

6 How does working in this way influence others?

6 How does working in this way influence my practice with others?

Introduction

The question that forms this chapter title is broad in its implications and my reflexive responses to it will be found not just here but also throughout the rest of the thesis. The value of the question is that it challenges me to turn my attention more to outer arcs of inquiry whilst still holding on to the inquiry into my own developing aesthetic which was the focus of the last chapter.

My intentions therefore are to,

- begin to explore the changes that follow from my developing aesthetic in practice
- to do so through reflections on my first period of practice at Silver Street as a volunteer.

This work took place in 2003 and now in 2006 I return to the extended contemporary journaling of this first stage of connection with Silver Street. I notice how some of these accounts have taken on an almost iconic status; by this I mean that they have crystallized around a particular action or image and I have endued them with a heightened significance as they inter-relate like beads with other episodes strung on the narrative thread of Silver Street. Individual stories have subsequently re-surfaced in different contexts either as verbal re-tellings or as written texts that were used in later projects in Silver Street and elsewhere. I do not therefore approach them as if they had been frozen in time and somehow acquired a fixed meaning; they are still live and capable of making new connections with me and others.

My decision to write and share what I was writing week by week was perhaps the most influential change in my practice. It stemmed from an interest in the place of journaling in my own first person inquiry. I had developed this through my participation in an MSc programme in Organizational Consulting at Ashridge that I completed before joining the Bath Doctoral Programme. However I had never before extended the readership of what I wrote to include the people I had written about.

Ellis and Bochner, (2000) describes the influence of evocative stories, as they,

'activate subjectivity and compel an emotional response. They long to be used rather than analysed; to be told and re-told rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted fact.' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 744)

I think what I capture in returning to this first volunteer phase of the work, is my sense of risk and excitement in the openness of this offer. I did not know how the writing would be received. I wanted to push myself beyond what was then my current practice and establish a fuller and more responsive relationship with the people with whom I was to spend this time. In what follows in this chapter I will reflect on the extent to which this began to happen. I also notice that inevitably in exploring how my developing aesthetic influences my way of working with others, I cannot help but notice how theirs is synchronously influencing me.

In this chapter I will work with two journal accounts of meetings I held with staff at Silver Street. In the first of these meetings I introduced myself to the group as a volunteer/researcher; the latter part of this dual role not surprisingly became a focus of interest and curiosity. The second meeting came at the end of this first Silver Street project when I worked with a small group of staff, inviting them to reflect on our shared experiences of the intervening weeks.

I have chosen the initial and final meetings to focus on because, as occasions of transition, such events offer a number of insights. As was referenced earlier in Chapter 3, *A theoretical framework*, Bateson (1972) was attracted to interfaces between systems of mind as places where there were heightened levels of learning about the news of difference. I will therefore explore my own sense of joining this community and also seek evidence of the ways in which this influenced my working with others.

Between these two accounts I include an analysis of one day's journal from the middle of this two-month period when I was beginning to orient myself in the very different world of learning disabilities. This will provide me with an opportunity to reflect on the experience of being with people with profound learning disabilities for a day. In so doing I shall explore the aesthetic processes at play in my noticing and responding to what happened, as we made connections with each other.

Making connections

In September 2003 I had got permission to work as a volunteer at Silver Street as a volunteer. It had taken some months. In my letter seeking permission from the Centre's management I had explained that any writing that came from the experience might be included in my research at Bath. I also offered to disguise the identity of participants and indeed the location and identity of the service. All material would be made available to be read and discussed within the Centre. If photos were to be included in the thesis, their use would be cleared by seeking consent from those involved and/or their parents or guardians. (This agreement was implemented in 2006, via the Centre manager.)

My strong intuitive attraction to spending time at Silver Street has already been outlined in Part A. I now include the account that I wrote after an initial meeting with staff. My subsequent commentary is shown in the right hand column. This was the beginning of a cycle of writing and response to writing in this first phase, (September '03 to November '03).

*J*ournal ... My first visit – 10/9/03

Journal

I arrived at Silver Street as buses lined up to collect people to go home. During a brief hello chat with Fiona in her office, I heard a PA announcement calling all staff to a briefing. Fiona points out that this is my half-hour slot to introduce myself and my work.

We go to a large room where staff are assembling. 27 of them sit in a variety of chairs around the edge of the room. I know fewer faces than I expect. I walk round handing out my prepared sheet of introduction. I say hello to each person as I give them their sheet. Fiona introduces me and I stand up to talk.

I 'take up the strain', talking to the silent group. I follow the contents of the first few paragraphs of my

Commentary

I knew I was going to meet a group of staff, but this public address summons took me by surprise, a bit like a supermarket manager calling for more hands at the tills.

I had a strange connection in doing this with the memory of handing out exam papers to a class, – perhaps part of my adapting to my role in this moment.

sheet. I pause and ask for questions so far.

“What do you mean by ‘thought provoking?’” – a phrase I had written to describe my previous visits to Silver Street. In answering them, I’m straight into the middle of it. I explain that I realize how little I know about the world of ‘service users’ and how impressed I have been by staff attention to their needs. I am interested in understanding more about the lives of people who use the Service. What choices do they have? How are their lives proscribed, compared to mine? I have been impressed by the way managers have discussed issues of gender, sexuality and freedom for service users.

Phrases like ‘thought provoking’, ‘change’ and ‘spirituality’ became leitmotifs through the project.

I look to see what contact I have made with the woman who asked the question. (I later learn that she is Teresa, a support worker.) I continue my commentary on my written sheet; I say I want to work, not sit and watch.

The contact was positive and she became a warm ally through later discussions;

Teresa asks me if I can cook. There’s some laughter around my admission that I don’t but am willing to try.’

I can hear how she is ‘grounding’ me in the kitchen as a sort of playful test.

Reading this again at an interval I am still conscious of the tension in me of this initial encounter; I can recall the sensation of gears grinding as I sought to find a way of connecting with them. I was carrying an anxiety about the gap to be bridged between the group and me. Teresa’s question led to a humorous resolution of this tension; in answering, I was showing more of the individual who had presented himself as being laden with all these challenging questions.

I take from this the need to tune in quickly to the aesthetic of the group – as well as is possible in the unpredictability of how such events unfold. Through repartée, we had found a

way of accessing the implicative story we were both interested in – ‘What are you like? What am I like with you?’

The opening act

In this next extract I notice the way that my previously circulated written statement of intent provides linguistic hooks on which meaning could be tried and tested, as the group question me. (I also notice the painful ‘hooks’ metaphor that has surfaced here!) This was the dialogue I had not been able to have with their managers.

They are forming judgements about me and I about them, an initial sparring. I am beginning to find a refreshing directness in their questions, which leaves me feeling stimulated and alert.

journal ... ‘What do you mean by spirituality?’

| Journal | Commentary |
|---|--|
| <p>Someone has picked up this reference to spirituality and wants to know what I mean by it. Several others, including Ian and Nicole, add their endorsement to the concern about the word. I explain that I don’t relate organized religion and spirituality that closely. To me spirituality means when a moment transcends the normal, when something happens which is memorable. I add that there is certainly in my view a spirituality about Silver Street. They are visibly relieved that I am not coming to preach or convert. I do however find myself wondering about how precisely I am using the word and what their problem of</p> | <p>Now I am not sure if they were being protective of the culture of the centre in not wanting an evangelist in their midst, or whether they were expressing a robust personal alienation towards organised religion, or both.</p> <p>I was glad that the query had been voiced; this told me a lot about the frankness that I could expect from them.</p> <p>My decision to publish all my journal writing meant that by reading this first entry they knew I was open to self-questioning and reflection.</p> <p>(In fact I subsequently dropped spirituality as an inquiry theme – or did I?)</p> |

definition may do to my inquiry if spirituality continues to form an important parameter.

Throughout I felt as though I could remain open to their questions and answer with authenticity.

Now as I reflect on this first visit, I know that my working there will be significant. Helge picked me up on my statement that I would be interested to see how being there, 'changed my life.' "Is that what you meant to say?"

"Yes," I replied, "all experience change us in some way."

Helge, a Norwegian manager, who had a year earlier been on my ten week supervisors course, would, I felt, have asked this out of genuine curiosity, not to trip me up. My confidence in this judgement derives from a continuing sense of dialogue with him. I could tell from the tone, pace and articulation of his question now, that he was sustaining that dialogue with me.

This theme of change recurs in later sessions. I now find my answer bland, maybe I said more than this? At the final session in this project the question came winging back, this time from Nicole and I had a second chance to reply.

The *mis-en-scène* of this meeting is still very clear to me; people sat in a variety of chairs, some hard and upright, others squashy sofas, scattered at random around the edge of the room. I had a sense of this being a brief and polite interlude at the end of the day and that they had a hundred and one tidying up chores that needed to be tackled in preparation for the following day.

What was being played out had a dramatic quality. It had resonances with a thousand and one moments of initial encounter, the new child entering the classroom, or walking into a room full of strangers at a party, or facing an interview panel. There was perhaps an element of Agon, or competitive play, (Huizinga, 1938, Caillois, 1958), in the testing, they of me and me of them. (Agon is one of the four types of play, briefly introduced in Chapter 4 and

further developed in Chapter 9, *Play in practice*. Suffice it to say now that competition is at the core of many games.)

The Agon in this introduction 'game' was as much an expression of my wish to present my case, as theirs in receiving another visitor.

Journal

I notice how tired I feel as I walk back to the car. Over the wall of the car park I can see a row of council houses, terraced in red brick. One has an enormous corrugated iron extension on the back the whole width of the house. In the garden is a large concrete Buddha painted white and a series of small shrines with joss sticks. My mind goes back to Maenllywd, to the Chan Buddhist prayer hall and my five-day retreat in a Welsh sheep farm. I am conscious of a network of human longing for something that transcends daily routine. Spirituality may have been on test this afternoon, but despite it all, it is flourishing, alive and well in the crevices between these blocks of housing. Buddleia grows too randomly out of the brick walls of railway embankments.

Commentary

This serendipity was remarkable for me and would have been unknown to the people I had just been with, had I not written it up in this shared journal. Already I am offering people a closer connection with my inner thoughts through the writing than I could easily otherwise do. This had begun to open up channels between me and some participants, which would later take on some of the attributes of friendship.

The buddleia becomes a poetic metaphor. It associates urban decay and the spontaneous burgeoning of life within this environment. It also spoke to me of the random but creative nature of the phenomenological nature of my reflections. Where would beauty shoot out between the cracks in the wall? I seemed to be discovering that it was waiting for me, not me for it, in a spirit of less purposive, more open inquiry.

This moment of departure contains another important theme, which requires some further exploration. My reference to a 'network of human longing for something that transcends daily routine' is sufficiently resounding, not to be left without some comment.

In analysing earlier journal items I have shown how in noticing the aesthetic in ordinary moments and finding ways of expressing it, such moments undergo a poetic transformation. They can acquire resonances, which set off further evocative acts of imagination and so cease to be ordinary and unremarkable. Here there may also be a connection with the claims made by Bateson, (1972) Fox, (2000), Abram (1996) and others referred to in Chapter 3, *A theoretical framework*, that the aesthetic is a form of transcendence of everyday life and a way of re-connecting with the sacred.

I notice that I have found it easier to see this link through poetic imagery rather than in propositional ways. The transcendence is in the irrepressible buddleia and the iconography of the shrine set in so domestic an environment.

A day at Silver Street

There follow overleaf excerpts from my account of the fourth day during my initial experience of volunteering at Silver Street. I am to spend the morning with the Middleton Unit and the afternoon with Westfield, both for people with behavioural difficulties.

journal ... 'Day 4 – Thursday 30/9/03'

I started my written record with this introductory note to any staff who had been reading my journal week by week.

Note to readers:

I'm half way through the eight days I offered to come. Please add any comments you want to make, as you read, or catch me to have a chat, or, ring me on 01727 868063.

I'll be very interested in any responses you have.

Alan George

Journal

I am there before mini-buses have arrived. I stroll round the building and hear some chatter coming from the Artscope room.

Artscope seems more of a social hub than the staffroom. As Ian points out, there's always fresh milk for tea there. Keith, the main Artscope worker, has created a friendly lively environment, to which some staff naturally gravitate.

Keith explains that some artist/service users will be going to a studio this morning to see the firing of their ceramics that stand on a cupboard-top awaiting transport. One piece catches my eye. It is a very narrow chimney of clay, perched on top of which is a tiny human figure. Although the piece is

Commentary

Throughout my time in Silver Street I had been impressed by the quality of this work and by the support this project gave to helping people who use the Service to express themselves artistically. Connections were made between the Centre, the Tate Modern and a network of practising artist in this part of London. Those service users who became involved were encouraged to exhibit their work and in some cases sell it. In a community where people are partially verbal and others non-verbal, this expressive channel was felt to be vital; it was an essential part of the life and work of the Centre. People's artefacts were on display in the corridors.

probably only twelve inches tall the tiny proportion of the figure to the chimney makes it look giddily high. In producing it, the artist had made a reference to Fred Dibnah, the TV steeplejack. To me it also has a sense of Lowryesque isolation, part of an industrial landscape where a person is diminished in scale to a distant figure. No doubt there is a spectacular view and sense of freedom up there, as long as you hold on.

Another piece of ceramics awaiting firing, has a powerful, roughly fingered energy, which reminds me of the Jake and Dinos Chapman sculpture that won the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition prize this year. This coming together in my mind of two artefacts from such different sources raises questions about what counts for value in art. It encourages me to start from the assumption that if a work puts something out into the world that has shape and meaning for the artist, it is art; if it sets off resonances for a viewer, the art process lives on and grows in their imagination.

The first question in the commentary above raises an important issue for me about how I influence others. The intrinsic aesthetic of self-presentation is embedded in all interactions. For example I think of my consciousness, or lack of it, of how I sound when I talk or when I

Here I find myself being imaginatively drawn into a form of dialogue with the chimney and its diminutive Dibnah.

I notice that my experiencing of people's aesthetic statements is causing me to re-position how I think about my potential practice here. I have just had to re-examine unaddressed assumptions about what I might expect from people with learning disabilities.

In this moment I became keenly aware that there is expressive life already here which can move me and others. This prompted me to reflect on questions such as,

- What burden of aesthetic exclusivity has my education and upbringing landed me with, that I should have been surprised about the link with the Tate?
- Where do I find this life in other organizations that do not have their own access to media; for example, where are the expressive opportunities in an office or a bank? In their absence how do people find a means of self-expression?

respond to the humour or irony in a moment. These aspects of aesthetic 'presence' are in me, are me and are what I bring to the group.

However, when it comes to questions of aesthetic taste and choosing expressive activities, I, in my role as facilitator, need to be alert to the risk of imposing my preferences. (I discuss this further in Chapter 10, *Play in practice*, as a group of front-line staff spend a number of days with me in a cooperative inquiry.)

Reading the second question again, it would be naïve to expect an Artscope Unit in every bank. However, what would be involved in re-imagining such environments, so that there was room for an expressive aesthetic that recognized individual needs and aspirations, as well as organizational ones. It might even be good business. Pierre Guillet de Montoux (2000) quotes Joseph Beuys' claim that art is tomorrow's capital and describes organizations such as the Finish Bank Business Inc. and the Christo Corporation that have survived and grown in a capitalist environment whilst espousing purely aesthetic aims and practices.

I now return to Silver Street and in particular to 30 September 2003.

| Journal | Commentary |
|---|--|
| <p>On the red bus</p> <p>Three of us, Gias, Gildette and I, set out for a trip designed to improve the social skills of Yannis, Joanne and Venetia. Initially we were to have taken Maggie. She had been moving around in the room with her jacket hood pulled down over her face. The occasional glimpse revealed a cheek which was scratched and bruised by her repeated self-striking, the same problem that I saw with Stella, last week, but with more damage.</p> <p>In fact we got no further than the corner of the road when it became clear that Maggie was not happy with the idea of a walk.</p> <p>An elderly couple passed by apprehensively, as Maggie struggled against Gias' soothing, containing invitation to</p> | <p>In this community people may express their anguish and confusion visibly by trying to injure themselves. The jacket hood becomes a veil to shut off the world.</p> <p>The fear of difference that I saw in this couple's faces is also to a lesser extent still in me although much diminishing as the weeks go by.</p> |

struggled against Gias' soothing, containing invitation to come with us. It was decided that taking Maggie today would be too much of a risk and she was led back inside and Venetia became her substitute.

When we turned into the High Road Yannis got excited at the prospect of going on a red bus. We wait at the bus stop as a stream of red buses come and go each greeted enthusiastically by Yannis' cry, 'Red bus'. I ask Gildette what was the thinking behind this sort of trip, as it was clear that none of the three people we were escorting appeared able to travel by themselves. Gildette explained that it helped prepare them for bus journeys with carers. In any case I could see that both Yannis and Joanne were excited at the prospect and that was as much a justification, if one were needed. Venetia also seemed calmer and more observant of the world around her here at the bus stop than when she had arrived in the room this morning.

Contact with the public

Our red bus arrives to take us to the shopping centre. I'm helping Joanne, a white woman possibly in her later thirties, although I'm discovering it is very hard to guess age accurately. She has already learnt my name and uses it to call my attention to her. She sings and seems so pleased to be out and about. I'm told that her mother has been in hospital for several weeks, during which time Joanne has been with a carer.

We clamber on to the crowded bus and try to make our way down to the few spare seats. The bus starts up and Joanne is very frightened by the movement. Although I am holding her hand, she immediately switches into her

This searching for an educational reason for going on a bus is quaint; I started it by my question. Whatever the programme notes for the day said in terms of learning objectives seemed palely propositional when compared with the spontaneity of Yannis' response to anything red and moving and the others' pleasure and excitement at being out and about. I am left feeling that in working with groups I must learn to be more attuned to the potential and actual play in practice as well as to the objectives.

am holding her hand, she immediately switches into her own safety routine, which involves sinking down and then sitting on the floor. I reach down to try to reassure her. An elderly man struggles up from his seat and moves out of the way. Gildette and Gias lean over to help and we get Joanne up into a seat. Fortunately Yannis is already sitting in front of her. Soon they are both keening and yelping with pleasure at the outing and I look round at the blank impersonal faces of other travellers.

I'm apprehensive about getting off the bus when we arrive; so too no doubt is Joanne, but it goes smoothly. Gias and Gildette check that their local authority ID badges are showing and we head off into the shops.

There's an easy flow between us. Sometimes Yannis or Joanne holds my arm as we saunter along. We look in windows and Yannis gets the idea that a cup of tea would be good. We pick up an Argos catalogue that might be useful for staff or for service users. Back in the Centre I had noticed one or two people enjoying the rustle of pages, as they flick through well used copies.

The cups of tea are bought in an indoor market. We're shown to a small bay where our rather ebullient and noisy group can sit without disturbing other customers too much. The young woman serving us is very friendly and seems quite happy that we should be there.

Venetia sits opposite me; I begin to catch something of her gentle nature, or at least that's how she seems to me today. She dislikes untidiness and is quick to re-arrange the salt and pepper pots on the table. On the next table Joanne has decided that the tea is too hot to

Knowing this much about Joanne's circumstances evoked an imaginative world of mother-daughter relationships. I thought of Winnicott's (1990) studies of attachment theory and child separation from mothers through hospitalization. How was Joanne, a grown woman, coping in her mother's absence?

The fear of difference was in most faces; 'avoid eye contact'. I am most acutely aware of it throughout the bus. Joanne, Venetia and Yannis have other things on their mind.

drink and keeps us waiting while she gets round to sipping it.

Then we are out on the street again looking for a bus back to the centre. I catch a reflection of myself in a window walking with Venetia, me in my sixties, white, tall, with grey hair; Venetia in her thirties, black, full of life, quite heavily built and with large dark eyes. She seems very content leaning on my arm. I find myself speculating what the myriad of passers-by make of us – father and adopted daughter perhaps, or maybe what we are, a person out window-shopping with a new found friend.

We need a 67 bus but they are in very short supply. Every other denomination of bus turns up in the half-hour we wait, but not a 67. It eventually arrives and we get on. Venetia is still on my arm and doesn't anticipate the slowing down and acceleration of the bus. I thread my free hand over a man's head to brace myself on a roof handle as I try to hold both our weights upright.

In describing and analysing this morning trip I am aware of the perceptual interplay between our little posse and the travelling or shopping public. This came into sharp focus for me in the image captured in the shop window for a fleeting second. The fleeting chimera of the image intrigues me. The brief snatches of appearance of Venetia and myself create an external reference point to the novel circumstance we are in. It is as if in aesthetic terms I am reaching out for sensory data to confirm who we are together in this moment.

I remember this young woman's quality of being with us, which was a delight – no fear here.

Again it is this interface with passers-by that preoccupies me. Why is there this need in me to define my identity and role in this way? Do I normally do this?

Probably yes, depending on the circumstance but in a less self-aware way.

The image in the window becomes a metaphor for this search for identity.

Equally my imagination rattles through possible relational answers, to try them out for fit, father/adopted daughter etc.

I was glad to be there; this simple action was my practice on this morning, stepping mimetically into and experiencing the role of someone who works with people with learning disabilities. Relatively brief though this was, I now see this practical association as a valuable part of my practice and a natural way of influencing through collaboration and friendship. I enter into the world, which engages my inquiry. Caught like this in the public gaze I am made more aware of this declaration of a commitment.

We, staff, service users and myself, shared in the aesthetic of shopping in an urban environment. Gias used the purchase of some items for the Centre as an opportunity for social skills practice. We experience travelling together and arriving safely back home. The random flow and connection with others was pleasurable for all of us in our different ways.

It confirmed my developing awareness of the difference that comes from my closer association with the day-to-day aesthetic and social experience of others. Walking along the high road as I accompanied Venetia makes it a different place. The sensory memory of our being together will re-surface when I walk there again.

How did this practice of being there influence others? It added to the basis of shared experience from which we approached the next stage of work at Silver Street. Gias, for example, was to join the cooperative inquiry group described in Part C. We all engaged in the same trip. My particular contribution, apart from participating in the morning, was through my written journal of the trip. In so doing I shared my experience as a newcomer with others for whom this was a familiar day's work. Within the scope of this first volunteer stage of Silver Street work, that seemed more than sufficient.

The afternoon

I now complete my description of this day in Silver Street.

Journal

Westfield 2

I spend some time in the afternoon in this, the last unit of my tour. Only four people are present, the rest having gone on an outing. The programme for this afternoon includes a relaxation session for those who remain. Mats are spread on the floor and Tina and other women are happy to lie down and rest to a CD of birdsong – which I know to be that of a nightingale.

Peter, however, cannot be persuaded to relax. At best he will sit briefly on the mat looking around for a convenient moment to get up and roam. David too is not tempted by the mat and is resolutely ensconced in a sofa, even through the end of the session when his bus is waiting to take him home.

Peter looks to be in his late 40's or maybe older, a sallow complexion on his lined face, which in his youth would have looked strong and fine. He is restless and wary of any contact I try to make with him. There is an impenetrability about the fleeting visual connection we have, as though

Commentary

This nightingale went on singing to the point of distraction. I hear them live in May in South West France singing in the middle of the night outside the bedroom window, not as now, forever off a CD.

But this is my aesthetic, my pleasure, my good fortune.

The electric nightingale in Silver Street may well please others here as much; it would be intrusive to try to find out. Why intrusive? I still feel to be a guest; it would be like querying the colour of someone's curtains. In any case no one here is complaining about it, – as far as I can tell.

neither of us can make sense of this random encounter.

Tina, perhaps in her 30's, is fitfully resting on a mat, but easily distracted by the arrival of a young male worker. The staff are relaxed and gentle in the mood of the afternoon. There is some playfulness around Tina's attraction to him. He handles her declaration of love professionally, but with just the right touch of warmth. I realize yet again how totally people in care rely on this mix of professionalism and humanity, and how vulnerable they would be to malpractice. The moment prompts me to think about the delicacy of service transactions which have to be framed within respect for others' identities and rights, but which still need to be brought to life by human warmth.

This playfulness was of the sort that goes on at street corners as teenagers sound out what it means to be with the opposite sex. It was a flirtatious game initiated by Tina. It appeared to me that she knew it was game and one that parodied what she may have seen elsewhere. She got great fun from it and it was handled very properly by the young male worker. It would not be difficult to imagine another very different scenario outside the professional context, but then there with strangers she would possibly be more reserved. The rules of the game here make clear this is not the real thing.

This last item needs further analysis. In introducing the play theme of this inquiry in Chapter 4, *Inquiry methods*, I referred to Huizinga's distinction between play and 'real life', a theme that is explored by a number of writers including Barthes (1957), Bateson (1972) and Gadamer (1975). This exchange between Tina and a male member of staff also showed the importance of rules to the satisfactory playing of games. He acknowledged her ploy jokingly but said or did nothing which would have infringed the rule that this was play and not for real.

This might be seen as a metaphor for many inquiry relationships. They may be understood to be exploring, in a parallel but 'not entirely for real' arena of play, issues and relational dynamics that preoccupy people at work and in community settings. An 'away-day' may be seen as an act of going to a separate play space where different rules apply. Role relationships change with the introduction of a facilitator. I have noticed this in the ambivalent presence in the group of a team's manager who relinquishes some role authority

to me, as facilitator, whilst holding onto their personal authority of being the team's manager.

There needs though still to be a creative tension between the play and the real thing. The activities of the day must allow the group space to 'play' with what it needs to attend to, but to do so without regressing into the breaking of rules, which destroys the game. Aesthetic activities have a lot to offer to groups in enabling them to work positively and creatively with the balance between the play and the real thing. Because they work symbolically they sustain the relevance as well as the 'unreality' of the game. The poetic of the encounter can also be the territory where 'real' issues are explored dialogically. These themes will be considered more fully in Chapter 10, *Play in practice* and Chapter 11, *Poetics in practice*.

The completion of Silver Street-1

There was an extraordinary richness of experience for me as the weeks passed by. I found myself singing Kumbayah from a school hymnbook with Lina. I have included other stories in journal entries in Chapter 7, *The intrinsic aesthetic of practice*, and elsewhere in the thesis, as they relate to the particular themes of aesthetics, play and poetics. Together they provided me with a fertile reflective territory and an encouragement to focus on the aesthetic in practice as my main theme of inquiry.

Seeking feedback

Having completed this first engagement with Silver Street, I was looking for ways of 'hearing back' from staff how they have experienced our being together. I had already had a warm sense of their appreciation of shared work. A number had also commented on their pleasure in reading what I have written. I wanted now to know in what ways these days have been different and what working together had meant for them.

In the journal entry below I recorded a concluding meeting with staff, which mirrored the one we had held at the start of this period of volunteering. These two meetings were the only part of my being there when I took responsibility for any form of overt structuring or programming. I notice how different it felt to be back in this role. I felt that I was tapping into their previous experience of group meetings – polite, friendly but not wanting to spend too long constrained by this format. It felt as if they were implicitly acknowledging a residue of unsatisfactory meetings. I was also conscious that I had a requirement to gather material from these weeks, as if the event would yield some sort of harvest, when in fact I had gathered a harvest just by being there and noticing the aesthetic of everyday life. Nevertheless there were some unexpected late blooms on offer.

In characterising the pattern of this meeting and the weeks that preceded it, I think of Patricia Shaw's description of organizational change,

'I am suggesting that we could approach the work of organizational change as improvisational ensemble work of a narrative, conversational nature, a serious form of play or drama with an evolving number of scenes and episodes in which we all create our parts with one another.' (Shaw, 2002, p. 28)

She wrote this in the context of her work with the Italian based company, Ferrovia, where her consulting approach is captured in a series of narratives which do have a strong dramatic dimension to them.

I too felt that I had been in a play with a prologue and six acts; now, for the epilogue. In framing this experience in this way I recognise a growing alertness to play as a dimension of the aesthetic in practice. In Chapter 10, *Play in practice*, I will relate these experiences of a playful quality in practice to a theoretical understanding of play as an aesthetic expression.

In this case which I describe overleaf the play is intrinsic to the meeting and arose as a form of improvisation around a loosely structured script.

I felt I was inviting a different type of dialogue, where stories and pictures spark off other stories. It seemed to prefigure some of the qualities of cooperative inquiry, in a small rehearsal of what was to follow in Silver Street-2 and -3. In aesthetic terms, the meeting moves from one evocative story to the next, as people's imaginations are stirred by the improvised flow of the dialogue.

journal ... Final meeting 13/11/03

Journal

The room in which we are to meet, needs re-organizing from a hotchpotch of chairs into a circle for participants, numbers as yet unknown. People begin to gather. ...

I have handed out the photos that I took during Black History Week. These are being passed round as we talk.

Teresa has made a choice not to go to some other meeting but to stay here for this discussion. She has a Latin energy and earthiness; she speaks with fire and passion, eyes alight, arms gesturing. She explains what her reflections are, as she relates to those she is looking after. She has deliberately chosen to work with people with physical as well as learning disabilities, 'the hardest work', she claims. 'Why?' she asks herself rhetorically.

She then gives her personal vision of her work. Sometimes she says, she is working on auto-pilot, for example, when changing people's incontinence pads. She mimes the automatic sticking together of these nappies, a task she'll do many times a day. But she also talks about her sense of fulfilment in getting to know each client, knowing their moods of happiness,

Commentary

I notice how these photos acted as a way of unlocking dialogue and prompted the subsequent flow of stories.

It was Teresa who had asked me in the first meeting if I could cook. This opening play had created a bond which now encourages her in the telling of this story.

Her story is made all the more influential for me by its sensory detail.

depression, anger. She struggles to find words to convey these relationships, and settles for 'love'.

Later in our conversation I talk about 'deconstructing' my practice. She chips in, "You've been reading Derrida!"

Steve talks about an earlier job in residential care when he was left looking after ten clients single handed for four days and nearly went mad. On the basis of this, my first encounter with learning disabilities, I cannot imagine what that might have been like.....

By this time, about a half an hour in, we are talking in a focused way often through stories. I point out how engaging these stories are for all of us. The energy increases when we look into them, as tellers or listeners.

I had prepared and circulated six pages of

This game around referencing Derrida was a brief gesture towards confirming a relationship with me. I was surprised by it and was left wondering where she had studied Derrida. I left it though where it landed, briefly acknowledging it and moving on. I could explore this further with her later.

My planned framework for the session had become deeply buried under the flow of conversation. It was as though my agenda had become the jazz classic around which the group, including myself are improvising, (Barrett, 2000).

This story spun off the earlier contributions. The meeting had come alive.

excerpts from my journal. This is my repository of stories. I hope that they have had access to them as I had asked. I'm not sure that they have, but fortunately many have all read some individual accounts week by week.

I remind them of the Summer afternoon item in my journal from Day 1, (included in the previous chapter).

We talk together about the randomness of disability and the quality of life that organizations like Silver Street aim to offer.

I talk about the early challenge made to me by Helge about how I thought working here might change me. Nicole now cuts in and asks, 'Well, how has it?' My first response is to say 'read the journal'. I then explain that I feel changed in my understanding of learning disability and what it means to provide this service. I add too that I feel changed in my experience of facilitation.

I ask them how it felt talking as we have done during the last hour and a bit. 'Yes,' they say, 'it's been useful, but it wouldn't have been like this if you hadn't been here.' Ian says that they have been 'polite' because of me. I ask what this means.

He scans the group and looks at the assistant manager. There is a shiver of laughter around the room. Sometimes, they explain, their

The bringing back into the group of these texts further anchored our shared inquiry, as people recalled the sensory detail of the incidents and what they had felt at the time.

They were also hearing together how I had represented the life of the Centre. This will have been the first time for many that their work had been represented in this way through storytelling.

I noticed how different it felt approaching this question again with the experience of this first stage of Silver Street behind me.

The answer was much more evident in the journal and how I now felt in relating to people on a daily basis, than in the few words that I put together here. This reinforces for me how working in more structured aesthetic modes such as writing can support and deepen dialogue and in so doing generate different types of knowing.

meetings become unpleasant. I feel beneath all the good work, the commitment, the service, there is a glimpse into the darker side of organizational life, from which I as a volunteer, have been screened.

....

Suddenly the session has ended; people are anxious to get away. There are some very friendly farewells including an enormous hug from Teresa and some good words to me from a number of others.

I now think that this sense of shadow was just that – one of the passing clouds that are present in all groups. The fact was that this issue could be articulated openly. I was to pick up a fuller understanding of this when I started the next project.

The abrupt end to the second meeting resembled that moment at the end of a play, as an enrapt unified audience dissolves into exiting individuals and groups. We had completed the substance of our play together; there was no need to hang around.

In reflecting on this meeting, I notice how my stance throughout was spontaneously appreciative, (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2004). I felt that most staff were doing the best possible in a world which, as one senior manager put it, you either started to work in and got hooked for life, or you left within the week.

Conclusion

Much of the analysis of the two meetings described in this chapter has focused on conversations. Shotter (1993) describes the unfolding conversational process as,

‘a changing sea of moral enablements and constraints, of privileges and entitlements, and obligations and sanctions – in short, an ethos.’ (Shotter, 1993, p. 39)

Shotter’s fusion of the natural imagery of the sea and group dynamics is powerful. It captures the emotional flow of encounters as expressions of social and ethical relationships. It points ahead to a direction for my continuing inquiry. I was very conscious of the ethos of these meetings and could begin to hear some of the privileges and obligations that were surfacing on this swelling sea. My *privilege* was to be part of this dialogue. My *obligation* was to contribute to the work of the Centre through my participation. Shotter describes this as an ethos. I would as well call it the aesthetic of this community.

I chose to establish a relationship with the place and the people of Silver Street, that was open to emergence and which allowed time for the growth of shared dialogue and friendship. An approach similar to this has been described by Tillmann-Healey, (2003) in a paper entitled 'Friendship as method'. In it she gives an account of a process of researching into the lives and experiences of a group of gay men by establishing a network of friendship with them over a period of five years. The friendship I began to experience with people at Silver Street opened up a dialogue, which was very different in its longevity and degree of openness, from most of what had preceded it in my experience of practice.

In providing a reflective commentary on my journal entries I have begun to explore the themes of play that were embedded in these encounters. I had experienced playfulness in exploratory games and engagements with this new world.

I described how deciding to produce and publish within the Centre the artefact of my journal was perhaps the most significant part of this transition. In doing this I found a way of sharing something of my aesthetic experience of place, time and people. Its existence created a form of triangulation between the writing, the people, and me. They and I could use this artefact as a means of reflecting individually and together on what had occurred.

At intervals later in the thesis I will show how other representations of this developing relationship acquired further poetic and playful dimensions. These themes will be explored in Part C and D, both through inquiry into related literature as well as the story of subsequent stages of Silver Street work and other practice examples.