

## CHAPTER 7

### Struggling with First-Person Inquiry

This chapter contains three sections, representing steps in a further cycle of reflection on my practice and then action towards building a new organisation. It indicates, I think, a turning point in my understanding of how I might engage in first-person inquiry in a way which embraces the sort of feminist politics and practice I am seeking, and yet not close the ambiguities which are a part of its framing. As discussed below, this necessitated me asking hard questions of myself, and finding ways *not* to do what I would normally do. In effect, I had to let go of my attachment to a particular outcome from my actions, and experiment with behaviour that let this happen.

#### (i) A Crisis: Commentary

Why hadn't I learned more from my previous encounter with J, when I had clearly noticed our use of different conceptual models, different value-bases well before these events? From a conventional growth perspective "based on public-sphere characteristics such as separation, individuation and independence" (Fletcher, 1998, 167) it was consistent and predictable for him to reach the conclusions he did, that C as an individual was expendable on grounds of furthering our organisation as a whole. From this perspective, holding our collective relationship as a value through which we might achieve our goals was non-sense, an application of inappropriate (private sphere, personal) affect. C and I were defeated, and J achieved his aim of C leaving the project on the grounds of her post being redundant, accepting her wish to leave immediately rather than to serve out her notice period. She was, of course, devastated. I could not understand how a project purporting to be about social justice in business could make someone - anyone - feel that degree of rejection and pain. To me this felt like a devastating blow to the principles on which I thought we were founded.

I came out of this encounter feeling bruised and angry. I asked myself what the connections were between the sort of multi-tracking I was doing, and my effectiveness as a member of my project to achieve justice. I may now ask myself, an inquirer, whether

that might be the wrong sort of question - it is the question of someone engaged in a progressive project: how to get the right outcome. From a progressive feminist perspective, I did not manage this well - and I felt that failure very keenly. But if I allow some of the principles of postmodernity into my position, I might also ask whether I was being, in Bateson's phrase "a difference that makes a difference" in that system?

Let me think of some different ways of looking at this encounter.

At one level it was a battle of wills between J on the one hand, and C and me: he wanted one outcome, and we wanted another, and I hoped that by re-framing and working hard to connect actions to principles, I would change his mind. I believed my desired outcome to be better, from a values perspective, than his - but I was drawing just as tight connections between my will and the outcome as he was. The strength of my commitment to the progressive project is clearly in this: I saw - I still see - what he was doing as unjust and wrong.

I also carried some strong feminist "oughts" with me into this. I used all of Martin's eight practices of feminist management (see What Next? at the end of Chapter 4). I asked the woman question of myself and C, highlighting the gendering dynamic in the situation. I challenged the static and oppositional nature of J's reasoning, trying to develop alternative practical responses to this particular situation. I worked with C to "consciousness-raise", by talking with her about the gendered nature of this situation, and the extent to which she might re-frame her strong sense of disempowerment in this light, rather than seeing it as an example of her personal failing or inadequacy. I explicitly challenged the win-lose nature of J's strategy, and proposed instead a more collaborative approach, in which we might participate in the making of the rules we were governed by. I encouraged J to use this as an opportunity to enable C to grow and develop, rather than rejecting her skills as inadequate for the task, and I tried to offer C time, care and companionship. And I really worked for a transformational outcome...talking with J

about the possibility of using this situation as a way to transform our project into a more values-consistent activity. I made explicit some of the implications I saw of this apparently reasonable management action for C, as a young woman. I raised questions about our collective responsibilities, and how we might reframe them.

And in doing all this, I got caught, as much as J in what Gherardi calls “oppositionism” (1995 p94) - as wedded to the rightness of a particular outcome as he was, as caught in winning or losing as he was - and I lost, whilst C lost even more. Oppositionism can be painful and passionate: my emotion was caught in a single place in this struggle, even whilst my head, my propositional knowing, was working with ambiguity and multiplicity. I do not feel I can say that was ‘wrong’.

I considered a number of options for going further (to win, in some way, to try and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat). I could escalate the dispute by going to our founder and others in the sponsoring company and expressing my distress. I ruled this out on two counts: first, I would be setting a train of events running that would put C. in a very tough situation: although I would have defined this an abuse of managerial power on my own account, it was C, not me, who was subject to that abuse, and I was far from sure it would help her to put her in a position where she had to take it further in a formal sense in a large company. Second, knowing that the company worked in normal/hierarchical ways, I suspected our founder would consider this something for J to sort out, or an interpersonal dispute between him and me, which she would try and placate (which was how she later saw it).

I could stop being at all reasonable, shout and stamp and express strong feminist anger for the outrageous treatment of my sister. This would not be my “normal” way of doing things, and so might have grabbed J’s attention. In many ways it felt justified - but again, I doubted it would help C and imagined it would feed into J’s inclination to personalise

both me and C as “overreacting” to a tough management decision. I stepped back from this, although J was in no doubt about the strength of my feelings.

I could threaten to resign - and carry out my threat if C. were not assured of her job - but I knew that I wanted to stay in the field of play (see Leaving, Chapter 4). To some extent, and not for the first time – recognising my own work patterns - I felt trapped by my commitment to our project, my wish to stay in a place where I could do the work I felt I needed to do. I would not threaten unless I was prepared to carry out the threat.

But a different way to look at this situation is to say inconsistency and flux within this project is, of course, to be expected, and I would not be able to change the paradigm within which I was working by expecting to achieve straightforward outcomes. This would be over-concretising organisational change. Instead, as I explored in ‘What Next?’ at the end of Chapter 4, I might begin to look for places within the project to use the ambiguity, the organisational space between values and behaviour.

“Effectiveness”, from this perspective, might look different: it would be still be remaining there, in the field of play; it would be resisting by not being taken in by my own rhetoric (on this occasion I was: I did not hold on to my self-doubt, I did take myself seriously, and this was a very serious business. I imagine I would do so again in much the same way, feeling my outrage)

And alongside this, not instead of it, I want to put another, simpler, feminist story of what was going on here. This scenario was one of gendered disciplinary power in action (Foucault, 1977). C overstepped too many marks: she was outspoken about her resistance to fulfil an organisational role she had not at any time applied to do or had the skills for, and which would never have been proposed to a young man in her position, that of

secretary/personal assistant to J. She challenged J openly about his treatment of her. She showed her pain at his systematic disempowerment of her. She shouted at him on more than one occasion. She did not respect him. They got on each other's nerves, as two people sharing an office with, most of the time, only each other for company. So he used his power to get her out of his way. Nothing more complicated than that. Whatever I said or did was irrelevant to this dynamic. He did not want her there. And, when she was forced out, she took to her next job a resolution to give less away, trust less, take up less space. I lost a valued companion and fellow-traveller in our enterprise: I still miss her. But the effect for her was much more significant. She was disciplined.

### **Post-script**

I recently sent these accounts and commentary to C, to gather her feedback. She says:

“the account corresponds accurately with my memories, or at least my thoughts about what was going on inside your head. There are parts I didn't know about ... I don't think I realised how hard you had been trying to deal with this in a progressive fashion. No - that's not true - I did, but I'm not sure how much I was following you or allowing you to fight my battles for me. Thinking about it honestly, I am not sure I was trying to do it in a progressive way myself, perhaps I was rebelling from the position of underdog, knowing I had little to lose? ...I knew I would never change [J] and his way of thinking, although naively I believed that at work people were supposed to challenge, question the norm and further humanity.

I did know how angry you were and how impotent you felt in the time prior to my departure, and admired your persistence at trying to keep the situation open...

Throughout the proceedings I wholeheartedly valued your support, understanding and interpretation of J's actions, I gained fantastic amounts from you and the way you dealt with the situation, which you know I am working hard to try elsewhere....there is only one time when I could have valued some more back up, and that was when it was impossible to offer it - when the situation escalated into a battle of wills at (the sponsoring company). That day was probably one of the worst, because I was not only being let down by J but also by (our sponsor and the company) and I felt that I didn't have you there to help me battle against the powers that be. I would be a liar to say that I am not still angry about it.

....Your commentary was probably the most fascinating for me, because it enters the realm of questioning why we reacted as we did. From an uneducated (when it comes to management styles) but challenging and questioning way of thinking, working and living, I know why I did. The last perspective [in the commentary] seems extremely appropriate to me...

....If being caught up in 'oppositionism' was an end effect, I do not regard that as totally unreasonable, it is a reduction of the conversation into a confrontation, an effect of being forced into a corner. You tried to keep the playing field open and were thwarted at every turn, and because your opinion was not taken into account, let alone respected, oppositionism was a natural reaction"<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from letter

## **(ii) Thoughts on inquiry and feminism: when to persist and when to desist<sup>2</sup>**

As I have worked with our project over the last few years, several things have been joyous and rewarding, and I feel much more centred and well-located than I did during my period at the MBA. But a continuing source of distress (and it has felt distressing to me, I use the word deliberately) has been the way we, as an organisation, have built ourselves. I have felt huge amounts of responsibility for this, and cannot easily let go of the belief that this is one of the most important pieces of transformation which I should be addressing if I have any ideas of myself as engaged in working towards the creation of a *more feminist* world. This is, after all, a new organisation, and a very small one, in which we, its members, have complete autonomy over how we organise ourselves within a legal framework given us by the Charity Commissioners.

I have noticed, struggled with and challenged what I see as our establishment of hierarchy and bureaucracy, as I have struggled with my own desire to blame the director for this. In the first two accounts I have given here of my practice in relation to this issue, I am carrying a very strong conviction that I know a better way to ‘do organisation’, and that I have a responsibility to bring first J around to my way of thinking. I have raised issues which he did not name as issues, and I have felt I have had little choice but to do so, because my emotional reaction and resistance to the violation of values which I hold strongly was fierce, rooted in my body, in my gut.

In the first two instances - ‘an Appraisal Interview’ and ‘a Crisis’ - I have been very conscious of setting my conviction within the context of inquiry, and can be seen to be trying to reframe my situation with my colleague, offer alternative perspectives, try and open more space for dialogue.

---

<sup>2</sup> A phrase developed by Marshall (1999)

I found my interventions to be 'ineffective' in that they did not produce the outcomes *I wanted*. This mattered to me very much, as part of the progressive political project to help create a 'new paradigm of business.' Karl Weick, commenting on the relationship between organisational rhetoric and practice, notes that if organisational members don't pay attention to their 'walk' as well as their 'talk', they can't know what the talk is - the 'walking' is part of the sense-making process, it is "the means to find things worth talking about" (1995: 182). But my sense is also that it is also necessary to struggle with the 'talk', to treat as problematic how the walking is named, what discourse is put on what is being lived. I have found it very difficult to create spaces in which collective sense-making, and hence this form of inquiry, can take place within my organisation. My own sense of the potential places seems fragile, and I have experienced it as over-ridden by J.

Ely and Meyerson (2000), writing on an action-research project in which I was involved, reflect that:

"we have come to see ...narratives as, in fact, a key element of the change process ...People develop and relate their stories within the context of general understandings ..which typically remain unacknowledged. By failing to make these manifest, narratives draw on unexamined knowledge claims without displaying them or opening them to challenge or testing. Narratives, then, are not just stories told within social contexts; they are social practices which are *constitutive of* social contexts".

After the encounter over C, I took steps to protect myself from personal hurt, not giving much away. I too, in a sense, was disciplined. I did not want to cease to believe that a different form of organising could be possible. I deliberately chose to mask myself more, hold back my 'truth', and value my energy enough to put it in other places. This was a



period of reflection rather than action (on this front), as I discussed the situation with trusted friends, with C, with my supervision group.

During my discussions, I kept coming back to the idea that as inquirer, I ought to go back to J again, share with him what effect our encounter was having on me, and work with him towards some better resolution. Not to do so would be to not live an inquiring life, to not live out my values. I located the “ought” both within the feminist project I have repeatedly, in this account, said I am engaged in, and within the action inquiry approach I am drawing on. I asked myself the question, what does this require me to do here? I was asking myself, in effect, how to get my inquiry practice *right*. Various imperatives stayed in my mind. Heron (1996) refers to the “primacy of the practical” - that practical knowledge, knowing-how, provides the predominant validity of an inquiry process. Where does that put ‘failing to know how’, I wondered? Fisher and Torbert have named their book on action inquiry for managers “the true challenge of continual quality improvement” and say that:

“engaging in a process of mutual self-correction requires ongoing effort among participants to recognise and correct errors and incongruities in the midst of action, an effort we find to be the primary requirement for continual quality improvement” (1995: 7)

Did that imply that unless I could successfully engage my colleague in such a process, and put further effort into this, I could not fulfil a ‘primary requirement’ of action inquiry? As the bruises from the encounter over C began to heal, I began to feel better, and began to plan how I would take on the struggle again, begin to re-engage.

I tried out various forms of how such a conversation might begin, how I might attempt again to create space in which we could together build an alternative narrative and practice:

J, I would like to talk to you about how we are working together, to find out a bit more about how you see me, and to look for ways of building more collaboration between us.....

one of the things that is important to me about this project, as you know, is developing new forms of working....it would help me to know if you see me doing that, and if so, in what way..... are there things that you would like to see me doing differently?

for instance, one example is the production of the business plan and our targets....we could look for a way of doing this which both meets the expectations of our trustees that we are taking our financial viability seriously, and at the same time is a collaborative exercise so that we as a team arrive at something which helps us , energises us, expresses our purposes....

I am sure you have noticed that I have withdrawn some of my investment in our team, that I have looked elsewhere for support and companionship since C left last year ...I wonder what the effect of this is on you, and on all of us...its not how I would choose to work, perhaps we could talk about this?

But as I have thought more, read more, reflected more, I have come to think that practising my values in this situation does not necessarily mean having this kind of engagement with J. I can let go of being 'authentic', trying to "promote community and co-operation" (Martin 1993) and pay better attention to the experiences I have inquired into in these accounts. That experience suggests to me that those practices of feminist management are *not* good rubrics for me in this situation, that *I need to take better care of myself, and use whatever power I have (which I know is not nothing) differently*. The question I have to ask myself is, if I were to have the conversation above with J, what would be the consequences, and what use would I make of the information it generated? If I were to offer J an opportunity to give me his perspective on what I do, I would need to frame that interaction very carefully so that I was not giving him an opportunity to damage me. I could ask him for observational feedback, what he notices, but because he is my manager, and I have experienced his categorisations and judgements on several previous occasions, it is likely that he would offer evaluative feedback, what he thinks I should do more of or less of. Would it help me, or our joint project, to surface some of his evaluations? My judgement is that it would not. One of my repeated experiences of having these kind of conversations with him is that he closes things down, closes down multiply conceptual spaces by naming a single explanation of them: "You take things too personally", "She has a problem with authority figures" "You are an academic, I am a consultant" "I have always believed class is more important than gender or race in these situations": I have difficulty finding or creating the space for mutuality in these situations. So, it is hard for me to imagine a positive outcome of an exchange in which I invite feedback, in the sense of it giving me information which I value. And the possibility is strong that by naming my purposes, and surfacing some of our shared assumptions about each other, gaps that currently exist, inside which I can take care of myself and work, would be shut down. I would be doing what I had resolved not to do - sharing more of myself, making myself exposed.

As I write this, I am challenging myself: is this a defensive routine? Is this avoidance of confrontation? But I am also exhorting myself to look at these cycles of inquiry, the

practice and reflection I have engaged in with good attention, look where they have taken me, and *learn* from them ....they are taking me in the direction of a different sort of action, simultaneously committed and masked.

So the next question is, what are the implication of not having the renewed engagement with my colleague? I would not use up the immense amount of energy and work it would involve. I would not open myself again to what I experience as denial and misrepresentation. I can work around the experience that exists inside even our small project, without having to remind myself every few months by re-activating the expression of it. I could have the conversation without having it, by *being* and *doing* the collaboration I seek wherever the I can identify the opportunity, and in so doing perhaps point to (without necessarily naming) some of the contradictions in our collective practice. I could act “as if” we had committed ourselves to resolving some of those contradictions.

Above all - and it is noticeable from these accounts that I moved some way around this cycle in relation to M three years previously - I will honour my feminist purposes best by not letting myself get hooked in this, by noticing, learning what I can, dealing with my emotional work on it as best I can, and moving on. I can resist the tendencies in my reading of action inquiry to move me towards repeating the same action again, in the hope of getting it right. I can notice my desire to close the values/action inconsistency in our project, and let it sit. Let this be my action here.

### **(iii) Lunch Out**

Like a returning ghost that haunts me, the question of how we treat each other as a team is coming up again. F, the newest member of the team, has talked to me about being upset at the way J is treating him: he describes it as inconsistent, disrespectful, unjust, overbearing. He says the atmosphere in our office is oppressive and cold, and he does not want to go there. He says he never thought it would be like this, when he came to work at the project: he thought it would be more enjoyable, more supportive, more valuing of individuals, less hierarchical. I can feel my emotions being triggered as he speaks: I feel my responsibility towards him, to help him enjoy what he is doing so that he can contribute well. I feel inadequacy that I have not played a greater part in creating a better sort of organisation, one expressing different values. I feel anger towards J that he might again damage our endeavour. Caught in my mixed feelings, I telephone J at home at the weekend (very unusual) and say that I need to meet with him. Since I am about to embark on running a two-week residential summer school (and I notice the irony of this - the compromise I feel in teaching others ways of addressing values in business, whilst struggling so much ourselves.) I ask J to come and see me so that we can talk between my commitments to the course. He agrees to come (I didn't doubt that he would: he can hear the emotion in my voice over the telephone, and asks me if I am all right).

Before he comes, I think in detail about what I want to say to him. I compose two letters, neither of which I intend to send him. They are the now familiar voices in me - one reasonable and framing, one angry and blaming.

We meet a few days later, and have lunch together. I am carrying several warning voices in my head: don't get hooked, you don't have to get this right, it's not your responsibility to change this person's behaviour. You

do not have to do this person's work for him. Think of putting new information in the system. Offer him some alternatives, but you don't have to lay out yourself here, for the greater good of the project. You can acknowledge that this situation hurts you without giving him that hurt. Maybe it hurts him too. Stay alive!

I tell him that I have asked him to come and talk to me because I am distressed at F's distress. I say that how we as individuals are in our work, and how we relate to each other, seems to me really important to our project – as he knows, because I have said this before, part of what a new paradigm of business means for me is finding more valuing and life-enhancing ways of treating each other. J says he is sorry if F is feeling bad, and that it has been a busy period with everyone a bit short-tempered. He says that he thinks F is sometimes a bit over-sensitive about these sorts of things, and that R doesn't help things. (I can see where this is going to go: he will talk about individuals and their strengths and weaknesses, and I will work to re-frame the discussion in terms of wider issues, and get upset when he does not validate what I am saying). I notice the very reasonable and concerned tone of voice he is using. I admit to myself I am just expecting too much of this person. I notice the beating of my heart, telling me I am getting sucked in. So I decide to do something else, and to focus on him, as a way to encourage him towards reflectiveness. As I do so, I am accepting that this may

reinforce his picture of me as showing a stereotypically female orientation towards support and making things okay. I am going to ride that one out.

I ask him whether our office, as a place to be, is as he would wish it. Does it do for him what he needs it to do? Does he get sustenance and support from it? Does it help him be creative and affirming? He says that it does not, and talks about what he finds difficult, how much time he has to spend doing things he does not want to do, how unsupported he feels at times. I realise as he is talking that I have been pretty successful at finding my support elsewhere. I have established new colleague-ship, through leading on our partnership with a university to run a Masters programme: it stimulates me and puts me with fellow-travellers: this was a deliberate decision on my part after C's departure. I decide to share some of this with J. , and say that I withdrew some of myself from our joint-ness. I ask him what the effect of this has been on him. He says that it has left him more alone, and that at times he has felt that I have undermined him. We explore this a bit, me asking him in what way he thinks I have done this...then I sense we are going to go down a (now) familiar route where I resist his interpretations of me. I decide to shift again, and I ask him, what purpose does having our office serve? What is it there for? Might it not just trap us into reproducing "office" relationships which we don't need and which don't energise us? Suddenly

the tone of the conversation lifts. He is getting quite animated now, and together we are thinking aloud about what other way we might operate – from our homes, as a virtual organisation, meeting two or three weekly for exchanges of ideas, finding an meeting place to create different sorts of experiences, just not doing most of the routine admin work. I drive him back to the station before returning to the course.

Even at the time of this exchange, I knew that it held a different quality. The arduous first-person work I had undertaken between these encounters – the processual back-drop to these stories (see Chapter 2) – seemed to enable me to let go of my desire to make J behave the way I wanted him to. I did not enter this meeting with an outcome in mind. I deliberately tried not to challenge J about the behaviour I blame him for, recognising both that it is counterproductive (he does not change it) and that he is operating with his own anxieties and hurts. I was not sharing what was going on for me, but nether was I deceiving. I was trying to make space for something else to emerge. I was attempting to *participate* with him in where we both were...and I came away undamaged, thinking it was probably a worthwhile thing to have done.

(Some months later, J told me that this conversation played a part in his reaching the decision to leave the project.)

This encounter represented the third of three cycles of action and reflection I have presented here. I must stress that it took me considerable intellectual and emotional work to reach this point, where I could begin to see both the self-defeating nature of some of my earlier strategies - including the demands I put on others which they could not understand - and the continuing connection between theses so-tricky interpersonal



encounters and the over-arching purpose I am holding of working towards ‘mother-consciousness’, a new paradigm. One thing I notice is that although I begin to see some patterns and what is self-defeating, this does not mean I now know what to do – more that I begin to accept that I will not, and cannot, know what to do, except perhaps to try and keep as open to as many interconnections as I can, to not let a ‘reality’ settle anywhere. Perhaps that is the best action to take?

## A Short Digression into Systems-Thinking

At the end of Chapter 4, I raised some issues concerning systems-thinking and its implications for approaching change: here I want to build on those thoughts.

I have learned a good deal during this inquiry, and in terms of ideas one of the main areas that I have become more aware of is the body of work variously called systems-thinking, complexity science or New Science. I have already taken several dips into this territory in the course of this account, because it interweaves with ideas of postmodernity, ecology and change. Having little knowledge of science, there is much that I find confusing in this writing, but am aware of intriguing ideas that suggest different stories of the world.

If modernist thought was built on the fundamental assumptions of ‘classical’ physics (Toulmin, 1990), the successor science which underlies many of the emergent images and descriptions of the world is biology, the world as a living and interconnected system. Just as physics lent imagery to many aspects of modern thought – the divisibility of the whole into parts for the purposes of understanding, the ubiquity of mechanistic causes and effects, the stable reproducibility of scientific experiment, the potential mapping of the entirety – New Science offers alternative ways of thinking which are informing images of change (Capra 1996), of organisations (Stacey 1996, Wheatley 1992), of the relationships between natural and social worlds (Spretnak 1997), and of leadership (Jaworski 1996, Wheatley 1992, 1996).

Many systems thinkers have drawn on the work of David Bohm (1980), and in particular his ideas of implicate and explicate order. Jaworski says:

“in the Implicate Order, the totality of existence is enfolded within each “fragment” of space and time – whether it be a single object, thought or event. Thus everything in the universe affects everything else because they are all part of the same unbroken whole” (1996: 78)

Bohm suggests that this indivisible reality exists as a set of potentialities which are drawn into the explicate order in different ways at different times. Along with other of those working with New Science concepts, he suggest that the modernist obsession with the physical manifestation of things is a mistake - that the important and defining phenomena in the universe are *relationships*, that these constitute the organising principle of our reality. Such a picture radically re-frames the human relationship with ‘the world’. This is a participant and interconnected universe, in which that which humans perceive is called forth from a continuing processual flow. According to Bohm: “both the material

world and consciousness are parts of a single unbroken totality of movement” (in Jaworski, 1996: 79). Wheatley describes the way in which physics, too, has become ‘quantum’, quoting Zohar:

“In the place of tiny billiard balls moved around the contact forces there are what amount to so many patterns of active relationship, electrons and photons, mesons and nucleons, that tease us with their elusive double lives as they are now position, now momentum, now particles, now waves, now mass, now energy – and all in response to the each other and to the environment” (1992: 32)

Capra defines a system as “an integrated whole whose essential properties arise from the relationship between its parts”, and systems thinking as “the understanding of a phenomenon within the context of a larger whole” (1996: 27). Bateson (1972), one of the pioneers of systems thinking, suggests that such a view implies that the concept of intelligence, of Mind, can meaningfully be applied to systems. Delineating the boundaries of thinking at the boundary of the human body is, in his view, mistaken, since human mind is part of a larger systemic process. He sees Mind as immanent, applying to the passing of information around the system as a whole. Human consciousness is simply a small part of Mind, a part determined mainly by problem-solving purpose – he describes it as a “bag of tricks” whilst acknowledging that some of them are very valuable tricks. By contrast, he describes wisdom as “the knowledge of the larger interactive system”, which is not fully accessible to human consciousness because “of course, the whole of the mind could not be reported in a part of the mind” (1972: 432). Conscious purpose is “a short-cut device to enable you to get quickly at what you want; not to act with the maximum wisdom in order to live.....today, the purposes of consciousness are implemented by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, airplanes, weaponry, medicine, pesticides, and so forth. Conscious purpose is now empowered to upset the balance of the body, of society, and of the biological world around us” (1972: 434)

Systems are dynamic, they have the capacity to self-generate, and to maintain a form of integrity of pattern as they do so. They demonstrate not only coherence but endlessly emergent creativity (Spretnak, 1997: 22). In some way, a system ‘knows’ its shape, and can reproduce it. This process is called ‘autopoiesis’, in which a “never-resting structure constantly seeks its own self-renewal” (Wheatley, 1992: 18). Systems move between states of stability/order and states of chaos, triggered by small variances which become amplified in exponential movements (the so-called ‘butterfly effect’ where a small flutter of a butterfly’s wing in one part of the world can set in motion a series of amplifying changes in air-pressures leading to a typhoon in another, Gleick, 1987). It is not possible

to predict such movements, and at higher levels of complexity *new* system properties emerge, further increasing the complexity. Complex, dynamic systems, then, are not reducible to the sum of their constituent parts.

Systems are able to demonstrate their properties, their patterns, at all levels within the system: ‘fractals’ replicate the system, like the shape of the ice crystal reproducing the shape of the snowflake. Wheatley describes them as “a glimpse of infinity that is well-bounded: of simplicity feeding back on itself to create beautiful complexity” (1992: 81). And they offer us a paradox: “two forces that we have always placed in opposition to one another – freedom and order – turn out to be partners in generating viable, well-ordered, autonomous systems” (1992: 95)

Systems-thinking also tells us something about diversity: in complex natural systems, multiple connections between a rich diversity of components creates the quality of the system, which is correspondingly weakened as the diversity of the individual members or the multiplicity of the interconnections is depleted. Homogeneity means rigidity and ultimately death (Berman, 1981)

One of the most intriguing aspects of systems-thinking is ‘field theory’ (Sheldrake and Bohm, 1982). Fields are nonmaterial regions of influence that structure relations between system parts, of which gravitational and magnetic fields are examples. . “Fields are states of space”, says Jaworski “but space is full of energy and invisible structures that connect” (1996: 150). Although non-accessible through our senses, they can be detected through their effects, they constitute the ‘medium’ which enable connections to take place, and, like water connecting fish in the sea, they ‘flow’. Some scientists working with these ideas now consider fields, rather than particles, the basic entities of the universe (Wheatley, 1992). Sheldrake’s work in biology on “morphogenic fields” suggests that populations are able to ‘store’ knowledge in these nonmaterial fields, which can be accessed by new generations, so facilitating collective learning. ‘Fields’ offer new

perspectives of thinking about change. Jaworski quotes Bohm: “We are all connected and operate within living fields of thought and perception”. Changing ideas, human behaviour, the systems-thinkers suggest, might involve some sort of ‘field-building’, generating rich connections which suffuse a new field, so influencing others who are within it (Wheatley, 1992).

Several of the writers drawing on system ideas note nuances of gender in systems thinking. Capra, for instance, is explicit in his reference to the female qualities of this framing (1996: 9). As discussed in Chapter 4, ecofeminist thought has drawn widely on this form of human/ecosystem indivisibility. Merchant writes:

“Chaos is the re-emergence of nature as power over humans, nature as active, dark, wild, turbulent and uncontrollable....the world is not created by a patriarchal God ex nihilo, but emerges out of chaos...” (1995: 54)

The emphasis on relationship as the foundational concept, rather than individual entities, also echoes much feminist thinking. Wheatley, though making no gender-connection, says:

“To live in a quantum world ...we need to stop describing tasks and instead facilitate process. We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing and evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships....the quantum world has demolished the concept of the unconnected individual” (1992: 38)

This could be a description of ‘relational management (Fletcher, 1998).

The politics implied by systems thinking seems to me to be to be complex -of course. Viewing the universe as a dynamic complex system is to return to ideas of the Real (Spretnak, 1997), accepting that there is some kind of physical entity, of which we are a

part, which has its own dynamics and imperatives. This offers a new perspective on values, suggesting an ecological ethic, a responsibility on the part of humans to develop what Bateson was calling a greater wisdom towards their place in the whole. The system is seen as out of balance, threatened by human action. Spretnak quotes Vaclav Havel, the first president of the democratic Czech Republic:

“The basis for the new world order must be universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from respect for the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence” (1997: 38)

This moves away from the nihilistic and relativistic tendencies of deconstructive postmodernism. But postmodern thinking carries with it a critical perspective, tying its critique to the uncovering of the political, historical and social constructions of any particular comment on ‘reality’. It would suggest that the danger of systems thinking is that it downplays the construction of human understanding by human ‘regimes of truth’. Disentangling the interplay of constructed understanding and our relationship with a shifting, implicate Real is not easy. In what way, I wonder, is this not another story? I am grappling to bridge these two conceptual worlds, whilst noting resonance between them (on the processual and shifting nature of reality, and the impossibilities for humans to control what they are simply part of, for instance). There is also, as Berman (1981) notes, a lurking tendency within systems thinking towards conservatism, the need to keep things the same, so as not to disrupt the whole.

But systems thinking does offer some interesting ways of conceptualising ‘system-change’, and in particular the paradoxical sort of change I have been exploring, which so easily contributes to the maintenance of what it sets out to shift. Conventional approaches to organisational change, for instance, carry deep assumptions about control. Bate (1994) is a good example, offering a summary of much of the recent organisational change literature. Although seemingly incorporating some ideas from a systems approach (that of vicious/virtuous circles, for instance) Bate says:

“the task for the manager...is to become aware and develop a familiarity with vicious circles, explore their causes and consequences, and devise strategies for breaking into them and controlling them....this is the whole essence of the process of managing culture and bringing about cultural change” (1994: 128)

“managers of change need to build up a varied repertoire of approaches from which they can select the one that best aligns with the dominant activities of a particular episode within the change sequence” (1994: 226)

The systemic, quantum approach would suggest that the aspiration to control such processes is based on a misapprehension of the human relationship to the world. Such a thought is, of course, deeply challenging to purposive consciousness, particularly as it is framed for managers. Instead, it offers some other ways of shifting systems: one is the now well-known environmentalist’s dictum, think globally, act locally. Wheatley describes it in this way:

“work with the movement and flow of simultaneous events within that (local) small system....these changes in small places, however, create large-systems change, not because they build on one another, but because they share in the unbroken wholeness that has united them all along. Our activities in one part of the whole create non-local causes that emerge far from us” (1992: 42)

This would suggest paying attention to patterns of events, looking for small variances, “weak signals”, in the system that can be amplified through iterative processes. It also suggests seeking to move information around. I am fond of Meadow’s (1991) paper (add quote). Meyerson and Scully (1995) also suggest that ‘system diagnosis’ is an important aspect of bringing about change, and that one of the ways you discover the properties of a system is to carry out experiments within it.

Systems incorporate paradox, the movement between chaos and order, simplicity and complexity – and that is one reason why this way of thinking has something to offer to thought of moving beyond ‘father consciousness’. It encourages us – me – not to strive to iron out inconsistencies, but to let them be, since they may have some systemic significance we are not, cannot be, aware of.