, chaotic and childish femininities. While art may be included in curricula and learning, there is a “tendency to fall back upon conventional discursive ways of knowing and communicating with others, ... almost as if we do not trust the arts in the area of serious intellectual inquiry, ... believing that only discursive disciplines such as the social sciences can convey real knowledge” (McNiff 2004, p.4). While some individuals

are able to resist the distanced, authoritative and rational voice of education, most cannot or do not do so. As a result, when it comes to artistic expression, many adults, even those who loved art and drawing as children, come to understand art as either something done by professionals or by children, rather than as a part of themselves and a way of understanding their worlds.

To repeat, art is much more than child's play and items displayed in museums or performed in theaters and concert halls. While we might gain pleasure from activities such as painting, dancing or making music, art "can also be a conduit for expression of those parts of the self which may not have been expressed in any other way," and a tool for healing and for exploring deep emotions such as sorrow or joy. It can also help in recovering and healing from trauma (Bluebird 2000). However, as Langer (1953) and others have shown, knowledge is more than discursive or analytic language; insight, intuition and reflection are also essential (Correia 2019). Art can be at its most powerful when it is linked with these other discursive practices and particularly when they lead to, produce or include reflection.

One discursive practice that can link art and language, including reflection, is storytelling. Stories are everywhere, but the stories produced as a result of traumatic events such as disasters, wars, or explosive violence are generally considered to be important for knowing what happened and for building awareness, resilience and enhancing safety. Sometimes the stories are spontaneous and personal. Some are deliberate and focus on the details of what happened; others focus on particular events or have a message such as the prevention of similar events from occurring in the future. Sometimes stories are also used to help individuals and/or communities heal. Here we understand stories to be important because they help us "define who we are, who we are not, where we want to go, and where we came from" (Shenhav 2015: p.3). Stories are important not only for their content but for the ways in which they make us think in new ways. Like art, the production and sharing of stories can be pleasurable, but can also serve to express things that might otherwise not be said, or as a method of healing and recovery.

When people listen to stories, they create multi-faceted storyworlds in which they locate the events, people and identities described in the story and/or narrative.<sup>7</sup> The audience, therefore, is an important part of the story, regardless of whether it is

consciously acknowledged or recognized by the story-teller. Stories, and the people who tell them, therefore play an important role how we understand traumatic events and in what we do in response to them. Historians, curators, journalists, teachers, NGO workers, medical and emergency workers all use stories, as do most other people as well. Those stories are not necessarily fictitious, but all stories reflect reality as seen by the storyteller. For example, Joan Scott discusses the role of historians as storytellers (2011). She suggests that storytellers can help to bridge different worlds. Storytellers, through their choices of stories, provide, through those stories, “a way not only of exposing us to differences beyond our frontiers, but also open us to other ways of thinking about the present, the place we live now” (Scott 2011, p.205). After a disaster, our understanding of what happened comes from the stories we hear, and is dependent on both the choices made by storytellers as to what stories to share, and our own selection of what stories we want to consume (See Alexander 2012; Alexander & Katsuragi 2020). Social media has vastly increased the number of stories to which we are exposed, but this has not necessarily meant better information; disinformation has become a major problem. But in spite of the amount of information available, some stories never get told or shared.

The interaction between storytellers and audiences means that the stories we hear and share are important for helping to shape personal and/or collective experience, but also for giving that experience meaning. When an artist or story-teller portrays or recites a series of events, it may help that person to better understand the facts of what happened. If, however, in addition to telling the story, the person engages in reflection, an important transformation takes place. Reflection is an often-used term that has many different meanings. Simply put, reflection is a process of discovery with the purpose of understanding, transforming and/or manipulating ideas or experiences which have no obvious answer or explanation. In other words, reflection is what allows us to change what we have experienced into what we know. It is possible to engage in reflection by oneself as, for example, one might do when writing in a journal. Most approaches to reflection, however, stress the importance of interaction in assigning meaning to a particular situation or experience (Moon 2004; Lyons 2010). Creative practices such as art or stories are not by definition reflective, but often involve reflection. In the creation of art, stories and the art-stories introduced here, reflection

can occur at any stage of the creative process. The interaction of the social setting itself, in this case the Popoki Friendship Story activity, may be what sparks the process of reflection. Alternatively, a simple question or prompt from one of Popoki's friends might encourage reflection during the process of drawing, or after a drawing is finished. In addition, interaction might occur in the form of a person viewing a drawing and as a result being encouraged to reflect on her/his own experience.

### **Storytelling with art-stories – Reading Popoki's Friendship Story**

This section will introduce art-stories from Popoki Friendship Story activities. These stories combine the attributes of art as non-verbal expression and stories as creative expression and/or narrative. These art-stories may have been created in a personal space created by the artist in the context of the Popoki Friendship Story project, but at the same time because they were created within the context of that project, they have from the beginning a real audience, as well as perhaps an imagined one.

Here we focus on stories collected through Popoki Friendship Story project activities in the context disaster in Japan, the Great Northeast Japan Earthquake in particular. We locate these art-stories within the social narrative (Shenav, 2015) of disaster. The drawings in these art-stories are different from those made by professional artists, and range from what appear to be random scribbling by young children to serious drawing, poetry and other expressions by adults, some of whom use art in their everyday work or lives. These art-story drawings are, like professional art, non-verbal expressions, although often the process of drawing is accompanied by some form of oral or written storytelling. We believe that for many of these artists, drawing makes it possible to express things that they do not, or cannot, express in words. We focus on “art-stories” as being different from oral and/or written stories and narratives that are not art-based. For disaster survivors, art-stories can be both an opportunity to express themselves, and a process for self-expression and understanding traumatic events. At the same time, analysis of art-stories also offers opportunities for the construction of a more complex and dynamic understanding of disaster recovery and DRR as social processes. The use of art-stories can add new perspectives to social discourses on disaster that will help to build resilience and

enhance physical and emotional safety.

As mentioned earlier, one purpose of this article is to contribute to a methodology for understanding and using art-stories in disaster support. Here I will explore a provisional typology for art-stories comprised of three different, but often overlapping categories: art-based stories, story-directed art, and reflective story-art. Art-based stories are stories that are brought to the art, usually by the audience or viewer. They are the storyworlds we create when we see a drawing as in, for example, the imagined stories about Popoki created when people encounter his picture on the cloth. Story-directed art is art that is inspired and/or accompanied by a story. The drawing may enhance or change the story, but the story was there from the beginning and originates from the artist, who tells the story in conjunction with the art. Without interaction or exchange, story-directed art might appear to be an art-based story; the main difference lies in the degree to which the story is shared by the artist or the symbolism/meaning of the story is understood by the audience with or without help from the artist. The third type is reflective-story-art. This refers to art-stories that were clearly produced as a result of reflection or art-stories that lead to reflection on the part of the artist and/or the audience. Sometimes it is difficult to discern reflection/reflectiveness without awareness of the interaction that took place around the creation of the art-story. However, as the following will attempt to show, there are some creations that are simply reflective or that prompt reflection to a greater degree than others.

Popoki Friendship Story cloths contain many drawings. Some stand out and others do not, and for some we have notes and memories, while others seem to have just appeared on the cloth. The above typology might prove useless without memories to go with the drawings, as most of the time the circumstances, explanations, and stories were told in conjunction with the act of drawing. However, for reasons that are yet unclear, these differences exist to some extent independent of intentional intervention or interaction.

Art-stories are at their most meaningful when they lead to some kind of reflection. As knowledge production through reflection requires interaction with another person, perhaps the ideal setting for art-story creation is one where verbal and/or non-verbal interaction can easily occur. This first attempt at creating a methodology for

understanding art-stories is undertaken with the understanding that reflection leads to the acquisition and production of new knowledge, and that it is this new knowledge that will enable the creation of greater awareness and safer societies.

### ***Art-based stories***

Here I introduce three art-based stories. All are stories that involve interaction, but begin with a particular drawing. All result in reflection on the part of the audience, and also perhaps on the part of the artist.

*The child was young and had trouble gripping the thin blue marking pen. I watched silently, wondering if we should get fatter markers for the younger children. The attention of the young artist was focused on the blue pen as it traced a shaky spiral on the cloth which was stretched on the floor of a school gym being used as an evacuation center. The child made a soft roaring sound as the pen made its circles. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pen stopped moving. The child flung down the pen, announcing “Done!” and disappeared. Nobody had uttered a word, but we all understood that our cloth now had a new story depicting the tsunami. Interestingly, it was a long time before anyone drew anything near that tsunami. Even small children who usually seemed to have no reluctance to draw on top of someone else’s drawing avoided it. And then one day, another young child surrounded the blue spiral with a curvy line, like the petals of an open flower. Suddenly the spiral was transformed. Soon other children were adding flowers and animals in between the lines of the spiral. Perhaps it was no longer so scary.*

The young child who drew the spiral shared a personal story. The adults gathered around the cloth understood it to be a story about the tsunami, although the child did not say anything to confirm that. And probably those who chose not to draw near that spiral also understood or felt it to be the tsunami, and stayed away. The child told a very powerful story, but did not use words.

Art stories do not necessarily have to involve trauma, as the following shows.

*A young girl came to draw. Popoki’s friend helped her to select a pen and she began drawing, but soon stopped, seeming unsure as to what to do next. Popoki’s friend suggested she draw something that she likes. The little girl thought for a while and then drew an apple, and then another, and then still another. Her father was watching, and asked about strawberries, but the*

*girl stuck with apples. Her surprised father explained that he had been sure of her favorite, and that it was definitely strawberries. “How could I have been wrong?” he wondered.*

The girl did not talk about her preferences or offer an explanation. Perhaps for her, the picture was enough. She no doubt had a reason to draw apples. But more than the picture itself, what is significant here is the opportunity it provided for a new kind of communication between the girl and her father. He may or may not have continued to assume that he knows what she likes, but without speaking she was able to successfully express her preference and to tell him he was wrong.

The story of the tsunami was about fear; the apples speak to preferences and choices. This last example represents change.

*She was an older woman at a recreational gathering for seniors. Popoki and his friends had come for talking and drawing. Most people drew houses – the homes they had lost in the tsunami, or the ones they wanted to build or rebuild. This woman was different. She drew clocks. Many different clocks. Popoki’s friend asked whether they were clocks that had been in her home before the tsunami. She replied, “No, before the tsunami I never even looked at a clock. But now....”.*

Prior to asking the question, Popoki’s friend had assumed that the clocks represented the woman’s former life, and she was surprised by the answer. For the woman, the clocks had meaning in and of themselves. She did not give details about either her former life or her current one as she drew, but her drawing and single sentence conveyed the message that her sense of time, and probably also the rhythm of her daily life, had changed as a result of the tsunami. While it is obvious that lives and lifestyles change after a major disaster, this story indicates an important detail that might easily remain unspoken and get overlooked. For the woman, the clocks represent not the tangible loss of things so much as the difficulty of adjusting to a new lifestyle and perhaps an intangible sense of loss.

The three art stories described above might have little meaning if they are seen outside of the context of Popoki’s Friendship Story, or without some kind of explanation. But within that context, these simple “art stories” do not only exemplify sharing inner thoughts, but also show how drawing can provide openings for interaction and support. Lying within each of these examples are stories; those stories

might change over time or be told differently depending on the audience. But each drawing is an invitation to share a story, an invitation that might not have been offered without art. And, each story leads us to reflect and teaches us something we might not have known about fear, preferences and time.

### ***Story-directed art***

Some of the stories on Popoki's cloths begin as illustrations for stories that already existed, or were in the mind of the artist as s/he drew. Often these stories take on lives of their own.

*About five months after the tsunami, two five-year-old boys drew figures on the cloth. One boy drew lots of small human-like figures. They were all simple drawings, but each figure was holding something different. The boy described them as "heroes" but told us that actually they were all weak and incapable of winning if they fought alone. But, he said, there were lots of them, and together they could do anything! The other boy drew three small figures standing in a row with their hands joined. He explained, "Let's exceed recovery!"*

Usually, heroes are strong, brave and invincible, which is why they are heroes. Like Superman, they might have help but their glory is their own. We were surprised by the story of heroes whose strength lies in numbers and working together. Could it be a story of helplessness in the face of the tsunami, and strength as a community in working toward recovery? It is hard to know, but most children do not emphasize community when telling stories of heroes. Similarly, under normal circumstances, it is unlikely that boys that young would even know the word or concept of "recovery", let alone use it. The drawings and accompanying stories by these two boys reflect their lives and provide a glimpse of how they see their post-tsunami world and the sort of heroes they feel might keep them safe.

*The older woman drew a salmon in great detail. It was a beautiful drawing that depicted the fish vibrantly alive and jumping. She was silent as she drew, but when she had finished, she shared her story. Her town, still in ruins five years after the tsunami, had been famous for salmon. They were born upstream in the rivers that run through the town and swim out to the sea, coming back in the winter to spawn. The town was famous for its preserved salmon that was hung outside and dried in the strong wind that blew off the ocean in winter, as well as its fresh and processed*

*salmon. “The salmon have begun to come back”, she said. Her story might have been one of hope, or one of loss.*

Popoki’s friends come from Kobe, far away from the region destroyed by the 2011 tsunami. Some of them are international students who visit northeastern Japan for the first time as Popoki’s friends. Art and stories are embedded in culture, and the salmon provided a way for the woman to share the story of her town and its culture. But it also enabled her to convey her feelings about her town, its culture and livelihood, and its importance to her. The opportunity to share with people from outside of her usual world provided her with a chance to reflect on what about her town she finds most important. Her insight might affect our understanding as outsiders about what was lost in the tsunami.

*A young mother in Fukushima Prefecture drew a logo that represented her organization – a group of women with small children wanting to provide safe food for their families and friends. Looking at her completed drawing, she explained how people throughout Japan had responded to her plea for uncontaminated food and were continuing to send supplies. The young mother and her friends divided what they received among themselves and members of their community. It was a story inspired by a logo, but she went on to describe the difficulties she encounters. The most troubling, she said, was raising a child in the uncertainty and unknowability of what is and is not safe, and knowing how to deal with people who thought that safety was not an issue or perhaps just did not want to think about it. She said that when her young daughter had to ask about cherry blossom viewing, a well-known custom throughout Japan, it broke her heart.*

Similar to the salmon, this story of the logo is a story of culture and everyday life based on a simple drawing of a symbol. This story, however, was one focused not on the past but on the present and future. The desired ending was to both be physically safe and to feel that way, too. When she began her story, the young woman was a successful activist fulfilling an important role. As her story progressed, she became a worried mother. The drawing and the story allowed her to be both at the same time.

These three stories of heroes, salmon and food distribution share the common attribute that art is what provided an opportunity not only for these stories to be told, but also for them to be told in a way that acknowledged the importance of recognizing how the story-teller was feeling and allowed emotion – fear, powerlessness, sorrow,

and hope, just to name a few – to play an important role in the story. Maybe these people would have told these stories under different circumstances too, but it is suggested here that art serves to enhance their subjectivity and make it possible, or at least easier, to share not only their thoughts but also their feelings about what it is to be safe. This could help to add depth to our own understandings of safety.

### ***Reflective story-art***

Reflection, as an intellectual exercise, is necessary for turning experience into knowledge. Art stories, or stories that grow out of art often include an element of reflection, sometimes on the part of the storyteller and at other times on the part of the artist. The father of the girl who drew the apple engaged in reflection when he realized that he did not know as much as he thought he did about his daughter's preferences. The woman who drew the clocks used her drawing to reflect on ways her life had changed since the tsunami. Although she probably was not telling the story of salmon and her town for the first time, the story the woman who drew the salmon told was an opportunity for her to reflect on the past and future of a town she loved; the Fukushima mother reflected in her story on the decision to stay and try to be safe, rather than to leave for a place that might be safer.

Some stories are more conducive to reflection than others; some stories grow out of reflection. In that reflection is a process through which both the storyteller and the audience grow and come to know their world in a different way, it can be suggested that stories that provide greater opportunities for reflection garner more interest and attention. Below are some examples of reflective stories that are based on, or begin with, art.

*She drew a house with a garden near the sea. Above the house she wrote, "Home Sweet Home". This retired teacher in the Republic of the Marshall Islands was dedicated to teaching young people about the horrific effects of the nuclear testing conducted in the Marshall Islands by the United States from 1946 to the early sixties. She said, "Even now, more than fifty years later, people still can't go back to their islands. We know what it is like to be displaced by nuclear. It is different from being displaced by a tsunami, but losing your home is the same. To feel safe, everyone needs to have a home." (2014.12 RIM)*

This artist knew about nuclear dislocation, but in a different context. When she

heard about the 2011 tsunami, she immediately associated it with the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant explosions. Upon learning about how the tsunami also destroyed other parts of northeastern Japan, she reflected on what was most important, and decided it was having a “home”.

*They were students at the University of the South Pacific and all came from small islands scattered throughout the region. I shared Popoki’s story and invited them to draw and share feelings of being safe. Like Japan, many Pacific Islands lie on the Rim of Fire and earthquakes are not uncommon. They also have first-hand experience with radiation from American, French and British nuclear testing in the region. The story of the great earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in Japan came as no surprise. The students thought about what to draw, and talked softly among themselves. Some drew religious symbols explaining that God would protect us all; others drew their national flags, and pictures of their islands. But the stories that made the strongest impression were the ones that depicted coconuts, pandanus and the sea. These stories fused culture, colonization and crisis; the message was that in the face of not only earthquakes and tsunami but also climate change, being physically safe may be impossible, but safety lies in love and respect for one’s culture, customs and beliefs.*

Like the artist from the Marshall Islands, these students combined what they know of past experiences of disaster and contamination with their own experiences of colonization/decolonization and sea-level rise. Their reflective stories showed the importance of healthy and vibrant cultures and belief systems at times of crisis.

This example is from a workshop held at an evacuation center in Kumamoto, several months after a major earthquake. The artist was a young boy, probably about nine or ten years of age.

*Everyone, adults and children alike, was drawing. Some were talking as they drew; most were smiling. But one boy who had done his best to be disruptive enough to get attention but not enough to be told to leave resisted. “I won’t draw!” he said. Popoki’s friends smiled. “I won’t use colors!” Popoki’s friends continued to smile. “I want to use words!” The adults had told us that this boy was usually very quiet and obedient; he was a big help in the evacuation center and everyone liked him. He had been showing a different face at the workshop. Popoki’s friends assured him that he could engage with the cloth in any way he wanted. He grabbed a pen and intently wrote the*

*following words:*

*“Kumamoto was horrible. Lots of people were missing and lots of people were killed, and there are still lots of people in evacuation centers, aftershocks of M.6 or M.3 or M.5- happen and we don’t know when landslides will happen and who will be crushed, and everyone will die, everyone will leave, and it’s lonely, and I wasn’t hurt. I haven’t died yet so if it’s OK with you I’d like to see you!!”*

This story is a powerful cry from a young, frightened, lonely boy. It is a written story, but it is also an art-story because it took place in the context of drawing. It was, in fact, the product of the boy’s ambivalence about participation in the workshop. There of course is no way to know, but I think it is unlikely that he would have shared those feelings without being surrounded by others who were drawing and sharing their art-stories. This story is on the one hand, a product of reflection by the artist. During the workshop activities prior to the drawing session, the boy had been prompted to reflect on his experience of the earthquake and living in an evacuation center. He had already told us that unlike all of the other participants, he did not think friends were necessary for feeling safe. The reason, he said, was that they disappear. The boy’s reflective story-art told the rest of the story. His story also caused reflection on the part of the adults who were present at the workshop, some of whom knew the boy very well. They had all been surprised by his behavior from the beginning and were even more surprised to read what he had written, saying that they had had no indication that he was feeling that way. This story provided many opportunities for reflection on the part of both the artist and the audience. Hopefully it also led to support for the boy.

The last example is of the way art-stories prompted reflection on the part of the audience.

*The cloth was colored a soft pink, but depicted damage to a riverside slum community in the Philippines after a typhoon had caused the river to overflow its banks, causing terrible flooding. The drawings depicted the flooding, but also the community coming together to overcome the damage and rebuild their lives. A friend of Popoki’s took a cloth when he visited the Philippines and brought it with him to the damaged community to offer support. There, many people contributed their stories. After returning to Japan, the cloth was displayed as part of an exhibition*

*in Otsuchi Town.*

*An older man stood for a long time, looking carefully at all the drawings on the cloth. Popoki's friend stood a respectful distance away, ready to converse but not demanding. Finally, the man turned and, shaking his head, said, "We're not the only ones, are we?"*

Reflection can happen without planning or intention. This man certainly was aware that disasters are occurring with increasing frequency and destructive force in many parts of the world. But as is often the case after trauma, while he may have known about other tragedies, the one closest to his heart was his own. Encountering the cloth took him outside of himself, perhaps for only a short time, or perhaps for longer. We cannot know how it affected this man in the long term, but knowledge and understanding of the suffering of others gained in this way can be an important step toward recovery.<sup>8</sup>

### **Learning from Art-stories**

Disaster is a personal, local, regional and global issue. As extreme events continue to grow in size and intensity, disaster mitigation and resilience have become important security concerns. As a result, disaster has become increasingly securitized. While the aim and intention of such securitization is to raise resilience, reduce risk and to save lives, understandings of safety in this context focus on discourses and practices related to physical safety, without necessarily considering whether or not people feel safe.

Starting with the assumption that safety has physical and emotional components that are of equal importance, this article has identified the importance of art in learning about whether and in what ways people feel safe. Although there is no established methodology for doing this, the article used art-stories from the Popoki Friendship Story project to illustrate three types of art-story: art-based stories, story-directed art and reflective story-art.

In the course of analyzing the chosen examples in the context of each of the categories, it became quite clear that these categories are overlapping, and that analysis should be undertaken in an intersectional way, looking at difference and similarity within each category, as well as among the three categories. The story of the clock, for example, perhaps should have started out as a reflective art-story. The

salmon might have been categorized as an art-directed story, and the drawings by students at University of the South Pacific (USP) were perhaps story-directed art.

Not only do the categories themselves converge, but the identities of the artists also have similarities and differences. It probably matters whether the artist is an adult or a child; most of the time age makes a difference when it comes to life experiences and knowledge concerning what it is to feel safe. One particular expectation for the use of art-stories is that they will help children and others who are unable and/or unwilling to express themselves in words, but have something to say, to tell their stories. But there is still much work to be done in order to better understand this methodology and its implications.

Security and safety are important, but illusive concepts. International relations and peace studies are filled with unsafe ways to enhance security. The use of art, stories and art-stories might contribute important clues to ways security can be enhanced in ways that both are, and feel, safe.

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## Notes

- 1 The Popoki Peace Project was begun in 2006 with the objective of publishing and then using Alexander's first picture book, *Popoki, What Color is Peace?* (2007). The Project emphasizes use of the senses and the entire body to imagine, express and create peace. After the 2011 Great Northeast Japan Earthquake, Popoki Peace Project used the same approach to

- begin a drawing project called Popoki Friendship Story. This is still continuing today. For more information, see Alexander 2018; 2012; Alexander and Katsuragi 2020.
- 2 Social inclusion and multiple avenues for communication are important attributes of peaceful societies, but are also necessary for resilience to disaster. For example, there is a high correlation between relative peacefulness and levels of disaster resilience (Institute for Economics and Peace 2016).
  - 3 Stories and narrative have become important in many fields, including international relations (Wibbin 2011, Sylvester 2011). Here, stories are seen as a kind of narrative text that are “experience-rooted but creatively reproduced (and) whose meaning is realized by specific communities” (Stone-Mediatore 2003, p.5).
  - 4 The ten stories used here were collected during Popoki Friendship Story activities between April 2011 and February 2020. Seven are from Japan; five from Otsuchi Town, Iwate Prefecture; one from Fukushima City and one from Mashiki Town, Kumamoto Prefecture. One of the remaining three stories is from Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands and another is from the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. The third is from the Philippines. The stories, artists and situations are different, but all express common element of “feeling safe”.
  - 5 Beginning in 2012, drawing activities took place along with exhibitions of previously drawn cloths. While children drew, parents often looked at the exhibited cloths. This frequently served as an opportunity for those adults to share their stories. Popoki returns to the same towns once or twice a year. Over the years, relationships of trust have been built and that connection has led to the sharing of many personal stories that were not shared at the beginning.
  - 6 The question of what defines being human is beyond the scope of this paper. Storytelling is one of the factors that may, or may not, make humans different (Herman 2018; Gottschall 2012).
  - 7 Herman (2009) defines storyworlds as, “... global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted — of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner” (72-73). Also see Horváth 2010.
  - 8 In this example, the man was able to engage in reflection because he was ready to accept the reality of others in similar positions. It could just have easily worked in a different way.