Chapter Five

I Listen to the Wind and the Wind Tells Me what to Do

We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how
they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as
new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static
thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into
a historical unity, which includes not only what one has been
but also anticipations of what one will be.
(Polkinghorne 1988)

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.
(Reinhold Niebuhr in a sermon ca. 1942)

At this stage of my journey let me hold a finger on the pause button to assess the progress I have made. I have surprised myself as the thesis has emerged. It is quite different from the one I imagined when I began this journey six years ago. Traces of that vision remain, like threads through the cloth, but other threads have joined it, woven by circumstance and unexpected connections, offering their creative influence on my way of being in the world. I continue to live with Schon's (1983) notion of 'backtalk'. I cannot participate in the world without its reality clinging to me and influencing my actions. If I ignore its speech I stomp on its fragile promises and become more isolated and alone. If I pay attention, it pushes against my blindness and prejudice, potentially opening me up to greater resonance. But have

I traced the path adequately? How did my inquiry affect its development and how did its development affect my inquiry? I am learning to live with questions, and even celebrate the way they keep life moving.

I intend to begin this chapter with some reflections on what I have learned from taking an attitude of inquiry to my practice and how this began to shape my work as a programme leader and learning facilitator of post-graduate students. I remind the reader that I began this inquiry with a technical/rational interest in improving the provision of post-graduate professional education and with the assumption that this would lead to the introduction of a number of improved techniques and learning strategies. Instead it has resulted in a radical shift in my approach to professional learning in ways that I will explore in the first half of this chapter.

My initial attempts at Action Inquiry were like the early practice of scales on the piano, requiring focal attention on what I was doing with my eye, my ears and my hands, struggling to register what was going on, noticing what I hadn't seen before and the different insights that came from different forms of capture (memory, journal, audio recording, etc). I am still aware that attention is not something I can fully control. I am always subject to distraction. But I am more relaxed now. I realise that the one attending (me) is a unique instrument. I am attending through the filters of my history, culture, interests and motivations, known and unknown. Sometimes I catch something from the corner of my eye, or the edge of a conversation and begin to explore its significance. "The more our society moves towards specialization," Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) says, "the more women and men alike are forced to focus on single activities, living in narrow channels. Yet there are many reasons why less narrow attention, more peripheral vision, offers richer and more responsible living" (1994, 100). This requires skills of attention to what is off the radar screen of most social science research, on the fuzzy edges of perception. It is no small surprise that conventional research methods are unable to handle this irregular and ephemeral data (Law 2004).

Bateson suggests a way of describing my experience of practice centred learning as "hit and miss epiphanies" (1994, 115). My antennae were alert to critical events as potential moments of understanding. They were often random and occasional, many potentially rich with meaning but apparently unconnected to each other or a wider plot. Now, as I enter this stage of my inquiry, Bateson offers a way of seeing the link between those rare moments of insight and the gradual changes in my practice - what she calls 'longitudinal epiphanies' (ibid). The link is found in the notion of practice as in playing a musical instrument, riding a bicycle or praying; the outcome of repeating "the same action over and over, attentively, mindfully, in a way that makes possible a gradual … process of change" (ibid). I am learning to give attention to longer wavelengths of meaning and to embrace the inconclusive, making do "with partial understandings … learning to savor (sic) the vertigo of doing without answers" (ibid, 9).

Marshall (2004) talks of knowing when to persist and when to desist. I see this as a spiritual insight. Elijah the prophet, battered by his confrontation with the religious authorities, had wandered into the desert alone and in despair, with only an angel to comfort him (I Kings 19). Suddenly the earth shook beneath him. But God was not in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire, the major cataclysmic 'events' of his desert experience. He was found in the quiet whisper ('the sound of sheer silence' as one translation expresses it). The encounter led to a new vocation in which he was to anoint a new king and a new prophet, Elisha, with the assurance that there were 7,000 others who, unknown to him, had remained faithful. So he was not alone and it was now time to pass the baton. When he did find God he also found himself and discovered he was part of a new community. Attention, in the first stages of my inquiry into critical incidents (as I tended to call them) focussed on the noisy and visible events. I now realise that some may have been distractions. Sometimes the significant is conveyed in quiet whispers.

As I write this thesis I am coming to see my inquiries in a different light. In my initial planning I saw the structure in three movements, roughly coinciding with three cycles of learning now presented in chapters three, four and this one, chapter

five. Like Brendan returning to the Island of White Birds, my journey brought me back to the same place but as a different person, able to see my experience in a different way. The winds and waves of professional life have conspired to take me on this circuitous route to learn more about myself and the environment in which I work, almost as if this is an essential process on the way to the Land of Promise. Each time the cycle has climaxed in a deeply personal experience, exposing aspects of myself as an actor in the world that were at first uncomfortable and yet lead to a deeper sense of integrity and presence. Each turning point was a spiritual experience, accompanied by the singing of the most beautiful white birds. There is a deep irony in the music performed by these spirits condemned to remain on earth because, in the ancient conflict between the angels of light and dark, they refused to take sides (Matthews 1998, 11). There is a mystery here that remains to be fathomed, hinting at a fundamental unity that lies beyond the opposites of light and dark, and promising a discernment that comes from such apparent ambiguity.

In this, the third movement of my journey, I will explore a number of more recent events in my professional life as my responsibilities shifted and the work moved into a more public arena, institutionally and academically. As my inquiries continued I became aware that my actions are shaped, not just by my own reflective practices but by the institutional structures in which I work. These are subtle and easily misjudged. Self-awareness and awareness of institutional realities cannot be considered as independent cognitive processes - one the focus of personal reflection and the other objective analysis. My institutional setting is both an external influence on my practice and the context in which I practice and therefore, to some extent, responsive to my action. Innovation in these systems can be disruptive and in the following pages I will describe my practice in navigating these quite turbulent waters. I am learning the art of paying attention to the choices I am making in managing these processes as the system seeks new equilibrium by either rejecting or embracing my intervention.

This chapter will explore the dynamics between the fluid politics of quotidian practice and the rigid boundaries of institutional culture and policy and offer a

learning narrative of my experience of its colonising pressures and, eventually, its action to shut down the space in which I worked. It led to the unexpected termination of a working relationship I had enjoyed for almost 20 years and the threat of premature retirement. While this experience proved crucial to my search for integrity and presence, for almost a year I was unable to write this part of the story. It was too close, too painful.

When a Teacher Becomes a Learner

But first, I intend to go back and to reflect on what I was learning from my inquiries around the provision of post-graduate education and the changes that emerged from this process. Some were quite substantial, as for example, the development of what we called an "Integrative Strand" which ran in parallel with the modules and was designed to develop deeper and more holistic approaches to learning. The strand represented 40% of the assessment in Part One. This caused problems with the validating university who couldn't understand how to recognise this work in the standard modular structure of the Masters, a problem we overcame by re-writing the module assessments to require evidence of the use of the integrative strand skills. This approach had the support of the External Examiner, however, who encouraged us to develop more synoptic assessment processes.

On a weekly basis, we convened a student-led seminar at which they presented the results of the assignments they had completed in the study units. Some were individual. Others were collaborative. At the end of the study unit on media ethics, for example, we asked the entire cohort to work together to draft a code of practice for media journalism, negotiating each entry with the rest of the group. The result was published on the Institute website and then used by the students individually to write up an explanation of what they would do when faced with a particular professional dilemma (several cases were offered).

When reflecting back on the course during the exit interviews[27] one student singled out this activity. "It was a very good process, for example, when we had to come up with a code of practice together. Group dynamics are not always easy. It is hard to get people involved but it was really good when we got going." The seminar process is formative not summative, yet it often attracted greater enthusiasm than the course modules and formal assessments. One student said, during their exit interview, "The Integrative Strand was more relevant and more personal to me. The modular assessments were harder because they were more theoretical." Another commented, "the non-assessed work was good...I found if I got behind that I missed it."

On another occasion I arranged a student-led, half day symposium on "how I relate my personal values to my work as a media professional". The students were asked to organise the event and decide how they would like to present the session. They could work collaboratively or alone. They also took responsibility for announcing the symposium to the wider members of the Centre. I personally encouraged faculty from other disciplines to attend.

The group started by presenting a "live" radio talk show, modelled on Radio Four's "Midweek", one student acting as host with the others participating as guests. The conversation was lively and the contributions often quite personal. It quickly established the very different attitudes and cultural experiences in the group. One student presented a powerpoint outline with examples from his experience. Two others engaged in a heated dialogue, taking sides on whether personal values should be excluded from professional practice or not.

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[27] At the beginning of the Masters project we used a conventional course evaluation form to solicit feedback from the students. It soon became clear that this was inadequate and we added an exit interview, involving the student, the Quality Enhancement Officer, and myself as Programme Leader. These conversations, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, provided opportunity to explore issues that didn't surface on the evaluation forms.

I spoke to both students and faculty after the symposium. One member of the faculty who taught on the communication course noticed quite different things about the students from what had been observed in the classroom. Although it involved quite a bit of preparation the students appreciated the opportunity to work together and what they had learned from each other. One student recalled the experience during his exit interview several months later. "I took my religion for granted back home, so to be asked "how do my personal values influence my professional practice" was a question I really struggled with. Perhaps this was the most important thing I did this year. It changed my way of thinking." A Kenyan student, said, "The integrative strand added a lot of value to the course. I had never heard of reflective thinking before I came on this course. I now see it as essential. It has become the bolt that holds theory and practice together. It was very good. You don't find this in other courses." An Ethiopian student added, "The best part was thinking reflectively. This was new to me. I expect to learn from my mistakes but this was something more intentional and regular. Reflection in action and on action is all very helpful. This has not been a key component of my work as a journalist." A Korean confessed, "I found my vocation on this course."

As these experiences accumulated, several convictions began to surface in my way of thinking about professional learning. It was encouraging to see students becoming aware of the importance of questioning whether their practice was consistent with their principles and beginning to assess the outcome of their actions in relation to some common good. They were "becoming authors of their own practice," a phrase I adapted from McGonagill (2000) and subsequently discovered in Shotter (1993, 155-157). My own practice, as a learning facilitator, was being stretched and I began to use a different language to describe the conditions that enabled this kind of learning.

Significantly, for me, what was emerging in my practice was contrary to many of the traditional approaches to adult learning - what Vaill (1996) calls "institutional learning." When I first developed the curriculum and began teaching at the Master's level I took for granted the prevailing notion that the student had enrolled

in the programme to acquire knowledge that had been created by formal research and was held in institutional repositories. Teaching, therefore, involved the transmission of this knowledge in locations set apart from ordinary life, and learning was assessed by standards set by the custodians of this knowledge. At a superficial level this made sense. There is no need for each individual to re-invent the wheel in converting inches to centimetres when learning a simple formula will do, and it is essential for someone else, besides the driver, to set the standards for driving competence. But the transmission model of teaching and learning quickly became unsustainable in the light of my experience. As the formulas and theories that were designed to help interpret reality become the lenses through which we look, we can miss other variables in the landscape that, in particular situations, may be relevant.

Reference to the particular is important. Most formulas and theories are attempts at claiming universal validity. Human life is experienced in different interconnected systems - personal, domestic, organisational, social, political and economic. While there are levels of interconnection between these systems their configuration and interaction is unique and dynamic for each individual and each situation. Practitioners already have implicit knowledge of this complex field and they bring this into the learning experience. They know more than anyone else about their practice. It may not be conscious or clearly articulated but it shapes their daily practice. They "know more than they can tell" (Polanyi 1977). The learning process should, therefore, enable them to give form to this knowledge, to find ways of expressing it (moving from experiential to presentational knowing (Heron 1996)) so that they can engage critically with it, and relate it to the knowledge of others. As I listened to my students I quickly came to realise that programmes of professional learning need to recognise the practitioner as an expert.

This has consequences, not only for the learning process but also for assessment. Rather than asking the general question, "what qualities should a graduate exhibit?" I began to place the learner at the centre of the assessment regime, enabling them to negotiate forms of assessment that give a sufficient or

appropriate account of their professional development. This makes the assessment process the subject of collaborative inquiry involving the participant, his or her peers, and the programme leadership. As authors of their own practice the assessment portfolio is, therefore, likely to include evidence derived from their professional environment and testimony as to its quality from peers and employers.

I am reminded of HP, an early student on the MA in Communications Practice, who struggled to find the time to complete his Part Two dissertation after returning to his work as an assignment editor with a TV News Channel in a major city in the USA. As a part of his responsibility on-the-job, he produced a documentary that won him an Emmy nomination for best television feature. In telling me the story of this project he gave an account of professional judgement and courage that brought social and economic benefit to his audience, and appreciation from his industry. The skill he evidenced in managing himself in this situation is a characteristic of professionalism that is difficult to assess by conventional means. It can only be recognised through what Della Fish calls "critical appreciation" - seeing practice as artistry and assessing with the eyes of an appreciative critic (Fish 1998). It seems to me that, rather than insisting on the conventional form of MA dissertation, it was more appropriate for him to submit the documentary, his critical reflection on the production process, and evidence of recognition by his peers, for assessment.

Finding a Language for Learning

My experience with the Master's programmes was also leading me to experiment with my teaching style as some of the stories in this thesis illustrate. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), in their encyclopedic survey of *Learning in Adulthood,* conclude that adult learning should be distinguished from learning in childhood, claiming that "the configuration of learner, context, and process together makes learning in adulthood distinctly different from learning in

childhood" (2007, 423). I would argue that this perspective obscures the continuities, particularly if we consider the following.

Each of us are born with what I have come to call "natural learning dispositions"[28] like wonder and curiosity, sensuality and imagination. These are most evident in the child - inquisitive, playful and creative. Institutional learning often denies the opportunity for these dispositions to serve us in later life. Hammond asks the question, "If we are all born with the ability to discover the secrets of the universe why do so many children lose this love of learning; this infinite capacity to wonder and urge to question and explore?" (Hammond 2008). Releasing the childlike qualities of curiosity (alertness to our surroundings), creativity (playfulness and imagination), sensuality (touching, tasting and smelling as well as listening and looking), participation (involvement with the focus of attention) and innocence (a trustful openness to learn from any source) could transform professional learning. The natural learning dispositions don't recognise convention. They innocently question the "mental models" (Argyris 1999, Senge 1993) that channel thought, encouraging an attitude of inquiry towards the "paradigmatic, structuring assumptions" (Brookfield 1995) that otherwise limit professional choice. It was Jesus who said that we must become again like a child, to enter the kingdom.

Natural learning dispositions are shy and fragile and need a safe place to flourish. Yet they can quickly recover when given the opportunity. Yorks (2005) refers to the work of the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida who first proposed the importance of a socially shared space in learning - what he called *ba* (which is roughly translated as "place"). This is similar to Torbert's liberating structure (1991), a generative space that "is social more than physical, in nature, and its creation is organic and evolutionary, not formulaic" (Yorks 2005, 1231). Information may be passed on in the traditional classroom setting. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, needs a safe and stimulating environment in order

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[28] Dewey (1933) wrote about "the body of habits, of active dispositions which make a man do what he does" (Dewey quoted in Ritchhart 2002, 19). For further discussion on learning dispositions see Ritchhart (2002).

to emerge. I can imagine, in time, these environments becoming a feature of the workplace as "communities of practice" (Wenger 1999) become communities of inquiry (Friedman 2001). Their power will lie in their ability to liberate the natural learning dispositions of their members.

This kind of generative space is not empty, like a playground, for the limitless imagination of the child. It has a narrative purpose. Candler (2006), in a thought provoking discussion of theological writing in the medieval period, provides an analogy for this practice. He contrasts what he calls "the grammar of representation" which he associates with modernity and "the grammar of participation" that preceded it. Attempts to catalogue and organise knowledge, to produce a panoptic, encyclopedic view of knowledge, arose with the printing press and the development of various aids - tables of content, indexes and the like - to provide access to the knowledge enclosed within the covers of a book. This reorganisation of typographical space entailed a parallel rearrangement of mental space (Ong in Candler 2006, 13) and separated the source of knowledge from the situation of learning. Before this, learning was a collegial experience. By re-introducing the medieval notion of "manuduction" Candler suggests that the culture of participation created a pedagogy of shared experience - the learner being led by the hand *(manus)* along an itinerary *(ductus)* towards a purposeful end *(skopos).* In other words, the learning process had a narrative, forward moving shape, in the company of others. The temporary liberating structures we organised in the Masters programmes had this manuductive purpose.

In this sense I agree with Howard Gardner (1993). The creativity required in professional life involves more than the maturing of a childlike sense of wonder and imaginative action.   Gardner argues that creativity requires first mastering a particular domain. This is distinct, I suggest, from the traditional disciplines or domains of knowledge that are recognised by the academy with their own methodologies and language. Mastery of this kind of knowledge leads to increasing specialisation and isolation. The field of practice, however, cannot be so neatly dissected and is in constant flux. Rather than seeking universal knowledge

about less and less we could pursue the whole in the particular. And this is what the practitioner does. His/her pre-occupation is better described as "specific" rather than "specialised." The practitioner wants to understand what is in front of them at the moment. "Whatever happens is the curriculum," to borrow a phrase from Howe (1974, 57). Mastery, in this sense, requires a different set of skills than the methods adopted by an academic discipline. Instead of focusing on the memorisation of "subject matter" professional learning needs to attend to the skills required to handle knowledge that is fluid and help the individual make meaningful, purposeful and moral decisions in the moment.

This is not to deny the value of academic knowledge to the practitioner. He or she can draw valuable insight from the social sciences, but it is not the purpose of the practitioner to add to this knowledge. In a context of substantial and rapid change, the knowledge already codified in conceptual claims and theoretical frameworks can become themselves tools for further inquiry, serving like lenses for closer investigation, or as "conceptual prosthetics" (Shotter 1993). Freire (1990) describes his own experience of reading words and reading the world, recommending that students do the same; "It has to do with reading the *text* in order to understand the *context"* (Horton & Freire 1990, 31).

And it is necessary, of course, for a practitioner to talk about their professional activity in language that is understood in the profession and their learning experience should, therefore, include a critical induction into the prevailing discourse of the field. I say "critical," because we now know how language itself operates as a source of power and control and the dominant discourse may need to be challenged in the learner's context.

Central to professional learning, then, is the need to develop an attitude of critical inquiry to both the body of knowledge that shapes the practice and the daily experience of that practice. This involves the acquisition and use of a variety of tools of inquiry that collectively I have called "holistic learning disciplines" that can only be acquired with practice. They include, for example, the skills of attention

(Mason 2002, Marshall 2001), critical reflection (Schon 1983) and action inquiry (Torbert 2004), and the regular use of learning journals, critical incident analysis, and other practices. The holistic learning disciplines provide a suite of tools with which to probe experience, situate it in its wider systemic context, and act upon what is learned. This is an essential feature of professional learning, ensuring that practitioners emerge from their learning experience as agile entrepreneurs and not just functional bureaucrats, capable of navigating the unstructured and unpredictable environment in which they work.

Working with these ideas I began to realise that, while the professional context may vary, the holistic learning disciplines were essentially the same. It therefore became possible to think of a generic programme in which the curriculum was determined by the participants' professional experience, providing opportunity to develop the holistic learning disciplines in a supportive, purposeful environment that set free the curiosity and creativity of the natural learning dispositions. So, building on the experience of the early years of the Master's programme, I began to dream of creating a programme that built intentionally on these core pillars of professional learning - providing the generative space for the natural learning dispositions to flourish and the holistic learning disciplines to mature. This, it seemed to me, would help develop heightened skills of observation and self-questioning, leading to a deeper awareness of the sociocultural reality shaping professional practice and nurturing the capacity to transform that reality (Freire 1970).

Into the Mainstream

In the Spring of 2005 the institution made the decision to terminate MA provision, focussing this resource on the research degrees programme, and mandating the development of a Master's programme that would facilitate professional development in the non-western world with course delivery as close as possible to the demand. It was expected that this would achieve two major benefits. By

organising delivery in country, students would avoid the fees and costs of UK based provision and, by enabling students to remain in employment, they would be able to relate their studies more directly to their field of practice.

I was invited to head up the project, working with partners in Africa and Asia, the core faculty and the administration. The goal was to create a common framework and shared platform, while respecting the uniqueness of different contexts. The market for the new award was defined in terms of the emerging generation of professionals in the non-western world, eager to invest their time and energy in eradicating poverty and building their national economy or social capital. I was thrilled with the opportunity and daunted by the task. Having spent many years working in these cultures I was aware of the very different constituencies we would have to serve - partner institutions, sponsors, validating authorities, faculty, students and employers. I wrote in my journal at the time:

> "I will need the spirit of affirmative inquiry in large doses - perhaps this needs to be a key element of growth on my personal path. This is not the only challenge I face. It is essential that partner institutions find ownership of the project from the beginning, requiring us to set up a collaborative inquiry processes across wide geographical distances."

Several questions shaped my approach to the new programme. How might it facilitate the professional development of the participants (a pedagogical question)? How might it serve employers by aligning staff development and organisational mission (a strategic question)? How might it operate as a learning organisation itself (a management question)? And, how might it serve the purpose of the institution? At the time I did not realise how difficult this question would prove to be. In the programme reorganisation the Board had set a goal to widen participation and double the number of student enrolments over the next five years. At the time the management culture was permissive and although I was in a middle management position, coping with top-down and bottom-up demands, I had a lot of freedom.

The major uncertainty was funding. The institution was dependent on core funding from Germany, Scandinavia and the USA as well as the UK and this new vision would take some time to attract the necessary resources. With the ending of the residential Masters programme the Dean was anxious to secure my role in the institution in the meantime. As a part of my portfolio, therefore, I was invited to serve as Stage Leader for the research degree programme, with responsibility to manage incoming research students through to their registration with the university. In this role I was given a seat on the Research Degrees Committee and, subsequently, to my surprise, was elected by the faculty onto the Academic Standards Committee. I had moved into the institutional mainstream. One of my first tasks was to organise the Research Induction School - an experience reported elsewhere in this thesis. I introduced a number of changes, based on what I had learned from the Masters programmes, moving away from traditional lectures to open space, student-led learning. I created an online environment where students could develop their own glossary of difficult words and ideas, for example, and rather than include a lecture series on the history of ideas, I set up an activity in which the students were asked to critique and revise the Wikipedia entry on "Intellectual History." I suggested that this had several benefits. It would require the students to study the topic for themselves and help them develop a critical perspective on Wikipedia as a source. Some of these changes were accepted without dispute but I soon began to experience opposition to my attempts to open up the epistemological space. In the relatively safe environment of the Masters programme the positivist culture of the research faculty had little influence. Now they were my colleagues.

In my new role I was also involved in admissions and quickly realised that many of the applicants had a professional, rather than academic background, and their research interests arose out of their professional experience. This raised concerns on the Admissions Committee. "She's too close to her topic," was a common comment, often accompanied with a question about whether she would be able to take an objective position in order to do research. There was a comment at the top of one application form, "Scope and method are at present hopelessly unclear,

showing that the applicant has not made any leap from programmatic rhetoric to academic enquiry."

As the students arrived to begin their research these questions became part of some very personal journeys in which I became involved. My journal entries over this period are peppered with reflections on my conversations with students and my frustration at the expectation that their research question fit the conventional methodologies of the academic disciplines. An experienced community development worker from Kenya, for example, was really excited about the possibility of Action Research on his work in the Dandora and Kibera slums. After several months working with his mentor, however, his research emerged as an inquiry into the role and contribution of Christian faith based organisations to the UN Millennium Development Goals in Kenya. I encouraged a social activist and pastor from Zambia with a passion to address the HIV/Aids crisis in his country to research his own interventions in the crisis but he was persuaded instead to study the impact of existing intervention strategies in the country. Something was happening in the mentoring process that I found uncomfortable. I had begun to dream of an alternative research pathway for practitioners that would facilitate rigorous inquiry into their practice in ways that would channel and deepen their passion to make a difference in the world.

A research student from Nagaland in NE India had enrolled to study forgiveness. In his first seminar presentation he outlined a theological framework of the topic and was challenged to include an empirical component to his inquiry. I sat with him over lunch at which he shared his personal story. His uncle had been killed in the ethnic conflict and he was concerned that these experiences had paralysed his community and they were unable to move on. He wanted to help them forgive. He recognised the value of including an ethnographic element in his research but several times he said that he didn't know whether he would be able to interview the perpetrators of the violence. I responded, "This was the third time I have heard you say that you were not sure whether you would interview them. Let's be practical - would you shake their hands, or not? If so, I think your research may be

in that handshake." The study would then be an inquiry into the fall out of this action, I suggested. How would it be received? Would it lead others to forgive? Would it affect his acceptance within his own community? How would his community talk about the violence after this act? I suggested that this action would deepen his knowledge far beyond any theological reflection and encouraged him to consider an action research approach. Perhaps he could set up a collaborative inquiry. Could he recruit a group prepared to experiment with action for change - to pray for their enemies, to walk past a house they have avoided for ten years, for example - deciding on a course of action, sharing what happened, making sense of it collectively and deciding on further action? At first he hesitated, weighing up the personal consequences of this level of participation in the issue. I suggested some material for him to read and some weeks later he came back to say that he was now ready to pursue it. The definition of action research offered by Reason and Bradbury in the introduction to the Handbook of Action Research (2001) was, he said, exactly what he wanted to do.

To succeed as a post-graduate programme this approach to research would need to be accredited by the wider academy. The normal route for this, as a private institution, is through external validation by a UK university. The Centre already had 120 students enrolled in a MPhil/PhD programme validated by a large regional university. While it may have been possible to present practitioners for registration on this programme our initial discussions with the university were disappointing. The disciplinary silos of traditional research were dominant and the regulations fairly rigid. Residence requirements and supervision structures would be difficult to modify to meet the demands of professional life. It was clear that the new programme would need a new university relationship. There were several prospects but one quickly emerged as the preferred option. Our ideas came to the attention of the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching at a university with a particular profile in serving business and the professions. As we explored the options available she saw the opportunity of introducing a university-wide PhD in Professional Practice as an alternative to the subject specific Professional Doctorates that had proliferated in recent years (the award was approved by

University Senate in September 2006). This development provided us with the opportunity of presenting external students for registration on a University recognised doctoral programme. The benefits to us were that, while taking responsibility for the academic preparation of candidates for examination by the university, we would not need to go through the detailed and costly process of external validation. Although, for the time being the Masters project was postponed, we had established a positive working relationship with the university that was formally recognised in a Memorandum of Understanding and a public launch in November 2007.

Several research students already enrolled at the Centre choose this path. We branded the new initiative the 4P - the Post-graduate Programme in Professional Practice - and began marketing. Within four months we had 20 candidates lined up to register on the new programme. The Associate Dean in the School of Community and Health Sciences was appointed as Director of Studies to handle academic relations and we were encouraged to adopt a work-based learning model that was being promoted in the university. Work based learning (Boud and Solomon 2001) is a broad, transdisciplinary innovation in higher education that recognises the workplace, or the work process (Boreham 2004) as the location and subject of inquiry.

While continuing to navigate our own institutional systems we were now relating to a new university administration and starting to engage with their well established academic frameworks. I wrote in my journal:

> "These are deeper waters. I sense that we have moved away from the sheltered coastal waters of our homeland. I am becoming aware of multiple connections and conscious that participation in these larger systems is not always clear … I am aware of the need to take a systemic view of the ways in which I navigate my professional landscape, giving critical attention to my own action … in the light of the dynamic nature of the systems in which we have become involved."

Navigating Systems

Senge (1993) talks of "learning disabilities" that arise from our failure to think systemically. In my early days of teaching management for media practitioners I treated systems like a black box with inputs and outputs (possibly influenced by my training as an engineer). When I then invited students to peer into the box I found the Tushman and Nadler (1996) model of organisational behaviour a useful curriculum tool. While the model helpfully identifies the interacting processes *within* the organisation it isolates these processes from the wider systems of which it is a part, and treats the environment as an input with properties that can influence the system, rather than as a larger system. While it can be argued that it may be necessary to reduce the complexity of the whole by isolating and examining the "system-in-focus" (Beer 1991) this tendency to attend to the parts, rather than the whole, betrayed a taken for granted loyalty to acquiring knowledge by analysis.

Systems thinking, however, is not just a way of understanding and solving problems but a language with which to think and communicate. A participative epistemology views these networks, not in the traditional hierarchies of organisational structure but as emergent processes. The new partnership with the university would lead to new systems and the reconstruction of existing ones, not as a formal process, but through the collective experience of new situations. While every system has its formal structures - committees, hierarchies of decision making, etc, - I discovered that participating in the systems that emerged to facilitate our new relationship was a largely informal process. We quickly established a high level of trust so that, although we had established a Liaison Committee to coordinate the relationship, most of the detailed procedures were handled through conversations and email. I came to value these as a vital tool in this process, although institutions also need a paper trail of committee decisions for quality assurance purposes.

The Director of Studies was very supportive of the project and quickly offered to organise and host a workshop to introduce our students to the university. The following account of the event began as freefall writing in my journal:

The lighting in the room is depressing, a sign on the wall informing us that the system is under repair. Our host is welcoming but the haphazard layout of the furniture in the room adds to our initial unease. The first speaker is delayed - a phone call to our host indicates that she has gone to the wrong room. Then, when the projector is switched on nothing works and minutes tick by as we wait for a technician to arrive. This is the first workshop offered by the University to our recruits for the PhD in Professional Practice. Six aspiring researchers wait to hear how the programme will work and what is expected of them.

The first speaker is a respected action researcher working in palliative care. She distributes a variety of papers and a bibliography and opens the session up for discussion. She sits on the edge of her chair, her body learning forward, arms open, as she speaks with enthusiasm about her views of action research. Her posture makes the room feel brighter and everyone seems involved. Unfortunately she has to leave quite abruptly for another meeting and the second contributor is introduced - an internal PhD candidate in the final stages of writing up her research. We all expect to hear about her experience as a researcher in the university but instead we receive a summary of her research which did not seem to have an action research element, and although the topic was relevant to one of the participants there was little interaction. A short presentation on "writing for publication" brings the morning session to a close.

After lunch, hosted by the university, the group is given a tour of the main campus and then settles down for a session to discuss their research interests with the Director of Studies. I had been invited to sit in on the workshop and appreciate the opportunity to hear from the presenters and listen to their

interaction. I am aware that my presence could influence the process. I have spent a lot of time with these students in previous weeks and am familiar with their ideas. This was their first time at the University and, for some, an anxious moment.

The Director of Studies is confident in her handling of the discussion. "I look first at your methodology", she tells the participants, "so when writing your proposal give attention to this - and to your literature review." I wonder whether to add a comment to question this requirement, since we have emphasised the emergent nature of practitioner research in the Induction School and downplayed the traditional way of preparing a research proposal, but I remain silent. A participant volunteers a brief description of her research interest. "So your question is a what question", the Director of Studies responds, "not a how or a why question. Take a look at Appreciative Inquiry - what is working now, as your base line." Someone else talks about their work and is told, "your question is a how question - how do I improve myself? You want to institute change but you are not using change words - you are using comparative words, reflective words."

The next day we gather back at the Centre to debrief. I sense some anxiety as the participants begin to share. There are concerns in understanding the epistemological issues and in relating their faith to their inquiry. "I came away from the university quite scared," one participant comments. "I don't think I can do this," another one offers, "I have been so immersed in my Christian culture that I don't think I will be able to think critically about it in a language that will be acceptable to the university. I'm not clever enough to pull this off." Another had framed her professional work as a counsellor for the terminally ill in terms of "a divine mandate." She is now worried whether this was appropriate. "Of course it is," another participant replies, "you can tell your own story" (April 2008).

The workshop was a temporary system in itself, partly designed to explore the relationships between the institutions and individuals. I was conscious of its importance in shaping my relationship with the Director of Studies and the students were clearly involved in making sense of their future relationship with the university. My own sense making, following the debriefing with the students, centred on the expectations for a clear research proposal and methodology. I had invited another member the faculty to sit in on the workshop at the university and I ran into him a couple of days later. Standing in the hallway, interrupted several times by others as they passed us, I told him what had happened in the debriefing following the workshop. I wondered out loud about the Director of Studies' preoccupation with methodology and the rather functional way in which reflective practice had been presented. The conversation lasted about ten minutes but it was long enough for me to verbalise my feelings and to receive, in his nods and responses, a clear sense of what to do next. Perhaps, I suggested, reflective practice has become so commonplace in the nursing profession (the Director of Studies was the professor of Advanced Nursing Practice) that it had settled into a portfolio of methods, just like the positivist traditions it sought be free of. It was clear that I needed to discuss this with the Director of Studies before our students submitted their applications as external students.

This experience triggers several reflections. Following Boje (2001), my account of the workshop has a speculative character, inviting the question "what is going on here?" rather than giving an answer. He calls this "antenarrative" - that which is before narrative. It is in a state of "coming to be", waiting for a plot. The plot, I suggest, emerges as I bring it together with the account of my casual conversation several days later, and begin, in my writing, to think *with* the story. Secondly, my sense making occurred in conversation, helping me bring my feelings to verbal expression. This was not a mental process. Following Wittgenstein I understood in the sense that I knew what to do next[29]. I was not making sense *of* the experience. Rather, sense-making was part of the experience that enabled me to move on. It

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[29]   I was first alerted to this insight from Wittgenstein by the Dean. I later came across the reference in Shotter (1993, 103).

doesn't matter whether my interpretation (that reflective practice has become commonplace in nursing education) is correct. What happened was that I reached a place where I could say "Now I can go on." Through the conversation I came to "know" what I needed to do, even though this was not fully articulated in the verbal exchange. The value of such conversations is not in creating common sense for its own purpose but in shaping the future action of its participants.

This places a conversation at the heart of the story. Lacking a panoptic view of the complex systems within which I live and work I must resort to conversational tactics that seek a collaborative way forward. Conversations are not, fundamentally, intellectual activities. Referring to Shotter, Shaw (2002) describes the experience as an immersion:

> "in a sensuous flow of patterned feeling, a kind of ethos in which words "in their speaking" have the power to "move" or "arrest" us, shift our perceptions and actions because we are communicating as intelligent bodies … These tendencies cannot be wholly grasped in mental representations, rather as we converse we "give form to feeling", so that what at first is a mere felt tendency can be eventually realized as a new form of organization and eventually social institution" (Shaw 2002, 51-52).

Schon describes conversation as "collective verbal improvisation" (1987, 30). Improvisation, not just in the sense of what is unrehearsed, but of what is essentially unpremeditated and unpredictable. There is something about conversations that is continually destabilising. Just as a temporary equilibrium is found that reduces the exchange to momentary silence, a further intervention tilts the balance. Conversation bring surprises and changes of direction leading Shaw to describes it as a delightful and disturbing experience "like someone always off balance and continuing to stay upright only by moving" (Shaw 2002, 114). Participation is an exhilarating experience of discovery, leaning into the unknown. Sentences begin before we know how they will end, letting go of what was previously known in order to enter the unknown. The future is not "there" to be

discovered but is formed in the exploration itself. "It is difficult to map ground that moves with every step of the explorers" (Shaw 2002, 141).

Conversation, then, is a fundamental form of social inquiry, a purposeful probing of the system or a testing of its boundaries and as the project developed I become increasingly aware of its role in changing systems.

Management by Grenade

The discussion so far suggests a rather benign view of systems, serving human purposes and responding to interventions of various kinds. Inevitably, however, the intentions of its participants can conflict, exposing the power that sustains them, and at times leaving the system dysfunctional or paralysed. As the practitioner programme developed the Dean was keen to keep the Academic Standards Committee involved and in one of my first meetings I was asked to present the plans for the new programme. Almost as soon as I had finished my presentation it was attacked by the external member of the Committee, a respected Oxford scholar. She complained of the erosion of academic standards and the intrusion of American style practitioner training into the university. The ferocity of her response reminded me of the arguments of the early 20th century when the University of Chicago decided to create a business school that resulted in what Schon calls the Veblenian bargain (Schon 1995). Thorsten Veblen had vigorously opposed the establishment of a business school in the university, arguing that this would undermine its role as a centre of research and scholarship. I did not want a similar compromise to result from this discussion, separating a programme of "higher learning" rooted in scholarly research from the "lower" task of preparing practitioners for professional practice, in which they learned to apply scientific knowledge to the instrumental problems of practice.

I was aware of an ambivalence in the response of the others in the group. One was concerned that the award would not be respected in Asia, another that it was

designed for a different market than the traditional programme and we had no experience in this field. After the meeting the Dean explained that the Director had been worried about the reaction of some members of faculty to my election onto the Committee and this had influenced his contribution to the discussion. The meeting approved the continued development of the project but I left it aware that an intra-preneur needs to navigate the political waters of their own organisation with skill and patience. Many of the forces at work in the systems we inhabit are unspoken and invisible.

Two months later I was invited to present the project to the Board. It was a very warm late June afternoon and the room in which we were meeting had become quite hot before I joined the discussion. The Director almost immediately caught me by surprise by introducing a sceptical note about the project, questioning the wisdom of working with UK Universities and recommending that, instead, the Centre focus on organising the content and quality standards for programmes delivered and validated locally. He was also critical of the viability and fees. He misquoted the fees we had agreed in budgeting and simply did not feel there would be a demand for the programme. When I responded to offer evidence of a very positive response from the potential market he claimed superior awareness; "I get around a lot more than you and I don't think anyone would be interested in this."

He referred to a partner in Indonesia, claiming that they no longer needed the western academy. This was not quite true. The partner did want to work with a western university but travel restrictions by the validating university meant that the field visit could not go ahead making it impossible to conclude the validation. The Dean referred to a partner in Zimbabwe who had completed the validation process and then withdrawn on the basis that they wanted to set up the programme with University of Zimbabwe validation. The Dean had just received an email from them in the previous couple of weeks asking if the Centre could help them gain international approval because their graduates were not being recognised.

The Director changed his line of argument, complaining that we had lost focus on the Masters by talk of a doctoral programme and that we had also been distracted by orientation towards 'practice' as the platform for reflection. By this time I was boiling inside. He talked about his recent experience with a group of journalists, stating that ethics cannot be highjacked by journalists working with a simplistic rights-based framework. Ethics must be built on moral theology, not practice. I remained silent, sensing that there was little point in arguing.

He warmed to his central point. "We don't need a Western programme. We need local programmes resourced globally. There is a very small market for International universities (and these need to be phased out). We must open up local validations. This should be our new policy." He concluded by reminding the Board that he had raised the money and couldn't go back to the donors with failure. It was better to cut the project now. The discussion had become quite heated and members of the Board were getting fidgety. Wisely the chair suggested that the matter be referred to a sub-committee to meet the following afternoon.

As we walked out of the meeting room the vice-chair of the Board said to me, "that was a good example of "management by grenade"". It was intended, I think, to comfort me although I felt as if my legs had been blown off. The Dean tried to reassure me by reminding me that the Director had announced his retirement and was walking away from something that had been his baby for 25 years. I saw it as the latest wave of what we might call the post-post-colonial struggle in higher education. Many countries have grown in economic confidence in recent years and understandably want to do it themselves. Skills, money and other resources now exist in country. A Centre of higher learning in the UK clearly does need to keep its role and programme under review. But conflicting influences on the meeting were blurring the vision and were in danger of paralysing the process.

Systems emerge from the collective will of their members and when these conflict, the system can respond in unpredictable ways. In this particular case the

dimensions and direction of these forces - epistemological disputes, post-colonial tensions, economics and questions of personal identity - could not have been mapped in advance. We were all caught in a system, to borrow de Certeau's image, too vast to be our own, too tightly woven for us to escape from it (de Certeau 1984). No-one in the system had created it and no-one was able to see the whole. No-one was in control. As different participants tried to take control, their action resembled what de Certeau calls a "tactic" rather than a "strategy" - action characterised "by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (de Certeau 1984, 37). Tactics "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (ibid). I will return to this paradox in a moment when I will explore two complementary ways of thinking about systems, but first I am reminded of a story from ancient Israel.

Intermission: The Wisdom of an Ass

The arrival of the tribes of Israel back in Canaan was clearly a threat to the indigenous population. "They cannot settle in my backyard," they thought. So the king of Moab summoned Balaam to curse these people. Being a religious man Balaam first sought guidance from God and was told that they were not to be cursed but blessed. But the invitation was repeated and, on the second occasion, seeing that Balaam was inclined to accept the invitation since it was backed by a tidy fee, God told him he could go, provided he only did what he was told. Yet "God was angry that Balaam had gone." It was an eventful journey. Suddenly his donkey walked off the road and into an open field. Irritated, Balaam took a stick and beat his donkey back on to the road. A little while later they passed down a narrow path between two vineyards with a stone wall on each side. Without warning the donkey veered to one side pushing so close to one of the walls that Balaam's foot was scraped against the wall. Angry with his behaviour Balaam beat his animal to move him on. A third time the donkey acted strangely, this time stopping and lying down in the middle of the path. The story is worth continuing in the words from the book of Numbers (chapter 22):

"Balaam lost his temper, then picked up a stick and hit the donkey.

"When that happened, the Lord told the donkey to speak, and it asked Balaam, "What have I done to you that made you beat me three times?"

"You made me look stupid!" Balaam answered. "If I had a sword, I'd kill you here and now!"

"But you are my owner," replied the donkey, "and you have ridden me many times. Have I ever done anything like this before?"

"No." Balaam admitted.

Just then the Lord let Balaam see the angel standing in the road, holding a sword, and Balaam bowed down. The angel said, "You have no right to treat your donkey like that! I was the one who blocked your way, because I don't think you should go to Moab. If your donkey had not seen me and stopped those three times, I would have killed you and let the donkey live."

The donkey served Balaam in much the same way as Sanjara, the charioteer, served the blind king, Dhritarashtra in the Hindu epic, the Bhagavad Gita. Roadblocks have significance. They are not just obstacles to be overcome or circumvented. They may be caused by an angel, if only I had eyes to see the whole.

Thinking and Acting in Systems

Early in their work on complexity in organisations, Ralph Stacey and his colleagues in the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire recognised the paradoxical nature of life in organisations. "Managers are supposed to be in charge," they wrote, "and yet they find it difficult to stay in control"

(Stacey et al 2000, 5). The problem, they concluded, lay with the way the dominant discourse thought of the organisation as a system, "at a higher level than the individuals, having properties of its own and acting back on the individuals as a cause of their actions" (Stacey 2007, 235). This way of conceptualising the organisation sets the individual and the system in opposition. As people act they build up mental models of the world in which they are acting that shape the way they respond to this world (Stacey et al 2000). This "organisation in the mind" (Briskin 1998) is not the world "out there" but a picture that holds our interpretation of the experience. Mental models can be questioned, as Argyris and Schon (1996) have shown, but people find this difficult and to avoid having to do so, issues become undiscussable (ibid). These patterns of anxiety avoidance become embedded in rituals and practices that may be at odds with the primary task of the organisation (Shaw & Stacey 2006). Managers resort to appeals for good relationships, differences are suppressed (for the common good), and organisational harmony is enforced through the exercise of supposedly benevolent power.

Over the past decade Stacey et al have explored an alternative perspective on organisations that sees the whole not as designed or chosen in advance but emerging through the interaction of individuals with each other - what they have called, "complex responsive processes of relating" (Stacey 2007, 239). This has importance for our ways of thinking about strategic planning, the nature of leadership, and systems - indeed Stacey claims that "this way of thinking has no need for concepts such as "system" (ibid). The process is self-organising. No one in the process can choose what will happen to all of them. "What happens ... will emerge in the interplay of their intentions and no one can be in control of this interplay" (ibid). Understanding organisational behaviour, then, requires attention to the "conversational forms of power relating based on ideology and reflected in intentions and choices" (ibid).

The dominant discourse distributes power according to position since it sees it as a finite resource dedicated to fulfilling an organisation's purpose. The new paradigm

on the other hand sees power, not as an attribute or possession of an individual, but as a characteristic of all human relating. Power arises between people as they relate (Shaw 2002). Power enables or constrains the relationship, continually rearranging it as individual intentions and actions interact. In complex systems this is not just happening between individuals but throughout the system. This helps me reflect on the Board meeting described above. Rather than accepting the incident as a top-down exercise of power by the Director I can receive it as a complex process involving hidden movements in loyalty as the discussion progressed.

This perspective also suggests a way of participating in organisations for the mutual good. Positive relational practice involves give and take, letting go and accepting one another as we are, not as we might ideally become. This requires a way of listening to each others stories in ways that don't highjack them. It is the kind of conversation in which someone says what you are thinking and you don't feel it was stolen, but respected. Elias describes this as "valuing," as others "offer, withhold and change their responses to our responses, generating for each of us feelings of being more or less powerful, influential or powerless" (in Shaw 2002, 73). This also suggests a way of thinking about the anxiety that, in the traditional understanding of organisations leads to avoidance. As complex relational processes organisations are the location of individual and social formation. As different voices arise it is inevitable that anxiety is aroused. As Shaw points out, this is a necessary consequence when the past is continually reconstructed and the future is perpetually under construction through the continuous interaction of the participants (Shaw & Stacey 2006, 122). Viewed in this way, discussions such as the one that occurred in the Board meeting, are ways of organising the future, not simply opportunities for those in authority to impose their will. This has implications for the way such meetings are chaired and for my own action as a guest.

By drawing attention to organisations as contexts of complex relational practice Stacey and his colleagues have helped demystify systems, suggesting quite

different tactics for participating in them. But by reducing the system to the dynamic interplay of the participants they fail to name what emerges. Indeed they suggest that there is no longer any need to talk of systems. "Patterns of human interaction produce further patterns of interaction, not some *thing* outside of the interaction" (Stacey and Griffin 2008, 1). However, it seems to me, what emerges through human interaction does have substance and acts upon its participants in unexpected and sometimes unpleasant ways. By focussing exclusively on the process Stacey may have discounted the significance of the policies and bureaucratic procedures that result from it. In this sense the paradox is not resolved. Systems emerge from these complex responsive processes that seem to have a mind of their own. Managers lose control, and simply replacing the manager doesn't change the system. So while I have found the views described above of enormous help in navigating my organisational environment, I would like to introduce another, hopefully complementary, perspective.

The traditional view of organisations assigns responsibility for their processes to the conscious choice of their participants, and particularly to their leaders. The basic assumption is control. A quantum view of organisations, on the other hand, sees the organisation as an interacting field in which order is not fixed or rigid but "a dynamic energy swirling around us" (Wheatley 1994, 119), its bloodstream flowing with information. If "consciousness is a property that emerges when a certain level of organisation is reached" Wheatley suggests, then "the greater the ability to process information, the greater the level of consciousness. With this definition, organizations qualify as conscious entities" (Wheatley 1994, 107).

While fields change as a result of individual activity, once formed they can sustain themselves and propagate, even when those who spoke them into existence have moved off the scene. Owen (2000) is bold to name the field "Spirit" although wisely he does not define it. Spirit shows up when the system is in flow and when Spirit is depleted we see signs of what he calls Soul Pollution, that exhibits itself in stress, exhaustion, apathy or a feeling of being overwhelmed by the great amorphous *They* (Owen 2000). The system continues to run by processes its

creators may have initiated but, by virtue of scale, can no longer control. These are not always benign, they can become pathological.

The traditional response will involve an often frantic attempt to maintain order, trying at all costs to prevent the situation descending into chaos. "Don't frighten the horses," I was told by the Dean when we faced uncertainty with the format of research proposals to be submitted for university registration. As a result we conformed to the system, although this involved additional work for the students who had already prepared a research narrative that I felt more adequately and thoroughly presented their intentions. As systems increase in scale there are practical difficulties in convening appropriate conversations to address these concerns. As our relationship with the new university developed, despite the remarkable political skill of our champion, the Pro Vice Chancellor, I became aware of processes to which we had no access, that were shaping the destiny of the project. Scale up the systems and they can be experienced as oppressive, sustained by myths that cannot be questioned. I experienced this in my early career as a broadcast manager in the final years of apartheid in South Africa. The emotional impact of the incident remains with me today:

> There was something incongruous about the lavish furnishings in the room and its location above a shopping mall in a middle class Pretoria suburb. Outside, I had parked my car alongside bakkies and BMWs in front of the crowded shops. People of European origin were busy about their business - there was a purpose to their step. Africans squatted amongst the discarded drink cans and dust on the edge of the pavement or hung around near the doors hoping for an odd job or a hand out.

> Upstairs I noticed a slight smell of furniture oil in the huge wood panelled office. In the area near the door was a circle of leather bound sofas and a coffee table, displaying several books depicting the scenery and wildlife of South Africa. Bookshelves filled the wall to my left. Towards the window, and facing me behind a massive oak desk was the Director of the Afrikaans

production company. He stood to greet me and pointed to a chair on the other side of the desk. The lounge chairs were for less formal meetings.

I had been in Africa for less than a year. I had inherited a production contract with this organisation that allocated them exclusive responsibility for programme production in Afrikaans and half a dozen local African languages. As Programme Director for an international radio station in Swaziland I had become concerned about the lack of investment in African programming and had decided that unless there was a clear commitment to staff training and more imaginative output we should bring several language projects in-house.

This was not our first meeting. On previous visits I was always made welcome and invited to meals in good restaurants. My wife and I had even been invited to spend a weekend on his farm. At the same time I had also made good friends in the African population. I remember one respected elder amongst the Tswanas who told me that the Africans could usually make up their minds about an ex-patriot within the first couple of weeks of their arrival on the continent. They quickly decided who they could trust.

A few minutes into our agenda and I began to realise that my ideas were not welcome. While the organisation was happy to host production in the African languages the majority of the sponsorship came from Afrikaans sources and they had to serve their own people first. I began to suggest that we take over direct responsibility for production in the African languages, but this was not acceptable - how could an international company know how to manage the Africans or have any idea of what was appropriate for them to listen to?

Suddenly, the Director jumped from his desk and walked swiftly across the 25 or more feet of blue carpeted floor to the door. "This is not the way we do things here," he told me, opening the door for me to leave. "I suggest you go back to England - and I will personally buy you the one way ticket home."

I didn't accept the offer and continued for another 12 months in the job. By then we had started to restructure the programming, giving the African languages more control over their budget and development. I was invited back a couple of years later for a production conference that was led by Africans and soon after an African was appointed as director. Quality broadcasting was to become, for me, a matter of social and political justice. As I recall I was disappointed and frustrated, more than angry, as I left the office that day, although my wife remembers the incident and reminds me that I was completely silent during the 5 hour drive back to our home in Swaziland. Having been raised in the footprint of the BBC I took for granted that broadcasting can be organised in the public interest although it was not until I returned to Europe that I realised that public broadcasting operated by a professional elite was unable to adequately give voice to minorities. The system could not cope with the challenge.

Liberation theologians in South America, faced with oppressive economic and political systems, were the first to propose a way of thinking about these systems in spiritual terms. In a radical re-telling of the Biblical notion of the "principalities and powers" they saw them, not as disembodied spirits floating above the earth, but as institutions, structures, and systems. This was radical because it suggests that the systems we create and inhabit have an inner spiritual power. And it helps explain how, when their creators lose control, they can drift from purpose, become dysfunctional and even pathological. What may be happening is nothing more than an expression of the collective will that has lost its way - the system no longer fulfilling its human or environmental vocation. They are not "possessed" by anything other than their own way of doing things. But without the compassionate oversight of their creators they can become dysfunctional. No institution exists as an end in itself, but rather to serve the common good. However, in an inspired insight, liberation theology argues that the powers that control the systems are fallen, not evil, and can therefore be called back to serve more human ends. Their

power can be redirected as people withdraw their consent. Their Spirit can be renewed[30].

It is worth remembering, however, that this involves a struggle. Jesus saw that the active life would create enemies. Hence his emphasis on loving our enemies, what McIntosh (2008) calls our "worthy adversaries," if for no other reason that they, with us, are involved in the co-creation of our world. Our action then is not just social and political, but like a medieval mystery play,

> "the name of the game of what gets played out before people during a campaign is nothing less than the revelation of God. Our activism in issues of ordinary life therefore becomes a form of mission: the articulation of spiritual vision. In other words, spiritual activism both sustains those of us who engage in it and teaches those around us some of the meanings of spirituality" (McIntosh 2008, 106-7).

Which brings me back to my own experience.

August 12th 2008

The early part of 2008 was hectic. In February, around the time of her 94th birthday, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Until then she had been remarkably fit and mentally alert. While laying the groundwork for the new programme and preparing an intensive Induction School for the first cohort of participants I was commuting across the country to be with her during therapy, and to help close down her small bungalow and move into care. A pattern of over-work and under-inquiry had become the norm. I had to catch a moment for quiet reflection when I could. I recall sitting in the hospital waiting room as my mother

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[30] For further discussion on spiritual power in human systems see Briskin 1998 and Wink 1998.

was receiving further radiation, writing Haiku. From where I was sitting I could see the warning lights outside the blue theatre switching between "no entry" and "radiation on." I counted the length of each burst of radiation - thirty seconds - before the lights went out, I presumed to permit some adjustments before another burst of radiation.

> blue room, mild sunburn
>
> prayers ascending, fears receding
>
> cancer retreating

A few minutes later it was all over, my mother emerging with a smile on her face. She had lost a lot of weight and her main complaint was of the hard surface on which she had to lie.

By the end of April I was at saturation point. This is what I wrote in my journal on April 21st:

> I'm really, really tired of things "to do"
>
> rotas to produce
>
> phone calls to return
>
> bills to pay
>
> budgets to produce
>
> memos to write
>
> notes to make of last week's meeting
>
> a student's writing to read
>
> emails, endless emails, to answer...
>
> even being creative needs to fit onto my "to do" list
>
> so I have learned to multi-task
>
> to do more than one thing at the same time
>
> listen to a lecture

and answer my emails on my laptop

sit in a committee meeting

preparing the notes for my next seminar

do others manage "to do" better than me?

when I have something "to do"

then there are other things I can't do

and I'm not available "to be"

to be present and aware in the moment

I'm tired of "to do lists"

they get longer before they get shorter

sometimes things drop off the list before they are done

the deadline passes

but the world still turns

Will I ever wake up one morning

without something "to do"

buzzing around in my head?

with a blank sheet in front of me

inviting me

to create rather than respond

to participate joyfully in my surroundings

to celebrate life?

Since November, when we had launched the new programme, I had been swept off my feet by the interest it had generated. By April, eight students had enrolled in the PhD programme and I went back to the university to upgrade our recruitment estimate for the first year from six to twenty. We added a further Induction School to the schedule and began to explore different ways of growing our resource to meet the demand.

I approached the second Induction School in June with excitement and fear. I was excited by the opportunity to explore action research over two weeks with the new candidates but nervous about the process. I recall my hesitation in producing a timetable and the realisation, almost as soon as we started, that we would abandon it. The participants brought a rich variety of professional experience into the process - the director of a Geneva based organisation involved in conflict resolution, a community worker from Washington DC, the director of a television production company in Ghana, for example - and the process needed to facilitate their voices. My journal notes, written during the school, record my own reflections on the choices of facilitation style, moving between hierarchical and cooperative modes (Heron 1999) as the process developed.

Most striking in these reflections are my thoughts on a discussion early in the school about action research triggered by the presentation of an action researcher from an educational background. Perhaps it was the rapid fire presentation of his powerpoint slides (he apologised at the beginning for condensing a 3 day workshop into 1 session) which left us breathless, and it was more than 20 minutes before anyone interrupted to ask a question; "So is action research another term for Evaluative Research?", they asked. The individual then described a project they had lead on assessing another educational institution's performance, drawing from interviews and surveys across the institution. The quick answer was, "it is AR if there is an implementation phase, if the process leads to action." The individual wasn't satisfied with the response and another joined in, giving an example from their professional experience about young people and drugs. Supported by both public and private funds they needed to give an account of their impact. "But I am trying to understand whether what I already do is AR", the first individual repeated. "This is the wrong question," a member of faculty interjected, "a PhD involves deeper levels of inquiry." I noticed one participant left the room at this point and learned later that he had gone to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, commenting to someone in passing, "there is a battle going on in there at the moment."

As I debriefed with the Dean, after the session, I suggested that the participants had found the presentational style stifling. Their stories were bursting to come out but there had been little opportunity. We agreed to re-structure the following day, allowing time for conversations with the participants around their research interests.

A few days after the induction school ended I received a phone call from the university, explaining that they needed to cancel the next meeting of the Liaison Committee, the following Monday. Two days later we received a letter from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, whom we had never met, expressing concerns about the future of the partnership and requesting an urgent meeting. Because of holidays we were unable to meet until the middle of August. The atmosphere in the meeting was brisk and businesslike. The Deputy VC explains, briefly, that as a result of a strategic review of the university undertaken by the new Vice Chancellor, they would no longer be able to resource our partnership. The decision had been taken. We needed to decide how to close the partnership as smoothly as possible. During the meeting a mobile phone rang. At first I paid no attention but then realised it was mine and scrambled to switch it off. Whoever it was would have to wait.

There was discussion about the number of students already enrolled in the programme. The Deputy VC was only aware of the four who had already submitted their registration documents but, as I tried to explain, we had a pipeline of 16 others who had enrolled with the Centre and were now preparing their registration. As a joint project these needed to be considered as well. We subsequently learned that the strategic review had far wider consequences across the university. It had "decimated" the research capacity of the School of Community and Health Sciences, for example, and other partnerships were terminated. I walked away from the experience aware of the importance of monitoring the alignment of our strategic goals as well as academic interests. In the commercialisation of higher education we brought little economic benefit to the university.

As we left the building at the end of the meeting I reached in my pocket to retrieve my phone and return the call. It was from my sister telling me that our mother had died at 11:00 o'clock, while I had been in the meeting. Jung defines synchronicity as "a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved" (in Jaworski 1996, ix). A project that had increasingly become the fulfilment of my most deeply held values and a mother who had raised me and prayed for me throughout my life both died on the morning of August 12th 2008.

Death is the ultimate letting go, when the body has no more strength to keep going. My mother's final struggles were both physical and spiritual. As the disease took control in the last days of her life she entered a cycle of fear as she lost confidence in her own natural strength. I visited her two days before she died and all I could do was hold her hand quietly. My sister was with her when she died. We had spoken the evening before and we both felt that she was waiting for us to give her permission to go. My sister told me that later in the evening she became quieter and then, out loud, she made a confession of her faith and prayed for the family by name. This was the last thing she did. She said no more. She became unconscious while the disease did its final work. At first, in the stunned presence of death, time stood still. The past, the memories, would return later. The future would take even longer to emerge. But at first there was an emptiness.

As I think back on my professional life at the time I now realise that the hectic pace and conflicting demands on my time had squeezed out time for reflection. It was difficult to maintain an attitude of inquiry when the "to do" list was so long. There is a kind of doing that flows from a settled sense of being. But I was not settled - the project had momentum and I was pulled along by its demands. I had been involved in creating a project involving people, partnerships and resources - a complex system - with good purposes and strong values. But in my frantic attempt to stay in control I lost control. Something worthwhile and enabling had taken on a mind of its own. I was carried along by its energy, not guiding its development. Whether this contributed to its demise I cannot tell. Could I have prevented the

outcome? Probably not. Was I blind to some of the forces undermining its success? Undoubtedly. All the hard work had come to nothing, or so it seemed at the time.

Three days after the meeting with the university I received an email from the Dean:

"This is a moment at which I think I ought to say a simple 'thank you' for all the work commitment, effort and inspiration you have given to the 'project', and to admire your intensification of determination to make the 'project' happen." He then went on to say, "In the dark times it is difficult to see, but they are the times when we most need to trust. Being in the dark is not a bad place for intensification of 'reflection'! Did Schon write at all about the stormy seas as well as the swampy lowlands?"

I felt slightly patronised. For a while I ignored the message but then decided to respond:

"Perhaps I have a different perspective on what has been happening in the past few days. Schon may not have written about stormy seas but Brendan certainly experienced them! However, at this point, I don't feel buffeted by winds and waves - I feel becalmed. It may be time for an oar, not a sail! I don't see this as a dark time. It is, of course, disappointing that our expectations for the university relationship have been thwarted. But the vision for a radical innovation in research-based practice has not. And the university provided an environment in which we were able to incubate the vision. We are in a very different place today than we were two years ago. So I may be disappointed, but not discouraged. The university has told us that they do not want to continue this journey with us ... But the horizon of this vision is not bound by the university."

The Centre leadership didn't share my hopeful outlook. I should have heeded the advice of Brendan when the wind left them, and their food and water was in short

supply. It was not a time for the oars. It was time to give myself (ourselves) up to the will of the sea. To listen to the wind and let it tell me where to go. Management took direct control of announcing the decision. I was gagged. I found myself excluded from discussions. Faced with potential chaos the management resorted to structure and I was not involved in numerous management meetings that discussed the issue. But I kept paddling. For example, I tried to move the discussion forward by offering a short list of prospective university partners. Silence. I wrote up a short case for approaching the top runner and was told I was not to approach them. At the beginning of September I decided to offer evidence of the importance of the programme in recruitment. I estimated that the new programme had been responsible for 50% of enrollment in the past year (its first year). No response.

This was repeated over the next few weeks. As my isolation deepened my only recourse was to my journal. In early September I wrote, "I fluctuate between irritation, frustration and despair. I maintain a positive outlook and presence but inwardly begin to doubt the ability of the institution to re-establish the project." A few days later I was informed that the programme would be closed and my contract would not be renewed beyond the end of the year. My frustration turned to anger. I was unwilling to let go of the vision and wrongly assumed that it should be developed within the structures of the Centre. I was hurt by the way its management had closed rank, excluding me and the project from its future. It took a long time to recover from the pain and confusion of this death. As the weeks dragged into months every attempt to negotiate a fresh start for the project was rejected. The space in which I worked had collapsed, the programme was dead and I was surplus to requirements. I had been taken to the edge of the river that flows through the Land of Promise but was not allowed to cross.

But there was more for me to learn about myself. I had been here before. Three years earlier I had received a gift that transformed the grief of ending into hope. For several years I had been a consultant to a media organisation in the Middle East. Perhaps, with hindsight, I had bitten off more than I could chew. Perhaps the

client was unwilling to change. But it all came to a head in the conference room of a seaside hotel in Cyprus. By the end of the day I had done something I had never done before, or since - I walked out of the meeting and resigned a consultancy contract nine months before it was due to end. I was frustrated and hurt.

It was quite late in the afternoon of the following day when I finally left my room to take a walk along the beach, hardly aware of my surroundings. This is what I wrote in my journal:

24 hours after my decision to withdraw from the contract I walked out of the hotel and along the beach, deep in thought, reflecting on the events of the past few days. I could hear the waves lapping the shore and felt the sun on my balding head but my attention was inward.

After walking for perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes I quite suddenly noticed that the sand beneath my feet had given way to pebbles and as I looked down I found myself surrounded by small white stones. I reached down and picked one up, fingering it in the palm of my hand. In that moment I remembered reading Charles Handy's (1997) comment on the white stone, promised "to the one who prevails" in the Book of Revelation. This gift, to be received at the end of life, has written on it, "a new name, known only to him who received it" (Revelation 2:17).

There was no name on the stone I held in my hand. I noticed how smooth it had become from the endless battering with others in the waves. But it was not perfect. I rubbed my thumb over a small chip - a "wound" from a recent (in geological terms) encounter with another stone. My imagination was fired and I thought of my life, knocked about and yet smoothed by interaction with others. Perhaps, like marble in the hands of Michelangelo, my name - my true identity - lies hidden inside, to be revealed gradually by the bangs and bruised of life. I gripped the stone firmly in my hand, aware

that my identity, my true name, lies in what I am becoming, only to be known at the end and received as a gift.

I was startled by the idea and suddenly found the experience of the past few days re-framed in a very different way. When the Spirit gives me my stone I will then know who I am, and not before. My life is a search for myself. I am who I am becoming - an enormous incentive to "living life as inquiry." I am on a journey towards wholeness where identity and daily living meet.