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Published in:
International Review of Qualitative Research

DOI:
[10.1177/19408447211049529](https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447211049529)

E-pub ahead of print: 12/10/2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):
Carless, D. (2021). What can a song bring? Balancing out the picture in pandemic. *International Review of Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447211049529>

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What Can a Song Bring? Balancing Out the Picture in Pandemic

David Carless¹ 

International Review of Qualitative
Research
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–6
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Qualitative Inquiry



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DOI: 10.1177/19408447211049529

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Abstract

How might we personally and collectively contain the burnout and emotional depletion that has arisen as a consequence of COVID-19? For some, the pandemic has been a further stressor on top of pre-existing trauma. Under these circumstances, how can we continue our work of intervening into the challenges and demands that face our communities? Here, I turn to a song – called *It's Alright* – written and sung not only as a response, but also as a survival strategy. I try to let its sentiments and sensations wash over me to calm my nervous system. I sing it as a way to self-soothe, to stabilise. I sing it with and for you, on the chance it might be of service.

Keywords

critical arts-based research, burnout, COVID-19, music, performance autoethnography, songwriting

In their welcome to the 17th Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, [Denzin and Giardina \(2021\)](#) write, ‘Like nearly everyone else in any other profession, many of us are burned out, depleted, and emotionally drained from charging forward these last 18 months as if everything is okay but, really, it isn’t’ (p. 4–5). They also offer us a challenge, a calling:

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can we collectively live our way through these troubled times—this nightmare—and push through into newly imagined utopian spaces? Can we train a new generation of engaged scholars and community leaders who will lead us into these uncharted spaces? Can we intervene into the challenges and demands that we face—to be present to the history that we all shape? (p. 5)

I recognise the burn out and depletion they describe. I am pleased they have acknowledged it here – it makes me feel less alone. But I feel trepidation contemplating their call. I do not think I can do any more at this point in time.

*

Wednesday, before the full Congress even begins, I am informed, challenged, engaged and moved by the performances and presentations of members of the autoethnography special interest group. In one of those presentations, Amber [Johnson \(2021\)](#) suggests to us that we – as a community of autoethnographers – might still be ‘on mute’. Johnson challenges us to find ways to *unmute* ourselves and our work. We urge ourselves and each other to do more because more *needs* to be done.

The Congress of Qualitative Inquiry is a remarkable conference. It is a unique community of engaged qualitative researchers from around the world. *We* are its embodiment. Perhaps, here, anything is possible? Or perhaps, even here, there are limits to what can be achieved? Perhaps – even here – a time is needed to rest, regain balance and composure, and to recharge. Perhaps it is enough at this time to be staying afloat.

*

Some years ago, I worked on a large research and evaluation project with British military personnel on a residential adapted sport and adventure training programme (see [Carless & Douglas, 2016, 2017](#)). Most of those on the programme had experienced some kind of trauma – physical or psychological or both – often consequences of the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. The programme offered some kind of support for transition, recovery and personal development. As you might imagine, each week’s course was an intense roller coaster not only for the soldiers, but also sometimes for the coaches on the course. And sometimes for the researchers too.

The coaches had a beautifully simple device. It consisted a 40-foot length of rope marked at one end with a single red band, in the centre with two red bands and at the other end with three red bands. One band corresponds to ‘comfort’. Two bands correspond to ‘stretch’. And three bands correspond to ‘panic’. Prior to an activity a coach would ask the group members to take up a position on the rope that matched how they were feeling as they contemplated the upcoming activity, the task at hand. Learning, transformation and development, the coaches reasoned, cannot happen in panic and is unlikely when a person is too comfortable. The optimal zone for change, they would say, is the ‘stretch’ zone.

*

Babette [Rothschild \(2000\)](#) notes, ‘There are lesser and greater degrees of stress. The demands of trauma cause the most extreme stress responses’ (p. 92). I have spent too much time in recent years in or around the ‘panic zone’. In a hyper-stimulated state of

chronic stress and nervous activation. To say the least, I have found it to be no fun at all. It is utterly exhausting. And I have found that it makes effective, meaningful and useful work difficult or impossible.

*

Yet, we are called to do more. We call each other to do more. We call ourselves to do more. Always more. Because more *does* need to be done. Because, as [Denzin and Giardina \(2021\)](#) note, everything is really not okay for a good many people.

But alongside this honest, ever present and seemingly escalating need to do more, I have also needed to tell myself that I am doing enough. That it is okay. That our work is okay. That I am okay. *That it's alright*. I have needed to tell myself this – and to believe it in some way – to have a chance of ratcheting down from the panic zone.

But that is hard to do, isn't it? To believe that it is alright, it is okay, while knowing full well that everything is *not* alright. It is so easy to believe the bad things I tell myself. It is so easy to internalise the alarms and warnings of others. Most times, I struggle to see – much less believe – the 'good news'.

*

Writing songs, I think, has been one way that I have been able – somehow, sometimes – to see, feel and believe the good that surrounds us. (It is there, by the way.) I do not know how the process works – how writing a song can reveal to me something I had not otherwise been conscious of. Kitrina Douglas and I have previously written about our experience of this process ([Carless & Douglas, 2009](#)) and I have described it as 'throughness' ([Carless, 2018](#)). It is not something I am in control of, something that I can make happen. But it does happen. And it has happened for me for over 30 years now.

The song I share today – simply called *It's Alright* – is one such song. It emerged out of chronic distress. Illness, job loss through savage cuts at the university I was then employed, insomnia, bereavement ... and a global pandemic. To borrow [Denzin and Giardina's \(2021\)](#) words, I was already burned out, depleted and emotionally drained even before COVID-19 hit. So, I *really* needed this song. I needed to be in the place that I could *feel* it. I needed to *write* it. I needed to *sing* it. And I still do. I try to let its sentiments – and its sensations – wash over me to calm my nervous system. I sing it as a way to self-soothe, to stabilise. It helps me to gear down from panic, into stretch and, from time to time – for essential respite – towards comfort.

I am grateful for this song. That it exists at all. That I can sing it any time I want. That I can share it today with you.

It's Alright¹

[The song opens with a staccato two chord figure, played on acoustic guitar, strings muted]

She's watching, she's waiting

She's behind that door

She knows that she's held
 and she believes in love
 I see you, I see you
 I see your form
 And it's alright, it's alright
 It's all right

[The guitar part opens up for the second verse, strings ringing out]

He's hurting, he's hiding
 Still behind safe walls
 But he's learning and growing
 He's beginning to trust
 I hear you, I hear you
 I hear your song
 And it's alright, it's alright
 It's all right

[Instrumental middle eight: guitar played hard, all six strings ringing. As many singers as possible join in, no words, just a reaching into space, straining to lift off. Any decibel meters in the vicinity peak into the red]

[For the final verse, the guitar part reigns in, leaving the words of the first four lines to take center-stage, before reaching a crescendo for closing lines]

You're grooving, you're dancing
 You're not on your own
 You're turning, rebuilding
 And you're taking it home
 We see you, we hear you
 We know you all
 And it's alright, it's alright
 It's all right

The song may not, on the face of it at least, provide any answers to the dilemmas I am wrestling with here. It does not seem to provide any instruction on *what I should do* or *what should be done*. If a 'should' even exists at all, which I am beginning to doubt. I, like many of my colleagues, at times feel depleted, burnt out and emotionally drained. It is no surprise in the wake of the events of recent years. But at other times I have moments of great energy, enthusiasm and joy. I felt these things when I wrote *It's Alright* and I felt them again when I performed the song over Zoom during the

Congress. I often feel them when I paddle out into the Atlantic Ocean to surf or when I connect in a meaningful way to others, especially those I hold dear.

Recently, I have found some comfort – guidance perhaps – in Pema Chödrön's (1997/2017) book *When Things Fall Apart*. This section seems important to me now, as I contemplate what a song like *It's Alright* might bring to the table:

So, along with clear seeing, there's another important element, and that's kindness. It seems that, without clarity and honesty, we don't progress. We just stay stuck in the same vicious cycle. But honesty without kindness makes us feel grim and mean ... Sometimes it's expressed as heart, awakening your heart. Sometimes it's called unlimited friendliness. But basically kindness is a down-to-earth, everyday way to describe the important ingredient that balances out the whole picture and helps us connect to unconditional joy. (p. 99)

I think Denzin and Giardina (2021) bring a clarity and honesty to the dilemmas that face the qualitative inquiry community and, perhaps, our wider communities as well. But I do not imagine they would want the clarity and honesty they offer to leave me – or any of us – feeling grim and mean. So, I need kindness too. I need to awaken my heart. I need to balance out the whole picture and connect once more to joy. That is what a song brings.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note

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Author Biography

David Carless is a researcher-writer-musician working on interdisciplinary projects across social science, education and health using narrative, songwriting, filmmaking and live performance approaches. His collaborations with Kitrina Douglas are available online (see https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkWCty8bNOY6JlvX_yg-Uig) and have been published as journal articles, books and book chapters. David is currently a Reader in the School of Health and Human Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland and an Honorary Professor in the Centre for Creative Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh.