

Preface these past five years

*Some fools seek knowledge higher and higher,
To MA, PhD aspire,
Though people deem them very bright,
Those fools can't understand aright.*

Sebastian Brant, Ship of Fools, 1494

... mental processes resemble logic in needing an outer frame to delimit the ground against which the figures are to be perceived...

Gregory Bateson (2000: 188)

I've been working at this PhD for just over five years. I registered for the process in May 2001, a time when I had finished my MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath, but hadn't quite yet graduated from that programme. Learning on the MSc invited and contained upheaval across my life, and I spent the first five months of PhD time restabilising myself.

Then, in October 2001, I broke my Achilles tendon, a nasty injury which left me unable to walk or drive for the next five months (which, as a self-employed person living alone in the country, had quite an effect). At the time, one of the stories I told myself was that the injury, subsequent recovery and enforced "laying low" were some kind of divine retribution for the previous changes and upheaval. Not the most useful of framings. Yet, looking back at my diaries, what felt like laying low at the time looks barely any different from other times in terms of my schedule (which, to say the least, has been packed).

I want to appreciate being alive. I enjoy most of what I do, most of the time. But this desire to appreciate also feels like a kind of greed, or an embarrassment of riches, akin to having a fancy meal out every day. Gorging myself on one interest after another builds a kind of mental indigestion and constant backlog of pending self-reflective processing time¹. Early in 2006, I reached a stage where I felt like a saturated solution, with this thesis needing to precipitate out into existence.

¹ Jungian writer, James Hillman comments on this, too. He suggests that many people lead relatively unexamined lives, which, to him means we have "more events than are experienced" (Hillman, 1975: 150).

My challenge in this writing has been to converge and do justice to the rich base of my experiential knowing and eclectic reading, conversations, thoughts and writing, whilst stepping aside from unpleasant, victorious hubris. My temptation has been to not just step aside from this risk of hubris, but to run away completely from simply stating the fullness of what has been happening with an appropriate humility. At times, I have felt reluctant to revisit my diaries to chart my activities, and experience some embarrassment at showing the full extent of my “busy-ness”. Writing this preface feels like opening up the kitchen bin to reveal a whole pile of hidden empty chocolate wrappers.

How do I acknowledge that I have “gulped down²” ideas about inquiry, development, pedagogy, presentational knowing, power and so on? How do I recognise that the material I am choosing to put in this thesis is a fraction of what I could have focussed on - that the inquiries I have presented aren’t the only ones I could have? Can I simply state that I have immersed myself in inquiry, worked with eight or nine long term second person cooperative inquiry groups from business and the public service, facilitated and tutored more than a hundred Masters’ level students of action research, lead seminars, designed experimental workshops, attending workshop after workshop to loosen and extend my own practice.... the list groans on.

On the next page is an image showing how my range of activities seems with the “now” of me-in-2006 sitting at the centre of the spiral. Each arm of the spiral is associated with a key theme in this thesis, although not every activity mentioned on the diagram is detailed in the writing to come.

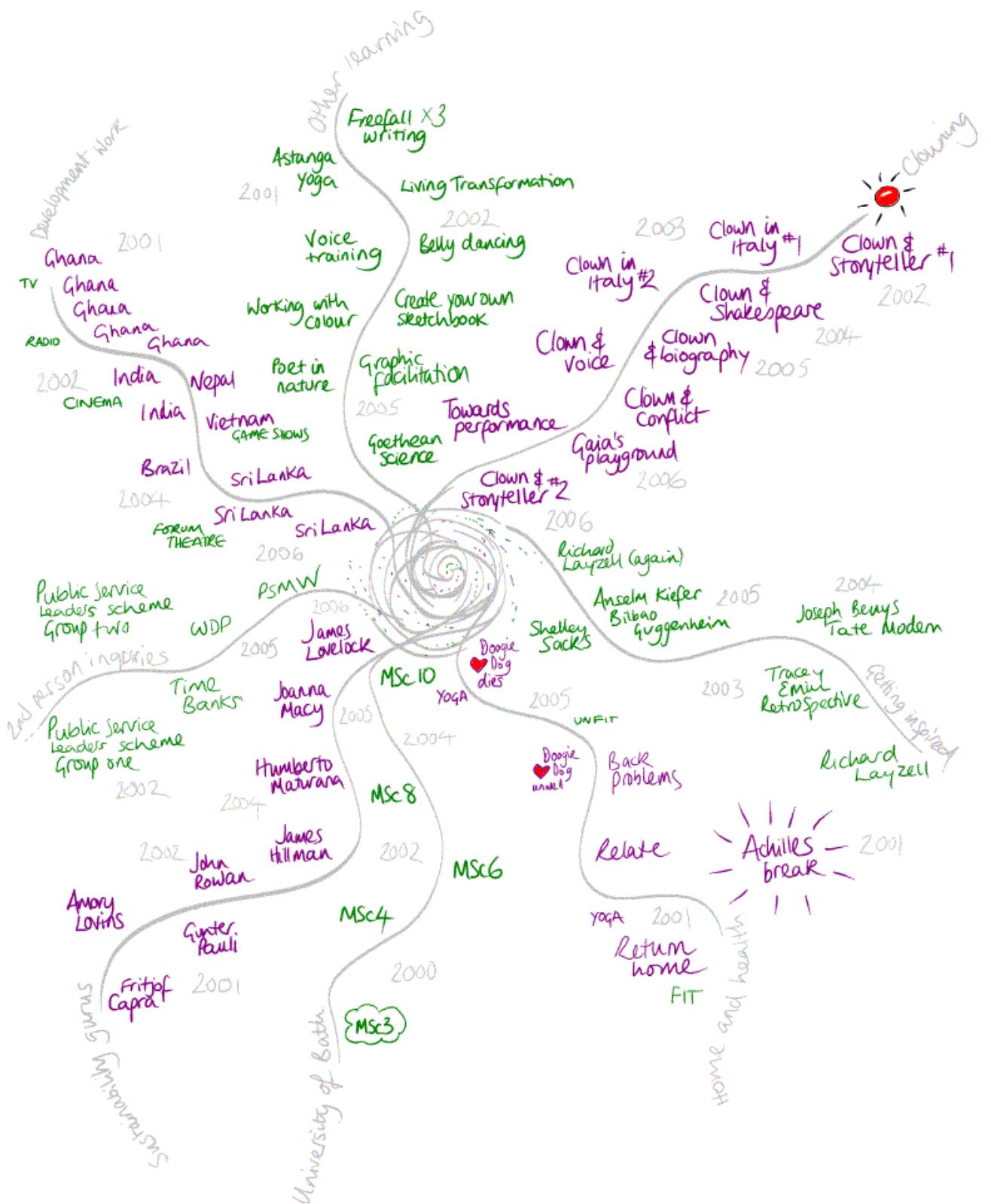
Following this image, I look back through my diaries from since I first registered for the PhD process and simply note the order in which the main activities, events and encounters happened³ (running from the present to the past)⁴. This listing starts on page 4, and, one more, you’ll notice that not all events mentioned are detailed later.

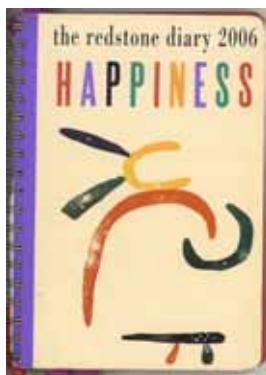
Together, these two representations offer an insight into the shape and scope of these past five years, and I offer them as background, context-setting information.

² A phrase used by my supervisor to describe my approach to learning during a PhD supervision workshop in June 2006.

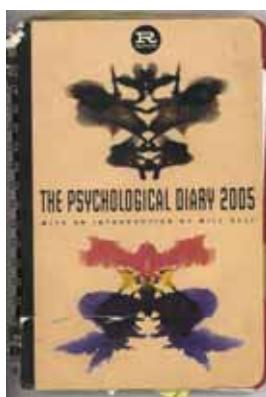
³ This list does not include day-to-day client work which gets scattered across time. Beyond the International Labour Organisation and the University of Bath, my client base since 2001 has included: Allied Domecq, Ashridge College, BG Group, Birkbeck College, Centrex, Chartered Institute of Marketing, Countryside Agency, Environment Agency, Groundwork Trust, GTZ, Herefordshire College, International Foods (Mars), International Society of Typographic Designers, Island Harvest (NY), Manchester Business School, National School of Government, The Natural Step, New Academy of Business, New Economics Foundation, Peabody Trust, Schumacher College, SITA Waste, Smiths Industries, Time Banks UK, UNEP, University of Gloucestershire, University of Birmingham, University of Cambridge, University of Surrey, Warwick Business School, West Midlands Social Economy Project, Westminster Drug Project.

⁴ “MSc” refers to the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath for which I am an Intake Tutor. “MSc10 workshop 1”, for example, refers to the first of eight workshops for the tenth intake of participants to the course.

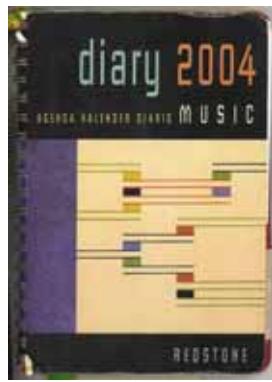




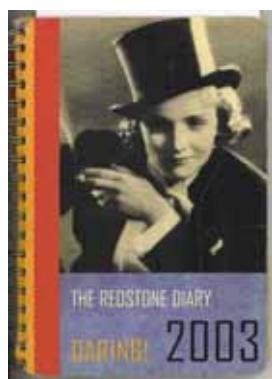
MSc10 workshop 4
Sensory Awareness course, Richard Layzell
MSc10 workshop 3, Schumacher College
Doogie Dog dies
Crete holiday, storytelling and yoga
40th birthday party at Gifford's Circus
Clown and storyteller course
PhD draft thesis submission
MSc10 workshop 2
Gaia's Playground
James Lovelock
Goethean Science course
MSc10 workshop 1
Playing with Fire clown and conflict resolution course
Sri Lanka
MSc8 workshop 8



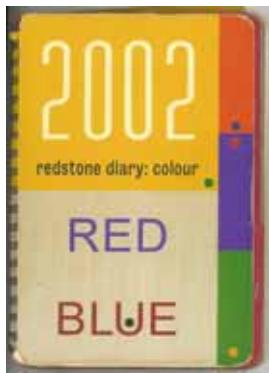
Sri Lanka
Towards Performance clowning weekends begin
MSc8 workshop 7
Sri Lanka
Anselm Kiefer
Pyrenees holiday
First public clowning performance
Clown and Voice course
Clowning course in Italy
Creative Colour painting workshop
MSc8 workshop 6
Doogie dog diagnosed with heart failure
Festival of Fools workshop
PhD writing week in Suffolk
Shelley Sacks and Richard Layzell
The Great Turning course, Joanna Macy
Poet in Nature course
Joseph Beuys
MSc8 workshop 5
Voice of the storyteller course
Storytelling and conflict resolution course



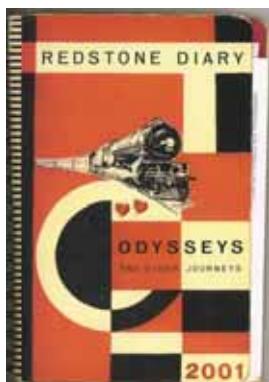
Christmas storytelling performance
Graphic facilitation course
MSc8 workshop 4
Astanga yoga and PhD writing week, Cornwall
Clown and deep ecology discussions, Toulouse
MSc8 workshop 3, Schumacher College
Humberto Maturana
Barcelona holiday
Clown and Shakespeare course
France holiday, Chartres visit
Sketchbooking workshop
EGOS Conference, Slovenia
MSc8 workshop 2
Relate
Clowning course in Italy
Brazil
First public storytelling performance
Living Transformation reunion
Forum Theatre course with Augusto Boal
MSc8 workshop 1
The Pearl of Great Price storytelling course
MSc6 workshop 8
Taking Heart clowning and biography course



Christmas storytelling performance
Antigua holiday
MSc6 workshop 7
Viet Nam
Living Transformation #3
Spain holiday
Risking the Heart spontaneous storytelling course
Voice training
MPhil to PhD transfer
MSc6 workshop 6
Ghana
Storytelling course
Living Transformation #2
Freefall writing course
MSc6 workshop 5
Living Transformation #1



MSc6 workshop 4
Clowning course
Tracey Emin, Amsterdam
Tongues in Trees ecological storytelling course
Ghana
Spontaneous storytelling course
MSc6 workshop 3, Schumacher College
India
Boston holiday
Storytelling and clown course
MSc5 workshop 6
MSc6 workshop 2
India
T'ai chi course
Belly dancing workshop
Joseph Beuys, Tate Modern, London
Freefall writing course
MSc6 workshop 1
Standing up again
John Rowan
Icon painting
MSc4 workshop 8
Infection and physiotherapy



Plaster off
Ghana
Storytelling course
MSc4 workshop 7
David Abram
Achilles break
Ghana
Amory Lovins
Ghana
The Firebringers storytelling course
Crete holiday, yoga
MSc4 workshop 6
Nepal
PhD registration
MSc4 workshop 5
Abstract art course
MSc3 workshop 8
Botswana
Santa Monica

The fruits of my eclecticism offer a gift to the learners I am with - there's been a joy in the learning, and a joy of being with learners. Sometimes, though, the inquiring life I have made for myself feels like more of a curse to me. The previous listing also fills me with a kind of horror as the crucible of the PhD has invited the gluttonous part of me to flourish... and it has devoured everything in sight in a frenzy of research.



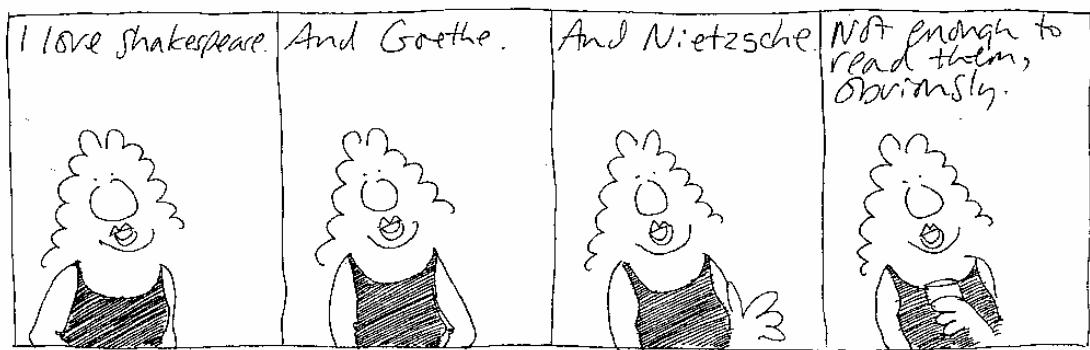
What's been left out in my life to accommodate this glut of learning and experience? As you can tell from the way my books are "arranged", my house is a mess, and has structurally declined, as has my garden. I started the process off physically fitter than I'd ever been previously, and I am now quite unfit. I weigh more than I did to start with, and have, on occasions, eaten for comfort. I miss spending time with my friends – this has diminished substantially, especially a kind of low grade "hanging out" together, which I value highly. I can't remember what it is like to be at a loose end. I also miss reading for pleasure. My reading capacity has been sucked up by articles, papers, text books and theories, which, whilst enjoyable in themselves, have left me with little physical desire to spend more rest time reading. My reading has tended to become instrumental, offering both freedom and ties. More insidiously, as I have developed my practices of being present in working situations, I have become less present in leisure situations and have developed an unhealthy mantra that "I should be doing my PhD".



Book,
beautiful
book,
minuscule forest,
leaf
after leaf,
your paper
smells
of the elements,
you are
matutinal and nocturnal,
vegetal,
oceanic,
in your ancient pages
bear hunters,
bonfires
near the Mississippi,
canoes
in the islands,
later
roads
and roads,
revelations,
insurgent
races...

Book, when I close you
I open life.

*Poetry extracted from Pablo Neruda, Ode to a Book, parts I and II
Winged book sculpture by Anselm Kiefer*



Playing at edges

I have worked solidly over the past five years as an Intake Tutor for participants on the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath, helping learners to learn to put themselves into the picture of their work (which often starts straight out of an objectivist mindset, and can reach a subtle mix of many ways of knowing expressed as a satisfying whole). Now it is my turn again, not the students I work with, to submit my work to the academy, and I am finding myself wanting to push up against the edges of what is deemed acceptable for a PhD thesis from the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP). It seems to me that CARPP PhD theses already sit somewhat outside of academic norms, so I need to be careful about pushing my luck too far in the forms I am seeking to create for my own work, whilst also inviting you to join me in the landscape of my inquiry as it unfolds.

My invitation to you is to encounter this thesis as an active reader participating in occasional experiments. For example, what is it (as I do in the “Achilles” interlude) to juxtapose the images that remain after a life-changing event without having your readerly hand held at all times by a safe narrator, checking and reassuring you of your place in the story? What is it to consciously experiment outside of the boundaries that say good framing comes in the form of a clear written statement of intentions, vision, assumptions and purpose. What does inquiring work look like when I take a step outside of that framing in an attempt to create forms which manifest many ways of knowing at the same time, without privileging the intellectual voice above all others⁵? These experiments with form might change your sense of connection with this work as you read - you might falter and flow as a reader. Sometimes you will need to think for yourself, and at other times you’ll be more firmly held by a more figural narrative voice guiding you through.

⁵ It is not lost on me that this preface is, of course, giving the intellectual voice primacy and privilege over other ways of knowing. By the time you read this, though, I might have chosen to meta-frame the whole thesis with a series of photographs.

Anonymity and confidentiality

I have worked pragmatically on issues of anonymity and confidentiality. On the one hand, it is very unlikely that this thesis will turn up and be read in a largely illiterate town in rural India (although I have nonetheless changed the names of people I have met but have no means of tracing or contacting, for example, Amrit in India and Estelle in Ghana).

On the other hand, to try and pretend that the University of Bath's MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice is some other degree in some other University when this PhD is being held within the same institution seems equally daft. Somewhere in the middle, I see no educational benefit in identifying specific individuals who have taken part in the MSc at Bath, nor any of the second person inquiry participants I have worked with. This would contravene the confidentiality and anonymity agreements that form a core basis for developing trust in those groups.

Given the nature of the inquiries about perceptions and power, I have no desire to divulge the actual names of Ravith in Sri Lanka and Basil from the management education establishment, for example. Any of these people and organisations could be traced at least to a small pool of possibilities should any reader be inclined. I don't see how that would enhance anyone's learning, though.

Occasionally, I mention G, who lives with me sometimes. He is also involved with action inquiry, and anyone who knows me knows exactly who I am talking about. This relationship has been a source of much painful learning and inquiry, including, as two inquirers, trying not to meta-communicate about the relationship all the time. I chose not to focus my PhD on this relationship, nor use it as a primary way of defining myself. Making contact across irreducible difference, a strong theme in this thesis, characterises the learning in this arena, too, so the relationship has both fed and been fed by my other inquiries.

Different voices

Throughout, this work flows around the voices of many different ways of knowing. This is clearest, for example, when the shift entails moving from words to images. Similarly, the move between prose and poetry is visually clear. Elsewhere, I move quite freely between roman text, italics and footnotes to indicate shifts in mood within prose writing, for example, when changing from an intellectual voice to a commenting voice which is looking back over a piece of text written previously. My intention is to build a richness of texture which mirrors the plurality of my own knowing and draws the potential flatness of the intellect into more dimensions.