

Section 3 - From Surviving to Thriving

Chapter 9 – Learning to Thrive

Introduction

How do I communicate ten years learning in one chapter? This has been a challenge with which I have sometimes actively engaged and then at others withdrawn from. There is so much I want to write about that decisions about exclusions and inclusions are difficult to make. In the last ten years great insights have radically changed my perspectives *on*, and my way of being *in* the world and produced many valuable pieces of writing that I have been reluctant to accept could not be included. As I struggled with the difficulty, and challenged myself to know the source of my resistance, I realised that I was resisting the knowledge that there was space to tell the *story* of moving from surviving to thriving. Yet when I moved from writing the experience/ stories, to a mode of generalising about the process I found myself outlining what seemed like a linear sequence of steps to be taken or competences to be mastered. Steps which though critical to the process of learning to thrive seemed ‘empty’ without information of the experience of being in those positions and of moving from one to the other. In thus articulating my struggle, I realised that I had returned to the problem I had anticipated at the start of the research, and that had been encapsulated in the poem about the explorer and the map in chapter 5!

I was recognising that for me the most valuable learning from this research journey lies in the *process* by which we (my collaborators and myself) had effected varying degrees of changes in ourselves. It was *in the course of* the various research/learning actions that I learned about the nature of the terrain, expressed in (Chapter 8), and happened upon information about critical issues that have to be encountered and negotiated in order for us to not only survive but thrive in this terrain. Working with my resistance to presenting these stages as linear, I began to understand that the wisdom produced from my experience indicated that the process of transformational growth was cyclical, and that intervention could be made at any point in the cycle. There are indeed, specific and identifiable critical aspects of the process with which the learner must engage, but how and where the individual starts is dependent on the prior experience, motivation and energy of the individual. Vaill (1996) makes the point that learning which changes not only our behaviours but our ways of being in the world needs to be self-directed, and as such, each learning journey is unique.

I discovered that the process of moving from surviving to thriving is a complex weave, which demands that we *change ourselves* through a very challenging process of learning and unlearning. It demands the *objective analysis* of the specific ways in which our disadvantage and oppression is systematically constructed. It also requires that we *understand and change the relationship* between the objective, external system and ourselves. This work involved me in Learning of a type described by Vaill

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(1996) as " Learning as a way of being", by Bateson (1972) as Learning III, and by Schon as model II learning.

It is not my intention in this thesis to explore the significance of these theories of learning for the process of moving from surviving to thriving. Notwithstanding, at this stage of the inquiry, as the furious pace of 'living the inquiry' seems to have quietened a little, and as I find myself more and more engaged in making sense of 'where I have been', these writers' theories of Learning claim my attention. An important discovery from the research was that it is not necessary for us to know what type of learning we were engaged in, in order to undertake processes of transformatory development. In fact in recent times, as I challenged myself to cease avoiding engaging with Bateson's theory of logical types and Learning I, II and III, I realised that there was possibly some sort of unconscious self-protection at play! I had been introduced to Bateson's work, by Judi and Peter, in the very early stages of this work and I had found " Steps to an Ecology of Mind" invaluable in building my understanding of double binds, yet I had avoided reading the chapter on logical types. It remained in my memory as something that must be read, but I just never got around to reading it. Reading it in recent months I was extremely glad that I had not read it earlier! I had known that I was engaged in a difficult challenge, but until then I had not fully conceptually understood the scale of challenge. Having read the chapter, I wondered if I would have assumed that my endeavour was impossible and given up if I had known what I was involved in, and been able to theoretically analyse the shift in type of learning that would be involved. I decided then that sometimes ignorance is not only bliss but also necessary to discovery!

This chapter is really a collection of essays exploring four aspects of the issue of moving from surviving to thriving. These are:

- a. Our notions of thriving;**
- b. Awakening the Wild Woman**
- c. Re-framing the Black Woman.**
- d. Finding and valuing self**

The first piece of writing provides information from our inquiries into the meanings that we gave to the notion of thriving. In the other three pieces, drawing mainly – though not exclusively - from my own Living Inquiry, I explore critical issues in the process of recovery from oppression and becoming fully human.

As I write about these issues I will be communicating:

- Information about the challenges, dilemmas and contradictions encountered in changing self
- Insights gained about the nature of the system - this builds on, and extends and maybe sometimes repeats in a different way, the information shared in chapter 8. Critical to the negotiation of our liberation is the understanding of:
 - i. How we are trapped – this is cumulative learning gained not once, but by returning many times to the same issue, and on each occasion adding /collecting a sometimes small, but new, understanding of this process
 - ii. The part we play in our entanglement

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- iii. How we may change our relationship to the system.

From the stories it will be seen that learning to thrive is a lifelong process, in which we search for the various points of our entrapment by the system and continuously, repeatedly and sometimes with great tiredness, work at negotiating our dis-entanglement and in the process we change ourselves. As a study where the main objectives were not about theory-making but about actively trying to change our lives, there are no 'ends' to any of the issues identified - the work continues, and in many instances it is hard to define the starting points.

A. Our Notions of Thriving

At the time of starting this study I assumed that thriving was a point at the opposite end of a continuum to surviving, and that it would demand a higher level of competence / mastery of the same type of skills used in surviving. I thought that both surviving and thriving were identifiable, unchanging states to be attained - with thriving being a sort of Nirvana. I exaggerate somewhat as I try to describe some of my very early unarticulated assumptions about these terms, but in my exaggeration I hope to communicate the quality of the shift that took place in the meanings I bring to these terms. In the previous chapter I wrote about our uncovering of the experience of surviving, and of the sense of powerless helplessness that often accompanies this experience. Running parallel to this exploration was our inquiry into our notions of thriving. I started the process in my collaboration with Roseanne. In a journal entry 5 September 1989, reflecting on the insights that had occurred after Roseanne and I had considered this issue I wrote:

"We both had images of plants growing -abundance, greenness and fruitfulness. My image was of a coconut palm - laden with flowers, fruit, and with small flowering plants growing around its roots. I had chosen the coconut palm because a) it is not indigenous to Britain; b) it has very strong roots, and copes with the elements by its ability to bend and weave; c) others benefit from it in so many diverse ways. It is graceful and beautiful and thoroughly useful. It provides welcome shade from the strong rays of the sun, the branches can be used to make houses, baskets, trays and firewood, and the fruit provides water and food. It seems to me that when we are thriving we are like that.

It is a process of transformation and growth. Michel Quoist (1959) states:

"The flower must be transformed in order to become a fruit. The fruit must be transformed in order to become a seed. The seed must be transformed in order to become a living thriving tree."

Thinking more about this concept, it seems that it is a process, a product and an outcome. It is both a present reality and a goal to be attained. I do not envisage ever being able to talk about this goal having been achieved - any attainment can only be in the transient present. For instance at this time I am experiencing myself as thriving but I also anticipate that there may still be times in the future when my experience would be best described as surviving.

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I am learning that growth, development, the giving of birth, creating of new life involves a process of pain -sometimes quite acute pain. The moving from one state to another is paradoxical, involving death and birth, joy and sorrow, pain and happiness.

Writing at this moment - three months pregnant - I am very conscious of this. I have a heightened awareness of the great changes that are taking place in me at so many different levels. At an intellectual level it is exciting and wonderful to see the ways in which a young woman's body is being prepared for motherhood. However at an experiential level there is pain - physically, emotionally and even spiritually. Physically my pelvic joints and other parts of my anatomy hurt, I sometimes feel as if I am gradually being torn apart! Emotionally, it is difficult to let go of the image I have of myself - both physically and otherwise. I am struggling to come to terms with the idea of being responsible for this new person, who I sometimes experience as an intruder! The shift from independence to having a dependent is difficult. Spiritually, my consciousness of being part of the creation of life brings me sharply in touch with the creator and with my place in the 'Universe. Here too I am shifting and Learning. One of my lessons is about the need to 'let go and let God.' I am learning that I cannot control life, and that my impact on the circumstances around me is limited. I must learn to relax, trust and wait. I am learning about my dependence on a force that is larger than I am. Once again, this experience is a mixture of pain and joy."

Within this piece of writing are insights that I returned to many times – learning and re-learning them in different ways. There is an understanding about:

- Birth – the triggering of new life that seems to be connected with the process of thriving remains shrouded in mystery. I explore this a little later in this chapter as I inquire into the means by which my own process of growth was started.
- Idea of transformation of the self – the changing of the self-image and of self - definition.
- Thriving necessitating the changing of the relationships between self and others.
- Encapsulation of paradox in the process – joy and happiness, birth and death.

Exploring this concept with others (Roseanne, the Personal Development Groups and with the Collaborative Inquiry group, Chapters 7 & 8), many of the women found it difficult to generate images of this notion. The only other image produced, was of "a person standing on land or on a raft looking back at where she had come from, noticing others who are desperately trying not to drown, and throwing a lifeline or holding out a hand to pull others on to the raft." It was said that when we are thriving there is space for noticing others. This is unlike the experience of surviving where all our energies became centred on ourselves. Claire, in the Collaborative Inquiry group felt that thriving was unattainable for her in Britain and that to experience it she would need to 'go home'. As I reviewed the various responses I realised that thriving was most often seen as a way of being rather than as a state. Unlike the experience of surviving where the locus of control was external, and we were engaged in a reactive response, with thriving the locus of control was perceived to be internal and we "grew

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and developed self even though the blocks and barriers are still there" (Personal Development Group). Across the groups we talked about:

- "Looking for big things, aspiring to great heights and not taking what comes"
- "Looking for ways to improve yourself and to achieve set goals"
- "Having a vision, and taking time to envisage"
- "Going for what you want, not what is imposed on you"
- "Looking for more in life and not settling for less than you want – being assertive"
- "Taking on challenges"
- "Coming to terms with inner self – being fulfilled"
- "Able to make choices without compromising self"
- "Able to say 'Yes' or 'No' without feeling guilty"
- "Being ourselves"
- "Living life to the full – having experiences that uplift the spirit, and creating a mood of happiness"
- "Sense of achievement"
- "Being able to affect things while accepting one's limitations"
- "Able to make a difference in the world – both in our relationships with others and at work"
- "Power within - not over"
- "Inner strength and external support"
- "Loving relationships, sharing feelings and feeling nurtured"
- "Moving forward"
- "Being successful"
- "Breaking out of the cycles of surviving – no longer *just* surviving"
- "Being able to exhale"
- "Overcoming obstacles and struggles"
- "No longer fighting as a way of life"
- "Little sense of fear and anxiety"
- "Feeling of contentment – feeling lively, elated and happy"
- "You must survive to thrive"
- "Loneliness – because you have left others```````````````````` behind"
- "Coming together with other 'thrivers'"
- "Pulling up the ladder – feeling greedy, and not satisfied –intolerant and selfish"
- "Being on top – successful, many holidays"
- "Looking for satisfaction, always looking for more – looking for satisfaction inevitably leads to non-satisfaction"
- "Wheelers and dealers"

As I reflected on the material produced I observed that whereas there was powerlessness and helplessness communicated by our images of surviving, in our notions of thriving we were in action, powerful and creative. In our discussions it was said that thriving was about attaining general well being rather than wealth or position. I also noticed that thriving was something that could be attained *outside of*, and *despite* the environment.

In the Personal Development groups there were some women for whom thriving was perceived as a negative concept. As we explored this it became apparent that they had

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not been able to generate an image, and like Claire, they were unable to associate the term with their own experiences. They had instead looked for models outside of themselves and had selected successful Black people from the media and elsewhere as representatives of that experience. For these women 'thriving' was perceived as a process in which you lose your sense of values and of community. They were anxious about the possibility of attaining such a state and becoming detached from what they perceived to be the humanising values of community. In this I saw our internalisation of the either/or dualistic scheme of thought that caused us to assume that thriving - the attainment of our potential - was selfish and demanded sacrifice of concerns about community, and our ambivalence about thriving and breaking out of the system and of being successful. From our discussions I identified that there were different ways of measuring personal success – one was in Fromm's (1976) terms measured primarily in the 'having' mode, while the other was based on a way of being in the world.

Surviving and thriving as part of the same coin

As I worked at discovering and exploring our survival strategies, and determining what it meant to survive I unconsciously began to disparage our ability to survive. Working with one of the Personal Development groups in 1995, it became apparent to me that we were at risk of undertaking a pendulum swing and throwing out our survival skills. Reflecting on this insight I wrote:

Feb 1995

*It seems that we are now at risk of devaluing the skills of surviving which have kept us alive, in a society where everything that is associated with womanhood and 'Blackness' is actively or passively disparaged and put at risk. In such contexts survival is a major feat. Our presence here - in 1995 - as Black women with a sense of both our difference **and** of our own innate value, and a deeply held 'knowing' of our powers of agency, our ability to resist and survive give us good reasons to celebrate our mothers, fathers, and fore-parents. In moving beyond surviving I do not want, in any way, to devalue, disparage or decry the need for, and value of, survival strategies. My challenge is to find ways in which survival strategies can be held more consciously, more loosely - in ways that do not inhibit our movement towards growth, health and well-being.*

An image of a person in a space suit comes to mind. Is it possible to treat survival skills as a suit of armour - seemingly part of us when worn, but also very detachable from us? Is it about being able to identify those places and spaces in which those suits are necessary and to be able to put them away when they are not. What skills and abilities would we need if we were to be able to sense when the environment is life enhancing and when it is not? Yet maybe we need to go beyond this to ameliorating the external environment so that we are better able to both survive and thrive. If we were to seriously explore possibilities of living on the moon - would we be content with learning how to use our space suits appropriately, or would we want to make the environment less hostile to ourselves?

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It was around this period that I began to shift my perceptions on these issues and to see surviving skills and strategies as useful, necessary and compatible with the mode of thriving. Kegan (1996) suggests that higher orders of change incorporate all prior orders. As was said by another collaborator, "to thrive we must survive". As long as the terrain remains hostile, survival strategies are necessary life-maintaining strategies. However the paradox is that they do not lead to thriving. To thrive we must put them aside and risk not surviving. It is this conundrum that makes the decision to thrive so scary. I began to realise that the issue was not about the survival skills and strategies per se, but rather about our way of seeing and being in the world. I was changing our epistemology for living.

I was now seeing thriving as a conscious process in which we claim responsibility for our responses, and in interrupting the stimulus-response connection that is inherent in survival strategies, we create freedom for us to choose. I began to see thriving as a delicate, inherently risky struggle to attain poise, between modes of being that were both potentially generative and degenerative.

B. Awakening the Wild Woman

In the course of my own inquiry, and in working with others, I observed that we repeatedly encountered certain issues as we attempted to thrive. I noticed that in the course of recovery there was always a point at which the individual made a rather amazing transition from unawareness into consciousness. The process by which the awakening takes place has always fascinated me. As a facilitator of development I could see my role in supporting and encouraging growth **after** this process of awakening had taken place, but how is the process started? Can we as facilitators stimulate its start? Exploring this in an undated journal extract I wrote:

"How do we begin this journey from surviving to thriving? Can one undertake fundamental personal change without being aware of the need for change? Are there times when there is a knowing within us that though unarticulated may prompt us to engage in certain experiences or actions? Does consciousness of the need for change sometimes follow the commencement of the journey? Are there times when having undertaken significant actions or indeed started on an journey we then have a dawning insight about what we are engaged in. In this essay I inquire into the process that triggered my own awakening and try to identify how and where it started.

As I tried to identify the point at which this research was conceived, I felt that I was dealing with a problem similar to that of trying to locate when and where does the life of a human being start; and at what point does the new seed start its process of becoming. In the course of the inquiry I realised that there were a number of critical incidents during which it seemed that I was jolted/disturbed, and from which a different level of knowing about myself in the world occurred. From these I have selected five experiences:

- A surprising and complex question
- Writing
- A story

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- Butterflies at Nerja
- Self portraits.
- **A surprising and complex question**

In 1984, I was part of a team of trainers running a workshop for women executives from seven West African countries in Sierra Leone. The aim of the workshop was to help participants to explore both the external and internal barriers to their health and effectiveness. One of the other consultants was Indira, from India. She was particularly skilled and influential and, as is so often the case, I too found myself undertaking my own course of learning, in my trainer's role.

The establishment of an informal learning set between Indira, one other woman trainer, and myself assisted this. At the end of each day we would meet - often in each other's rooms - to explore issues that were of concern to one or the other of us, and to facilitate each other's process of learning. One day Indira threw a question at me, as if out of the blue - I do not remember the context from which it came, I only remember feeling as if I had been hit in the solar plexus by a big object. It seemed as if for a moment I could not even breathe. The question was "Carlis how do you cope with your despair?" I felt as if I could not speak. I did not know what she meant, but I did not want to ask her. I was already frightened by the question and I did not want her to say anymore. It was with a sense of great relief I realised that she did not expect me to answer it. That question stayed with me for many years and started the journey that led me to this place today.

Some weeks or months after returning home from Sierra Leone, I was ill and as a result spent some time in bed. As is so often the case, illness provided a space to look inward, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of my despair. I did not understand it and I did not stay with it for very long, but I saw it. I realised how tired I was and how rare it was for me to have the space to think. I do not remember doing much else with that insight for a while - except writing to Indira to tell her that I did not know *how* I coped with my despair, but that I had glimpsed it.

- **Writing an article**

In Chapter 4 I recounted the experience of being asked to write an article about being a Black woman Trainer in Britain, for the MEAD¹ journal, and not realising what that would involve until I tried to write it. The learning was in the action (Schon 1983). As I started to write about my lived experience something new happened. I became engaged with my life experiences in a new way. As I consider this experience again, it seems that this change in the way of seeing my experience was again instigated by the asking of what seemed on the surface a simple and almost routine question. However until then I had not allowed myself to know the cost of attaining the degree of career success that I had achieved.

This was the moment at which I started to feel again.

A Story

Indira was a skilled user of life drama in learning, and led some sessions during the programme. One day she engaged us in stories. She told us a story of four princesses.

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Each received two particular gifts at birth. They lived in a Kingdom where the rule of the land demanded that on reaching 21 years of age, they were escorted by the guards to a particular boundary of the Kingdom and left to find their way in the world. One was taken to the North, another to the South, etc, and the guards kept watch to ensure that they did not try to return. They were not allowed to take with them any of the possessions with which they had been blessed while in the Kingdom. Even their particular gifts were taken from them.

Indira took each princess to the edge of the Kingdom, where she must encounter her first major challenge, and then she stopped. Participants were asked to choose a princess with whom they could most closely identify and to continue the story. I was drawn to two of the princesses, and over the years their individual stories have become somewhat confused and merged. However, my aim in this chapter is not to faithfully recount Indira's story, but rather to tell the story that has prompted my growth.

The princesses to whom I was attracted were:

Princess 1: Her gifts were a magic pot that she used to heal, and a bag of tears. Each night as she closed her bedroom door the bag appeared and she cried and cried into it until, exhausted she fell asleep. She was taken to the northern boundary of the kingdom and left in a harsh, barren and cold land of snow and ice.

Princess 2: Her gifts were a book of learning which contained the answer to any problem encountered, and a doll ... but I do not remember what was significant about the doll, so it could not have been particularly pertinent to my development! She was taken to the eastern edge of the Kingdom, where she encountered a wide, turbulent and fast flowing river. There were no bridges and like all the other princesses she could not return, because to do that would be to encounter death at the hands of the soldiers.

The aspects of these stories that resonated with me were:

- *The magic pot and the book of knowledge*: I saw them as similar - one provides solutions and the other heals. I understood how they would both assist me in fulfilling my need to help and they are mechanisms by which I could gain acclaim, and by which my welcome among the people of the Kingdom would be assured. Yet I am cynical about them, I do not believe that my ability to do these things says very much about me. They are simply gifts that I received at birth. To develop and grow I must leave them behind. I empathized with the seduction of that book of knowledge from which ready-made answers to the world's problems are produced and the magic pot with the facility for supplying instantaneous relief. Yet each night in the privacy of my own room I faced the deep knowing that both the magic pot and the book, with their superficial ready-made answers, could not address the contradictory

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challenges of everyday life. Still, they gave the people what they wanted, and as a helper wanting to help I was trapped in the role. But it was at nights away from the activity of the day that I faced my inadequacy. Alone, I faced my despair. The contrast between the public and private arenas of this princess resonated with me.

- *Fear of change and of Life:* Empathising with the princess as she stood outside of the boundary of the Kingdom, having left behind her various gifts I encountered despair, sadness, anger and fear. I imagined her sadness and anger, at the loss of the book and at the system that had forced her to leave the safety of her protected home and to go off to find herself, and to make her own way.
- *Feeling trapped – afraid to go forward, unable to go back:* I experienced with her the feeling of being trapped as she knew that she could not return and yet the fear of going forward as she faced the river - fast, furious and uncontrollable. I felt her consternation as she stood in that 'no place' land knowing that to cross the river she must go *into* it. With certainty she would lose her usual composure and sense of control and risk being doubled-up, disorientated, battered and bruised as she hit against the stones, and certainly she could not go back. I understood her fear of going into the river which I identified as the 'river of life', I imagined her searching for alternative ways of getting across, and bemoaning the loss of the book that would surely have provided a solution. Until finally, unable to stay any longer in the very narrow space, between the soldiers and the river, she enters the river.

In my story, having gone into the river I emerge in a subterranean cave, and there I meet a group of people around a big fire, and on the fire is a big pot. The people of this cold, barren land live underground. They are mixing and brewing herbs, and creating medicines. They are a very old people and their knowledge goes back thousands of years. They draw me in to join their circle and there sitting around the fire I start to learn about healing. This is a different type of knowledge, it is not book-based nor magical. It emerges from a place of deep knowing within me. As I sit with these old people, around that glowing fire I know that I will return to the people of my father's Kingdom and again I will solve problems and heal, but this time I will not offer superficial answers. This time the solution will not emerge from a source outside of myself. Then one day when the time was right, and I had learned all that I needed I thanked the people of the cold who had been my patient teachers for so many years, and both regretfully and with a sense of great anticipation said goodbye. I was now ready to return to my daily practice of engaging with the people of the Kingdom, but this time with knowledge that comes from within rather than the ready made answers of the book.

As mentioned earlier, for many years after this experience I returned to and reflected on this story. Through this process I realised that it had tapped my disillusionment with many of the ready-made solutions that were offered to the issues of race and gender (Chapter 4) and also my despair about being trapped in a situation from which I did not know how to escape. It also spoke to me of my desire to discover other sources of knowledge that were not book based, but emerged from the wisdom gained through experience.

- **Butterflies and Self Portraits at Nerja**

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In January 1988, soon after New Year, I attended a Self-Development programme in Nerja, on the Costa Del Sol, for experienced trainers and consultants committed to extending their understanding of Equal Opportunities. At the time of deciding to attend this course I could not have anticipated that it would provide me with two critical prompts for my process of growth.

- **Butterflies**

The first of these was an activity in which we were asked to choose one or two colleagues with whom like to work. Each person was asked to select a critical issue from their work with which they were currently struggling, and on which they would like to work. Each pair or trios then selected a single issue on which they jointly agreed to work. Feedback to the plenary group took the form of a picture that in some way depicted their joint work. The activity culminated with a display of the pictures on the walls, and a group conversation in which the creators of the picture could respond to questions about meaning.

On this course there were only two other Black participants. A woman whom I had met some time previously when she attended a course that I had led, and a Black man who was a friend, though not a very close, of mine. As we got up to leave the training room, eye contact was made between the three of us and without words invitations to work were made and accepted. This was a very brave decision to make, and we acknowledged this as we walked out of the room and into the sunshine. We had all spent many years negotiating white organisations and knew the unspoken pressures against Black people 'cliquing', as it was often perceived. We knew that in choosing to respond to our own needs we risked creating a group issue - but on this occasion it had to be risked. That morning in the sun remains captured vividly in my memory as a moment when I experienced myself fully in communication with those two people. It seemed as if we communicated verbally and non verbally. We had no problems in deciding on the issue with which we would work - as we had all independently selected the same issue. We had each decided to work on the challenge of getting true sense of self. We had chosen to face up to the difficulty of knowing ourselves in a world that felt like an 'Alice in Wonderland' world of mirrors.

We talked about seeing ourselves as beautiful butterflies when mirrored in the eyes of our families, or sometimes when reflected in the eyes of Black people at junior levels of our organisations. Simultaneously there were other mirrors, which reflected us as grubs. We talked about the distortions these differing pictures created within us. We shared our loneliness and our sheer joy at the experience of working with Black people as peers. It was an experience of intensity and laughter.

This activity in the warm winter sunshine of Nerja marks an important point in my process of transformation and change. In the supportive dialogue of this activity I experienced myself being reflected back to me through the eyes of these managers in ways that I had rarely encountered before. This was an early experience of full participation where trust was given unguardedly. The colleagues, with whom I shared what was, I suspect a rare and momentous occasion for us all, still remain dear to me. In those moments I recognised my desire to discover who I was and I committed myself to working on, a project that was to last for many years after. Also, by deciding to give myself the privilege of choosing the people with whom I would like

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to work, regardless of concerns of ‘race’, and so flouting the unspoken rules and expectations, I learnt about giving priority to my own needs rather than conforming to the rules of the dominant group. Like the Chrysalis this was a very early sign of my emergence.

- **Self Portraits**

The second important activity of that Nerja experience was one led by one of the participant/colleagues. It involved walking around a large number of photographs and choosing one or two that seemed particularly meaningful.

I recall circling the photographs many times, and initially having a problem with my analytical left-brain and internal critic. She wanted to protest and to withdraw from the activity. She said that it was purposeless. She pointed out the numbers of pictures with which there was resonance, and asked how among so many could any meaningful choice be made. However, I chose to ignore her and to keep circling and then I found myself stopping, moving on and returning yet again to three photographs. Another colleague selected one of the three, so that assisted my choice.

The next stage of the activity involved the sharing of the reasons for our choices with one or two others. It was suggested that we might want to work with another who may have chosen a photo that we would have liked to choose for ourselves. I chose to do this.

In talking about the photographs I realised that I was expressing my urge to find and be myself. One photograph was of a woman enjoying what I imagined to be the rain on her face. It triggered a yearning in me for the sensual appreciation of my environment. I saw her as a woman whose senses were alert enough to consciously *feel* the experience of the raindrops on her face. I also saw her as someone who was able to open herself to both the sunshine and the rain and I envied the expression of joy that such a simple and ordinary experience seemed to give.

My second choice was a woman laughing uninhibitedly as she enjoyed a game of cards. Again, it was an image of a simple pursuit producing great pleasure. In this older woman I saw someone who, despite the various difficulties and challenges that she would probably have encountered, having lived for those numbers of years, she still knew how to relax and enjoy life. I wanted to learn that relaxed contentment that I thought produced the facility to enjoy life.

The third photo, ‘shared’ with another colleague, had held me enthralled for many minutes. Initially I could not make sense of the picture. Then eventually I began to see it as a picture of

an artist at work, carving out of some material (marble, stone or even wood) the image of a ‘live’ model – standing nearby. The images of the model and the sculpture seemed merged. The identity of the artist was unknown, as only hands were visible. This picture touched a very deep place within me. I experienced a merger with the whole picture. **I** was the lifeless image created by someone else’s hands, **and I** was also the woman struggling to emerge from the lifeless form.

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So in among all the objective reasons for engaging with this work were these pre-verbal yearnings to blossom, flourish and generally to experience the pleasure and beauty of being the person that God gave me the potential to be.

Estes (1992) says:

"The Wild woman from the viewpoint of archetypal psychology as well as from the storytelling tradition, is the female soul. Yet she is more; she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is of instinct, of the worlds both seen and hidden – she is the basis. We receive from her a glowing cell which contains all the instincts and knowings needed for our lives. ... She is ideas, feelings, urges, and memory. She has been lost and half-forgotten for a long, long time [...] she resides in the gut not in the head. She can track and run and summon and repel. She can sense, camouflage, and love deeply. She is intuitive, typical and normative. She is essential to women's mental and soul health."

The process of thriving demands that this 'Wild Woman' is awoken. In taking consciousness her senses are awakened - she sees, feels, discovers her ability to make connection with others and with her world and finds her voice.

The puzzle of empowerment

In the last ten years both in the course of my job and in my research I have puzzled about the process by which this awakening takes place. I perceived this taking of consciousness to be critically important to the gaining of liberation from the dehumanising processes that stunts our growth. Freire (1972) says that subjects - not objects must enter into commitment to the struggle for liberation, but what is this process by which we move from object to subject?

Having inquired into my own process of awakening, and reflected on various times within this research and in my work, when I had felt that I had witnessed a similar process of coming to life I was still left with a number of questions. How does one move from a passive 'victim' position, where things are 'done' to one, to an active position where one is exercising choice and playing an active part in the path of one's life? What is this process of empowerment that awakens, and breathes life into human beings who have been mummified by their constant objectification, and pushed into the background and given the role of observer rather than actor? Does this process happen naturally, like the changing of the pupa into the butterfly? Is it simply a matter of development and if so can there be external intervention into this process - either encouraging it to happen, or interrupting and halting it? Does this empowerment happen as a result of the environment? Is it like a seed that lies hard and dormant if left in the cold and exposed to harsh lights, but which when nourished carefully with warm, soft, moist earth starts to swell, and sprout until at some stage it blossoms and contributes to the world the goodness of the fruit whose potential lay deeply hidden inside? If this is the case, is the acquisition of the right environment entirely a process of chance? Can others play a part in creating that environment?

Yet every seed given the right environment will not grow. It seems that there needs to be something within the seed that causes it to respond to the right environment. From our human perspective there needs to be an intrinsic desire to grow /develop as well as an environment which gives permission to create or change. At this moment the creation of the environment (though difficult) seems easier than inspiring this urge to

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develop and grow in people preoccupied with survival needs? Having come to the end of this study, the process by which we are empowered to awaken still lies in mystery, and I am now content to leave it there.

In the process of reflecting there were patterns and observations made about how in my role as facilitator of learning and a catalyst of liberation and change I could encourage and support this coming to life? Common themes observed were:

- **Use of stories and imagery**

I was struck by the number of times in my own experience that big and small awakenings took place through the medium of a story, a metaphor and/or an image. I observed that when I worked with the Personal Development Groups in exploring our notions of surviving and thriving, they commented that the images of surviving revived experiences that they had not recalled for a long time. They also talked about the sadness, despair, and anger that had been triggered by that process. It seemed to me that in experiencing the deeper feelings of sadness and despair (Bradshaw 1988) they were being nudged into consciousness.

In working with the Collaborative Inquiry group it was suggested that we used words as part of our masks and that to do deeper work we need to use other forms of communication. We talked about using pictures, collage, and drawing but in practice we did not. Yet I observed that stories and metaphors were often the starting points of many of our explorations.

However perhaps the best example of awakening being triggered by the use of stories and images was my experience of working with a group of Black and White women in a Government Department that I decided not to write about in chapter 7. They were a very de-motivated group who did not see the point of the developmental training course. They claimed that there were no problems of sexism and racism in their organisation, that they were happy with their positions in their Department and that the only problem they had were people who would not accept that they were quite content. I considered the possibility that their statements were accurate. However they were at odds with the lowness of their spirits and the feelings of 'stuckness', despair and powerlessness that I sensed from them. They were also contradicted by a scene I witnessed in which one of these women had been, in my presence, publicly humiliated by her manager, and also my own experience of being negated in the organisation on a number of occasions. This caused me to question what was happening with these women.

As I left the training centre at the end of the first day's training, I did not know how to move forward on the second day. However, having switched my attention from my dilemma for a few hours, and done some meditative reflecting I became aware that our relationship triggered strong feelings for me. I realised that I had been scared by their sense of powerlessness, and by the 'lifelessness' I had experienced in the room. This was an important insight. In finding my anxiety I was able to understand that I might be holding myself back from making full connection with them.

Next day as I prepared to go to the second day of the course I was still not sure what to do, except that it needed to be in a different mode. I felt that I needed a method that

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would engage the left brain rather than the right. Poetry came to mind, and as I stood in front of my bookshelf my attention was drawn to a book of poems by Black women. I took it with me on the tube and there planned a session based around poetry. I had no idea of how they would respond, except that they would be surprised. They were, and soon they became engaged. I put them into pairs and trios and gave a choice of three poems, told them that they had been written by Black women and asked them to say what they thought those women were talking about. Within the first hour this lifeless group had come alive, and suddenly we were working together, and working hard. Soon they were talking about the pain of their own experience, and of the challenge of surviving in that organisation. For many years I remained surprised at the impact that those poems had had on those women. Maybe through poetry (like the stories and images in my own awakening) we can be communicated with at a level below the conceptual. Perhaps at this level my course participants could be 'reached' by those other Black women poets.

Yet if we are to drop our defences, and open ourselves up to others, it demands the right environment. Perhaps in the very fact that I had abandoned the training schedule and resorted to poems they experienced my care and concern for them. Maybe part of the shift in that group was also about the shift that had taken place in me as I moved out of my head and allowed the whole of me to feel and know the group. As I conquered my fear of knowing their feelings of powerlessness, so I was able to communicate with and 'touch' them.

- **The use of complex Questions or intuitive statements**

Critical to my own awakening was the question asked by Indira so many years ago, that has had a profound effect on my life. It was certainly an intuitive statement, and I have often wondered what she saw that caused her to ask that question. I have since learnt that she may or may not know. It might be that she was able to ask the question because she was someone who had learnt to value and trust her intuition. Recently in a conversation with Roselyn¹ I talked about some of my questions about the empowerment of others. She said that she was surprised that I held those questions, as I had on many occasions been instrumental to her awakening to issues that previously had been outside of her consciousness. I asked her for feedback about how I did that. She commented on my ability to ask questions and make statements that made her uncomfortable, to offer her support in exploring them if needed but also to leave her with it, having ensured that my question/statement was heard. I was thankful for her feedback as it affirmed for me the value of trusting and speaking from my intuition. This is something that I have learnt to do more as a result of this research, and as I have found and integrated different parts of myself. It seems that in this endeavour of development and growth others can play roles in the process, but we are never able to predict the effect of our actions. It seems that the best that I can offer is my whole self, and the rest must be left in mystery.

A change in my level of awareness was also triggered in the course of writing the MEAD article (Douglas, 1985). In this instance the trigger was a simple routine question. This experience confirms the value of questions in the process of empowerment, but also helps us to understand something about the power of connecting action with reflection. I believe that this was the critical difference in this experience. To write that article I had to engage in a process of reflective action. It is

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also interesting to me that I knew that I would only be able to write it in my bedroom. At that time when I had not yet learnt to accept that I could cry and still be a worthwhile human being I 'knew' that I would have to be in an extremely private place to do this. A number of times in this Inquiry I observed that a woman would share something about her life that was extremely painful, and caused her to cry, and then withdraw from the group for a period or sometimes forever. This caused me to wonder if they too needed similarly private places to start this process of awakening to their feelings. I can also think of other times when such learning has taken place in the context of the Inquiry/ development group, so there are no simple answers. For the moment I will rest this issue and pick up another strand of learning about the process of learning to thrive.

C. Re-framing 'the Black woman'

This title is not a description of what I set out to do at the time of starting the research. I would not have been that presumptuous or courageous. However as I have looked back at the various explorations that I have undertaken in the course of this work I realised that that is precisely what I have been doing! I entered the study with certain questions for myself. I asked:

- *How can I find a way of successfully and effectively managing to maintain work, home, relationship, and research/study commitments in my life?* – Just prior to starting this work I had become highly dissatisfied with the balance between work and personal life which occupied a very small section of my life. My concern was to live life fully and to pursue health.
- *How can I create greater balance between the personal and professional aspects of my life, and integrate them in a way that allows skills possessed in one to be accessible in the other?* – At that time I was very conscious of feeling out of balance.
- *How can I learn to 'let go' more?* – At that time I was very conscious of an inappropriately high need to feel in control. I experienced myself as being more controlling of others than I wanted to be and I was becoming conscious of the high physical and emotional costs of trying to maintain control in all arenas of my life.
- *How can I be more courageous and less fearful?* - It seemed that my life was dominated by fears and that in so many ways my opportunities were limited by my fearfulness.
- *Who is the Black woman?* – I wanted to discover **this** particular Black woman, as I started the process of waking I became more and more aware that I did not know who I was. I had a sense of the person who had been shaped by invisible hands, but somewhere inside of me this did not seem to be me. I also wanted to get a more accurate 'generalised picture' of the group. At the time of starting this study there were few models of Black women done by Black women. The only ones of which I was aware were those of 'woman' which were clearly based on an idealisation of the middle class White woman, the 'mammy' and the highly sexualised being who emasculates men. None of these pictures seemed to reflect the Black women I knew, so part of my search was to find her.

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These were the starting questions that informed my research actions in my Living Inquiry. At all times I was in pursuit of answers to one or the other of these questions and in the process generating many others. This process that I became engaged in was re-framing the Black woman. The research has indeed transformed me in ways that have been observed by and commented on by my husband, mother, and closest friends. It has also changed the type of informal feedback that I get from people in my professional life.

Finding the problem This was a research project in which the problems were not evident. An important part of the project was their formulation. I entered the study with a conceptual knowing that many of the blocks to my ability to experience my full humanity – whether external or internal were both not easily visible and well disguised. However I had no way of assessing how it would **feel** to engage in an exploration in which there were so many uncertainties and where the research topic is your life! There were times when indeed it felt as if I had lost my grounding and was caught in a totally disorientating fog! Kegan (1996) talks about the challenge of undertaking tasks which demand change of a fourth order. I did not at the time know that this was what I was engaged in but in retrospect I am able to identify that the disorientation suffered at certain times in this project was associated with the nature of the task with which I was engaged. In many instances working with a research dilemma proved to be similar to the unfurling of an onion ring. Sometimes for months or even years I would work with an issue believing that I had located an important source of my difficulties only to discover that indeed it was **not** the problem. In some instances I would be left in a sort of limbo – having discovered that I did not know the source of my problem and yet not knowing how to move on. Often, I did not even know how to find out where to look for the problem. A further complicating aspect of the process was the interrelated, interwoven and tangled nature of these issues. Again my theoretical knowing did not in any way prepare me for coping with the experience. In the course of this study I was to discover layers of entanglement that previously I had not known about as well as to gain experiential and practical knowledge of the issues. A good example of the challenges encountered in this inquiry was my exploration of what it meant to attain balance between my home and work life. As I write this I am trying to think about how I might have expressed this problem ten years ago – somehow I feel that I would have spoken about it differently. An important outcome of this work has been the shifts in my perspectives. Therefore a challenge to the writing of this thesis has been how, with integrity, to portray the shifts that have taken place in my vision. I do not know how it would have been expressed then but I could see from my starting points then that my perception of the problem has changed. **Exploring balancing work and personal life**

Working on this issue has spanned the whole life of the project and it still continues. It has gone through many phases and has spawned many other explorations yet the core issues as I now perceive them to be are:

- How do I enable myself to express the various aspects of myself and to make my unique contributions, in a world which separates the domestic and the public and pressures me to choose one or the other?
- How do I make spaces for self – healing, energising and recovery – in among the various roles?

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I am noticing that despite my concern to restrict the size of this document it seems necessary to express this issue thorough two questions. This is, in itself, an indication of the way in which my perception of the nature of the challenge has shifted. The two questions indicate the connection between the public and private, inner and outer worlds and identify that there is both individual and systemic responsibility for change. I very much doubt that at the start of this study I would have seen the needs of the self as a separate goal of equal priority.

- **Simple addition**

Within the broad theme of balancing work and personal life, one of the major explorations I undertook was of my tendency to overwork and then to make myself ill. I perceived it as a deadly survival strategy, but did not know how to break the double binds. A prompt for this work was the feeling of imbalance and a prolonged spell of illness that caused me - at the urging of my doctor, and colleagues of the management course being undertaken at that time, to review my life and create changes. I did this and came to the conclusion that the problem was due to my being unattached, with no children. Journal entries from that period indicate that I thought the overwork taking place in my professional life was due to the underdeveloped nature of my personal life. I felt that as there were no pressures from this area of my life to boundary the over-spill of work, it was therefore difficult to resist the temptation to fill evenings and week-ends with that. The solution was to enhance my personal life. Understanding the problem in this way I engaged in therapeutic work that allowed me to explore some of my blocks to forming long-term relationships. In that process I learnt about the low level of my self-worth, uncovered my fear of connectedness and intimacy and of commitment. Working on these issues enabled me to give attention to building friendships and family relationships, sustain a close intimate relationship that led to my marriage. Within two years of starting the research I had my first child.

- **Multiplication**

However, while the enriching of my personal life created in me a better sense of balance and reduced the number of hours spent occupied with paid work activities it did not deal with the problem of overwork. Instead I had succeeded in making my life far more complex! I was now managing far more roles than I had ever done before and I began to realise that I had not simply added to the problem but multiplied it. The addition of each person to my life did not only bring responsibilities in relation to that person but each connected me to other people and produced new multiple relationships to be managed. An excerpt from my journal 1992 illustrates the challenge of trying to keep all the roles in play:

Jan '92

My mind is full of thoughts for a paper, and I am frustrated by all the other domestic and family commitments, which make it impossible for me to write. I feel angry at the circumstances, which have removed my ability to be flexible - writing when I feel inspired rather than at the time allocated in my diary. I look back with longing to that period in my life when I had fewer commitments - to a period before motherhood when I could cancel the

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weekend and write, catching up with other tasks at another time. Today I am frustrated because with so little time I will not write the paper I really want to write. Family pressures, the pressure of the caring role in particular has eaten into my writing time.

In this week I should have had three writing days, but half of that time has been snatched away in taking care of my sick mother in law. At this time of my life I am care taking for two mothers! I do not carry this responsibility on my own, but for a number of reasons a disproportionately large part has fallen to me.

With the addition of my first child came a number of new relationships and roles beside that of 'mother'. I became 'an employer' with the full number of responsibilities and functions of that role. As I worked with the problem it changed and as it moved I became more concerned to contain it. I became more anxious to organise and manage more effectively, got better at multi-tasking and for a number of years learnt to survive on very few hours' sleep and still I struggled. There are many pieces of writings in my journals in which I explore this issue and search for new ways to approach the problem. In a 1989 journal, while sick, I wrote:

1989

*Illness is one of the costs I pay for trying to be a superwoman. I am disappointed in myself for drifting back into that pattern of being. .. I am back in a mode of only just surviving. Life is about doing - one thing after another, with no time for being. There are always so many activities competing for my time. A situation where there is only **one** task to be done in an hour seems unimaginable.*

In this same entry I wrote about feelings of disappointment with myself for both not being able to manage the various tasks better and also for making myself ill again. I said that I felt a failure. Some time later, following a period of feeling very overloaded, I undertook a detailed analysis of my roles and responsibilities. Yet again, I set out to organise myself into a routine in which I would be able to have a little more sleep, get regular exercise and do some things to take care of me. I had started the activity by reviewing my life goals, mapping the main roles and responsibilities and from that prioritising the main tasks that had to be done in order to keep all of the tasks in play. Having selected my weekly priorities, when I tried to schedule them I discovered that there were not enough hours in the week! The writing that followed this activity indicated that although feeling stressed and overloaded this objective analysis brought a new level of insight. This was important knowledge - I now **knew** why I was always so tired and why no matter how hard I worked there were still so many things not done.

- **Subtraction and division**

This created a new perception of the problem. I now began to perceive myself as overloaded and as doing too much and I decided to apply subtraction and division to the problem. I decided to review my responsibilities and look for opportunities for dropping some, and to ask for help from others. Working with the problem in this way

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produced new insights. It caused me to look at my contribution to the problem and to find a number of survival strategies at play in the maintenance of this problem. I began to problemise:

- *My reluctance to ask for help* - I began to notice that in many relationships I experienced myself as giving a lot and receiving little, and that eventually led me to explore issues of over-functioning (Lerner 1986).
- *Allowing others to take responsibility for themselves, and to take their share of joint responsibilities*- from this exploration I began to identify the number of different ways in which I intervened to help and ended up either taking over or being left with others' problems. As the princess with the book and her magic pot there was always time for others, but there was no one to recognise that I too need help. This exploration took me into looking at issues of being "too good for [my] own good" (Bepko and Krestan, 1990), and at co-dependency (Bradshaw 1988) and self-worth (Steinem 1992, Sanford and Donovan 1993, Jeffers 1989). This issue of self-worth and self-love is so important that I will give it its own space.
- *Achieving against the odds* – Writing in December 1991 I said,

"It feels as if I have been struggling with overload for a long time. In fact I have just realised that there may be a connection between being continuously overloaded, and the development of two of the skills of which I am very proud. These are my ability to (1) work at a number of different tasks at the same time and (2) achieve a lot in a comparatively short space of time, and against the odds. I guess that when you are in a position where the odds are stacked against you, and you are starting from way back behind the starting line, (1) is an absolute precursor of (2). I am also seeing that it may be possible for one to become hooked on the buzz gained from achieving against the odds, to such an extent that one could be constantly driven to take on challenges. THIS SEEMS LIKE ONE OF THOSE SURVIVAL STRATEGIES THAT IS A BARRIER TO THRIVING."

- *High standards – intolerance of mistakes* – This is a survival strategy that I had encountered previously in my exploration of other issues. I was very aware of its ability to distort 'Black to Black' and 'woman to woman' relationships. I perceived it to be often a contributing factor to the breakdown of relationships between Black managers and their Black staff that was talked about by many managers. In this inquiry I discovered the part it played in binding me to the problem. Working with this issue I taught myself to identify when it was 'safe' to offer 'good enough' contributions, and to accept that to achieve one thing I may have to leave others undone. These were hard lessons that I am still learning about
- *Lessons learned from family and cultural models*: In the course of the research I began to recognise that our emotions and actions are often influenced by messages programmed into our brains in a variety of different ways (Powell 1976, Harris 1973). We are often unconscious of the messages that guide our response and I had come to believe that if I were to be able to create fundamental change in myself I would have to become conscious of the messages I gave to my self. Like Milner (1934), I worked at becoming

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conscious of my thoughts and tried to 'catch' them while in the process of acting. I also found that writing with the left and right hands allowed me to hear the voices of different parts of myself and to listen to the instruction and injunctions I gave to myself. Working in this way I got to know my internal critic who worked very hard to protect me from the hostile environment which put my survival at risk. In addition to these I undertook a number of inquiries aimed at providing me with information about the messages I had internalised about work, family and the Black woman's role.

- *stories we tell each other and ourselves* - In August 1991 I set out to explore my beliefs about having an orientation towards a) career, b) family, c) self. I used mind maps to track my spontaneous responses, as I wanted to capture all emerging thoughts. I also wanted the opportunity to observe links between thoughts. Having generated each map I asked myself "how would I be if I were sitting in the centre of this map?" Reflecting on the activity later I wrote:

"I found it easier to do the career and family orientations. The self-orientation map was hard to do. I am not sure whether I have used the correct descriptive term to trigger my responses here ... The self-orientation map triggered mainly feelings - initially - quite strong and pejorative feelings. I had to wait a while for the belief and values around this orientation to emerge. I am surprised at the numbers that have emerged. This feels like a place of great contradictions. It feels like an emerging position, which is still being wrestled with. I am recognising some of the values from this position, but the strong negative feelings around it are stopping me from fully engaging with it.

The statements on the career orientation map are rather instructive. They are "ought to" type statements. The family orientated statements seem to be the ones that are most in my voice."

From this inquiry I realised that the 'Family Orientation' map most reflected my voice. It was a position that having rejected initially, I had more recently reclaimed, and in that way made my own. The 'Career Orientation' was a sort of 'knee jerk' reaction emerging from internalised injunctions that had not been reviewed. The difficulty experienced with the 'Self Orientation' indicated to me my discomfort with the idea of being orientated to self.

- *The image of the strong Black woman* - The image of the strong Black woman is one with which most Black women are familiar. We unconsciously learned it from our mothers and from other significant women in our lives as we are growing up (Mitchell and Herring 1998). Zora Neale Hurston (1937) describes herself as "de mule of the world". Maya Angelou¹ when asked to write a woman work song wrote:

"I have the children to tend

The clothes to mend,

The floor to mop,

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The food to shop,
The chicken to fry,
The baby to dry.
I've got company to feed,
The Garden to weed,
The shirts to press
The tots to dress,
The cane to cut
I've got to clean up this hut
Then the cotton to pick"

It is sung in an unbroken rhythm with a steady beat – there are no rests.

I then reflected on the images of 'the Black woman' that I had gained as I grew up in the Caribbean. As I did this I realised that whether working in the home or out of it Caribbean women were relentless workers. Social conversation, whether harmonising or conflictory often took place in the context of pursuing other tasks. They were conducted while shelling peas or corn, picking cotton, cooking, darning old clothes or making new ones; during needlework circles; washing clothes in the river, at the stand pipe fetching water; or tending to the children.

Riva Berleant - Schiller and William M. Maurer (1993) in their exploration of women's roles in Dominica, state that news and important pieces of information are passed around the community while washing at the river or at the market, or during hair-plaiting sessions. Creative or relaxing pursuits were either combined with productive tasks or undertaken for purposeful reasons - rarely would women undertake an activity simply for the pleasure that that pursuit may bring. The women I knew were continuously engaged in productive activity.

The Black women around me as I grew up were all managing a multiplicity of roles. Women were involved in care taking for not only their own children, but also for those of other family members or friends. Sometimes because the children's mother was working away from home, or emigrated or because the child's chances of adequate food and education were improved by living with a 'better off' member of the family; or for a number of other reasons. They also cared for parents, aunts and uncles and for those with disabilities.

Most women also engaged in some moneymaking activity. In many instances they were the main bread winner, carrying major responsibility for the well being of the family, but even in situations where this was not so and the head of the household was male, women were generally still economically active. Growing up, it seemed to me

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that it was an automatic assumption that every healthy person, male or female, would be commercially orientated. This meant that if she or he was not employed then she/he would be engaged in some mode of self-employment and/or involved in the acquisition of knowledge and skills that would lead to gainful employment. This applied regardless of marital status.

My mother, despite having sole responsibility for four young children - ranging from 8 to 2 years of age, ran a pre-school education service for most of the six years after Daddy left and before we joined him here in England. Other women offered dress-making services to the community; or farmed and sold their vegetables and fruit to either the local community, at the market in the main town or to the marketing board for export; or made food and sold to school children for lunch or snacks. They traded in fish or participated in a number of other money generating including paid employment.

In addition to these roles most people who had access to any land, outside of that on which their house stood, farmed it. It was common for chicken, goats and sheep to be kept actually in the 'yard' or to be grazed elsewhere, and for a kitchen garden to be maintained. It was often the buying and selling of each other's surplus food that kept many households reasonably self-sufficient, and needing to move outside of the community only for products such as rice, sugar, flour and salt.

They also played responsible (though often caring) roles in the churches - initiating and running

Sunday Schools, youth work, visiting and caring for the sick and elderly. Women anchored the society and featured in all its roles.

The Women in the Caribbean Project (1986) showed that Caribbean women perceived work to be "those activities that are necessary to the daily survival of themselves and their households, as well as those which earn an income." They considered it as a valued activity "which not only has a positive impact on a woman's sense of self but also makes a positive contribution to their societies." (Massiah 1986)

Janet Momser (1993) looking at gender divisions in the Caribbean says "Women in the Caribbean exhibit higher levels of labour force participation than in most parts of the Third World and indeed these levels are often above those in many industrialised nations."

We do not create a demarcation between domestic and public work, but rather perceive work as activity necessary for survival. This perspective causes us to participate in it in any way necessary and to do as much as is necessary to survive. Slavery has provided both Black and White women with different templates from which to work. Angela Davis (1984) says

"Black women were women indeed, but their experiences during slavery – hard work with their men, equality within the family, resistance, floggings and rape – had encouraged them to develop certain personality traits which set them apart from most white women [...] Required

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by the master's demands to be as "masculine" in the performance of their work as their men, Black women must have been profoundly affected by their experiences during slavery. Some, no doubt, were broken and destroyed, yet the majority survived and, in the process, acquired qualities considered taboo by the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood."

Our experiences during and after slavery left us with a greater sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency than many white women. However it also left us carrying huge challenges to our survival, together with a determination to do so and with adaptation skills for surviving.

Davis (1984) states:

"The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery [...] It was those women who passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality – in short a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood."

However, I would suggest that these non-verbal lessons were, and are still, continuously reinforced by the messages we give to each other and by the stories we tell and maybe more importantly by those stories that are not told. My exploration of the lessons learned from my family and cultural background indicated to me that overwork was a survival strategy passed on to me through the generations.

Changing the paradigm

From these explorations my perspective on the problem underwent a radical change. I ceased to see it as a simple problem and began to identify it as deeply embedded and as an addiction to activity or workaholism.

- ***Acknowledging the scale of the problem and naming it***

The naming of the problem was not easy. It took some time before I could really accept inside of me that this was a problem of addiction. Sometimes I joked about being a workaholic but I continued to think that I worked because there was a lot of work to be done, and either it was my job or there was no one else to do it. One of the earliest insights to the problem was in December 1991 when Tukur decided that he would like to spend Christmas with just our 18-month baby and myself. I resisted his suggestion passionately, and we both took up entrenched positions. Challenged by my therapist to say why I was so resistant to the idea of a quiet restful break when I acknowledged that I was very tired, I realised that I did not know. Later I began to realise that the thought of it caused me to panic. I heard myself saying, "What would we do?" My orientation maps indicate that I thought of rest as 'wasting time' and as 'being lazy'

However it was some years later before I really accepted that I had a problem. One day having mentioned the issue of workaholism in a supervision session, Peter responded " Well if you are really serious about this issue of workaholism you should read Bateson on addiction and do something about it". The comment "if you are really serious" registered with me and I began to wonder if I really believed myself to have a problem and if I did why was I not doing any thing about it.

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Acknowledging the scale of the problem involved me in admitting that the problem was both external and internal and that some aspects of the problem were outside of my control. Many of the roles performed and tasks done were genuinely needed if my family and I were to survive. I really did not have the option to drop some of my roles without very negative repercussions. I had to recognise that the problem was being reinforced by forces external to me. However I was in a process in which I produced work. I looked for big challenges because I was determined to prove my worth to the system.

- ***Hitting bottom***

This was the stage when I realised that I was trapped. There were a number of times over the years when I experienced my powerlessness over the problem. In an undated journal entry I wrote:

"I am realising that I cannot stop. I am a rat on a treadmill. I want to get off but I cannot stop the wheel."

Over the years there were many occasions when I became aware of my sense of desperation around this issue. It happened on the occasion mentioned above when having analysed my commitments I realised that there were physically not enough hours in a week to do them if I was also to sleep and eat! However on many occasions I would find a way out. I would create a new plan and occupy myself in putting it into action. However in December 1996 the experience was different. I had been ill for about three months. I had tried western and alternative treatments. I was getting to the stage where it was becoming nearly impossible to mask the extent of my illness and to keep going. I knew within me it was connected to the years of overwork and that I needed to change, what I was doing but I did not know how. My sense of absolute powerlessness over this issue was triggered by two successive conversations. One of my sisters called me and in the course of our conversation she expressed her, and the family's, concern about my prolonged illness. She asked me what I had been doing about it. I told her, but acting as if she had not heard she said: "Carlis, you have two young children who need you, and I think that you must know whatever it is that is causing you to be so ill. So I suggest that you find the cause and do something about it." At the end of our conversation I felt devastated. I was ill and the last thing I needed was someone telling me that I needed to sort myself out. The little girl inside of me wanted to cry from her sense of helplessness - she wanted the opportunity to repeat again how hard she had tried to deal with the problem. She wanted her efforts to be seen and acknowledged.

Soon after this call a friend, with whom for a period I had had a co-consulting relationship, called. He inquired how I was and I told him that I would have liked to be able to honestly say that I was well, and went on to tell him about my efforts to get better. He laughed and said in a puzzled voice "Hold on, Carlis, why are you sounding so angry about being ill?" His comment triggered a different type of response. Firstly it put me in touch with my anger – of which I had been unaware. I then realised that I was deeply ashamed about my inability to get better, and also about my lack of success in conquering what I still persisted in terming as my tendency to overwork. During and after our conversation, I realised that I was still not taking this issue of workaholism seriously.

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Bateson (date unknown) in a taped exploration of addiction, describes it as being "caught in a trap and tumbling into a groove from which it is impossible to remove ourselves". He suggests that the harder we try to extricate ourselves the deeper into the groove we dig ourselves. This experience of hitting bottom was very important to my re-framing of the problem. As I faced my inability to break the connection between discrimination -overwork - and illness, I was brought face to face with the fact that this was an addiction – an illness. I asked myself if I had really decided to claim life and to live fully or was I just content to survive – finding more and more creative ways to mask the problem. In that state of despair and helplessness I began to know the need for support. I realised then that, as in the three steps of the Twelve Step Alcoholics Anonymous programme, I was powerless to conquer this problem. I was in need of help from a Higher Power, and I needed the support of others in dealing this addiction.

It is often stated that this realisation of powerlessness is critically important to the recovery process. This is the stage at which we attain a change in vision and realise that our actions are indeed reactions. Overwork for Black women – throughout the centuries has been a reaction to extremely adverse and unfavourable circumstances. It is a way of being developed in order to survive in situations where survival was nearing impossible. Overwork was not our chosen way of being. The establishment of the link between our behaviour and the context from which that behaviour arises is so critical for our health and sanity and yet it is so hard to maintain that perspective. In this place of depression we have the opportunity to see our reactions for what they are. In this position I began to see my self-pride and my addiction to unilateral control, and I gained a different perspective on survival strategies such as achieving against the odds. Reading literature on addiction was of great help to me (Bradshaw, 1988, Bateson 1972, Bepko and Krestan 1990, Schaef 1992). With the help of these writings, I began to see that to tackle this problem I had to move outside of the frame. I had been for many years working very hard at tackling overwork and working at learning to rest. From my supervisors and colleagues I had had comments about the contradictory nature of this endeavour. However it was many years before I was able to understand more than the words of their communication. I began to realise that I needed to stop doing more of the same and to undertake change of a different order.

I had to find and problemise the part of me that refuses to lose at all cost, and that is determined to "beat them at their own game - using their own rules". I began to understand within me that in a 'no-win' situation, a strategy of achieving against the odds is potentially suicidal. Bateson (1972) talks about the self-pride of alcoholics and their beliefs that they will beat the problem and that they will be able to stay sober. To prove his success he must have a drink! Reading this I realised that my solutions to this problem were equally double binding. I began to observe that a number of the solutions I had brought to the problem had increased my tiredness, and further entrapped me in processes of continuous work and struggle.

Another important insight from the work on alcoholism was that the motivation of the alcoholic is often linked to the presence of a challenge – staying sober. Bateson says:

"Alcoholic pride is linked with risk-taking ... 'I can do something where success is improbable and failure is disastrous' ... as success begins to appear the alcoholic must challenge the risk of a drink"

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I began to understand that when motivation depends on conquering challenges the individual is forever trapped in a system of seeking challenges. Success in this frame is **not** a reward. I began to make links with the insight gained years previously that doing nothing or resting produced anxiety and that the thought of boredom produces anxiety in me. I began to notice a tendency to underrate a task once I had achieved it. "If I did it it couldn't be very hard" – so of course I must next time look for harder challenges. These thoughts are usually subliminal. I have discovered that part of the work of recovery is the finding and giving expression to those hidden thoughts that drive us.

In this recovery process I had to gain better appreciation of the inextricable link between our survival strategies and the system. I had to understand at many levels – not just in my head – that they are symmetrical and produce each other. Bateson (1972) describes symmetrical relationships as ones where:

"The behaviors of A and B are regarded (by A and B) as similar and are linked so that more of the given behaviour by A stimulates more of it in B."

I saw discrimination /oppression as being symmetrical to resistance/ survival strategies. The message communicated in abusive acts of power is "you are within my control", "you are helpless", "you have no power so you are totally at my mercy". Resistance as framed in many of our survival strategies is similar to this way of thinking. It 'says' "I am not within your control" I will prove to you that I am as powerful or more powerful than you". I began to see that the linked nature of these issues means that resistance triggers greater oppression! This was a very painful insight. In my head I could see this but emotionally every bit of me continued to demand resistance. I could see the fallacy of this response but my dualistic way of thinking suggested that the alternative was to give in, give up and not fight back.

This leads to another important insight that the outcome of this vicious cycle was the affirmation of my own powerlessness. To choose to try to win in a situation that cannot be won is to work towards proving your helplessness. Not to do so is to accept your powerlessness. I was trapped! I could see no way out. Bateson (on the tape mentioned previously) stated that he did not think it possible for an addict to recover without first acknowledging his/her addiction, getting to a point of feeling a desperate need to change and also recognising his/her desperate need to change. Bradshaw (1988) says:

"All recovering persons come to a turning point in their lives precipitated by the pain of their addiction."

- The paradox of personal responsibility and surrender

So, my sister was right when she confronted me about my helplessness. Although at the time I felt oppressed by her suggestion, I did indeed have a responsibility for my own health and welfare and I had an important choice to make. Anne Wilson Schaefer (1992) says:

"Those of us who work with addicts also know that choosing not to die is not the same as choosing to live... When we think dualistically, we assume that saying no to one thing means saying yes to the other, but this is not the case. At least three combinations of choices are

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possible. The first is, in a way the simplest. One can (1) choose to live (2) choose to die. The second is rare in our system, one can (1) choose not to die (2) choose to live. The third is the most common, one can (1) choose not to die and (2) choose not to live. Choosing to live means that we can no longer support the system as it is... For most addicts the thought of living – and by this I mean fully living – is far more frightening than the thought of dying or being partially alive. Living fully seems the same as having no control; and that feeling is experienced as unbearable."

As I began to acknowledge my addiction and my powerlessness I was struck by the paradox of the issue of surrender and personal responsibility. I began to see addiction as being both about a desire to stay in a state of powerlessness/ lifelessness *and* a wish to mask that sense of powerlessness by believing in the "myth of being in control" (Bateson 1972). Scheaf (1992) says:

"The primary addictions in the Addictive System are the addictions to powerlessness and non-living."

I found this a very difficult piece of learning. It demanded a re-framing of the concept of power. I found that I needed to learn about power as being 'in relation to' rather than as an oppositional force. It is the power of surrendering – 'going with' rather than 'fighting back.' I find this so hard to describe in our current language so I will offer you the image of 'fighting' from Tai Chi. When learning that art I experienced mental dissonance with my experience as I learnt about its use in self-defense. We were taught to go with the other energy rather than to resist it. The result was that I found it difficult to believe my experience that a punch could be deflected and turned against the aggressors by leaning **into** the punch rather than against it. At this moment I do not know, in words, what that means for the struggle with oppression but perhaps this is the very essence of the problem. Perhaps when we are 'in relation to' it is hard to describe what happens. Bradshaw (1988) suggests that the recovery process demands the restoration of four important relationships. 1) The relationship with the Higher power (which I understand as God) 2) the relationship with self; 3) the relationship with others; 4) the relationship with nature.

In my own process of recovery the hardest lessons to learn were those of 'non-resistance' and of 'letting go and letting God'. Having lived my life assuming that to be OK I would have to work very hard, surrender proved very challenging and it is a lesson that I am still learning. Influential to my learning was the work of Florence Scovell Shinn (1925). I also found it helpful to, as my mother would say, "talk to my self" or, in the language of self-help literature, 'use affirmations'. When my mother talks to herself, she firmly challenges the ideas that "that old devil puts in my head", and I believe that this needs to be the nature of the use of affirmations. I found that to be effective, affirmations must be messages that challenge the messages in **my** head. Therefore they have to be chosen carefully and re-framed if other people's words were used. Powell (1976) talks about the need to smash the old record. I found it necessary to let my mind know, preferably aloud, that the message identified as faulty and damaging was now useless to me.

Critically important was learning to hand over problems to God. This demanded the re-establishment of a close relationship with a God who was both outside and inside of me and could be known intimately by me, and yet was not limited by my limitations. When in such a relationship, life becomes very easy. There is a lovely

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journal entry written out of one such experience, which I would have liked to share fully, but through consideration for the length of this document I will restrict. It says:

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I am aware that at this moment there are a series of very serious problems - but I am OK! This is an OK-ness that flows from inside out, it is not the familiar OK mask.

I am OK because I know that everything will be fine. Because I know that whatever happens I will find the strength within to face it. I am not afraid!!!

I have only just realised this - and it makes me want to dance. I want to skip and jump and laugh and shout "Hey, I am not afraid!.. I am not afraid! "

Well, maybe only a small sneaky fear - of not being afraid! Afraid that if I shout too loudly something will prove to me that I have something to fear.

This represents a VERY important learning. It is an indication of a disconnection from a process that has terrorised me and therefore kept me trapped.

- **Links between addiction and oppression**

It may be that you are wondering why, in a chapter on thriving I have chosen to spend so much time on identifying and dealing with addiction. This is because I believe that there is an inextricable link between oppression and addiction and that in recovering from oppression we must find and confront our addictions.

Learning about addiction I was surprised to find our survival strategies listed as classic defenses of people who have been shamed and addiction as a product of a shaming process. As I reflected on it I remembered that in the early stage of this research when I was first identifying our survival strategies I noticed a similarity with the patterns of people who had suffered abuse as children and I had wanted to follow that connection. In this process that intention had been lost, but through my reading about addiction I had returned to the same place. I suggest that the making of this link is important to effectiveness in the recovery process. I would argue that we need to become conscious of the impact of the context on the individuals. In chapter 8 I identified the context as shaming therefore it should not be surprising to find that it is the work of those who have looked at the impact of shaming situations that prove

most helpful to our recovery.

D. Finding and valuing self

Central to my ability to thrive has been the work done in finding and valuing self. In chapter 8 I identified the multifarious ways in which as Black people we are devalued and negated, and as a self-protective strategy we detach from and alienate ourselves. The claiming of our humanity and our ability to thrive demands that we find reconnection with, and undertake a total reassessment of, our worth. It requires that

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we learn to love ourselves. This was a major theme of my work, it emerged very early on in the inquiry from activities such as those mentioned under "Awakening to the Wild Woman".

What is self worth

Self-worth is a concept that proves elusive when we try to quantify, specify and describe it. This

may be because it is often at the base of, and hidden behind, many other behaviours and actions.

Gloria Steinem (1992) describes self worth as being that process when "self is recognised,

valued, discovered, esteemed". She offers the official definition of the California Task Force to

Promote Self Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990:

"Appreciating my own worth and importance and having the character to be accountable for myself, and to act responsibly towards others."

Steinem (1992) suggests that modern ideas reflect ancient wisdom and quotes:

Aristotle c 300B.C. "Happiness is self-contentedness".

John Milton (1667). "Off-times nothing profits more than self esteem, grounded on just and right well, manag'd".

In the Bible we are told:

" Love your neighbour as you love yourself".

"Take care of your bodies as they represent the temple of God."

In these very old thoughts we have something of our intrinsic value communicated to us.

Self-worth is when we see ourselves as being worthwhile. Not because we are a certain shade or colour; or because we were born or live in a certain place; or because we are a certain age, a certain gender; or because we have written a book or designed a palace or because of who we know or where we have been but simply because WE ARE. Being valuable because we are a human being, with the God Spirit within us. It is when we are able to celebrate ourselves, when we feel that it is worth taking care of - investing in, nurturing, protecting every aspect of our being, because we are precious and of great value. It is not feeling better than or worse than, but it is knowing that the other has great value too because they are.

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It is the valuing that we are often in touch with when we see a very small baby. Regardless of race, gender, ability (at that stage we are often unaware of what that small human being's ability may or may not be) the beauty and preciousness of that young one often strike us. Most people would find themselves - almost like a reflex action - reaching out to protect that young one from danger, and feeling a sense of tragic loss at the death of an infant. It is often said that that child did not have the opportunity to be what she/he might have been. This indicates that within us, there is a knowing about the uniqueness of the contribution each life makes to our world and to our society.

However, our appreciation of babies simply because they are living human beings, and therefore ones with something special to give, gets lost before they are very old. It does not take many months before that baby is seen as being of a certain gender, a certain racial group, from a certain class, with certain levels of abilities. Very soon the child is sent messages of either being very special, very valuable and therefore welcomed in the world or being not very good, in no way special and with little or nothing of any worth to offer anyone.

The theft of self worth

As I struggled to understand self-worth I was brought face to face with the knowledge of the interconnected wholeness of body, mind and soul. Self worth can be, and often is, undermined at any of these levels. It may be attacked by the devaluing or attribution of negative and inferior status to some aspect of our bodily image, or intellectual ability, or most subtly of all it may be by acting as if someone is invisible or of no consequence. It may be done by not attributing to an individual or to certain groups the right to their own space on the earth.

This is true for every human being, however I suggest that self esteem is either conferred on, or stolen from, the individual on the basis of group identity, and that this process is one of which the individual is often unaware. Various studies indicate that notions of racial and gender superiority or inferiority are held by children as young as age 3 (Amos N Wilson 1978, Dixon 1977). As seen in chapter 8, racism is constructed through a series of powerfully negating acts that convey messages of "You do not matter"; "You are valueless and have nothing worthwhile to contribute". Bepko and Krestan (1990), writing about issues of addiction and co-dependency in women say:

"messages about the innate inferiority of women have been part of the larger fabric for centuries. Aristotle, writing in the fourth century B.C., believed in the basic inferiority of women: "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness."

Learning that you, the individual, are not of much value, though difficult, leaves possibilities for improvement, but learning that you are part of a group of people who are, and have always been, all completely worthless is devastating. The attribution of worth on the basis of colour, gender, race – things over which the individual has no control presents the situation as insurmountable and immutable and creates a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and despair. It is extremely painful for the individual to face this information.

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Low self-esteem and self worth is sometimes disguised behind a mask of supreme confidence. It may be the woman manager who in preparation for a meeting with a group of powerful men in which she knows that she will be attributed little or no value, pays great attention to her self- presentation, carefully choosing styles and colours that send messages of " I am someone to whom attention must be paid". Or it may be the man who swaggers rather than walks, visibly displaying evidence of wealth - gold chains, rings, bundles of notes being pulled from the pockets, the beautiful high status car; and who talks loudly of all his achievements and accomplishments, proclaiming through his actions " I am a man of worth". There are times when these masks are used not to create a temporary effect, but when they are lived behind in such a way that they become the people. There are times when the masks are no longer being used by an individual to impress the outside world but to avoid their own sense of being nothing, of being empty and to avoid feeling their deep sadness, shame and rage at the loss they have encountered.

- **Recovering self- worth and learning self-love**

This is, in my experience painfully slow and repetitive work. The pearl of self-worth cannot be reclaimed in one go, it demands many, many journeys sometimes seemingly retracing the previously trodden paths to re-find, rediscover and reclaim something that we had previously found. The theft of self-worth does not only happen to the young. It is something that, for most of us, is continually happening. It happens as soon as we relax, and are inattentive. Worst of all is that sometimes we may find ourselves colluding with its loss without any real appreciation of the value of what we are losing. In many of those situations in organisations when as Black women we were overlooked, negated and humiliated, our self-worth was incrementally and gradually being undermined and eroded.

Waking up to our loss, and owning - even to ourselves - the extent to which we have internalised the messages sent to us by the dominant society and therefore see ourselves as being intrinsically of no value is a very painful process. Sometimes it seems better to live with the familiar pain of feeling valueless, than to move into the centre of the huge void and encounter the emptiness and nothingness that we may have masked for so many years. We fear that we would be overwhelmed if we were to experience the deep sadness, pain and rage within us and that we will have no control over it. We dread that we will not be able to return. The journey is also frightening because it is essentially a lonely journey. It is a task that can only be undertaken by the individual by her/his self. Others may offer support and comfort but essentially that entry into the cold, dark place in which there are no markers or sign posts is one that must be undertaken alone. Each point of facing up to the absence or lowness of one's self worth or to the need to reclaim it is painful - it is not easier because it was done previously. It is always a period of feeling one's acute distress and suffering.

- ***Starting the journey***

How do those of us who have been robbed of the key to our power, begin this journey of reclamation? How do we even begin to gain a sense of something that may have been stolen from us when we were so very young - possibly at a pre-verbal age - before we have any conscious and easily accessible memory? How do we even recognise its absence?

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Awareness of an issue is the first step to change. Over the years I have collected a number of different indicators which assist me in measuring the absence or paucity of my own (and others') self-worth. In doing this I have learnt to listen closely for the statements verbalised or implied to explain actions.

Statements such as:

"It wasn't worth doing it just for me"

"I will make a cup of tea if anyone else would like one, but if it is just for me then I won't bother."

"I can't spend so much, just on me".

"Perhaps it would be better if I just left, disappeared, ran away - maybe that would make it easier for others around? Would anyone miss me?"

"No, I haven't got very much to say so I will just listen to the others"

Other indicators are the feelings of having nothing to say, nothing to give, nothing of value to contribute. Feeling that whatever one is able to do, to say, to give, to write, to offer will not be appreciated or good enough to meet the needs of the other person or of the occasion. Another, but one that is subtly disguised and so less easy to identify, is where others, like ourselves - those from groups with which we are most closely identified - are seen as not having anything valuable to offer. We devalue, undermine and disparage their skills and abilities.

Behind all these statements are questions such as – "Am I worth it?" "Is my contribution of any value?" "Am I worth this time? this space? this money?" "Do I make an impact or am I really invisible".

Process reflection

I am so frustrated by the pain of this work. I am noticing that as I write this I feel the incredible sadness and rage of this experience. I still cannot believe that after so many years of actively working with these issues I should still *feel* the pain. Will there ever be a time when I will be able to write about or talk about these issues without feeling so hurt by this process and so angry that so many human beings suffer this experience?

It has improved tremendously. I am now able to acknowledge it, to write and speak it – and maybe if I were to cease to feel it that would be an indication that I had once again become detached from myself and from others around me.

Over the years I have seen many examples of this. I recall having a conversation with a senior woman manager in which she suddenly leant across the table and said, in a rather conspiratorial voice "Let's be honest with ourselves, if we were to interview two people for a job, a man and a woman and they were equally good in every way we would take the man". I asked her why she would do this, and she said, "After all

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he is likely to be of more value to the organisation, we would not be able to rely on the woman."

I saw in the stories of the women in the Action Learning group how they struggled to establish their credibility with Black staff and with women (White and Black). In the Collaborative Inquiry Group, we struggled with the issue of recognising our own and others' value and power.

Indicators of low self-esteem in our self and in others are varied and must be listened for very keenly. Pinkola Estes (1992) states:

"People who have been thusly robbed are not bad. They are not wrong. They are not stupid. But they are in some major way, inexperienced or in a kind of psychic slumber."

Recognition of the need to set out on the journey to find and reclaim our self worth is one that demands great self-honesty, and courage. Although, I have written about this issue separately it is an essential aspect of the re-framing of the Black woman. It is in, and through, the process of recovering our sense of value and in learning to love ourselves that we lay the foundations on which our new, positive image of the Black woman can be placed. This is the basis from which we are able to resist the need to defend and hide ourselves through our habitual survival strategies. As our sense of worth is enhanced we discover our ability to reach out to others respectfully but without fear that we would be destroyed.

Recovering, loving and valuing self

This is a process that demands the changing of our mental frame. To do this we must let go of the way of assessing and evaluating ourselves and create new measures. We must create new mental images of ourselves.

Maya Angelou¹, in a poem about the Black woman says:

"She does not know her beauty,
She thinks her brown body has no glory,
If she could dance naked under palm trees,
And see her image in the river
She would know
But there are no palm trees on the street,
And dish water gives back no images."

Loving myself was an action of the will. I did not wait to feel loving towards myself but set out to interrupt the messages I had been programmed to give myself about me. I:

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- used left and right-hand writing as a mode for making contact with that inner little girl who had been so damaged by her experience of living.
- chose primarily to see myself through God's eyes and to discover how beautiful I looked to him and then I chose others who reflected back to me something of my beauty, and more than that were courageous enough to interrupt me when my familiar negating of myself was at play. This demanded working with my physical image of self also. I worked at loving my body.
- used affirmations to tell myself nice things.
- set out to learn to be appreciative of my achievements and to celebrate them.
- learnt to nurture and pamper myself sometimes and learnt to challenge the guilt that arose when I did that.
- decided to give myself no less than I would offer to another.
- searched for my boundaries and learnt to patrol them.
- found space for being with me – meditation, contemplation and reflection and rest.
- set out to discover what I liked and what I wanted. A discovery was that I could assert myself if only I knew what I wanted or that something was important to me.
- worked at appreciating, celebrating, giving thanks for and USING my talents. Oppressive situations had taught me to hold back and to hide my strengths.
- learnt to accept that things could be easy.

This is not an exhaustive list but I must move on. I found this to be essential. I have been extremely thankful for the loving-challenging support of two friends who are also learning partners undertaking similar recovery journeys. Also for a lot of my journey I had the support of a therapist, and of the various Black women's groups that I participated in as a result of this research. As I move onward I am committed to creating other supportive spaces and places for continuing this work.

Closing Remarks

In this chapter I have endeavoured to find a way of communicating to you some of the critical issues encountered on this ten-year journey and to harness some of the insights about the process of recovery. As usual the map seems very unrepresentative of the terrain covered, but it is the best I can offer in this context. I have emerged after a journey that spanned ten years, with at least as many, though different, questions than I had when I commenced. However the nature and quality of the questions have changed. I believe that they are deeper and more germane to the problem of Black women's self-actualisation and to the emancipation of people who have been oppressed. My journey has affirmed for me the need for complex strategies with multiple responses. It has identified the need for initiatives that address the learning/development needs of Black and White women, and Black and White men, *and* that problematises the established patterns of the relationships between individuals from these groups *and* with ourselves, *and* that are designed to change the nature of our organisational and societal contexts. It is a journey that at certain times produced tears of desperation as I did not know how to go forward and knew that it was impossible to go back, but the process has assisted me in living more fully and in discovering my humanity.

Link to:

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