

## Chapter Four

### Healing Journeys

Let me begin by making it clear that I am not using the word “healing” in a pathological sense to signify curing sickness or disease. Rather, I am talking about renewal, about metaphorically finding gold in the ashes of our lives. I believe that we are all wounded from time to time by life’s vicissitudes and that we shape our lives by our responses to those wounds. As the poet Robert Bly<sup>1</sup> says:

We did not come to remain whole  
We came to lose our leaves like the trees  
The trees that are broken  
And start again, drawing up from the great roots

A similar point, in the context of human inquiry, is made by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury in their introduction to the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury 2000)

Given the condition of our times, the primary purpose of human inquiry is not so much to search for truth but to heal, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterises modern experience. (p10)

My conscious search for healing began as a crisis of identity in my mid-thirties when (as I put it in *Police Stories*) “For the first time in my life I began to seriously question who I was and what I was about.” It became an enduring search for meaning and purpose, for emotional expression and satisfying relationships, for intellectual development and understanding and, latterly, for physical health and well-being. Some of these quests are documented in *The Men’s Room* and *Postcards from the Edge*, but I believe that my professional practice as a senior police officer and educator has also been significantly influenced by other, as yet untold, healing journeys.

These journeys are a vital part of my “living inquiries.” Many have brought me joy and some began in suffering. A defining moment for me was sitting in a classroom at Police

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<sup>1</sup> Lines attributed to Robert Bly - found on a noticeboard at Cortijo Romero, Southern Spain

Headquarters in Welwyn Garden City in 1987 as one of twelve participants on a two-week facilitation course. We had been talking about emotional sensitivity and, as usual, I had little trouble finding glib words to show how well I understood the importance of paying attention to people's feelings. Then one of the trainers said: "Let's check right now how each of you is feeling." I sat quietly as others responded and when my turn came reached inside to check how I felt and found... nothing. I had no idea what I was feeling. I had no idea how to find out what I was feeling and I realised in that instant that (though I always knew what I was thinking) I had never known what I felt.

Writing this, fourteen years later, I can still pick up the echoes of my vertiginous descent into panic – at the time I mumbled some borrowed words: "I guess I feel about the same as John does – a bit tired and frustrated" and relapsed into silence. When we broke for tea, I walked round the grounds, increasingly desperate at the realisation that I was so out of touch with my emotions – no wonder my relationships were so muddled and confusing. After forty minutes or so, John came to find me and brought me back into the group. To my astonishment they seemed genuinely concerned about me and welcomed me warmly without demanding an explanation for my absence. The course continued but the incident stayed with me.

In the weeks that followed I came across a small book by psychotherapist Alan Wheelis called *How People Change* (Wheelis 1973) which seemed to speak directly to me: "We are what we do... and may do what we choose." Change, he argues, begins in suffering – discomfort with the way things are. If suffering leads to insight – a glimpse of understanding – we can use our will to take action and, through doing things differently, we can change our lives. It is, I see now, an overly-simplistic logic. Yet, it inspired me; I did not have to passively accept my lot; I had a choice. I could either ignore my concerns and carry on as usual or I could do something about it. I decided that, whatever the cost, I did not want to be an "emotional cripple" for the rest of my life and found first a counsellor and then a therapist to help me learn how to heal my "self".

This is a significant narrative, which is both a personal story about a key moment of realisation that it is possible to change and a story that, as I tell it, is woven into the life I am "composing" (Bateson 1990). In this chapter however, I want to do more than tell personal stories. I want to show how I am offering what I am learning through my own self-healing to others by co-creating what I call "transformative spaces" for learning and

healing. To do so, I move freely between the inner life of the psyche and the outer life of working for good in the world, agreeing with Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Reason and Bradbury 2000) when they quote Matthew Fox's translation of Meister Eckhart:

The outward work  
will never be puny  
if the inner work  
is great

And the outward work  
can never be great or even good  
if the inward one is puny and of little worth

I want to dig deeper into the "self" and what that implies for "self-healing." As throughout this thesis, I intend to ground this exploration in my lived experience, setting my reflections in the context of the wide range of healing activities and inquiries undertaken over the years. I then intend to look much more closely at two strands of inquiry which have particular life and energy for me now – finding meaning and purpose through creative storytelling and the co-creation of transformative spaces. Through this, I want to look at how I am applying what I am learning from my own self-healing to help others through my personal and professional practice.

### **Self and healing**

Pinned to Jack Whitehead's office door is a laminated notice bearing the ironic injunction: "Please help your selves." "Well, I'm trying to," I think ruefully. "But I might do better if only I knew who or what my self is." In *The Space Between* I declared that:

My sense of self is multi-faceted. Through living inquiries I seek to reveal some of these facets and find connections between them. I strive to embrace the apparent paradox of the one and the many and to live as if "I" matter. I think of my inquiries less in terms of "growth" or "development" and more in terms of "healing" – making whole. My understanding is always shifting and the more I discover, the less I know.

In this section I want to return to this question with the intention of continuing my self-exploration, hoping to enrich my understanding of the self's possibilities and potentials rather than to define it. As a point of departure, let us begin with some ontological reflections written in March 1998.<sup>2</sup>

For many years now, probably since my early thirties, I have found it impossible to accept the mechanistic-dualistic worldview of Newton and Descartes. As an explanatory framework for my being, it leaves me disconnected from nature and from my own body. Its linear logic seems to reject the richness and complexity of human experience and leave no room for the mysteries of spirit or the soul.

It was probably Gleick's book *Chaos* (Gleick 1987) that first provided me with an alternative viewpoint and I have continued to deepen my reading around the so-called new science of complexity. Writers such as Briggs and Peat (Briggs and Peat 1990), Stacey (Stacey 1992) and Capra (Capra 1983; Capra 1996) have been particularly influential. In one sense, I think of the world as emergent - a flux of constantly shifting patterns, an autopoietic response to the interplay of order and chaos. Creativity, learning, growth, new knowledge occur in this transitional space "at the edge of chaos". I cannot control what emerges, but I do have some agency - I both contribute to and am shaped by intrinsically unknowable systemic forces.

In recent years, as I have engaged in a wide variety of "developmental" activities, coinciding with the arrival of mid-life, I have come to believe in the sacredness of creation. I cannot define this in terms of a coherent belief system, simply that I have heard the voice of my soul and felt its connection with the soul of the world. For me, soul is embodied and is nourished by the use of my senses, as I encounter what David Abram (Abram 1997) calls "the more than human world". Hillman (Hillman 1983; Hillman 1996), too, has greatly influenced me here.

Spirit seems to me to be disembodied, a universal presence combining wisdom and love. In *Out of the Frying Pan* I recount several occasions when in different ways, through ritual and divination, I have sought and received guidance from the spirit world. I am grateful to Peter Reason, whose clear thinking and willingness to embrace these issues in an academic context, both in seminars and published sources (Reason 1993; Reason and Heron 1996; Reason 1997; Reason and Goodwin 1997) I find inspiring. He has also introduced me to the work of scholars such as Henryk Skolimowski (Skolimowski 1994), Richard Tarnas (Tarnas 1991) and David Abram (Abram 1997) who, in different ways, are creating the vocabulary to describe an emerging,

<sup>2</sup> As part of my CARPP Diploma/MPhil transfer paper

participative paradigm in which I find room both for my strong sense of “I” and my deep, reciprocal connection with “other”.

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What I notice now is the almost exclusive emphasis in these reflections on two aspects of being – the mental and the spiritual. The physical is barely implied and the emotional omitted entirely. Yet I am also a feeling body, living in relationship with other feeling bodies and with the natural world. My sense of self certainly encompasses these aspects as equally important and deserving of attention. Indeed, whilst ever-wary of the dangers of over simplification, I am drawn to the old Indian proverb, which according to the writer Rumer Goden says that:

Everyone lives in a house with four rooms; a physical, an emotional, a mental and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time but, unless we go into every room, every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not complete persons.

At the practical level of self-care, such a notion can certainly help us to pay attention to a wide range of needs and encourage us to live a balanced life-style. I have used it myself (for example, when playing the Transformation Game™) as a framework for inquiry and action. We might say that the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of our being represent a palette of four (rather than three) primary colours. Like an artist, we can extend our palette by using and mixing different hues, tones and intensities of colour. Of course, the palette is not the painting – just as my sense of self is more than the sum of its various aspects. The artistic metaphor implies that self-creation requires imagination and inspiration as well as good technique. Both, in my view, are equally important. One cannot paint a vibrant picture with an insipid palette and it is hard to imagine that one can develop a strong and healthy sense of self without paying attention to each of these four aspects of being.

Before going on to consider a more holistic view of self, I want to pause to review some of the ways I have sought to extend my “living palette”. Separating them into discrete areas is quite artificial but may serve as a rough guide to my inquiries.

Physical	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jogging, exercise, diet</li> <li>• Dancing - Five Rhythms</li> <li>• Massage, acupuncture</li> <li>• Qi gong, Tai Chi</li> <li>• Learning to sail</li> <li>• Making a new home</li> <li>• Starting a business</li> <li>• Buying a sports car</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship counselling</li> <li>• Individual Gestalt therapy</li> <li>• Friendship with Chris</li> <li>• Loving relationships                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Separation and divorce</li> <li>▪ Children and parents</li> <li>▪ New partner</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Mentoring and coaching</li> </ul>
Mental	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing an MBA</li> <li>• Training as a consultant</li> <li>• Reading widely</li> <li>• Theatre and cinema</li> <li>• Writing articles</li> <li>• Speaking at conferences</li> <li>• Studying for a PhD</li> <li>• Working as a strategist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zazen (sitting) meditation</li> <li>• Ritual menswork</li> <li>• Astrology, divination</li> <li>• Poetry and painting</li> <li>• Annual retreats</li> <li>• Walking and gardening</li> <li>• Transformation Game™</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> </ul>

**A living palette of inquiries into four aspects of being**

I notice that virtually everything in each list involves some activity – so perhaps the palette says more about my doing than my being. None of them are “trivial pursuits” (with the possible exception of buying a sports car); most of them have either extended over several years or been a regular practice during the past ten to fifteen years. Far from being constrained within separate categories, most have a high degree of inter-penetration between two or more aspects of being. Thus, walking in the woods around my home each weekend is clearly a physical activity. It is also a time for creative thinking and of opening myself to encounter the “more than human world” manifested in the plants and

animals around me. Dancing the Five Rhythms<sup>3</sup> is also a deeply emotional experience, allowing me to relate to others and express my feelings through sound and movement. Studying for, and writing this PhD, has stimulated profound inquiries into my conduct in loving relationships and into the nature of my own spirituality.

The five years I spent in individual Gestalt psychotherapy (1989-94) represent an enormous investment of time, energy (and money) in self-healing. At forty, like Dante:

Mid-way this way of life we're bound upon  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood  
Where the right road was lost and gone<sup>4</sup>

Like Dante also, I was lucky enough to find a guide, Judith my therapist, who led me through my own psychological inferno to face the ghosts of my childhood and better understand my adult self. She taught me how to get in touch with my emotions, helped me to express my fear, grief, shame and anger and eventually enabled me to find a measure of self-acceptance and willingness to take responsibility for my own life. Although much of this process is documented in my journal, I shall not dwell on it here, not because it is secret or taboo, but because it no longer holds energy for me. That inquiry has run its full course; I learned a great deal and it is done. I need to acknowledge how valuable it was but writing about it at length now would merely be re-hashing the past.

Over time, the focus has shifted within and between the four areas. If I tried to do all these things at once I would be spread too thin. My ideal is to achieve balance, focus and a sense of space in my life though sometimes things go awry. Writing this thesis is demanding a huge commitment of mental energy. Too often, I end up living "in my head" to the detriment of my physical, emotional and spiritual well being. When I notice, as today, I can make a conscious effort to go to the gym, to phone a friend, to meditate for ten minutes and regain some balance.

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<sup>3</sup> A form of free-expression dance created by Gabrielle Roth which was part of my practice for six or seven years until an unconnected back injury caused me to abandon it for the time being. See Roth, G. (1990). Maps to Ecstasy: Teachings of an Urban Shaman. London, Mandala.

<sup>4</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Trans. Dorothy Sayers.

In each area, there are some solitary, inner-focused activities and some that focus outwardly on connections and relationships with others and this intuitively feels right. As I said earlier, I need to “find room both for my strong sense of “I” and my deep, reciprocal sense of “other”. I could write much more about all of these individual activities and inquiries but the palette is not the painting and despite the importance (perhaps even the necessity) of this work, I know there is something more. Something, perhaps, to do with identity and purpose that is closer to the “me” that I recognise as a unique constellation of consciousness and energy in the world.

Yet the more I try to answer the question “Who am I?” the more confused I become and increasingly I find myself in sympathy with Kenneth Gergen’s argument that the social saturation of contemporary life is leading to the erosion of the identifiable self:

For everything we “know to be true” about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view. (Gergen 1991)

The danger is of feeling so overwhelmed that we sink into a morass of moral relativism in which we lose all sense of agency and responsibility, our identities “written upon us” by random forces beyond our control. The alternative is for each of us to assume responsibility for who we are and for how we embody and enact our multiplicitous “saturated selves.” I choose to behave as if my choices matter, believing that I have some agency in the world and knowing that I am strongly influenced by the social formations of which I am a part<sup>5</sup>. I choose, also, not to limit my sense of self by holding rigidly to a single philosophical viewpoint. Thus, although the “authentic self” may not withstand ironic scrutiny, I still find myself strongly influenced by concepts of integrity and authenticity as I engage in the lifelong “reflexive project” of the self (Giddens 1991). I am still striving for meaning and coherence in an incoherent world, not yet ready to sound the death knell for humanistic aspirations of self-actualisation and heartened by Gergen’s conclusion that, despite the postmodern imperatives of the “saturated self”:



... neither the romantic nor the modern traditions need be lost from the culture. Modernist attributes of the person such as rationality, sincerity, and perfectibility need not be abandoned, nor must modernist forms of relationship – investing in children, building hierarchies, conducting science, building for the future - be ultimately condemned...In the same way the post-modernist perspective invites a resuscitation of romanticism. A person need not be embarrassed to speak of his or her soul, passion, or communion with nature. (Gergen 1991) p247

Indeed, it has often been insights from ancient wisdom traditions that have helped me most as I floundered through a protracted mid-life crisis of identity searching for a new sense of meaning and purpose. James Hillman's marvellous book *The Soul's Code*, in particular has brought me back to my earliest calling, that of a writer. Drawing on Plato's Myth of Er in *The Republic*, Hillman entertains the idea that we are each born with our own *telos* (that which we are destined to become). Our soul-companion, our *daimon* remembers and is the carrier of this destiny. Therefore:

... we must attend very carefully to childhood to catch early glimpses of the daimon in action, to grasp its intentions and not block its way (Hillman 1996)

When I was eight years old, at boarding school, I used to hide from my loneliness and fear in books. My favourite character was *Biggles* – a dashing pilot (like my dad who had been killed in a plane crash when I was four). I loved these stories and, one day, I sat down with a fresh pencil and notebook to write one of my own. I decided it would be about a German pilot who had been shot down and captured. I wrote a page and a half of my intended novel and stopped. It was nothing like the books I had read. It did not occur to me that the author of *Biggles* was an adult, just that mine was not good enough. I wept in frustration and threw the notebook away. It would be another forty years before I remembered that the first thing I ever wanted to be was a writer. Of course, I wrote in the meantime – for school, for university, for work, even love letters and the odd poem. It was not that I did not write but that I did not identify myself, as I once had and now do, as a writer. In the past few years, writing has again become central to my way of being – as it was during that brief and intense childhood experience – and now I have the skill and confidence to express myself as I wish. I write to communicate and

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<sup>5</sup> This is akin (though not identical) to Berger and Luckman's statement that: "Identity... like all subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society." Berger, P. and T. Luckman London, Pelican.



understand. I write to discover and create meaning by languaging the world afresh each time my pen touches the page... and that is how I write, long-hand, watching the ink flow and the words stream out of me, down my arm, through my fingers and, magically, out of the pen onto the paper. I can type, after a fashion, and my words often end up being transcribed via a word processor but, for me, writing is an analogic not a digital process.

This is a story I have often told and I tell it here for two reasons. First, because I think it says something significant about who I am and, second, because it illustrates beautifully how I come to form and reform my sense of self through the stories I tell about myself. As Arthur Frank says in *The Wounded Storyteller*:

The self-story is not told for the sake of description, though description may be its ostensible content. The self is being *formed* in what is told. (Frank 1995)

Perhaps then, the self is a telling. If so, it comes into being in communion with others for there can be no telling without listening. This, at least, best expresses my current understanding of self. From that I take self-healing to be re-storying our lives in ways that provide meaning and purpose through changing times and circumstances. To understand this process more fully (both for the sake of my own healing and to help others) I have been learning about and practising storytelling for several years and, as a parallel inquiry, exploring the conditions that enable us to create safe spaces for such powerful and transformative work.

### **Once upon a time**

“We are forever telling stories about ourselves<sup>6</sup>”, but when our existing sense of self collapses through serious illness or some other traumatic event, our habitual stories lose their meaning. Arthur Frank refers to such times as “narrative wreckage” and he writes movingly about them as a “call for stories... as a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations.” (Frank 1995) The self-stories that emerge from narrative wreckage offer the most vivid and dramatic examples of self-healing through storytelling.

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<sup>6</sup> Comment attributed to psychotherapist Roy Schafer in Frank, A. W. (1995). The Wounded Storyteller. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. P53

When our marriage ended and Sara and I went our separate ways in 1997, I experienced this kind of narrative wreckage. The stories that I told about myself as a dutiful husband and loving father sounded hollow and false in the face of my “desertion.” Others began to inscribe their stories upon me – another “client story” from the lawyers; a “mid-life cliché story” from dismissive acquaintances; a “great escape story” from those who saw themselves trapped in loveless relationships. It was difficult to resist these projections – to avoid being taken over by other people’s tellings – but eventually, after a year or so, I knew that I needed to find a way to tell my own story: a story that would help me make sense of what had happened, one that would help me find new meaning and purpose in my life.

Pursuing my fascination with stories, I went on a weeklong, residential storytelling course at Hawkwood in the summer of 1998. On the second morning I woke up very early realising that I wanted to use our end-of-course performance to tell the story of meeting my lover Alison at that very same place nearly two years before. Tentatively at first, then with growing confidence, *The man who lived as a king* emerged through our daily improvisation sessions until, on the final night, it was my turn to take centre-stage and tell my story to the twenty or so course members and tutors gathered round the storyteller’s chair.

### **The man who lived as a king**

Some people say that this story comes from long ago and far away - while others say they can remember exactly where and when it happened.

There was once a man who lived as a king. The land in which he was born was rich and fertile. But when he was five years old his father was killed - and the land died with him. Nothing grew. It became bleak and barren.

When he became a young man he left that place and went to a great university where he studied the history of the ancient kingdoms. While he was there, as sometimes happens to young men, he met a princess. Her father had also died so there was no one to set him ordeals or tests for her hand. However, they were young and they liked each other and they decided to marry.

After the wedding, he moved into her realm. There he found a crown to wear, but it did not fit him very well. Indeed, neither of their crowns fitted very well. They did not know how to rule at

all - although they did their best. Being young and healthy it was not too long before they had children. In fact they had four wonderful children, two girls and two boys.

You might think that would be enough for anyone's happiness. But they were not happy. For, although they loved their children dearly, they did not love each other. The years passed. The princess became a queen and turned her love and attention towards the children. The man, not knowing what to do, fell into a deep despair.

Then, one night, he had a dream. He saw the land of his birth and longed to return there although he had long since forgotten how to get there. The dream stayed with him and he decided to search for the way. He began to travel out from the queen's court for one or two days, sometimes a week, at a time - visiting new places, meeting new people, even sampling new customs. He regained some of the love of learning that he had as a young man. One thing in particular brought him some respite from his sadness - he learned .... to dance! There was no dancing in the queen's court - but he danced in secret whenever he could. And he went on searching.

One day, as the man approached his fiftieth year, he found himself in a place that he had never been to before .... A large stone house, perched high on a hill, overlooking a broad valley. There was a great company of people there - scholars, musicians, travellers, searchers all and he had a wonderful time. He enjoyed himself so much that he invited them all to join him for a dance that evening.

At dusk they gathered in the ballroom and as the music played they began to dance, some in couples, some alone. Suddenly from the shadows, into the centre of the room, came the most beautiful girl the man had ever seen. She had a mane of chestnut hair that fell to her waist and swayed as she moved. Her dark eyes flashed with fire and her face shone with good humour. She was wild and free. She called no man her master and she came and went as she pleased. Their eyes met and she approached him boldly. They danced together. They danced and danced and danced ... out of the evening and into the night ... and beyond.

It was late the next day when the man awoke. He was lying on a grassy bank, under a sycamore tree, with the sun streaming through its branches onto his face. He was so mesmerised by this sight that he thought that it had all been a dream and he went to turn over. Something held him back ... There, looking back at him, lying in the crook of his arm, was that same girl.

Now, she was a spinner of tales and a weaver of spells and she wove a purple bubble around them both to keep out the world. They lay in that place all day, talking, laughing and holding each other close. To him she seemed like a butterfly, free on the wind whilst he was earthbound, stuck

in the cocoon. But she taught him that anything is possible if you want it enough. Eventually the bubble burst, as all bubbles do and the man returned to the queen's court thinking that he should never see the girl again.

As the weeks passed he thought about her more and more and he realised that if he was ever to find his way back to the land of his birth he must first take off his borrowed crown and set it aside. He decided to tell the queen that he was leaving. She was angry and wept bitter tears. He told the children too and they begged him to stay. But he knew that he must go.

And go he did. He walked out of the queen's court with just a few books, a little music and the clothes on his back and he went on walking ... and walking ... and walking until he found himself beside a lake. There he built himself a small house and there he found work, writing and teaching and there he planted many seeds. As the seasons came and went, the seeds sent forth shoots. The shoots swelled into buds. The buds blossomed.

He began, at last, to live his own life. His days were joyful and full of small adventures. His nights were peaceful and solitary ... except when the wild girl came to visit and then the days were full of playful laughter and the nights of sweet love-making.

And I have it on good authority that they live so to this very day!

I wrote the text of the story down the next day. I knew it so well that I captured it verbatim but like any captured creature it has lost some of its living energy along with its freedom. I can never hope to convey fully what happened during the telling. As the story unfolded, I experienced a profound sense of communion with the audience. Our tears and laughter commingled and I saw myself, my new self, mirrored in their eyes. Telling this story to myself and to that particular audience was just the beginning. There were others I needed to tell, starting with Alison – the “wild girl” herself. I did so on holiday in a walking lodge in the Pyrenees on the second anniversary of our meeting, surrounded by our fellow guests. The story has become part of our story, reflecting and continuing to shape our relationship.

Subsequently, I told the story to close friends and then more widely to several men's groups and now (three years on) to the world at large through this thesis. Each telling is a reaffirmation of the story and of my sense of self. This seems to me to be identical with the concept of *narrative identity*, a self “born in stories”, which Frank attributes to Paul

Ricoeur (Frank 1995). *The man who lived as a king* is a good example of how creative intuition and conscious structuring come together in the art and craft of storytelling. Using the form of a fairy story enabled me to connect with archetypal energies to tell myself anew, no longer just another middle-aged man who left his wife and children but a character in a universal story, a survivor of narrative wreckage.

Reading these words again, I realise that I have glossed over the crucial role I believe such archetypal stories play in our lives. Every culture, it seems, has an inexhaustible fund of myth and legend<sup>7</sup> but what is their purpose? Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian analytic psychology both draw heavily on ancient myths to describe and explain the roots of human behaviour, as though these universal stories are imprinted on our minds at birth. Rollo May, a contemporary psychotherapist and writer speaks of an innate human need for myths which he defines as “narrative patterns that give significance to our existence” (May 1991 p15)

Mythology and psychology, it seems, are closely entwined. When we tell the stories of our lives in mythic terms, we touch the eternal: our personal ontology assumes cosmological significance. Paradoxically, we can see that what we have in common with the rest of the human race is our uniqueness as human beings: our individual experience matters more because we share in the human condition.

Several stories affect me in this way. One is *The Man Who Lived as King*, particularly in terms of striving for joy and fulfilment in loving relationships. Another, which speaks directly to my sense of myself as a “living inquirer”, is *Jumping Mouse*, a Native American teaching story from the tradition of the Plains Indian People<sup>8</sup>. It tells of a mouse who undertakes a perilous journey of discovery and sacrifice to follow his [sic] vision of the Sacred Mountains. It is a story of courage, of loss, of hope, of comradeship and, ultimately, of transformation.

I find aspects of my life present in this story just as the story itself is present in my life. A friend introduced me to the story about ten years ago and I have since told it on many occasions – to my children, friends, colleagues, MSc students, organisational consultants,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example Campbell, J. (1968). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, Bolingen.

fellow storytellers, even (as I relate in *Reshaping my Professional Identity*) to groups of police officers and managers. At every telling the story speaks also to me, to my commitment to lifelong *living inquiry*.

Talking about a story is no substitute for the story itself, so I include it here – at the heart of my thesis – as a celebration of the mystery at the heart of life. It is both a profound meta-myth for *living inquiry*, and a simple gift of a tale well told. The story comes from a long oral tradition and I have recorded a version for you to hear. Listening to rather than reading the story will, I believe, enable you to encounter *Jumping Mouse* more directly and, perhaps, allow us to meet as listener and teller on mythic ground. I invite you now to relax and listen to the story. I encourage you to suspend judgement for the moment, to open yourself to the story and, as Rumi says:

[to] enjoy this being washed  
with a secret we sometimes know,  
and then not.

<p><b>TAPE RECORDING – JUMPING MOUSE – 20 Minutes</b></p>
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I wonder how the story speaks to you, whether you find in it echoes of your own life, whether you can appreciate the significance it has for me as I live my life of inquiry, and whether you sense a connection between our stories – yours and mine – through the medium of this mythic tale. With these thoughts in mind, let me pick up the theme of storytelling as a healing practice.

As so often in my living inquiries, I followed my felt need and my curiosity – this time into a deeper and wider exploration of story through experiential workshops, storytelling “performances”, reading and writing until it has become an integral part of my personal and professional practice. Over several years, the inquiry has moved between the experiential, presentational, propositional and practical modes. Its emphasis has also gradually changed from **What can I learn about myself both from self-stories and**

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<sup>8</sup> This story has been shared with non-Native American cultures by Hyemeyohsts Storm in his classic book of the Plains Indian People, *Seven Arrows* Storm, H. (1972). *Seven Arrows*. New York, Ballantine Books.

**from traditional tales? through How do stories and storytelling work their healing magic? to How can I bring the gift of story to others in ways that help them heal too?**

The inquiry has been quite “messy”, shifting back and forth between these different modes and levels, often encompassing several at once. I have, for example, become an accomplished storyteller, able to “hold” an audience and serve a story well. As I practised storytelling I discovered a tremendous difference between story-as-text and story-as-told. Story-as-told arises in the moment as a shared experience between teller and listener, creating a sense of community. It seems to take on a life of its own, gripping the teller and listener equally in its imaginative possibilities. Story-as-text tends to create a less immediate experience: the relationship between author and reader more distant than that between teller and listener. Later in this chapter, in *Inquiring into my practice*, I explore some of these issues further – drawing on a workshop I ran in March 2000 for a CARPP/SOLAR postgraduate group on storytelling as an *Inquiry into meaning-making and community-building*.

I have used stories to help me make sense of organisational life and as a form of consultancy intervention, publishing a short article on the subject, *A Winter's Tale: Myth, Story and Organisations* (Mead 1997) in the journal *Self and Society*, going on to teach others how to use stories to catalyse organisational change in sessions with PriceWaterhouseCoopers (1998), Middlesex University (1999) and NHS Human Resource Directors (2000). I treat such storytelling as “gift work” through which I can “redirect” some corporate funds to charity.

My bookshelves are groaning with volumes of stories and books about stories too numerous to mention, but I do want to cite some of the writers who have been most influential in helping me get “underneath the skin” of stories: Jerome Bruner, whose classic paper *Two Modes of Thought* (Bruner 1988) originally published in 1968, gives a convincing psychological basis for the power of stories to “endow experience with meaning”; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) illustrates so vividly how our ability to make meaning both arises from, and is limited by, our metaphorical imagination; Mary Catherine Bateson (Bateson 1990) and Erving Polster (Polster 1987) who provide such rich examples of “composing” our lives through narrative; Robert Bly (Bly 1990; Bly 1993) and Allan Chinen (Chinen



1993) who show how the archetypal and mythic elements of traditional stories touch our common humanity and encourage us to “find gold in the ashes” of our lives; James Hillman (Hillman 1983; Hillman 1996) and Arthur Frank (Frank 1995) who explicitly identify the therapeutic and healing power of stories; Ben Okri (Okri 1997) and Salman Rushdie (Rushdie 1991) whose passionate and exuberant love of stories reminds us (should we forget) how exciting, joyful and liberating it is to tell our stories and what an essential part of our human nature it is to do so. “*Homo Fabula: we are storytelling beings.*” (Okri 1997)

By 1999 I wanted to offer an opportunity for others to experience the healing power of storytelling. In the first instance, I was drawn to do this work with men and wrote a “flyer” to advertise an event called (*His*)*Stories*, which I described as:

Designed for men in the midst of life, it will draw on the power and beauty of traditional stories and storytelling to invite us to tell our own life stories as men and to hear them mirrored in the lives of others. A good story can inspire us to step onto the path of transformation and it can cheer and comfort us on our way. To tell our own story and to be heard with love and respect is the simplest and, perhaps, the most profound act of human communication.

In the last sentence I am recognising that we need to be in relationship with others to heal our wounded selves. Or, as Bruner concludes: “Selves... can only be revealed in a transaction between teller and told” (Bruner 1990).

In the end, ten men joined me at Bramshill on a glorious September day to experience this for themselves. I told the story *Go I know not whither, bring back I know not what*. We exchanged insights, drew pictures, ate lunch together on the lakeshore and, by late afternoon, began to share stories about ourselves. Self-stories, some of them told for the first time, stories about success, failure, love, loss, ageing, sexuality, friendship, children, parents, loneliness, alienation, re-connection and hope – the kind of stories men don’t usually tell each other in everyday encounters. As we said goodbye and went our various ways I was left moved by the openness of the men and by the quality of attention we had given each other. It seemed to me that, together, we had created a very unusual space – a container for our stories woven from the stories themselves.

**Transformative spaces**

Holding this tantalising thought about a container made from that which it contains, I am puzzling about how such “transformative spaces” sometimes arise from our interactions and under what conditions they are most likely to emerge. *(His)Stories* had provided a simple structure, an engaging story, a pleasant physical environment, and the chance to speak and be heard without judgement. But I suspect this is too simple a rubric and that I need to open up this riddle to further inquiry. What comes to mind is to take another example, perhaps one of working with other men to create ritual space which also seems to have this “transformative” quality, and to mine the experience for some of the qualities and practices that enabled self-healing to occur.

I wrote the following text in May 1999, a couple of weeks after the events it describes, so they were fresh in my memory. It brings together several strands of living inquiry: men and masculinity, loving relationships, healing and (in the way I have since offered forms of ritual for other men) my educative influence. It begins by plunging into experiential inquiry.

**A ritual for separation**

Some weeks ago I realised that, although legally divorced since September, I still felt bound (imprisoned? trapped?) by the marriage vows Sara and I had taken twenty-five years earlier. I wondered if the pain I was experiencing in my testicles had some psychic connection with a sense that I had given my balls away. Talking about this with my friend Peter as we walked together in Ashridge Forest we compared the enormous psychic bond ritualised in the wedding ceremony with the unheralded arrival of a court order "decree absolute" through the post, terminating the marriage. It became clear to me that I needed a ritual ending to counteract the enduring the force of the wedding ceremony.

So, on 12 April, Peter and I met two other members our men’s group, Len and Mike at Hazel Hill, a seventy-acre wood near Salisbury. Together, we spent the morning clearing and cleaning the circular space within a wattle and thatch roundhouse. Taking our lead from the symbolism of the Native American Medicine Wheel we decorated the four directions. In the North, a circle of ashes with a rattle and talking stick for the warrior; in the South, an inner circle of drums, logs and candles for the "village" and for healing; in the East, the direction of new beginnings, we built a

fire and a shrine to represent male energy; to the West, the direction of endings, a shrine to honour the feminine, the earth mother.

Having laboured to create a sacred environment, we drummed, danced and chanted to bring ourselves fully present and to invoke the spirits. With the help and support of the other men each of us made our own ritual, honouring both male and female, to suit our different needs. I will not write of other's experiences but I want to describe my own here because I think it has played a crucial part in what I believe to be a fundamental shift in the ground of my being.

I knew that I was ready when I began to shake with excitement and fear. It reminded me of the feeling you get as the carriage clatters to a halt at the top of a roller-coaster ride, just before plunging into the abyss. Peter accompanied me from "the village" to the place of the warrior. I stood outside the ash circle for a minute or two, gathering my will so that when I stepped across into the circle, I did so with full intention. I took up the rattle and shook it vigorously, its rough tones stirring my passion, then took up the talking stick. I could find no words, just guttural noises. Breathing hard, I expressed the sounds louder and louder until I was yelling at full volume into the woods. I stopped and for a few moments, heard my voice crashing through the trees. My blood was up.

I went over to the female shrine [perhaps I should more properly say the shrine representing our commitment to and relationship, as men, with the feminine principle] and stood for a while, solitary, dumb and lonely so I asked the other men, seated in "the village", to join me at the shrine. Without knowing what I was going say, I simply let the words emerge. "You don't own me, you never have. I gave you my balls and now I'm taking them back." So saying, I reached out and seized two round stones lying in the grasp of clay fingers. "I choose never to be afraid of you ["woman"] again. I choose never to put myself in your power again. I do not hate you or want to destroy you, just to be separate, to be male, to be free."

From there to the male shrine, fire burning brightly in the hearth; I put the stone "cojones" down beside a symbolic phallus, feeling somehow complete. "For too long I have been ashamed and afraid to take my place as a man. No more!" It was good to be warmed by the flames, flanked by my comrades.

Finally, I went to "the village", where we sat on logs in a tight circle and I told the story of my relationship with Sara; how we met, got engaged and married - despite internal doubts - how we had four children together, some of the joy and pain of those many years together, and of the parting and divorce. To symbolise our separation, I cut carefully through a photograph of us taken together at a party in happier times. As I did so, two of the men began to drum - softly at first then

building to a crescendo - until, as I made the final cut, they struck a single clear note. It went straight into my body like a gunshot. I reeled from its impact and knew it was done. I was no longer enthralled.

We opened a bottle of champagne and drank in celebration of all our endings and beginnings. We hugged and whooped and hollered, laughing with intoxicated delight. Len lit a Havana cigar, which we passed round in lieu of a ceremonial pipe. Then, in more sombre mood once more, we sat quietly together until another man was moved to begin his own ritual. That night I wrote in my journal... "Now I am divorced. Now I am my own man, owning my own balls, my own power and sexual energy. Now my separation has been witnessed and feels complete. It is good that we [men] can do these things for ourselves and for each other".

Goose-bumps prick my skin and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I read these words, the power of the experience deeply embodied and still very much alive. Then I settle into a more detached and reflective mode and wonder what can be drawn from this particular occasion that might help me better understand how to create transformative spaces with, and for, others. Going back over the text and recalling the events of the day, here are some of the features of the ritual that strike me as possible contributions to this wider endeavour.

- Intention – We went to Hazel Hill prepared to commit ourselves to the process, to take it and ourselves seriously enough not to hold back, and believing sufficiently in the possibility of beneficial outcomes to find the time to be there.
- Attention – I think we brought a quality of mindful awareness that enabled us to be fully present in that time and place, allowing the possibility that anything and everything that happened might be relevant and significant. This seemed to require a “willing suspension of disbelief” and an opening of oneself to the sacred.
- Invocation – Through the creation of the shrines and “energising” them with our drumming, dancing and chanting, we invited a connection with something beyond, something greater than our everyday human selves. We might call this Higher Self, God, Creator, Great Spirit, Universal Wisdom, the “more than human world”, Anima Mundi or any one of a thousand names.

- Imagination – In our words, and in the symbols and images we made, we activated our creative intuition, allowing ourselves to be inspired and inspiring each other to put our hearts and souls into the work.
- Preparation – We worked together to clean and prepare the space – to honour it with our labour and make it a fit place for ritual. We also prepared ourselves through reflection and meditation so that we would be ready to receive whatever blessings might come our way.
- Spontaneity – The counterpoint to careful preparation was our willingness to trust our own process enough to allow the rituals to unfold spontaneously, freeing our attention from anxiety and attachment to outcome sufficiently to stay in the “here and now”.
- Enactment – We did not just talk about our issues, we enacted them in ritual, moving round the “stations” of the ritual space, interacting with the shrines (and with each other) through gesture and touch as well as spoken words, embodying our questions and responses, taking the experience deep inside.
- Environment – Hazel Hill provided a wonderful location for the ritual. We built our shrines in the heart of the wood, far away from public gaze, open to the elements and surrounded by natural beauty. Although we are not always so fortunate, the environment in which we do such work does play an important part in the quality of the experience.
- Structure – The four directions of the Native American Medicine Wheel provided a simple and robust form for the ritual space, within which we were free to elaborate and improvise. It held us well – neither so tightly as to constrain nor so loosely as to leave us floundering.
- Mutuality – We were there for each other just as much as for ourselves and this was reflected in an attitude of mutual respect and companionship. Each of us gave and took the time that was needed. I experienced being “seen” and accepted for who I am, without feeling the need either to apologise or show off.

- Vulnerability – As well as summoning our warrior energy, we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, freely naming our hopes, fears and pain. Our vulnerability was an offering to each other, a gift to be shared through our stories, our singing and dancing, and through our need for physical contact – to hold and be held.
- Leadership – No-one held tightly on to leadership. It moved freely around the group as we made suggestions, co-operated and initiated. There seemed to be enough room for everyone to lead, even though Peter and I had called us together. Maybe, over a longer period of time, egos would have clashed (which would certainly have tested the quality of the “transformative space”) but there was no sign of this during our day at Hazel Hill.

Teasing these twelve features out of the text moves us from experiential and presentational knowing into the propositional realm. The statements identify some of the conditions that, I believe, created the space within which it was possible for me to find a new (and separate) sense of self, through a powerfully symbolic transaction “between the teller and the told” (Bruner 1990). I call this kind of social setting which enables, encourages and supports such qualitative shifts in self-perception “transformative space” and this notion has become central to my practice as an educator.

Staying in the propositional mode, I am aware that my understanding of “transformational learning” and “transformative space” also has roots in several sources. My four and a half years training in a Gestalt approach to organisational consulting (1991-95) and five years as a client in Gestalt psychotherapy (1989-94) have been major influences. Within a Gestalt frame (Perls, Hefferline et al. 1984), “transformational learning” occurs in the “aha” moment as an old gestalt (or pattern of meaning) dissolves and a new gestalt emerges from the dissolution. This is a non-linear and discontinuous process - similar perhaps to the emergence of order on the edge of chaos - and ultimately a mystery. We can help to create the conditions that improve the likelihood of this kind of learning but it is always unpredictable, a moment of grace. In the Gestalt model, letting go of old patterns of understanding is a pre-requisite to the emergence of new patterns - unlearning as well as learning. As Petruska Clarkson says:

It is from the void that the new emerges, it was in the deepest darkness that Moses found God and it is when we most truly let ourselves go into the emptiness that fullness can begin to arise. (Clarkson 1993)

Letting ourselves go into the emptiness can be frightening and we can support each other by creating a climate in which we are prepared to be, and be seen, as uncomfortable, inconsistent, out of control and “incompetent”. As in *A ritual for separation*, many factors can contribute to such a climate, but the quality of relationships in the group is crucial. Many writers have offered helpful frameworks for understanding group dynamics, from the psycho-analytic “basic assumption group” of Wilfrid Bion (Bion 1959), to the human needs “inclusion/ autonomy/affection” model of Will Schutz (Schutz 1979), or the Reichian nurturing/energising/achieving/ relaxing” stages of group development proposed by Randall and Southgate (Randall and Southgate 1980). I do not discount the usefulness of these generic frameworks when working with groups but regard them as describing necessary rather than sufficient conditions for the creation of “transformative space”.

Something more is needed and I catch glimpses of that “something” in the writing of Murray Stein when he describes the archetypal energy of Hermes, God of Magic. For me, this touches on the element of mystery that I believe to be intrinsic to transformational learning and transformative spaces:

Hermes... god of journeyers, of boundaries and of boundary situations, who transfers messages and communications among the realms; the god of passages from one dimension of existence to another, from life to death and from death to life, who in alchemy becomes the master of transformations (Stein 1983).

So strongly do I identify with this Hermetic energy that I once proposed Hermes as guardian and patron deity of organisational consultants (Mead 1997) and named my own company Hermes Consulting in his honour.

As well as this element of mystery, “transformative spaces” are places where people feel recognised and accepted for “who they are”. Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1992) draws on the Greek notion of *thymos* which he describes as: “Man’s [sic] sense of self-worth and the desire that it be recognised” as a powerful social driver. I think it offers a partial

explanation for the particular power of people coming together as peers to support each other's learning. *Isothymia* – the desire “to be recognised as the equal of other people” may help to create a lively, participative and democratic community, while *megalothymia* – the desire “to be recognised as superior to other people” is likely to create a dysfunctional community, riven by power struggles.

I am very grateful to Jack Whitehead for bringing Fukuyama's book to my attention. Reading the chapter on *The Rise and Fall of Thymos* caused me to radically reframe part of my educative practice. Instead of trying to help others by telling them stories of my learning, I came to realise that it would be much more helpful to enable them to share stories of their learning. I now believe that sharing our stories with others is one of the most effective ways of creating “transformative spaces.” I think this will be evident in the account of the storytelling workshop in the next section and later in the thesis when I look at my work with the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* Action Inquiry Group.

Related to this is the importance of “voice” which I have come to understand something about from feminist writings such as *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan 1993) and *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986). “Transformative spaces” are places where hitherto silenced or muted voices may be heard. For both women and men to find their own voices means recognising and trying to counteract the effects of gender conditioning and cultural oppression. As a man, I am particularly conscious of the “white noise” of stereotypical men's talk, merging and drowning out each unique voice. Finding my own voice in the police service continues to be a struggle with the constant risk of rejection and alienation<sup>9</sup>. Creating spaces where we can each “speak our truth” is one way of healing the alienation (mine and other's) that Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury identify, in the quotation that opens this chapter, as a primary purpose of human inquiry.

A decade ago, when I became Director of the Police Accelerated Promotion Scheme, I came across Mike Pedler's ideas about “learning communities” (Pedler 1981). I was struck by what he calls “the riddle of the liberating structure”, designed ironically to move people into greater autonomy. For three years, my colleagues and I wrestled with what this meant in practice as we sought to create an effective learning environment for

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<sup>9</sup> See *Police Stories* – Section entitled *Leaving Home*, for example.



future police leaders. Bill Torbert's description of the ironic leadership to which we aspired proved tantalisingly elusive:

Instead of attempting to hoard power or to give it away, the leadership uses the power granted to it by institutional status, by its members, or by its own experiential authority to perform a kind of psycho-social jiu-jitsu whereby the members gradually come to question their own assumptions about the nature of power and begin to experiment with the creative power to constitute a new world. (Torbert 1978) cited in (Pedler 1981)

Today, I am much less comfortable with the idea of "psycho-social jiu-jitsu". There is a very fine line between ironic leadership and manipulation. Now I am striving to find ways of co-creating "transformative spaces" in a more open, aware and participative way and I hope this too will be evident in later examples.

I have also learned from Jurgen Habermas's concept of "communicative space" (Kemmis 2000) and Joyce Fletcher's description of "discursive spaces" (Fletcher 1998), but it is these ideas of mystery, mutual recognition, voice, liberating structure and community that have been most influential upon my thinking and my practice. They do not supplant the kind of embodied knowing that I draw from *A ritual for separation* and many other such experiences. Rather, they complement, deepen and enrich my understanding of "transformative space".

### **Inquiring into my practice**

I want to focus now on how I am offering to others what I am learning from both of these strands of my own self-healing (storytelling and transformative spaces). The medium for this is to share some reflective writing and correspondence about a daylong workshop I conducted at Bath University in March 2000 for some twenty members of the CARPP and SOLAR post-graduate research communities. It was billed as an inquiry into storytelling as meaning-making and community-building.

To help me use the occasion to inquire into my practice as storyteller and educator, I asked Jack Whitehead to video the day. In the event, he was only able to stay for the morning so missed the group-work and discussion during the afternoon. Two hour-long sessions during the morning (in the first of which I facilitated the group in sharing their

earliest childhood memories of story and in the second of which I told the story of *The White Bear King Valemon*) were recorded<sup>10</sup>. Jack later sent me copies to review together with some comments about his contrasting impressions of the two sessions. His comment that he believed he had seen a fundamental contradiction in my actions/relationships provoked me to reflect carefully on my experience of the day and some of the other comments I had received from participants and to write the following response. I think it will give you a flavour of the day – the nature of the transformative space we created together – as well as opening up some important differences between sharing our own stories and participating in story at a mythic level.

**Storytelling Workshop**

**3<sup>rd</sup> March 2000**

Jack, now that I have managed to view the videotapes you took during the storytelling workshop, I want to pull some thoughts together about the experience. Partly, I am prompted by your remarks on several occasions since then about your very different impressions of the two activities that morning – sharing our early childhood memories of story followed by my telling of *The White Bear King Valemon*. Once, you told me that you had a “deep sense of unease” at the end of the storytelling session and, recently, you wrote in an email (22<sup>nd</sup> April) about what you see as a “fundamental contradiction in my actions/relationships”. Let me quote you verbatim:

“Let me share with you what I see as a fundamental contradiction in your actions/relationships. I know I’m working with you on what I see as the positive pole in this dialectic. I think you will see this contradiction when you have time to look at the tapes I made of your storytelling session”

You have not told me the nature of your unease or what contradiction you see in my actions/relationships, preferring me to look at the tapes and report my own feeling on doing so. In a minute, I will do just that. But let me first surmise what you may be thinking. I imagine that, as you filmed the first activity, focusing your camera and attention on each of us in turn, you felt very present and involved. You probably shared our growing sense of community as we spoke from the heart about the place of story in our childhood and, sometimes, how that resonated into our adult lives.

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<sup>10</sup> I considered including some clips from the video to exemplify my practice but the pace of the day was deliberately slow and it would require several lengthy excerpts to illustrate the two sessions

Then, as you filmed me telling the story of *The White Bear King Valemon*, you focused your camera and attention almost exclusively on me as I held the space for nearly an hour. This time, you were sitting to one side and slightly behind the rest of the group who were arrayed as an audience as I “performed”. I imagine that holding that single focus through the camera lens required an intense effort of concentration. I guess that you felt excluded from the ebb and flow of the story and, since I consciously avoided looking at the camera (and hence at you) somewhat alienated from me as the storyteller.

Now I want to explore the experience from my perspective and, as far as I can from feedback, also from others’ points of view. As I do so, I shall try to remain open to the possibility of discovering the “fundamental contradiction in my actions/ relationships”, though I do not necessarily assume that there is one in this case. (I know such contradictions do manifest themselves in my behaviour quite frequently!) I am also open to the possibility that your perspective was affected (distorted?) by operating the camera and/or, because you left immediately after the story and were not part of what developed and emerged during the afternoon.

The workshop was billed as “An inquiry into storytelling as meaning-making and community-building.” The invitation was to “meet each other through the medium of a traditional story” and “to use this material as a basis for sharing personal stories and/or stories of our inquiries.” The idea of introducing ourselves to other members of the group by sharing our relationship to stories in childhood came later – almost as an afterthought – when designing the structure of the day. A flyer for the day was circulated round the SOLAR, CARPP and MSc communities. It clearly struck a chord since twenty people turned up and stayed all day (hitherto unknown in my experience of CARPP!) The level of interest in the workshop seemed to validate the relevance of stories and storytelling in our lives and research.

The first video begins with me introducing the day by telling the group about my fascination for the subject and checking out the day’s programme. After ten minutes or so I invite the group (seated in a circle) to “Take a breath and go back to your childhood... What are your earliest memories of stories and storytelling? Were you told stories, did you read them, listen to radio or watch television? Was there an absence of stories in your childhood?” Most of the group closed their eyes as they retrieved these memories. Then I invited them to share these thoughts and recollections with a neighbour. I did this because, having articulated these personal stories to each other, I knew from experience that it would be easier to speak freely in the big group.

Then we began to speak out – I offered the injunction, to “Take what time you need. We have to manage the time together, but there is no need to rush.” Suzie Morel went first. “I was the last to

arrive so I'll begin," she said and went on to paint a vivid word picture of her childhood spent on horseback, meeting all manner of folk, including the vet who threatened to shoot her horse if it did not get better. I asked two or three questions to draw Suzie out a little because I wanted to establish a "norm" of openness and discursiveness.

Then came the moment Paul Roberts wrote to me about when, from across the room, he began to speak then queried whether we were going round the circle in turn (perhaps picking up on my unspoken expectation that we would). After a little discussion, I confirmed that we would go round the circle which, as I later explained to Paul, followed my intuitive sense that it would result in a safer and more predictable pattern and help us manage the time better (albeit at the possible expense of greater spontaneity and creativity).

After a few more contributions (from Peter Reason, Nigel Caldwell, Lynn Ashburner and Emrys Jenkins) to whom I again asked a few encouraging questions, we seemed to find our way into a natural flow. Watching the video, I am struck by a wonderful quality of mutual attentiveness in the room. Our facial expressions seem to indicate the resonance of our stories in each other's lives. In a gentle way, we expressed a tremendous range of emotions; warmth, care, compassion, humour, shock, fear and surprise to name but a few. We spoke of intimate moments with family and loved ones, of stories told and untold, of stories unheard, of favourite books, of Listen With Mother, of schooldays and holidays, of growing up in different cultures and countries and of our own children.

You asked me what I feel, Jack, looking at the video and the answer is delight and fascination at the amazing richness of our lives and our willingness to share them. I see, in my own countenance, a sense of confidence and ease. I am both facilitating a process and part of it. There is space for me to become present through the stories I loved as a child – and those that were hidden from me. I notice, with pleasure, my joke about Biggles and my fur-lined flying jacket. There is one particular moment, towards the end of this session, when I am smiling with delight and reaching out with my arms to embrace an imaginary feast of stories.

As I watch myself in this moment I think "I really like that person." Moments later, a second – more rueful – thought occurs. "And it has only taken me fifty years, hundreds of hours of therapy and one divorce to get to this point – not such a bad deal really."

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Again,



“I was ‘indescribably’ impressed with the first tape. I think you brought alive in a profoundly human way, values which people are trying to live by. In Michael Connelly’s and Jean Clandinin’s sense of ‘stories to live by’ you enabled, in a delightful way, people to tell the group, within \_ minutes really important things about their lives and values. Really Great”

I feel that this tape shows me at my best, in my practice as an educator, expressing (again I quote your email) “a loving warmth and value for the other which helps them to find their story worth living for.” There is, perhaps, some corroboration of this in a comment about the workshop in an email (12<sup>th</sup> March) from Paul Roberts:

“Overall I really enjoyed it and noticed your capacity as a workshop leader to create a climate of interest, inquiry and passion for the story. This quality of presence that you have seemed more important than any particular set of skills or competences in influencing mine and other’s learning – though, of course, one’s presence and skills (being and doing) cannot be neatly separated”

Now to the bit you have been waiting for, Jack – my responses to the second tape. Here, with the rest of the group sitting and lying in front of me, I tell the story of *The White Bear King Valemon* which I set up by reading Rumi’s poem *Storywater*, through which I invited them to “enjoy this being washed with a secret we sometimes know, and then not.” Watching the video, I am conscious of myself “in performance”. I am aware of holding multiple awarenesses; of the audience (I notice my eye contact moving around the room to draw them in and gauge their reactions), of myself (I notice when I lay down the “bones” of the story and when I let my imagination run free and describe the images I can see), and of the story itself (I notice my own fascination with this rich and wonderful tale).

The question I ask my image on the screen, moment by moment is: “Are you serving the story or is it serving you?” If the former, then I can enjoy the exercise of my craft in a good cause. If the latter, it becomes something hollow – a mere inflation of the ego. As I look into my own eyes, I answer the question: “Yes, I am serving the story – and enjoying myself in the process.”

I look critically at my own telling. Is it a good choice of story? Does it have enough substance to engage this group of twenty very bright people for the rest of the day? Will our modern sensibility allow sustained interest for a whole hour? The story took longer to tell than I had expected and the energy and attention of listeners ebbed and flowed. The princess is lost in the forest for a long time – a dark night of the soul enlivened only by the pleasures of playful repetition. I notice how quietly I speak and think that I should inject more variety of tone and volume. I see where I occasionally get lost in my own inventiveness. I have a strong sense of engagement with the audience (something that may not have been obvious to you Jack from behind the camera).

Of course, this is a very different situation from that depicted in the first tape. Power relations within the group are quite different. Sharing stories of our childhood quickly became a democratic and participative process in which we were all equal before each other. In contrast, power relations were temporarily altered as I told the story and others listened. Yet, Robert Bly sometimes talks about storytelling as a different kind of democracy – where we are all (and this includes the storyteller if told with good intent) equal before the story. So, I return once more to my primary question: “Did I serve the story,” and answer: “That was my intention.” Only others can judge if I served it well enough.

Then I have to ask what use we made of the story throughout the day – and was the gift of attention repaid with learning and insight? Certainly, the tape recordings of our subsequent discussions reveal a lively and intense debate, though they were not able to capture the work done in small groups as individuals explored some of the “untold stories” within the story by speaking in role as, for example, the glass mountain, the bear, the oldest daughter, the Great One, the carpenters, the poor mother of four children. This was powerful stuff – a means of expressing sometimes neglected parts of ourselves.

An email from Elaine Fernandez (23<sup>rd</sup> March) gives some indication of the opportunities for learning provided by the story:

“I’m sorry it’s taken so long, but I want to say thank you very much for the story workshop. I’m not sure what detail to give you to let you know what a good day it was for me. I remember you talked some time ago about making space for others through storytelling (I think). For me the relaxed, uncluttered form of the day was really welcome. The listening and the speaking were important, but what was particular about the day for me was the sense of building. It was a sort of constructing day.

I’m aware that I said I disconnected from the story you told at the point where the children disappear and the parents, seemingly untouched, continue to enjoy their own passion as opposed to being frantic at the loss. And that you came in half way through my being the woman with the four children who gets salt beef for winter... The most wonderful part of that day came after that, in the very small group... but this “best bit”, where as Eden put it I spoke my real truth, would certainly not have come about without the other bits. So again, thank you.”

So, there you have it, Jack. I see difference but not contradiction between the two tapes. Of course, I may still be blind to whatever you can see. Maybe we are looking for (and hence finding) different things. Maybe we need to watch the videos together so you can point out the images that generate your sense of unease. Others, too – particularly Paul and Eden (who were both there) – might confirm or disconfirm the contradiction you have identified, or offer alternative interpretations.

I have tried to write this in a spirit of non-defensive exploration, though I fear I may not always have succeeded. It has certainly helped to deepen my own inquiry into storytelling as meaning-making and community-building. Above all, I am delighted to have taken the risk of exposing my practice as an educator to the critical, but not unkindly, eye of colleagues in the SOLAR, CARPP and MSc communities. It feels like part of my coming of age as a practitioner and researcher.

Jack and I met a few weeks later to discuss our respective experiences of the day. We agreed to differ, respecting each other's viewpoints: Jack holding to his view about the pre-eminent educational value of enabling others to tell the "stories they live by" and me continuing to claim equal status for engagement in the mythic realm. Much later, I circulated my paper to everyone who had attended the workshop and received several additional responses to the day including an email from Peter Reason (28<sup>th</sup> February 2001) from which I take the following extract:

My own sense of the day was that the earlier personal storytelling was intended and served to bring us present into the room with each other and with story. I did not imagine that we would continue in that mode. The second part, in which you told this wonderfully long story, served a different purpose, which was to take us away from personal material and into the archetypal and to explore story as a way of doing that.

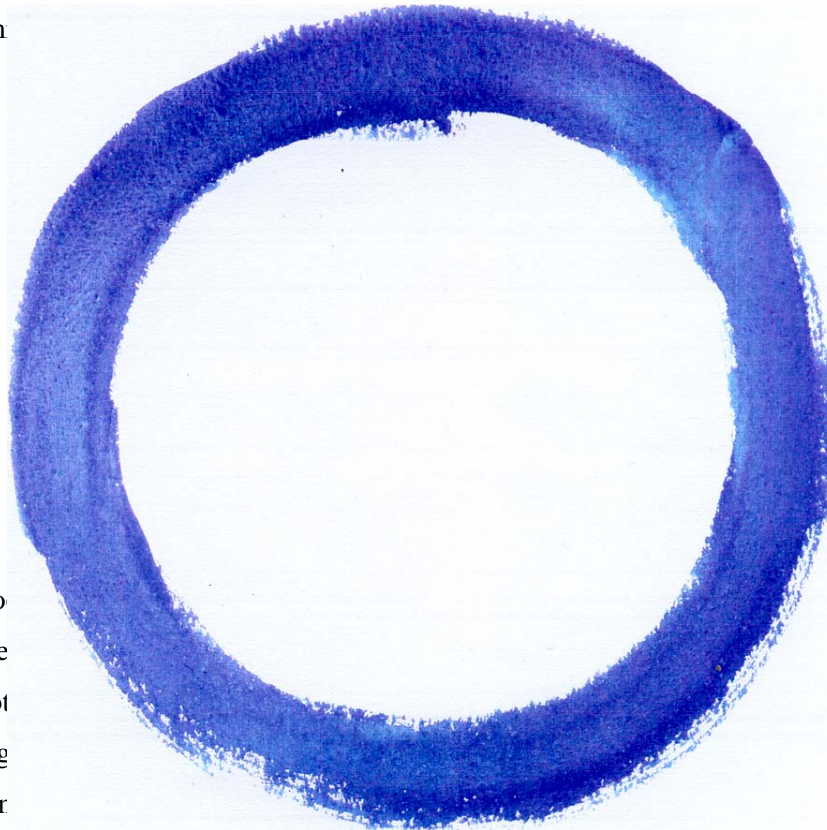
Personally I was much more engaged with your storytelling than with the personal stories. I saw these latter, on this occasion, as a necessary part of a process toward the archetypal. I was much more engaged with the images, which float around me even now, as I remember the wood, and the mountain, and the struggle to move on through life which the story tells me about.

Peter's comments offer further support for my belief in the healing power of story – not least the vividness of the images he is still carrying from *The White Bear King Valemon* nearly a year later. Storytelling (both personal and mythic) and the role of stories in creating transformative spaces and renewing our sense of self, our narrative identity, continue to fascinate me and I shall go on looking for ways to share what I am learning from this particular healing journey.

### **Opening a circle**

Finally, in this section, let me return to presentational knowing. For several months during 2000, I painted mandalas and circles as a way of expressing my being in the world, writing a brief reflection on each one. There is one that, to my mind, somehow conveys some of the qualities of “transformative spaces” and some of the practices required to create them - though it was not painted with that intent. I wonder what meanings it will convey to you.

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Painting the *enso* was a deliberate act just as, when leading a group or facilitating an educational process, I make conscious interventions to help us build a safe learning environment. These may be suggestions about time boundaries, confidentiality, self-disclosure, expressing our feelings, respecting each other’s experience, possible activities or any number of other issues. Yet, though deliberate, both are also improvisatory, applying paint in response to the emerging image and engaging creatively with the unfolding group dynamic. To both, I bring an aesthetic (and kinaesthetic) sense of



proportion and relationship – working the brush or making process interventions with the aim of creating a “good enough” space.

Part of this judgement is how firmly the space needs to be held. In the *enso*, this is apparent in the diameter of the circle and solidity of the line. In groups, we each balance trust and risk, acceptance and self-disclosure, content and process. When facilitating, I have a particular responsibility to hold this multiple attention in order to help the group shape itself, moment by moment, into the *vas* – the alchemical vessel in which transformational learning is made possible.

Working to create transformative spaces and painting *ensos* are both paradoxical practices. As artist and as educator, I seek to bring all that I know and all that I am to each essay and, at the same time allow myself to be fresh, spontaneous and responsive to emergent form. As I said above in my journal entry: “It is a delicate balance between persistence and effortlessness.” Sometimes the results are pleasing to the eye; sometimes they fail to satisfy. Sometimes, groups fail to reach their potential for transformational learning, sometimes the experience is extraordinary and life enhancing – truly part of a healing journey.

## Commentary

In this commentary on *Healing Journeys*, I focus on three more of the twelve distinctive standards of judgement and criteria of validity described in *Chapter One: Living Inquiry*, exemplifying their embodiment in, and emergence from, my practice of *living inquiry*. I have chosen Breadth and Depth, Epistemological Balance, and Relatability as particularly, though not exclusively, relevant to this chapter and I invite you to bear them in mind throughout your reading of the thesis.

**Breadth and Depth:** As I said in *Chapter One: Living Inquiry* when describing this attribute, my interests are wide-ranging and I have consciously inquired into many aspects of my life. Honouring this diversity is important to me and I was not prepared to take the easier route of focusing this PhD on a single area, though the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* collaborative inquiry project (described in *Chapter Five: Reshaping my Professional Identity*) alone produced more than enough material to have done so. Balancing breadth and depth is important: if the span is too narrow it loses context, if too wide it loses focus and becomes insubstantial. In *Healing Journeys* you will see how I have used Rumer Goden's Indian proverb of the four rooms to illustrate the breadth of my inquiries into self-care and self-healing before delving into the realm of storytelling and narrative identity.

This feature of the text mirrors my practice of *living inquiry* - I follow my curiosity and energy, paying attention to what in Gestalt terms would be called "the field" as well as what is figural. I think you will see in this chapter how this kind of dual awareness allows me both to pursue particular interests in depth and to make interesting and novel connections, for example between storytelling, transformative spaces and Zen painting.

**Epistemological Balance:** This quality is demonstrated by the extent to which my different ways of knowing are acknowledged and represented in the text. In *Chapter One: Living Inquiry*, I characterised my plural epistemology as emphasising personal (tacit) knowing, metaphorical and imaginal knowing, embodied knowing, complex and emergent knowing, uncertainty and unknowing with a particular concern to redress the conventional academic imbalance between (undervalued) *mytho-centric* and (valorised) *logo-centric* forms of sense-making. My commitment is not simply to champion but to enact a new balance between *mythos* and *logos* in my life of inquiry and in my thesis.

I think you will agree that all these forms of sense-making and knowing are represented throughout the text. But, in *Healing Journeys*, I believe that I have gone further than that and succeeded in integrating many of them in a coherent multi-stranded chapter that moves easily between experiential narratives (e.g. *Inquiring into my practice*), fictive stories (e.g. *The man who lived as a king*), the spoken word (*Jumping Mouse*), graphic images (*enso*), reflective writing (e.g. *A ritual for separation*) and the exploration of literature and development of ideas (e.g. *narrative identity* and *transformative spaces*).

You may not be surprised to learn that, as I look beyond the completion of this thesis, I feel a growing energy and interest in taking these ideas - about storytelling as a healing practice - much further and am contemplating taking a full-time three month training in the art of storytelling next year when I leave the police service after thirty years.

**Relatability:** I have located this commentary here because, although this attribute is relevant to the whole text, the question of relatability is explicitly addressed in this chapter. I argue in the *Introduction* and in *Healing Journeys* that it is the personal and the particular – not abstract generalisations – which enable us to relate to each other’s stories. In *Chapter One: Living Inquiry*, I liken this to Michael Bassey’s notion of *relating* to the research findings of the study of a singularity (Bassey 1995) but I am going further than that in suggesting the possibility of a unity of insight between the individual and the universal. Helen Simons comes to the same conclusion in her paper on *The Paradox of Case Study* (Simons 1996) when she says:

By studying the uniqueness of the particular we come to understand the universal.

I believe that many of my narratives of inquiry are presented in such a way that you will find yourself able to “relate” to them. Of course, I cannot know this. Only you, the reader, can judge whether this is so. I think that you might also find that sometimes, as in *Driftwood and Dogmeat* (my open letter to my best friend Chris in *The Men’s Room*) and *The man who lived as a king* (a fictive account of separation and renewal in *Healing Journeys*), my stories connect with archetypal themes that give them what I call “mythic resonance” – connoting those narrative epiphanies where ontology, epistemology and cosmology meet. I wonder too if you experience any of this quality in my telling of the

Native American story *Jumping Mouse*. Did you recognise aspects of your life of inquiry in the story? Were any of the characters or situations strangely familiar?