

Toward wellbeing: Creativity and resilience in the life and work of Madge Gill

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It may be tempting to look at aspects of Madge Gill's life and her responses to the many difficulties she experienced, and then to speculate about possible mental health problems and retrospectively formulate a specific psychiatric diagnosis. To do so, however, would not be a scientific approach to understanding her life, nor would it necessarily be a principled way to try and comprehend who she was and why art-making, Spiritualism and being a medium were so very important to her. Like many people, Madge Gill had problems and deficiencies but to use the magnifying glass of psychoanalysis or other psychological theories in order to psychopathologise her by focusing on deficits, as often occurs in the study of artists, would construct a circuitous cul-de-sac that fails to examine her resilience, creativity and strengths. On the seesaw of life almost everyone faces some degree of psychological, social and physical challenges on the one hand, but we also possess *and can develop* psychological, social and physical resources to balance out the challenges and help create some sort of equilibrium and obtain a sense of subjective wellbeingⁱ. It is through the perspective of developmental psychology along with considering wellbeing theory as a type of equilibrium responding to the challenges and resources one faces and possesses, that we can begin to look at the life of Madge Gill and to try to understand the roles creativity and art-making had in the life and work of this enigmatic Londoner.

Before continuing with the discussion about Gill some brief background about the concept of wellbeing might be useful. Although the idea of wellbeing has been popularised in the second decade of the 21st century, it is not a new concept. Aristotle's ethical theories directed his readers in the "prudent pursuit" of their own human flourishing, which has been translated from the Greek, εὐδαιμονία, as meaning both happiness and wellbeingⁱⁱ. More recently, France, followed by Canada and the United Kingdom have been the first countries to develop national wellbeing measures as part of annual population surveys. A measure of wellbeing, these governments argue, is necessary to counterbalance the over-emphasis on the financial aspects of

success, such as the gross domestic produce (GDP), stock market returns and bank balances. Indeed, if we were only to look at the life of Madge Gill through the lens of economic measures or certain aspects of her behaviour, one would miss the full picture of how this woman survived, lived and thrived.

In contributing to the Madge Gill exhibition catalogue as a psychologist and as a researcher, and in trying to understand her life and contributions from a life span developmental perspective, one of the most salient features that stands out is the tremendous sense of rejection and loss she experienced during her childhood and then later as an adult. In keeping with the equilibrium model of wellbeing, her own wellbeing was put at risk at birth as she entered into a society that shunned children born outside of marriage. Not knowing her father, being born to a mother who had become shamed by her family for a liaison with an unnamed man, cared for by another family in her very early years and then shifted to an aunt with seemingly little contact with her mother who appears to have emotionally abandoned her, all the while being kept pretty much hidden from society—it was as if the family wished to deny her existence. The social and emotional embarrassment of Madge Gill's presence may have been too much for the family to bear and at the age of 7 she experienced further rejection and loss by being placed into a relatively nearby orphanage. Even an orphanage as benign as Barnardo's, and with all good intentions that the organisation had, remained an orphanage and not her family home.

One cannot escape from being confronted with the significant social disruption and psychological distress she experienced during the childhood and adolescent years of her life and then again twenty or so years later as an adult. How did she come to make sense of these experiences and events? What internal resources did she possess? And what role, if any, did her creativity and art-making play in her adult years? These questions do not have straightforward answers but understanding them from a developmental viewpoint can help to contextualise the role art-making and creativity had on her resilience and wellbeing.

A good deal has been written about childhood development from many authors but the contributions by John Bowlbyⁱⁱⁱ, a British physician, and American psychologist Mary Ainsworth^{iv}, were some of the first to link the importance of the quality of early attachment relationships for infants and young children and their later impact on adulthood. Subsequent research has clearly demonstrated the importance of these attachment relationships in childhood, including the first year of life^v, and

through the limited information we know of Madge Gill's early years, the quality of her attachment to one or more consistent, caring and stable figures appears to have been tenuous. While there is no evidence of outright abuse, there are obvious indications that she was not wanted and subsequently rejected by her unknown father, mother and extended family.

During these first seven years her equilibrium of wellbeing, to continue with this model, certainly fluctuated and there were likely times of balance where her social, psychological and physical needs were indeed met, but drawing on what we know from attachment theory and research, her overall psychological and social development was likely to have been severely hindered if not damaged, leaving her emotionally vulnerable. After five years in Dr Bernardo's orphanage, she was sent at the age of 12, along with hundreds of other British children, to Canada to start a supposedly new life. One could argue this was yet another rejection, this time on a grand scale by her country in collusion with her family who did not intervene to prevent it. Emotional distance from her mother and extended family was now compounded by geographical and cultural distance as she was forced to confront new uncertainties and to experience further losses.

From what we know of her years in Canada she was treated well by the Raes family, the first family that employed her. Her three years with the Raes was important developmentally. As a 12-year-old girl alone in a new country with indeterminate emotional attachments to family members in England, the Raes provided her with a secure home, support, kindness and access to education. During this period of relative stability we see indications of her resilience, likely nurtured by Mrs Raes. Madge worked hard, took care of two children and further developed her creativity through sewing, crocheting and embroidery.

It is important to note that Madge Gill chose to leave the Raes in order to earn a higher wage to save up for her planned return to England. This was a significant event and may have been the first time in her young life when it was her decision to leave someone—rather than the one being left or rejected—in order to seek something better for herself. It seems likely that the positive experiences she reported with the Raes helped her to gain a greater sense of wellbeing as her sense of identity and self-confidence grew. This seems to have served her well as she went on to reject the conditions she was subsequently presented by the next three Canadian families, none of whom she remained long in employment.

Making the choice to seek higher wage employment was a decisive action that Madge Gill took after she had developed realistic goals (to move back to England) and made a decision to move towards them (saving money). Rather than accept circumstances that could not be changed she developed a long-term perspective that can be argued was the result of a new, more hopeful outlook in which she expected success. These are all empirical indications of her strengthening resilience^{vi}, supported by a greater sense of wellbeing as she acquired more psychological, social and physical resources.

As other contributions to this catalogue have documented, Madge Gill successfully returned to England and moved to a location not far from her family's home in east London. Fast-forwarding ahead, she met a young man, fell in love and had three children. Although her creative activities of needlework continued during these years, there is no indication that she had yet begun to draw or paint. A tragic event occurred at the age of 36, when Reggie, her middle child, died of influenza. This was followed within a year by the stillbirth of her daughter, a subsequent life-threatening illness that resulted in the loss of sight in her left eye, and a deteriorating marriage that was reported to have involved physical violence. This rapid-fire succession of immense psychological and physical trauma left her in a fragile state. It is also very likely that the traumas in her adult life, occurring so closely together, were consciously and unconsciously affected by her earlier childhood losses and rejections. By all appearances, her sense of psychological and physical wellbeing would have been severely diminished and her emotional resilience significantly challenged at this time. In order to cope with these overwhelming losses and try to regain some degree of equilibrium she further turned toward Spiritualism, engaged *Myrninerest*, her spirit guide, and began a near frantic embrace of creative activity, which included drawing, writing, knitting, crocheting, embroidery, tapestry and weaving. One could argue that these components—Spiritualism, becoming a medium, and creative activity—and the roles she played around them were indications of her resilience and were also means for her to increase wellbeing by effectively using these newly developed resources to gain equilibrium. It is her role as an “outsider artist” that this essay will next address.

According to an account by Madge Gill the “upswelling of an innate expressive impulse” was self-defined “not as artistic inspiration but as an other-worldly spirit guide named Myrninerest”^{vii}. Here we see Gill disavow her own

creativity in favour of the spirit guide's goals, an unbodied figure that influenced her life; the drawings, she asserted, were not of her making but that of Myrminerest's. Not taking credit for her own artistic work was, arguably, a form of self-rejection that *may* have paralleled the intense feelings of rejection and abandonment she experienced as a child and then re-experienced as an adult after the death of her second son, a stillborn daughter and a husband who has been reported to be unsupportive and physically violent. If one examines the content of some of her drawings, particularly those with multiple faces appearing to float about, disconnected from any specific context, there is a haunting, lost quality to these figures. They do not appear to be contented, angry, happy or satisfied. The feelings they portray and whom they represent is unclear. For each viewer of these drawings—and in actuality for all of her work—there is not one meaning or one interpretation on offer. Her art is akin to a Rorschach inkblot^{viii} where we can glimpse a bit of ourselves, fantasise what is at the end of the vanishing staircases and become lost in the fine details and cross hatching of thousands of tiny lines.

For Madge Gill, her art-making may have been an attempt to make sense of how a mother and a family could so utterly, and, I would advance, callously reject and abandon her to the care of others. It is not possible to know without having spoken directly to her, but from what is known about research in lifespan development, attachment theory, resilience research and the wellbeing model of equilibrium, her art-making and art exhibitions may have been a way for her to create a psychological and social balance after a series of devastating losses that began on the day she born. Wellbeing is not a fixed place that, once we arrive, remains constant. Our wellbeing is something that fluctuates depending on the challenges we face and the resources we can muster. Mage Gill faced an enormous number of challenges in her life. Her art-making can be seen as a kind of comeback to these challenges and appreciated as a creative and life-affirming response to external events and the internal emotional upheaval which they caused. While the meaning and purpose of her art-making was multi-determined and multifaceted there are two fundamental ways in which it can be psychologically understood; how it helped to form an important element of her resilience and how it was used as a resource that contributed to her fluctuating sense of wellbeing.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Bowlby J (1973). *Separation: Anger and Anxiety*. Attachment and loss. Vol. 2. London: Hogarth
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- ^v Fonagy P., Steele M., Steele H. (1991). Maternal representations of attachment predict the organisation of infant mother-attachment at one year of age. *Child Development*, 62, 891-905.
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- ^{viii} Rorschach, H. (1942). *Psychodiagnostics: A diagnostic test based on perception* (P. Lemkau & B. Kronenberg, Trans.). Berne, Switzerland: Hans Huber.