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What can my Neurodivergent experience of Burnout teach me about myself and my future as a Psychotherapist?

The road to Neurodivergence has been winding, and to reflect this unstraightforward journey, the current Heuristic Inquiry has also taken a somewhat bumpy and unconventional path. Rather than a traditional introduction laying out my initial engagement (Moustakas, 1990) with the topic, the beginning is, like me, hybrid. Part internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990), part literature review. Part ADHD, part Autism. Duality. Often tug of war, and ever frequently a beautiful Yin Yang. A personal tale, with relevant research hung on it like baubles on a Christmas tree. A way of writing that quickly became necessary in the pursuit of congruence and authenticity; because as far as I could see, my experience, although common, was nowhere to be found within the academic literature. And so, I went about piecing together shards of it, so that I might make a coherent whole in which to see myself reflected.

Internal Frame of Reference and Literature Review

Whilst reading the proforma for this assignment, I had a deep tugging sensation in my 'gut' akin to what Moustakas (1990) describes, that my experience as a Neurodivergent person in the world of Psychotherapy training, was something I wanted

to explore through Heuristic Inquiry. I use the term Neurodivergent, as there is currently no officially recognised term inclusive of both ADHD and Autism, despite their significant symptom overlap and co-morbidity (Ramtekkar, 2017; Hours, Recasens and Baleyte, 2022). Therefore, where the term **Neurodivergent** is used, this should be considered an umbrella term for both Autism and ADHD. The term 'AuDHD' is used on two occasions as a colloquialism.

Having claimed an identity as a Highly Sensitive Person with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (Aron, 2017; Roxburgh and Churchill, 2023) after the birth of my second child, it was only when re-entering university education at the age of 40, that I realised the extent of my sensory and processing differences. Although excited and inspired by connection and learning, I often felt like a square peg trying to fit into the round hole of academics. At this point it became glaringly obvious to me that I share significant traits in common with those who are diagnosed with ADHD, and although internally I relate more to the term **Response Ready** (Jensen et al, 1997) as this feels more accurate to my subjective experience, I describe myself as having ADHD to others for clarity and brevity.

In addition to this I have recently concluded, after much reading about late identification in diverse populations, that I share significant traits in common with those who identify as Autistic; something I was somewhat 'late to the party' in realising, as I do not consciously experience issues with socialising or picking up on interpersonal cues (UCLA Health, 2023). In the past year I have read, and related to, myriad first person accounts of late identified Autistic individuals, and as a result have learned about

subjects such as ***monotropism and hyperfocus*** (Dwyer et al, 2024) as well as ***fixed and repetitive behaviours*** (Paula-Pérez, 2013); all of which I score highly in at assessment.

Late diagnosis/self-identification in individuals with this neurotype is extremely common, as a dual diagnosis of ADHD and Autism has only been possible since 2013 under the DSM5 Criteria (Ramtekkar, 2017). Due to the recency of this diagnostic possibility, there remains little known about the interaction between the two, with some academics still doubting its currency as a phenomenon at all (Hours, Recasens and Baleyte, 2022). Many continue to be missed due to each phenomena masking the other (Kentrou et al, 2019), which is further complicated by a persisting lack of awareness in how both Autism and ADHD present across genders and diverse populations; those assigned female at birth (AFAB) being among this under-represented group (Craddock, 2024; Eaton, 2024; Stibbe et al, 2020).

I clarify this, regarding my aligned experience with late diagnosed/self-identified 'Autistic AFAB's with ADHD' and its reflection in the literature, as I believe it to be an important internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990) and context that my recent experience of Burnout can be both characterised by and viewed within. Many 'AFAB's' with Autism and/or ADHD are not only ***missed*** but also ***misdiagnosed***, as the title of Judy Eaton's (2024) book suggests. Indeed, I only realised I was experiencing a ***Neurodivergent Burnout*** because of the brave sharing of a friend who had experienced the same; I fear had I employed the help of a 'professional' at the time, I would have been

diagnosed with some other condition and packed off with extraneous medication as my only life raft to the shores of sanity.

Burnout is common to both Psychotherapy trainees (Archer, 2024; Um and Seon, 2024) and the Neurodivergent community (Mantzas, Richdale and Dissanayake 2023; Porto, Murgu and Souza 2024; Arnold et al, 2023), though research is new and scant on both topics. **Neurodivergent Burnout** is characterised as; a state of extreme exhaustion, sensory overwhelm and reduced functioning, often caused by excessive masking and trying to fit in to, and/or pushing oneself to meet the expectations of Neurotypical environments (Raymaker et al, 2020; Mantzas, Richdale and Dissanayake, 2023; Porto, Murgu and Souza 2024; Arnold et al, 2023). As the nature of **Neurodivergent Burnout** is only just being defined within academic literature, there remains little in the way of papers exploring how to work with it, though some expert clinicians provide helpful and detailed guidance via blogs and websites. An example of which is Neff (2024), a Neurodivergent Psychotherapist who explores behaviour patterns that may lead to **Neurodivergent Burnout**, such as ‘the boom or bust cycle’.

I believe I settled on **Neurodivergent Burnout** as a topic for Heuristic Inquiry because, on some level, I instinctively knew this to be a key overlap, or **intersectional** (Smooth, 2013; Wickenden, 2023), of where my experience as a trainee Psychotherapist and my Neurodivergence met to create a new phenomenon. I had a powerful sense of tacit knowing (Moustakas, 1990) that through exploring this, I might find some important

new knowledge to sustain me on the rest of my journey as a trainee and my future as a qualified Psychotherapist.

Methodology

The current Heuristic Inquiry was conducted as part of second-year requirements on a Psychotherapeutic Practice MA programme. The assignment parameters being to carry out an in-depth Heuristic Inquiry using Moustaka's (1990) method, exploring personal insights and reflections, which may have, and may continue to, influence growth as a Psychotherapeutic Practitioner. Moustakas's (1990) method comprises **phases** (initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis) and within these **phases, processes** (identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, internal frame of reference); all of which were engaged with by myself during this inquiry, as sole participant and researcher.

The Heuristic Inquiry method was developed by Moustakas (1990) to reflect and encapsulate the natural process humans go through whilst exploring phenomena and is closely linked to the creative process (Sultan, 2019). Indeed, during the current investigation, I experienced natural cycles of Heuristic Inquiry before I even knew what it was (**Appendix 1**), both whilst understanding what Heuristics is and when navigating how to make a start on the assignment. During these formative stages, I began to understand, through experience, the "innate artistry (of this) back and forth...rhythmic dance"

(Sultan, 2019, p12) between the **phases**, which were all the while defined and characterised by the **processes**. This dance was not something I forced or tried to do, rather something that was happening anyway, and has always happened within me (**Appendix 10**), that I am only now discovering a common language for. Subsequently, Heuristic Inquiry went from being the most baffling, to the most natural and instinctive process, and from this point onwards took on what often felt like, a self-propelling life of its own.

Miniature cycles of Heuristic Inquiry were gone through at each fork in the road, from reading the first of Moustaka's words to the final edit. Like overlapping tornadoes each spiralling off the other, or quantum entanglement, these non-linear cycles of inquiry are hard to extricate from one another (**Appendix 1**; Sultan, 2019). Further to this, I have been journalling, reflecting, sensing, and creating, regarding these topics in some form, months and even years before this current process of Heuristic Inquiry was undertaken, and will continue to do so long after it is 'finished'. It is therefore hard to draw a line whereby the inquiry began and ended. However, a concentrated period of data collection and analysis was undertaken over a period of 3 weeks, whereby I, as researcher and participant, forewent all other external obligations, other than the most basic family necessities.

During this time, I sat deeply with the question at hand, intentionally (but often non-linearly) following Moustakas's (1990) **phases** and engaging in his **processes**. More specifically I; focused, created new journal entries and artwork, reflected on my

embodied experience, pondered previous encounters, re-read past journal entries, listened to music, sang, talked with friends, family and colleagues, and where my interest was piqued, read relevant literature and first-person accounts of those with similar experiences. Following this I processed the data through combined writing and embodiment, created appendices and then stepped away from the research completely for a 5-day period of incubation before starting my creative synthesis process. Creative synthesis involved viewing my appendices side by side and contemplating their essence and connection in a state of open awareness, all the while relying on focusing, intuition and self-dialogue to provide insight and collective meaning.

Throughout my life, and this process, I have been “entranced by visions, images and dreams that connect me to my quest” (Moustakas, 1990, p11), and therefore visuals and artwork form a significant part of my exploration, as does my engagement with music. In fact, I have come to realise since starting Psychotherapy training, that image, colour, sound, and other non-verbal sensing’s are my primary emotional language. Further to this, I am often haunted by song lyrics, going round and round in my mind. I sing them over and over again until at some point, my curiosity peeks through the veil of consciousness and asks the question; what is it about this song that is trying to speak to me? My instinctive process then, is to listen to the song in question and more often than not, as I immerse myself fully in sound and movement, I see images; although **see** does not seem quite like the right word, as the experience is not only visual but multisensory. I **embody** images feels more accurate. The images then connect to movement and sound

to create coherent meaning and affect in the most congruent of ways, words often an afterthought or completely unnecessary to proceedings.

Presentation of Data

The first sample of data, **Appendix 2**, is a journal entry that depicts how my Burnout felt at its peak (when the entry was created). Included are sketches, accompanied by a paragraph of song lyrics (Imagine Dragons, 2017), as well as my own reflections, which speak of the connection between the song and my embodied experience at that time. My central nervous system was in complete overwhelm, though I was trying to ignore it and push through discomfort as I always had to conquer and overcome difficulty. However, this tried and tested strategy of masking my discomfort did not work anymore, and my system simply ceased to function. I distinctly remember this unfamiliar song stopping me in my tracks and feeling fully in my body the pull of recognition and validation; “the more I stray, the less I fear, and the more I reach, the more I fade away...the darkness right in front of me, oh it’s calling out and I won’t walk away” (Imagine Dragons, 2017). I replayed the song over and over, listening to the words and almost holding my breath as the chorus not only directly reflected my experience, but felt like a guide to recovery; “the more I stray” from the way I’ve always done things, the better I feel, and “the more I reach” for the solid ground of familiar patterns “the more I fade away” (Imagine Dragons, 2017).

Like the Gestalt ***Paradoxical Theory of Change*** (Joyce and Sills, 2018), I must submit to the flow of “darkness right in front of me” (Imagine Dragons, 2017), and let it break me apart, so that I may transcend it and be formed again new. Old patterns were pulling me down to the bottom of the ocean, but to let go of them was freefall. This experience (***Appendix 2***), guided by art and music, was a pivotal turning point and marked the beginning of my Burnout recovery journey. Following this, through focusing and experimentation, I started to understand the true needs of my nervous system that I had ignored and overridden for so long. I started to explore the masks and adaptations I had been unconsciously employing in order to survive Neurotypical environments and expectations; processes that, whilst effective, were draining me in the background at a sensory level. My reflections at this point bear a striking resemblance to Roads’ answer to the question of self-exploration; “Let go and fall into the river. Let the river of life sweep you beyond all aid from old and worn concepts...Can you trust me enough to let go of the known and swim in an unknown current?” (Roads, 1987, p26, cited in Moustakas, 1990, p13). To me, this parallel between Roads’ words and my experience frames my Burnout as a flare my body sent up to my soul, inviting a necessary pilgrimage back to my authentic essence.

The next data sample is a collection of images that illuminated in my mind during an intense period of incubation (***Appendix 3***). This series of diagrams represents the sequential progression that unfolded in my mind’s eye regarding the overlap and intersect of my experience of Neurodivergence and Psychotherapy training (labelled Counselling Profession). ***Appendix 3, Diagram 1***, shows a pyramid where these two

concepts are the base that feeds into and creates the experience of Burnout (the peak). This then evolved into a Ven Diagram that felt more accurate, with Burnout being the overlap of Neurodivergence and 'Counselling Profession' (**Appendix 3, Diagram 2**). Whilst drawing these first 2 diagrams, something occurred to me that didn't come to mind when they were simply mental images; that there is another Ven Diagram, where the overlap of Neurodivergence and 'Counselling Profession' is 'creativity' (**Appendix 3, Diagram 3**). This led me to reflect on what conditions might cause each differing overlap, and this resulted in **Appendix 3, Diagrams 4 and 5**, where the conditions of the intersecting circles are changed to reflect their differing nature and consequences. The diagrams are simplistic and have been reduced down to their essential nature; that highly Neuro-normative environments/expectations resulting in an excess of personal adaptations will land me in the energy deficit of Burnout, whereas more Neurodivergent-friendly environments/expectations result in optimum energy levels, thus making room for creativity. In **Appendix 3, Diagram 5**, I am the opposite of Burnout, I am vital, alive, energised and inspired.

As part of immersion, I had been drawn to the concept of using 'energy pacing systems' for managing **Neurodivergent Burnout** caused by the 'boom or bust cycle' (Miserandino, 2003; Neff, 2024). Whilst reading Neff's (2024) work I connected to it at a base level and experienced a full body "YES!" of recognition (Martin, 2021). I often have periods where I overextend myself on a sensory level (boom) and this results in a following (sometimes planned) crash and lack of capacity (bust). In fact, this has been my pattern for as long as I can remember. Environments and activities designed for a

different type of nervous system often demand more of me than my capacity, and therefore I make invisible (often unconscious) adaptations. I particularly relate to the traffic lighting system (Neff, 2024) and start to identify with this focus of inquiry. Eventually I feel as if I **am** the colours (**Appendix 4**), and I sense them cluster red over the time leading up to my Burnout. Whilst looking at these images I have created, I am suddenly struck by the memory of two Internal Family Systems ‘parts’ (Earley, 2009) that were mapped during a personal development session called ‘the accelerator’ (go) and ‘the tin man’ (stop). At this point I do nothing more than acknowledge the presence of these parts, though they (along with two others) come knocking on the door of my consciousness the very next day, and I reflect on their relationship to the duality of my ‘AuDHD’ nature (**Appendix 5**).

The last two samples of data to be analysed are connected and will therefore be reviewed as a pair. Firstly, **Appendix 6**, a drawing of a girl in a rainbow, reflects my experience of the immersion and incubation process. This is a version of artwork I have created many times in various forms since starting the process of Psychotherapy training, and I believe bears great significance to my developmental journey. There is some connection between this image, my **monotropic** brain, Burnout and my experience of the Heuristic Inquiry process. Since embarking on this inquiry, I have felt a contented relaxation and deep joy to a level that I have not felt for quite some time. I feel energised by the deep immersion of experiencing less things more deeply, as well as the space and permission to incubate. I am beginning to examine very honestly who I really am, what energises and what drains me, posing the question; is the Neurotypical norm of doing

multiple things at once at conflict with how my system was built to operate? During this point of reflection, indwelling and deep focus, I am again haunted by the chorus of a song; “the dawn is coming open your eyes...the dawn is coming open your eyes” (González, 2013). An embodied image starts to form in me, I feel a sunrise and a person in a boat watching it, so I follow my process and listen to the song as I set about painting **Appendix 7**, all the while focusing on my embodied experience.

Multisensory experiences such as these imprint on me with a permanence, integrating themselves into my being. By simply bringing the image to mind as I write, I feel the wave again; a feeling inwards but simultaneously projecting out, arms open, eyes closed, face turned to the sky, deep contented breaths that radiate all the way to the very depths of my stomach and glow to my limbs. Space...freedom...depth...creativity...me. I feel the stirring of another image below the surface, but **now** is not its time, it must percolate a while longer, and I delight in the feeling of it bubbling away. Now is the time to rest, and so I follow the deep urge to step away from the research before I attempt to creatively synthesise its meaning.

Through this ‘stepping away’ I have a strong sense of having birthed something significant, though at the same time, as Sultan (2019, p20) states, I suddenly feel ‘lost’ in the research question. I feel unsure that what I have produced is **right**, is **correct**, in terms of what a Heuristic Inquiry should be. I therefore take comfort in Sultan’s (2019, p20) belief, that the essence of this lostness “embellishes the research process and makes it richer”. And so, I surrender to this organic and inevitable nature of

groundlessness as a precursor to new knowledge being formed (Roads, 1987, p26, cited in Moustakas, 1990, p13). If I can just stop resisting **what is** and take my feet off the floor, I may float through space like a star, fading into the connection of nothingness, and therefore becoming everything.

Creative Synthesis

To synthesise the data, I view my appendices together and sit in quiet contemplation in order to connect to their essence and overall picture. When I focus, I feel the key is in **Appendices 6 and 7** and the embodied feeling that came to me after the **monotropic** delight and **hyperfocus** of discovering Heuristic Inquiry. I wonder if the answer to my Burnout is, not ‘complete rest’, but rather to focus on less things more intensely with periods of rest in between. Certainly, when I reflect, the experiences I find most enriching all tend to fall into the category of intense singular focus (including Psychotherapy). This further explains why the process of Heuristic Inquiry, and my response to it, has been so entangled with the content of this exploration. The “rhythmic dance” (Sultan, 2019, p12) of Heuristic Inquiry is my embodied home. I suddenly feel a strong pull towards the colour green. As often happens, this pull is preceded by circular lyrics; “I hear sounds in my mind, brand new sounds in my mind...I’m waiting for it, that green light, I want it” (Lorde, 2017); and as I listen to the song, I imagine my inner child skipping through a rainbow, arms outstretched trailing the vibrant colours, with nothing but warmth, light and space all around her...and just like that, an embodied image forms in me (**Appendices 8 and 9**).

Summary, implications, and outcomes

My introduction to Heuristic Inquiry was a journey that was as surprising as it was organic. The research was not **conducted** as much as it was **born**, in all its messy, nonlinear rawness, and much like birth, once started, felt impossible to stop. There were times I felt lost and unsure, though in the end even the 'lostness' made its own kind of sense. Quite poetically, the process of Heuristic Inquiry ended up providing the answer I was looking for all along; that my **monotropic** brain longs for the delight of deep immersion and the swaying green charge of incubation, both making way for the piercing clarity of illumination, the solidity of explication and the integration of creative synthesis. This is something I already knew the essence of (**Appendix 10**), but the significance and implications were not quite clear, as if under water, there but just out of reach.

Through this inquiry I have brought long-lost treasures down from the attic of my mind, dusting them off to reveal their contours and meaning. One such treasure is the knowledge that each time I have moved away from myself and masked my discomfort in order to access Neurotypical spaces and experiences, I have made my system work overtime, resulting in a cumulative deficit of energy so great, that eventually it could not be surmounted by sheer will. I feel that being re-connected to this primal knowing is hugely important, though it is not the end of the road. As an 'Autistic AFAB with ADHD' I have a lifetime of masking and adaptations behind me and this 'boom or bust' way of living has become second nature; a reflex I must gently and lovingly encourage to loosen its grip as I present it with new possibilities. Though in a way, I am merely trying to connect

it to **old** possibilities, and this is perhaps the reason my inner child appears so frequently during reflections.

Another significant discovery was how energy economy is connected to my wellness, and this is something I have been deeply considering since. How wonderful it would be to simply live at my own pace, but the reality is that I live in a Neuro-normative world, and I must meet it somewhere in the middle if I am to do certain things. Like any good relationship there must be compromise. Though, with the scales not quite even, perhaps an area for growth lays in asking for more adaptations to Neurotypical environments and systems in order to redress the balance. Where simultaneity is present and assumed, is there room to make space for **monotropism** and **hyperfocus**? As the saying goes, 'if you don't ask, you don't get'; advocacy, with its roots in both boundaries and self-care, an important lesson for therapists and clients alike.

In further embracing the Gestalt spirit of 'experimentation' (Joyce and Sills, 2018), I have introduced the concept of energy pacing strategies (Neff, 2024) to two clients who experience debilitating sensory overwhelm; both of whom related deeply to its essence, feeling seen and validated for their difficulties in coping with what 'should' be easy in everyday life. I have built on Neff's (2024) work and devised my own pacing strategy specific to the 'tug of war' of the 'AuDHD' experience, which I am fondly calling 'Chunking'. 'Chunking' involves balancing the ADHD need for variety with the Autistic need for stability, whilst considering the optimum ratio for each (which I have named the **Variety-Stability Ratio**). Too little variety may result in boredom and painful under-

stimulation; too little stability (via too many transitions) may result in overstimulation and Burnout. Testing this out on myself, I have started to 'Chunk' my week several days at a time and am currently working towards a 2-3-2 formation (2 days work, 3 days study, 2 days rest). These requirements may change over time and would certainly change between people; for some, a 4-2-1, or 3-2-2 may be ideal. This experimentation, rooted in the concept of ***Holding Opposites*** (Leong and Graichen, 2024), is my attempt at embracing and balancing my duality. Through this permissive acceptance my hope is, that the high spikes of 'boom or bust' will begin to wear a shallower groove in the graph of my sensory and emotional experience (***Appendix 4***).

Finally, through Heuristic Inquiry, I now have a common language for my natural process of creative multisensory reflection that has always been a part of me and is so essential to my emotional wellbeing. From this shared understanding, I feel more able to speak my neurological mother tongue and be understood by others, which is perhaps the ultimate act of self-care and the strongest antidote to my Burnout. It may seem that the creative synthesis section ended abruptly, but this was intentional. Sometimes I just want to let the images speak for themselves, and rather than finding ***all*** the words, I am asking to be met halfway; I ask you, the reader, to look at the images, listen to the songs and see how it feels for yourself. Asking to be met halfway here and now provides me with a sudden surge of energy, and so I must leave, to trail the Neurodivergent rainbow into the realms of the creative and divine. Maybe I will see you there.

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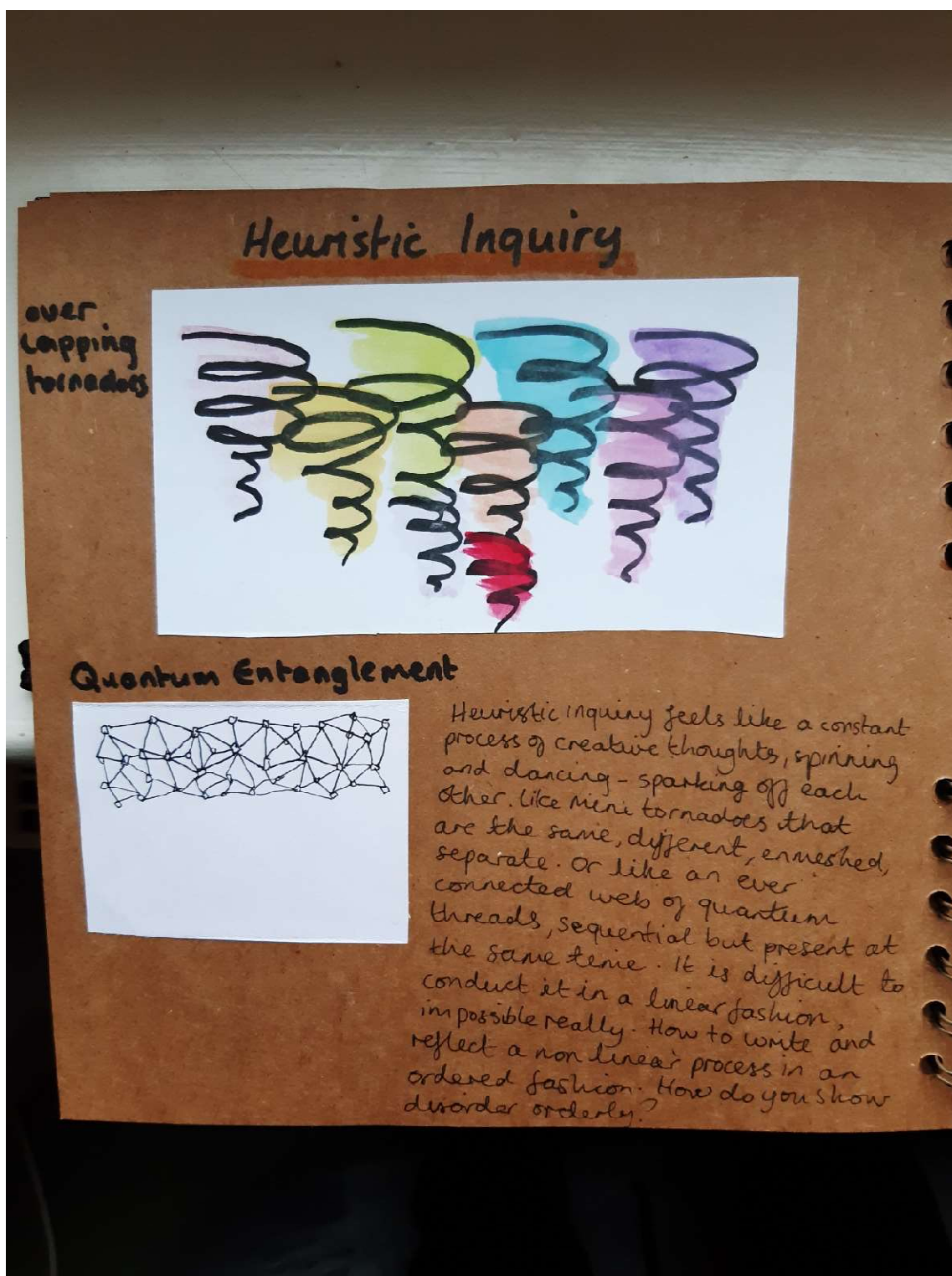
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Wickenden, M. (2023). Disability and other identities? - how do they intersect? *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2023.1200386>

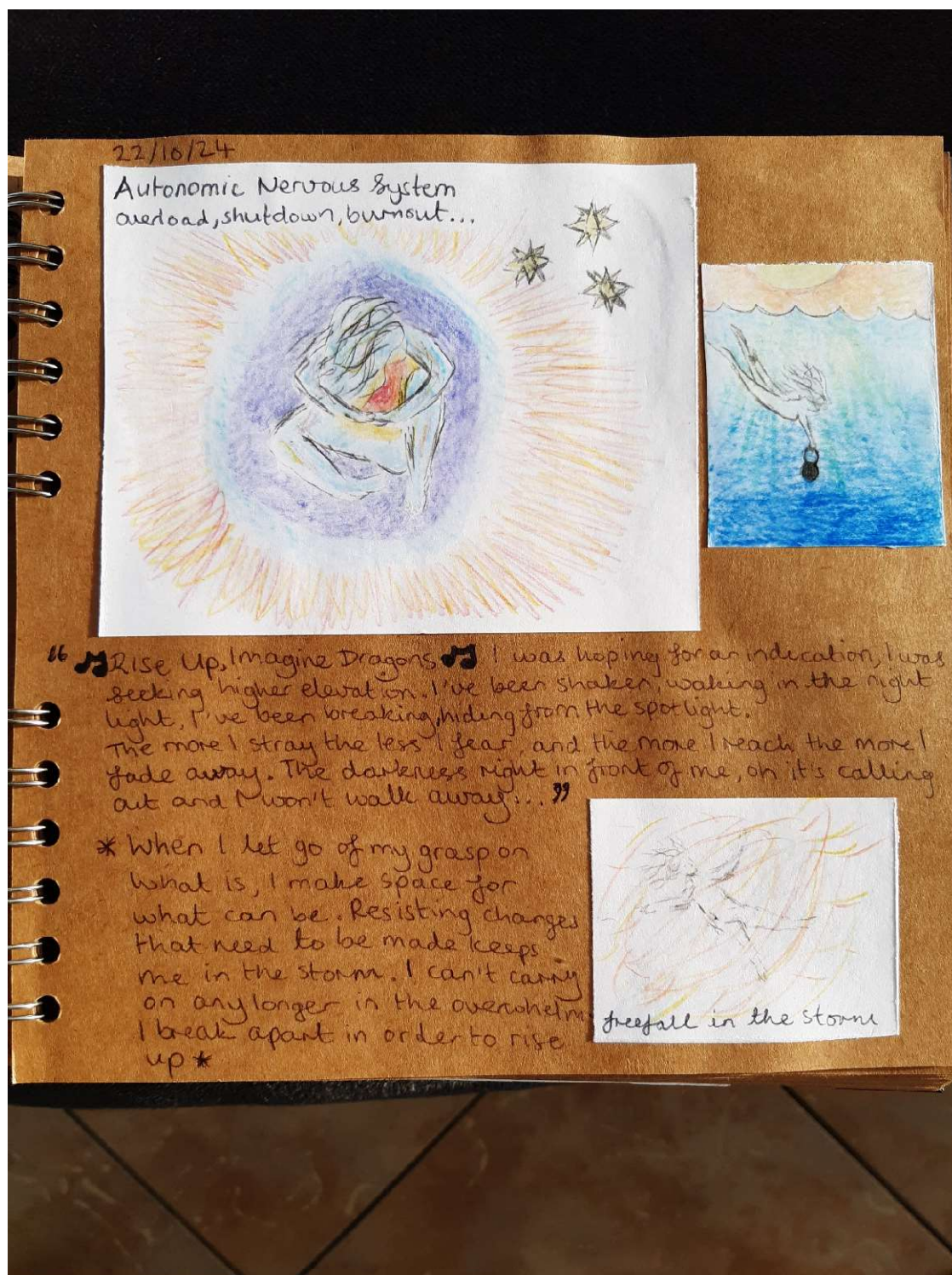
Appendix 1:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024.



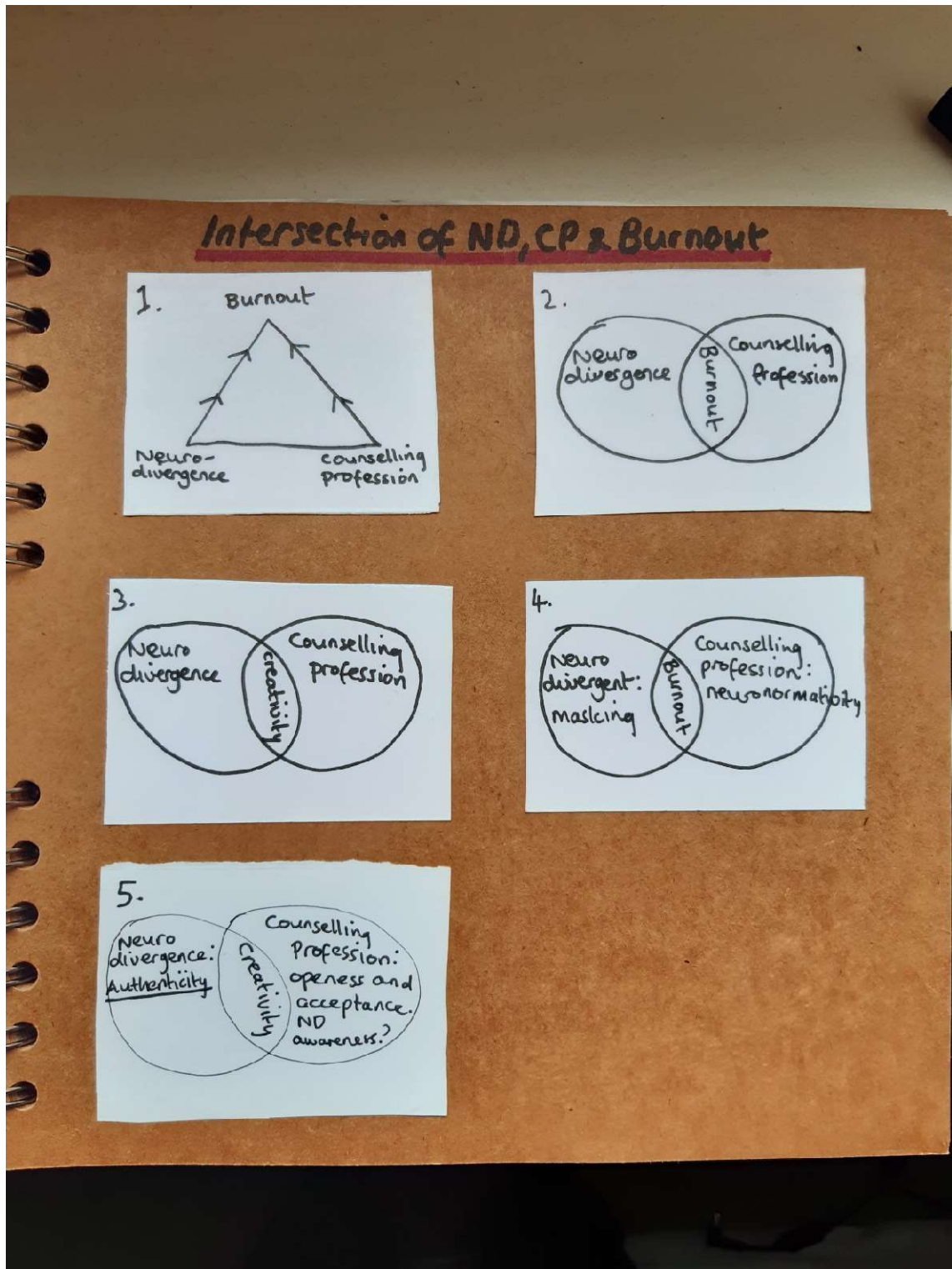
Appendix 2:

Art journal extract created by author, October 2024; quoting Imagine Dragons (2017),
within quotation marks.



Appendix 3:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024.



Appendix 4:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024.

Pacing Systems

traffic light pacing system
example Y1, S2 - tolerable?



traffic light pacing system Y2
S1, pt 1.



pacing system optimal for
AuDHD?



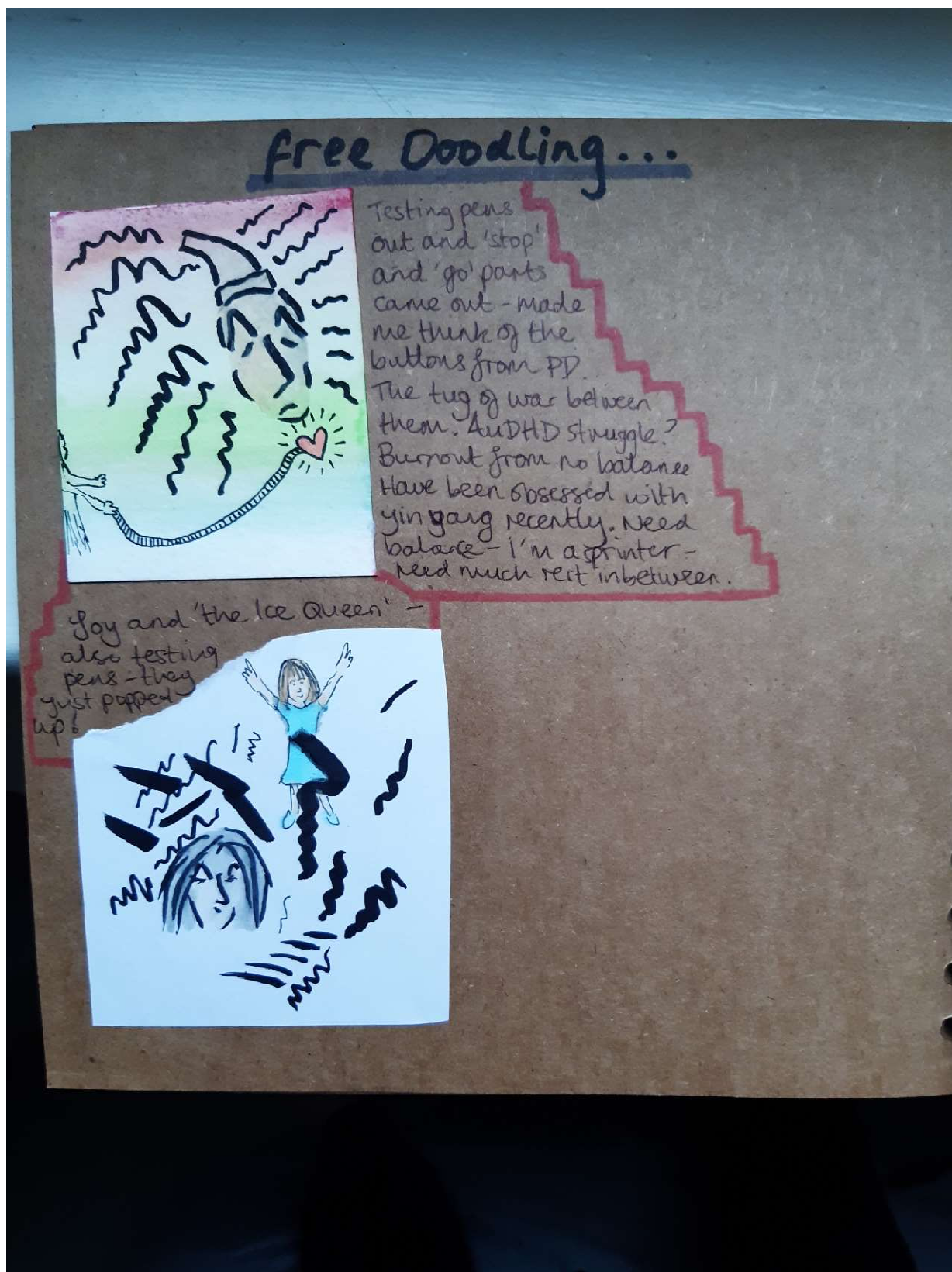
Heart Rhythm Pacing
system...

long term map? — or is this boom or bust?

I've been thinking about AuDHD and PD where I discovered the stop and go parts - actually I think it might be historical free writing journal exercise. Because of the 'Boom & Bust' stop and go - do I have extremes? I mask by pushing through. Is the heart Rhythm pacing system more optimal? With less extremes and leaning into both self care and monotropism, maybe stop will be less 'stop' and go will be less 'go'. I feel like stop and go are related to 'joy' somehow... I doodled them at the same time. I feel like she is the age I started making big adaptations, and my protectors are those adaptations.

Appendix 5:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024.



Appendix 6:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024.

Immersion & Incubation: Heuristics



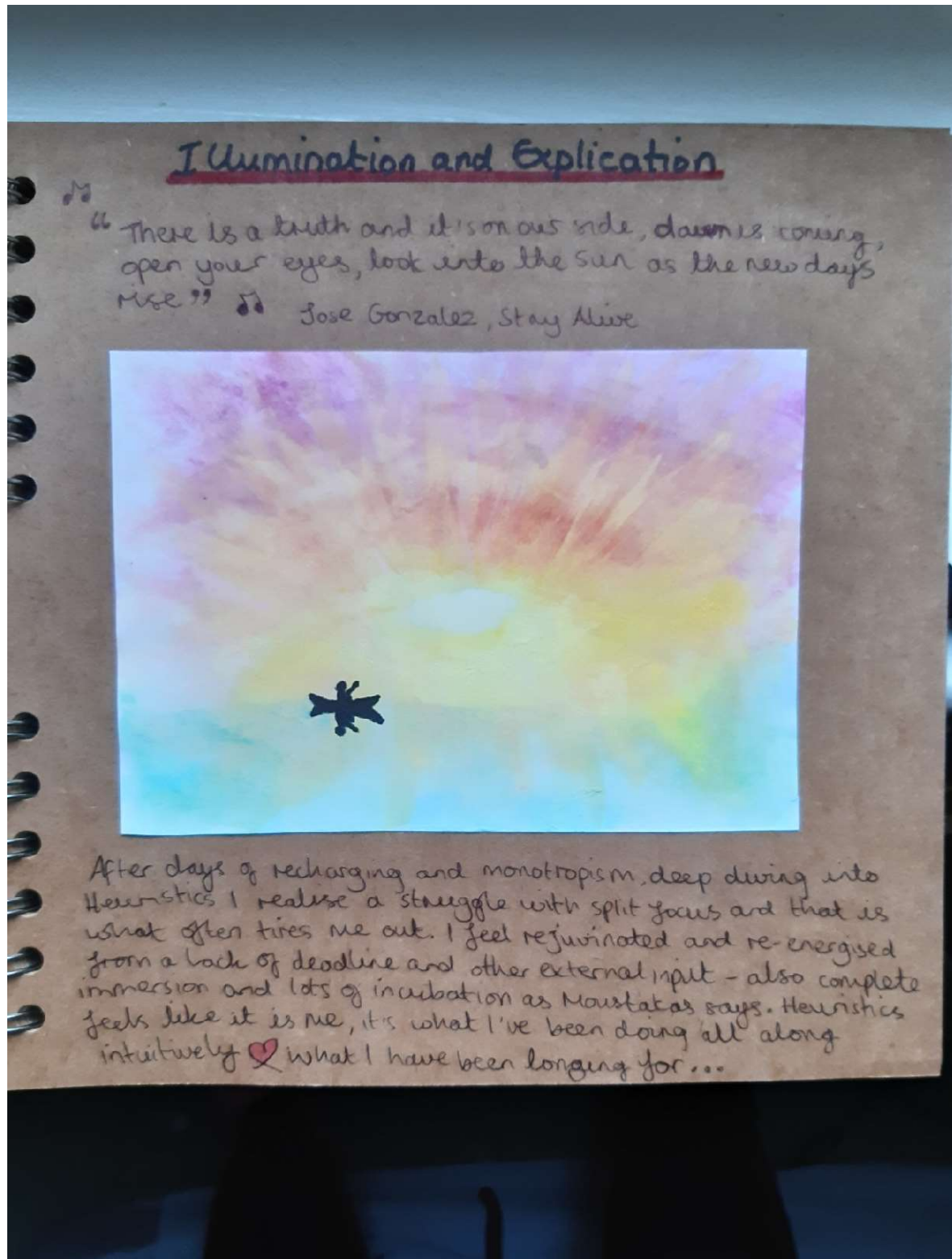
Immersion and incubation feels like a natural process and what I heavily lean towards anyway. This is why it's hard to work with tight deadlines and when there are too many things going on - not enough 'incubation time' and things getting in the way of immersion or 'hyperfocus'.

Words that come to my mind are: hyperfocus, synesthesia, hyperphantasia.

The 'sensing' back and forth to maintain balance is intuitive there are no words, only sensing. Maybe this is why I was drawn to the course when I saw the example of Gendlin focusing?

Appendix 7:

Art journal extract created by author, December 2024; quoting González (2013) within quotation marks.



Appendix 8:

Creative Synthesis (version 1), created by author, January 2025: 'Spiritual Rebirth'



Appendix 9:

Creative Synthesis (version 2), created by author, January 2025: 'Shadow Lifts Me Up'



Appendix 10:

Artwork created by author in April 2023; prior to starting current MA programme.

