

## **12 Silver Street-2, Where has all this got us?**

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### Introduction

In this short final chapter in Part C, I conclude the account of Silver Street-2, in which I worked with front-line staff on a project entitled *Different Days*. This illustrates a further staging point in the development of my inquiry into the aesthetic in practice. I set out at the beginning of Part C to explore three main themes; these were – action research, play and the poetic. This last chapter brings these together in a story of the final day of this piece of work.

My aim in this chapter is to,

- demonstrate an integration of the themes of action research, play and the poetic
- assess where my inquiry has reached at this stage.

The story as I left it in Chapter 9 had concluded with Lucy's challenge, 'Where is all this getting us?', in the morning of Day 3 of this 5-day programme. The day concluded in the following way.

*j*ournal ... Trip to the park, 25/5/2004

#### Journal

I found time over lunch to make notes about the dialogue with Ian, Lucy and Beverley. Then in the afternoon we set off on foot past an enormous cemetery to a local park. Ian had arranged a meeting between our group and a group run by MENCAP, to talk to Linda, the project manager, some of her staff and service users.

We spotted them sitting on a large multi-coloured sheet on the grass. Others were in wheel chairs around the sheet. The mood was very relaxed in the afternoon sun. One woman was helped to lie down on her side.

#### Commentary

This meeting place provided the MENCAP service users with a sunny excursion and, in some cases, a siesta; it also gave us a forum for a conversation with a staff from this voluntary sector provider of services.

She squirmed with pleasure turning to and fro in the sunlight. I found myself sitting by a young man called Ian, possibly in his early twenties, no speech but an inviting grin.

As he grips my hand, I realize how strong he is. He seems to have befriended me. We play a none too serious form of arm wrestling; if it turned serious, I know who would win, quite literally hands down.

This was not the only moment I felt I was in someone else's clutches at Silver Street, but I was more trusting of these physical contacts now.

There followed a useful discussion with Linda, the MENCAP manager, about person-centred planning. She explained that she has three sons, two of whom have learning disabilities. She has campaigned for wider opportunities for all people with learning disabilities. No barriers seem to be too great for her, or them. For example, some have abseiled down cliffs in wheel chairs and suitable modified harnesses.

This afternoon seemed an excellent example of the unpredictability and unfolding nature of this action research project. It was thanks to one of our inquiry group, Ian, that we had the opportunity to talk with this very experienced practitioner as we sat in the sun in the middle of a park. I reflected on how different it might have been in a more traditional course on people-centred planning where we may have by now been offered a set of guidelines for planning, implementing and evaluating person-centred planning. Both approaches have their place, though learning through informal dialogue and storytelling such as this was more rooted in reflection on live experience. The sensory vivacity of storytelling energised how we were learning. Her ambitions for service users were impressive.

## **Week 4**

The group was by this time devising its own programme of inquiry within our agreed sequence of weekly sessions. It had been decided at the end of Week 3 that we would try to arrange a visit to a hostel. Since a significant number of people using the Centre live in hostels, this was a gap worth filling. I was surprised to discover that some of the participants had not made such a visit before. We needed this contribution to the imaginal picture we were creating about how service users live and what they need for a fuller life.

On the phone between Weeks 3 and 4, I discovered from Ian that a trip had been organized.

**j**ournal ... Week 4 – A hostel visit, 1/6/2004

## Journal

Before setting off to visit the residential home, we talked briefly about what we might learn from making the visit. To get us there, Lloyd offered his vast Jaguar into which most of the group piled. I drove three others.

My expectation was that I might find the home institutional or grubby. In fact it was certainly not grubby and its institutional ethos was caring, communal living, nothing repressive or depressive, but still inevitably institutional. We were greeted by a spry and remarkably positive young woman who apologized that it was she, the administrator, who would be showing us round, not residential care workers, as they were all out.

So too were the service users, mainly at Silver Street. We were offered a brief glance into each person's room. One room belonging to a man had A1 sized posters of near naked women. We talked about the rights of residents to lead their own lives as they wished.

Our guide spoke with affection about the people who lived there. The Home arranges trips at the weekend. Lloyd questioned her about how they pay for transport and discovered that another part of the local authority was charging them, at a rate higher than a local taxi firm might charge.

## Commentary

The young woman who showed us round was brimming over with energy and seemed to radiate appreciation of what the hostel offered and also of our interest in making the visit.

The quality of her positive presence with us as we went round the rooms impressed me. It was an influential process that transferred to the judgement I was forming about the quality of the care in this home. In a small but significant way this evidenced an aesthetic process of relationship out of which practical knowing springs. Because of her I was prepared to think better of the home.

He offered to look into this anomaly, not least because he knew that there were minibuses standing idle at the weekend. Why could they not be used?

Thanking the few staff we had met, we made our way back to the Irish Community Centre. We talked over the impressions that the visit had made. People were surprised at the level of facilities and care that was evident.

The afternoon was devoted to refining what pieces of inquiry/project work people could seriously engage with during the summer interval when we will not be meeting ...

We agreed that Ian's group would work on the topic of food, choosing it, cooking it, planning menus, and increasing choice. Lucy's group would tackle communications related mini-projects. Lloyd volunteered to look into ways of making it possible for places like the hostel we had visited today to get cheaper travel options for visits.

As I reflected further on this visit, I recalled a story that I included in my account in Chapter 6, of the meeting at the end of Silver Street-1. Stewart had described being left by himself, earlier in his long career, to run a hostel for four days with ten service users; not surprisingly this had left him in a state of near madness. (This would now have broken all regulations, probably then too.) His story was so full of pathos and despair, that I had carried it in my

I think of this home, an encapsulated world in a quiet urban street, the place without which lives would regress, unless people's families could find a way of managing. Others though have no families on which to call.

Stepping across the threshold into this separate world extends my sense of lives lived in parallel with mine, but in such different circumstances.

Through the aesthetic of the visit, – the sights, smells, ambience of the hostel and the narrative of the person guiding us round, – I am re-storying what I understand about the lives of people with learning disabilities.

mind as something which was likely to be happening in other hostels. This visit told a different and positive story. Reflecting on the action of our research visit on this morning gave us a chance to hold both possibilities in mind. We had become open to the process of discovering this home and a story had been re-imagined.

(I also detect a number of details and images that were later to surface in *Tony's story* in the previous chapter.)

There followed an interval of several weeks during the summer break before we met for our final day together.

## **j**ournal ... Front-line Week 5, 14/9/2004

### Journal

I drove down to the Irish Centre after this interval, taking with me some white roses from the garden as I knew we were being put back into the pokey ill-equipped room we had started in. There was some major security alert in the district. Roads were shut off and a police helicopter passed overhead.

The group seemed pleased to be together again and any anxiety I might have about how far we had progressed soon melted away when they started talking about their pieces of work. Lloyd had turned his transport exercise into a well-presented report with photos, charts and recommendations. Lucy spoke at some length about the labelled pictures she had collected and used with a service user who has limited spoken language. She had discovered that staff and carers had underestimated what the person could say. Lucy was delighted to discover that there was a wider vocabulary there, a new channel of communication. Ian smiled in a resigned way at his having not been able to retrieve in time from Boots the photos he had taken of cooking sessions.

### Commentary

I wondered how well the momentum of the programme had been maintained during the summer break.

This anxiety told me that there was still some residual clutching at my old role of trainer. Within the framing of collaborative inquiry, if today did not go well it would be down to all of us, not just me.

I had found a chapter in Winter (2001) that was written by a person occupying a similar role to that of the Silver Street manager, Beverley. It described an action research project to achieve 'a more client-centred approach to serving the needs of people with profound learning disabilities'. We read through extracts of it together.

At 11 am Beverley, the service manager, and three manager colleagues arrived. I suggested that we divide the session into:

- a showing and talking about people's work during the programme
- a more general discussion of what managers hoped to achieve through the *Different Days* action plan and how staff felt able to respond and participate.

The first part of the session went very well. Beverley, the manager, responded warmly and positively to what she heard. She asked people to say how being on the programme had helped them learn. They talked about the challenge of thinking again about service users' needs and the opportunity to learn from each other. Lucy spontaneously rehearsed the moment when she had challenged our process in Week 3 and explained how she had then realised that this was a different kind of learning from a taught course. As they talked I turned over in my mind how to run the second half of the morning. I feared that without a structure, it might still just have the potential to develop into managers explaining or defending the plan and staff saying how it wouldn't work.

I had brought a roll of kitchen foil with me, (a material that Deborah Jones at Bath had used so successfully with our group). I asked people if they were up for a game. "As long as it's not a role play", chipped in Beverley, the service manager.

There was a strong sense of rehearsal for a performance about the first half of the morning. Agonistic play was shaping up around the question of how the visiting group of managers would judge what they found.

I split the group into two sub-groups, and asked two managers to join each.

I gave each sub-group a six-foot length of foil and asked them to use it to model how they would like the Day Opportunities Service to look in four years' time. One group settled on the floor and the other round the table and there was an agreeable hubbub.

In the talk that followed I was impressed by the group's level of engagement with re-shaping the existing service into something radically different. The combination of the managers' presence and the creative activity of the foil brought out the energies and visions of a number of people.

The group containing Beverley, Ian and five others had considered throwing the foil away as a gesture to demonstrate that the day opportunities service might no longer be there visibly because it would have been absorbed into the community. Instead they made a small structure in foil that was a contact point where users and staff would drop in during the day. Everything else was out in various networks, voluntary agencies and services in the community. The second group had replaced the centre by a mobile headquarters in the shape of bus.

In the conversation that ran up to lunch Beverley said she didn't think her current role would still exist. Others spoke about a service that might be managed flexibly in the community using mobile phones and the Internet.

This expressive modelling activity made people's commitment and energy clear to others. The symbolic use of a material as 'anonymous' as silver foil, liberated a lot of playful

Yet again I am struck by how minimal an intervention it takes to switch the flow of play. If we had all sat round and had a discussion about the future, ideas would have been developed in a linear counterpoint of contributions. The silver foil exercise in two parallel groups was a playful alternative that engaged everyone simultaneously in inventing the future.

By this stage there was a definite sense of llinx as the lunch became a sort of end of term party.



inventiveness. By initially freeing people from the constraint of sequential comments, ideas could surface and be developed in a more fluid way.

## What I learned in the completion of this action research project

In reflecting further on this account of the final day in this project, two themes emerge, firstly, the value of the model-making process that Barry (1994) refers to as making the invisible visible. Secondly, I want to reflect on where I and the group stood in discovering what it meant to work through a cooperative inquiry.

### Model-making

I found it remarkable how articulate the models were in expressing the difference we had been exploring in this *Different Days* action inquiry. Not only did the activity reveal more concrete imaging of how the service might be, than had surfaced in earlier discussion; but it also provided an indication of the emotional energy that people were feeling about these changes. They enjoyed the inventiveness of their model-making.

Barry's (1994) description and analysis of model-making in consulting assignments has already been referred to in Chapter 8, *The Expressive Aesthetic in Practice*. In analysing his practice with a group of military officers, Barry refers to the psychophysical patterns in symbolic inquiry such as defensiveness, denial and energetic shifts in mood and energy.

This Silver Street group had worked through earlier mood swings and had the benefit of collaboration over five days. Some detectable defensiveness came in their manager's mildly distancing comment before we started about not wanting to do role-play. It was also her group who playfully considered rolling up the foil into a ball and throwing it away.

Her arrival in the established group may well have energised them to show themselves at their best and in so doing repress any ongoing pessimism about the feasibility of change. (Even as I write this now though, I doubt whether the new power dynamic of the manager's presence would have held them back much; they have a respectful but open relationship with her.)

Drawing on the work of Schaverien (1987), Barry argues that symbolic inquiry can be seen as a process of transference.

**'it is the temporary transference of a client's hidden feelings and beliefs to the creation that gives the process its power; the construction becomes a "positive scapegoat." Unlike**

**the conventional therapist/client relationship, where the client projects wish states almost exclusively onto the therapist, symbolic inquiry leaves the consultant in a relatively neutral position.’ (Barry, 1994, p. 5)**

(This valuable distinction between therapy and symbolic inquiry connects with my earlier reflection in Chapter 8, *The Expressive Aesthetic in Practice*, on exchanging WB Yeats poems with a participant as we drove home from an away-day. There, self-reflection on some personal issues in the participant’s life, was made possible through a sense of permission set up by our shared poetic inquiry.)

The discussion which followed this modelling session was focused and energetic. The small vehicles and contact points that they made, had acquired a level of imaginative presence in our thinking about the future service.

Barry endorses Schaverien’s view that if the symbolic transference is substantive it will move from the ‘diagrammatic’ or illustrative stage, to the embodied in which the construction represents deeper and stronger emotion and then to the talismanic stage where the creation seems to acquire a life of its own.

When the activity was over, the models were rolled into balls. No one made a bid to take them back to the centre. Their embodying of people’s aspirations was complete and the image of a more community based and dispersed service was in people’s minds.

#### **Action research**

On this final morning I had experienced more clearly than before what the process and facilitation of action research could be like. Whilst I had played a crucial role in shaping the activity it was the group’s insights and dialogue which brought it alive.

I thought back to the opening play of resistance in Week 1. Together we had now glimpsed how service users might be better served in flexible and responsive ways that more closely resemble a normal family- and/or community-based life. We knew it would not be easy to move in this direction, but through our collaborative action research people had found a more shared language and started to re-vision future possibilities. I hoped it would enable them to work more collaboratively when facing inevitable future setbacks and obstacles. I hoped also I might have the opportunity to follow this through with further connection with Silver Street. This was to be the case as I was subsequently asked to facilitate the third project that I describe in Part D.

## Conclusion

This completes my account of the second stage of significant involvement in Silver Street as a research environment. During this period I learned about a paradox of action research facilitation, through which I discovered that *less* leads to *more*. By not stepping in and speaking into the silence, by not accepting that the group passed all decisions back to me, I discovered that inventiveness and openness flourished. By holding firmly to the principle of collaborative learning, I witnessed how people can grow into an active learning group capable of managing its own process.

The aesthetic of this programme lay for me in the subtle development of relationships, ideas and feelings that the group experienced and in their growing capacity to represent them to each other. It was manifest in the dialogue particularly around what was to be learnt and how it might be learnt. There was also a delightful quality of improvisation on the basic theme, as we found ways of shaping the content of the days to meet our objectives.

In describing the visit to Mencap in the afternoon of Week 3 and the hostel visit in Week 4 I noticed the narrative and poetic impact that they had on the main *Different Days* inquiry theme of this project. Through reflection on this storytelling and the aesthetic context in which the stories were told, we were able to fill in further parts of re-imagined picture of the lives of people with learning disabilities.

I concluded by giving an account of the last session when the Centre managers joined participants in a review of what had been learnt. This morning was characterised by playfulness and the use of symbolic inquiry in two parallel model-making activities. By reference to Barry (1994), a distinction between person-to-person therapy and symbolic inquiry was recognised.

The third and final account of work in Silver Street will be presented in the Part D. In this project with staff and people with moderate learning disabilities I will show how we inquired into creating work and training opportunities for a group of ten service users. It was in this final programme that we had the opportunity get even closer to an understanding of the needs and wishes of people attending the Centre. Key dimensions of this third piece of inquiry were the inclusion of people with moderate learning disabilities in the inquiry group and the introduction of creative media into the process.