

“Learning to inquire together about what matters most is some of the most significant work I can imagine. Our isolation, our investment in positions and roles, our defense of our own limits, fuel the condition of thinking alone. Dialogue represents a new frontier for human beings – perhaps the true final frontier. In it we can come to know ourselves and our relatedness to the whole of life”.

WILLIAM ISAACS, Dialogue and the art of thinking together (1999: p.48)

PART 2

How can I develop this art of dialogic inquiry as a form of learning and connective relationship?

Chapter 9

Introduction

A co-researcher, Eleanor, recently asked me this question:

“Does the voice go inward and outward with same or similar forms, or is there a qualitative difference between both the methodology and the questions generated by the inward and outward experience?” (email 3/2/02)

My immediate reply to her was this:

“You cause me to ask whether the voice is in the same form, whether there is qualitative difference. It is a wonderful question. If I do express the same voice out loud then I know I risk misunderstanding, and I do even have evidence of the negative effects of this exposure. But I also

know through my experience that masking the voice or even suppressing it is even more degenerative. At this stage of my inquiry then I feel that I am holding on to a notion of the voices being the same." (email 4/2/02)

Chapter 10

Exploring the possibilities of dialogic inquiry as a form of mutual learning and connective relationship

This chapter represents the first phase of a new inquiry journey, one that will continue beyond the boundaries of my thesis. It is still in the process of being shaped, instinctive concerns mixed with intellectual curiosity. I pick up its current questioning in Chapter 11.

I reflect on the chapters of Part 1, happy to have explored the possibilities of connective relationships and the formation or de-formation of identity within those relationships but still asking questions about how I might develop this aspect of my research. I am reminded of the possibilities of developing an inclusive inquiry practice, encouraged to pay attention to the potential connectivity of my dialogue. Perhaps even more importantly though I am increasingly drawn to the possibilities of the ways in which I might stretch this practice beyond the confines of my first-person research and begin to work with it in the new context of my anticipated organisational learning role. I know that I must start to focus on this extension to my inquiry, that I want to re-start here.

At the moment I can hold on to three certainties. First, I am clear that I have explored the central role of dialogue in the development and expression of my 'being'. Second, I have begun to form a clear and robust notion of dialogic inquiry that can be judged successfully against the criteria of 'living life as inquiry' (*Marshall 2001*) and the attentional qualities of dialogic practice developed by *Bohm (1985)* and *Isaacs (1999)*. And third, I am beginning to form questions around the possibilities of this dialogic voice that are taking it beyond the claims of personal development and into the creative formation of connective learning relationships.

So, I start with questions of connectivity and begin to ask how I might re-form my connection with colleagues and co-learners. I know with certainty that I am now

posing that question from within the depths of my own critical consciousness. I pause and celebrate that certainty for a moment, sure that in just a few moments it will inevitably diminish and I will once again be asking questions that will take its definition into new places. I anticipate the development and relax. I know that the connectivity I am now seeking is based on the attentive space and generative potential of my dialogue, its connective voice clearly articulating my aesthetic and experiential sense of self.

I return to *Isaacs* work (1999) on dialogue and hold on to these words:

“Learning to inquire together about what matters most is some of the most significant work I can imagine. Our isolation, our investment in positions and roles, our defense of our own limits, fuel the condition of thinking alone. Dialogue represents a new frontier for human beings – perhaps the true final frontier. In it we can come to know ourselves and our relatedness to the whole of life”. (1999: p.48)

I am already beginning to form new questions around the fundamental nature of my connectivity with others, and draft out this question to help anchor my progress: “Can my dialogic engagement grow and sustain my connectivity with you?” I find myself in an increasingly new place, exciting in its boundaryless potential but sometimes overwhelming in the de-stabilisation it causes. I feel compelled to try and answer the questions too quickly, flooding my own thinking with the richness of the thinking going on all around me.

First, I return to the images of my relationships with colleagues from the earlier autobiographical accounts (Chapter 2) and realise that I do not have any sense of the quality of voice present in those relationships, the voice that can potentially carry my unique and separate identity into my working partnerships. I begin to consider the implications of this omission, checking first to see if it is simply a result of selective writing or whether it is in fact a meaningful reflection on the actuality of my ‘practice’. Intent on maintaining my ‘practice’ as my experiential

source I re-read the accounts and this time look at them with the intention of detecting and exploring both the dialectic and dialogic qualities of my voice.

As I re-read my account of Anne I am reminded of the combustible tension that built up between us, our inability to communicate in a mutually constructive way. As I increasingly played the role of conduit, expressing out loud the official goals and priorities of the business, she played the role of a scared woman, threatened by her inability to fulfill the role expected of her and unable to ask for help. I focused on maintaining my sangfroid. It seemed important to me. For a long time I absorbed the growing frustration and anger, careful to maintain the respectful appearance of our public relationship. I suppressed the real voice of my expression, uncertain of its suitability and concerned by its potential consequences. I did focus as long as I could on sustaining our dialogue but it was badly distorted by the absence of my emotional honesty and the hostility engendered by our competing positions.

There appears to be a similar suppression in the account of my relationship with Andrew, my voice absent as we launch the new vision in both Athens and Ascot. But that is more a reflection on the scope of the account than the actual reality. As I leave the company at the end of the account Andrew himself shares a reflection on the quality of our dialogue, a flattering mix of values and inquiring behaviour. I am pleased with the feedback, evidenced by the photographs taken at the time and by my current recollections. But more importantly, I am able to see for the first time that I do bring some of those connective and dialogic qualities into my 'practice'. I remember the hours I have spent simply listening, forming the occasional question but always attentive to the possibilities of our discussion rather than the intentional outcomes. I realise that they are being positively acknowledged here. I value that very highly.

As I pause to think about the implications of this new knowledge I begin to wonder about the differentiating qualities of our relationship, of this emerging

ability to become both a part of and a participant in the improvisatory process of dialogue.

Still learning from the accounts of my 'practice' relationships Karen focuses my attention on the dialogic qualities of my inquiring voice and on my ability to engender a very human quality in dialogue. This dialogue though is not always sustainable. At the beginning of the account I reflect on the experience of trying to work in a consultative and inquiring relationship with Karen, setting up a meeting with her in which we discuss a restructuring plan. It proves an explosive start to our relationship and I am not able to reflect on it until later when she herself raises the subject. Her feedback is interesting and resonates strongly with a similar experience of my own supervision group at the University. In my 'practice' account Karen accuses me of inferring that I have the answer and am waiting for others to catch up. She doesn't want the preamble, she just wants the proposal. She doesn't want to discuss it with me, she wants to hear the suggestion. She doesn't want my questions, she just wants my answers. In the account of my supervision group Geoff and Paul echo Karen's responses, themselves uncomfortable with what they perceive as my 'game-playing' and deliberate reluctance to share an opinion.

In an attempt to invite you to share the reflections across the two accounts I have included an extract from the account of the supervision group meeting below. There are five of us in the extract, a transcription from tape of part of one our supervision group meetings. Jack, our supervisor, and Geoff and Paul are clearly heard. Ian did not play such a prominent part. The meeting took place in March 1999. We had been talking about the nature of inquiry, triggered by my own questions but apparently at ease with our dialogue. I had opened the discussion by sharing the progress I believe I had made in my research, encouraging my colleagues to let go of their familiar stances and try to meet me in a different place. However, as we introduced the issue of an email I had sent in response to an invitation from Jack for comment on Paul's inclusion in the group, an uncomfortable sense of tension started to get in the way of friendship. There

appears to be a direct influence on our dialogue, and instead of the creative inquiry we had enjoyed up to that point we descend into argument. We lose the positive qualities of our dialogue and the ethic of care and respect is somewhat diluted. For me it is no longer dialogue.

Meeting of the Supervision Group, March 1999

At this point the discussion moved more specifically to a discussion of an email I had sent when asked for my reaction to Paul joining our supervision group. It is significant in the way in which it takes the dialogue towards a more detailed inquiry into the exactitude of communication and abruptly loses the sense of connection as we appear to develop our dialogue towards personal criticism and argument. I sense we stop caring about each other and speak from our singularity.

Jacqui

...what I was trying to say in that memo was because I'd almost got to a fragile point of sense-making, which was about understanding where I had come from and trying to bed this learning down I was being protective in a sense that said I think I know something about your sense-making, and Ian's, and Eden's, that still created a safe environment from which I could continue to grow. My concern...was that adding an extra person ...I knew that Paul's sense-making was a very strong part of him...I felt that I wasn't strong enough at that point to cope with an extra form of sense-making in the group...You didn't see that in the memo that I wrote...

Geoff

To me you were alluding to something and not saying it. You didn't say in

that memo “I feel fragile and concerned about Paul coming in because I think it might disturb me”. To me you played some verbal games around it...

Jacqui

..Your sense-making said “she is playing verbal games; she is alluding to something!”?

Geoff

...You did not say “I feel fragile and Paul might overwhelm me”...

Jack

...what I got was that clarity of message...

Geoff

...it wasn't explicit...

Jacqui

All I'm trying to get at is the difference in sense-making between us. If we are each solely...anchored, shackled in our own personal sense-making my challenge is the point at which we try and form group inquiry and therefore dialogue; can you only ever do it from your own sense-making or do we each need to find a way to explore each other's sense-making and almost sit inside it and look out, together? So it may be that on the surface from your sense-making process this memo had some certain messages...Bearing in mind that the story I have just recounted which is about a very different way of growth and maturing it is likely that I may not

communicate in the same way. But I may also have an expectation that I am communicating very clearly my sense-making. So the question really is, if you've got some form of group inquiry and we have these wonderful notions of consensus, common view, common conclusions and actions...do we ever, or aren't we all so anchored back in our own knowing, do we ever get into any true dialogue or learning?

Paul

Sometimes the way you pose the question is problematic. You're posing it as an either or...

Geoff

What I want is the statement lying behind the question. There are times when you ask a question in a way that feels like...a disguised lecture. It doesn't feel honest, it doesn't feel straight...The sense I had of that email...was there was a statement to be said that wasn't being said and I wasn't prepared to read the statement for myself and make judgement taking responsibility for you.

Jack

...I suddenly felt, very powerfully, that you were...a living contradiction; you're doing the very thing Jacqui asked you about...colluding with a form of behaviour or relation which was stifling the very qualities Jacqui wanted to express...This is the kind of thing you have been saying...I don't want to hear your questions I want your statements...and Jacqui is saying I actually want to be open to inquiry here and I'm asking questions...

Ian

...what I have heard...are questions which are weighted. There is something behind the questions...they include a veiled statement of Jacqui's own views...open to misinterpretations...clear communication is essential for inquiry...more than just about asking questions...it's about making your own point clear

Paul

...I think it's worth thinking about...There is sometimes a sense that there is a statement behind the questions or even if it's not a statement perhaps the sense that the question is being asked in such a way that when the reply...there's a sense of "Ah, got it!"

As I reflect on this extract I know that it is significant – that it draws attention to the very nature of the space in which we were trying to explore together. I know that within its lines we each formed silent questions, sometimes united in the creation of something new yet in other moments hopelessly lost in our own controlled responses. We talked about creating new spaces, about whether we could or could not meet in those new spaces. My intention was that we would explore the possibilities of a mutual place of learning, of a new space that could be engendered by the creation of a dialogue based on attentive listening and mutual attention – but I had neither shared my intent nor sought their agreement to the inquiry. Despite the anger and frustration that is expressed towards the end of the account we did in some ways partly achieve a new, shared understanding and amongst the sometimes explosive images there are in fact many which underline the positive potential of our dialogue.

I am struck by the strong sense of my presence throughout the dialogue, firm in my inquiring voice and recognised in my identity by my co-researchers. Although my sense of self has inevitably changed over two years what is significant is the impact of its certainty on our dialogue. It is this emphasis on authenticity, and

dialogue as a form of participative expression of that authenticity, that is now pushing my inquiry focus forward. I find resonance in *Buber's* discussion (*Buber* 1965) on “*elements of the interhuman*”, in which he begins to emphasise the importance of self-awareness as an essential quality of authentic and sustainable presence. He calls it “*life lived from the being*”. He begins to make me aware of my ‘being’ as an intrinsic part of the creative dialogue, and raises questions in my mind around the necessity for wholeness and self-awareness as qualities of dialogic participation. As I consider his debate on the balance of the personal and the collective I again refer to his proposition that

“genuine dialogue is an ontological sphere which is constituted by the authenticity of being, every invasion of semblance must damage it” (1965: p.86)

I have already reacted to this claim in the introduction to this final part, within the context of explaining my own notion of self-dialogue. But here I find new significance in his words as I struggle with the possibilities of extending my singular practice to form a notion of connective dialogue. I find resonance in his certainty of identity and voice, and begin to link this expression of authenticity with thoughts of courage and emotional honesty.

This centrality of ‘authentic self’ also feeds my concern for an ability to respect another’s identity and unique presence in dialogue. In my reflections on the Supervision group meeting I talk of the challenge I felt in staying fully present, determined to listen out for our inevitable filtering perspectives but determined nevertheless to also learn constructively from them and look forward to something new. As I reflect on the experience I begin to clarify some emergent thoughts around this finely balanced act of personal sense-making and the rich potential for something other, something unpredictable, and something only made possible through the mutuality of attention and a willingness to learn. I realise that I am beginning to think of dialogue as a dynamic and participative experience, teetering on the edge of individuality yet at the same time holding promises of new creativity and co-creation. As such I hope I am beginning to respect the need

for a lightness of touch, for an awareness of the potential harmonies and disharmonies I might be contributing, and begin to imagine a new space in which I might listen and learn.

My interest is drawn firmly back to the qualities of attentive space and the evidence I might have observed during that meeting.

As I track the dialogue in my text I am grateful for the focused attention Jack, Paul and Geoff continue to give me, each one responding very firmly from within his own understanding but clearly empathetic to my sense of discovery and progress. I still remember the warmth and reassurance I experienced throughout most of the dialogue, and value highly their ability to evidence so generously their experience of my development and growth. I though failed to recognise the limitations of that mutuality and rather harshly judged their readiness to get alongside my frame of reference against these criteria:

“It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about” (Rogers, 1961: p.331).

I focus for a moment on the quality of listening evidenced in the text. I have read and re-read the text many times, struck by the calm expression my writing appears to ascribe to it. I can find no real trace of the anger and frustration Geoff clearly expressed as in his eagerness to follow me through my cognitive process he felt increasingly neglected and de-valued. They were all listening to me, empathetically and with grounded attention. I was certainly authentic in my presence, enjoying the creative development of our dialogue, but I was participating from a very separate place. I was listening, listening intently to their responses, but there is no actual evidence of my listening. I was learning, learning very quickly about those aspects of dialogue I then included in my reflection. But I am not now convinced in any way that I was in fact connecting, meeting them in that ‘other, shared place’ that I was encouraging them to do. I see instead very

clear evidence of my autonomous self, engaged in an inquiry into the nature of dialogue but limited by the central questioning role that I appear to have either adopted or been assigned. I realise I need to raise questions around the nature and qualities of my questioning.

I pause, surprised by this new interest but not displeased. I re-visit the work of *Bohm* (1985), *Buber* (1965) and *Rogers* (1961) to help me define it further. *Bohm* (1985), in his “*Remarks on the Process of Dialogue*” in the concluding pages of his record of a weekend of dialogue, shares a sense of anticipation as he reflects on the concentrated experience of a weekend of dialogue. He talks of the process of dialogue

“awakening...as a free flow of meaning among all the participants” (1985: p.175)

emphasising its constant development and change and its ability to grow without any pre-established purpose. He shares a sense that individuals can begin to connect through the quality of their participation, through the shared consciousness which they create together. He does not mention the role of questioning.

Buber (1965) talks of “*unfolding the dialogical*”, describing a quality of affirmation which at the same time respects the singularity of the individual but also helps create a “*mutuality of acceptance*” which I understand to mean an extension into the quality of participative consciousness described by *Bohm*. *Buber* also causes me to consider the nature of my questioning, evident in the Supervision Group and continuing to give me concern in my current ‘practice’. I am aware that as I move my dialogic voice out of my texts and into my ‘practice’ then I need to pay attention to its participative expression. In the text Geoff, Paul and Ian react angrily to questions they hear as dishonest and manipulative in their implied pre-defined meaning. I have also recorded more recent examples in the accounts of my ‘practice’. I have included a description in my relationship with Karen when she reacts angrily to my approach, and I can now hear echoes in the

frustrated outburst of one Director when he burst out ‘Don’t emasculate me!’ during one of our discussions and another accused me of lecturing to him.

I am becoming increasingly aware of the inseparability of my notions of dialogue and relationship. I know that I must find a way in which to move my inquiry forward into the relational space I find relatively easy to describe but significantly difficult to share. But for the moment I am confident with the pace of my questioning. I return several times to *Buber’s* contrasting descriptions of the propagandist and the educator and find them increasingly useful in clarifying my thinking at this point. I pick out the essential differences of “*indifference to everything personal*” (propagandist) and a commitment to enable the actualisation of individuals in a “*single and uniquely personal way*”. I then consider whether my apparent lack of empathy, and apparent lack of attention does in fact misrepresent me. I talk of a quality of attention, of the ability to listen from a respectful and participative space, but have not as yet considered the degree by which it might be appropriate or enriching. I turn myself to face the images of my own questioning and wonder at the degree of intent. I am forced to admit that under the glare of my own intensity I too wither. I seek reassurance in these words of *Rogers* (1961)

“it is not an easy thing to permit oneself to understand an individual, to enter thoroughly and completely and empathically into his frame of reference” (1961: p.18)

and begin to form new questions around the generativity of dialogue and its capacity to develop connective and mutually sustaining relationships.

Continuing to explore the connective scope of the dialectic and dialogic qualities of my inquiring voice I begin to look beyond the boundaries of my ‘practice’ and immediately remember the qualities of silent dialogue and relationship I experienced in the following account. It is an entry from my Journal, written during an Action Research conference held in Stroud, Gloucestershire in

September 1998, and includes fellow-researchers and friends from the University of Bath. I include it here because it contains such promises of a new and different quality of participation and connection that it is the clearest evidence I have of new possibilities.

JOURNAL

Hawkwood, September 1998

I had expected to feel overawed by the quality of debate and insight. I knew I would find it hard to cope in a community environment, eating prescribed meals at prescribed times. I had deliberately arrived early to secure the privacy of an unshared room, a secret I guarded jealously throughout the conference.

But what I wasn't prepared for was the sheer loneliness of the first days. I wandered silently through the rooms of excited interchanges. I lay in bed in the early hours of the morning listening to the muffled debate of the three strangers next door. I desperately looked for a place where I could belong, but instead became increasingly aware of my isolation.

I had described my research focus in the first plenary session as "a journey". I now felt completely lost in the shadows of fellow-researchers. By the end of the first day I contemplated driving home.

Early the next morning I walked down to the perimeter fence and gazed emptily across the beauty of the countryside. I was numb and painfully aware of it. That spirituality which had made itself so plain to me in May had abandoned me. I was again lost in my solitary detachment. I cried silently by the gate.

Geoff had organised an evening of dance. I went along out of sheer panic. I desperately needed to escape the deadness of my space. I was worried that the warmth of the evening might bring on an asthma attack. There was no-one there who would help me. Candles and joss-sticks had been lit around the room. I could already feel my breathing restricted by their cloying scent. I knew I was taking a risk. And I knew that I had to.

I met and talked to Ella-Bell during that dance, our silent movements shadowing and mirroring in turn, their responses acknowledged by a smile or a gesture. I had not been able to talk to her during the day, but here I was in perfect harmony with her. I met and danced with Elaine, with Catherine, with Bill and Peter and Andrew and Geoff. I sensed the changing rhythms through my limbs and body. I felt free and confident to move into my own physical identity. I stepped into the dance without inhibition, sustained by the unspoken relationships of movement and expressions.

In the misty beginnings of the morning I walked towards the main house. I stood to gaze at the streaks of light breaking up dawn's cloud. I felt fragile in the transience of this unknown place.

I saw Suzi approaching, her usual smile preceding her arrival. Without a word she reached out and hugged me. I can't recall if she spoke afterwards – the moment is still too emotionally charged for me to replay the memory fully. (I will, in time.) As she walked away I looked up at the immense facade of the faded building. Elaine was standing at one of the windows, toothbrush in hand. She waved wildly at me, smiling broadly through her toothpaste. I waved back and smiled inwardly.

The afternoon was hot and still. Kathleen suggested we both skip the next session and instead go for a walk. We set off along a quiet lane, bounded on one side by a ripening crop, on the other by the sloping hillside. At first

we talked about the conference, our CARPP work, the organisations we worked with. I sensed the deep hurt and frustration as Kathleen talked of her struggle for fairness and honesty. I shared her energy and passion.

As I carefully picked my way over my own 'practice' I heard a new voice tentatively seeking expression. I talked of my concern for two close colleagues, of the hours I had spent in dialogue with them. I described them with care and compassion. I expressed a hope that one day I would bring a sense of community into an otherwise sterile environment, connecting wholly through the human processes of nurturing and respect.

We shared a vision of an aesthetic world, cradling its occupants in colour and form.

Through our relationship we each gained understanding.

There is something about the quality of the dialogue that Kathleen and I share that moves my thinking on. I am reminded of a book by the jazz singer, *Cleo Lane*, called "*You Can Sing If You Want To*" (Lane 1997) in which she explores the potential qualities of singing voices that have been hidden under years of discouragement and lack of belief. In one of the exercises she describes how the singer can significantly change the sound of his or her voice simply through the imagination of feelings, modulating the tonal quality at will through emotional remembering. I remember the quality of the voices Kathleen and I expressed during our walk, the reality of the emotional expressions voiced through them, and am struck by the immediate contrast I envisage when I recall the usual voice of my 'practice'. I realise that I will need to pay attention to the musical qualities of my voice as an integral part of my dialogue, to learn to treat it as an instrument with the potential to both express and sustain my central consciousness. I put it aside for ongoing exploration.

I am again reminded of *Bohm's* work on dialogue (*Bohm* 1985) and his belief that dialogue can create

“the very nature of consciousness in which relationships arise”. (1985: p.175)

I am tempted by *Bohm's* clarity to ignore my own experiences and to try and put myself immediately alongside his understanding but I am too honest and too inquisitive to take the easy way out. I know there are experiences that I need to review and understand within the context of my own inquiry into connectivity, and turn instead to an extract from an account that I believe will help me finally define the questions to move the inquiry on.

The account again draws my attention to the questioning qualities of dialogue, and the care with which I need to pay attention to both the people in the dialogue and the formation of the process. It is a remembered account of a ‘gold-fish bowl’ exercise, set up by a colleague at one of the Business Schools and intended as part of a learning process on the MBA course. I was present as a co-facilitator in my role as a senior consultant in industry. I am particularly struck by the response of the participants as they comment on the experience of my joining the ‘inner circle’.

In both this account and the previous one of my Supervision Group meeting I appear to catalyse the deconstruction of potential relationships through the quality of my questioning, to cause a resentment and distrust by my apparent withholding of knowledge or intent. I know that there is no such intent, that there is no such concealment but there is something in the quality of my questioning and the framing of the dialogue that evidently engenders this response. I need to understand this, and know I will need to work towards a better exploration. I am already starting to form a sense of gentle and generative questioning, encouraged by *Isaacs' concept of “thinking together”* (1999) and have already begun to tentatively form new questions around this expression of dialogic engagement

within my 'practice'. For the moment though I am content to label it broadly as an exploration of the qualities of questioning and find it useful simply to reflect on its implications at this stage of my inquiry.

Gold-fish Bowl

Last year a member of one of the major Business Schools invited me to take part in a module he was running as part of the MBA programme. It was a two day module on consultancy. He asked me to join the group as both a practising consultant and as a senior industry representative. We had met previously on an experimental workshop exploring the potentiality of dialogue as a learning process.

I joined the group as it sat around the edge of a large room, chairs lined up neatly alongside each other. I remember wondering why or even how I had selected the chair with the broken back but decided that as I was relatively light it would hold me securely for the duration of the exercise. John opened the session.

He was keen to open up the dialogic possibilities of the group and set up a "gold-fish bowl" approach, with five chairs placed inside the main circle of chairs and representatives of the five break-out groups seated in each of the chairs. A sixth chair was then placed inside the circle and left empty and inviting for anyone who wished to join the discussion.

As I listened I was struck by two things – the "telling" propensity of the group and the lack of inquisitiveness. I was fascinated by some of the standpoints some of them were taking, particularly around their apparent condemnation of "polite conversation" within organisations. I joined the group and immediately sensed a feeling of anticipation as they appeared

to wait for me to speak. I opened with a question. Someone replied. I asked another one. Someone else replied. The energy level of the group began to change – I sensed the formation of some anger and frustration. People left the group and others joined. I sensed I was being put at the centre and a combined activity was going on around me. I stepped out of the group and re-joined the outer circle. John finally called a halt to the exercise.

After a short break we re-convened to discuss what had happened in the session. There were comments about the impact of my joining the group, of the way in which the group had turned to make me the focal point. But more significantly there were comments about the impact of my questions. They had all felt uncomfortable and one likened the experience to a sense of being interviewed. I asked them why they had allowed it to happen like this. They didn't appear to know. I accepted the feedback.

Later, two of the clients approached me and thanked me for my input. They were particularly keen to pursue notions of politeness and respect in their organisations and felt I had demonstrated behaviour that personified their beliefs. I acknowledged the affirmation. Another, a young man already working as a consultant for one of the "big six", warned me that such behaviour did not go hand in hand with "making big bucks". I promised to think about it.

Chapter 11

Reflections

I am turning my attention increasingly to the generative capacities of dialogue, to its potential to create new ‘truths’. I am beginning to focus on the quality and pace of my questioning, and its ability to define the nature of our collective participation. I am beginning to form new questions around its capacity to help me develop connective and mutually sustaining relationships and now ask how I can hold open a space for inquiry, how I can learn to loosen my grip on direction and outcome and allow new perspectives to take shape. I am beginning to hear the difference in the quality of the questioning in my written text, the musical fluidity in its form, and am starting to ask how I can extend this creative capacity into my dialogic practice. The inquiry is ongoing and is helping form those new questions that will take my learning beyond the boundaries of my thesis and outward into the complexity of my ‘new’ practice.

I realise that this form of dialogic inquiry is helping form the expression of both my emergent critical consciousness and of the reciprocity I seek to nurture in my relationships with others. Quiet words, generative questioning, attentive silence, mutual learning and respect – each sit by side as ideas and questions merge and we learn to share both our certainties and uncertainties. Unanticipated turns in understanding emerge without fanfare and we each find ourselves in new spaces, with new ideas. We are each separate, our dialogic voices defining the boundaries of our connectivity, but together and connected we co-create new forms of understanding and lay the seeds for the next questions.

I am also beginning to form a notion of relational space, one in which we can each explore the possibilities, loosening our grip on preconceived notions of certainty and intended outcome. As I learn to trust the organic nature of the emergent themes and questions I relax my hold on direction and intent, and trust the reciprocal nature of our inquiry. I am gradually learning to value the new qualities of consciousness our dialogue engenders and believe I am beginning to find ways

in which to bring my aesthetic awareness into the relational space between us. I become confident that the qualities of my dialogue are an expression of my 'being', an extension of my conscious identity, and slowly realise that the reciprocity I value in relationships is in fact one of mutual exploration and learning.

Jaworski (1996), in his account of his meeting with *Bohm*, mirrors my thoughts:

"It's a funny thing about dialogue: there's a wave/particle-like aspect to it. When it's present, you know it. You can't fake dialogue. Yet when you focus on it too hard, and try to capture the process, you change it, and it collapses and vanishes". (1996: p.112)

I am gradually developing a concept of dialogue that relies on a creative partnership in which no one participant is inextricably married to a deliberate stance or specific outcome. Each one may well have an overriding intention in participating in the dialogue but each is also alert to the possibilities of the direction of his attention and holds only lightly onto the form and structure. From here I am developing a concept around improvisation, around the ability of individuals to form and re-form a space within which they can explore the intuitive possibilities of their own sense and knowledge, a space that they can both create and sustain. I refer to it as attentive space.

Its success may depend on relationship, it may not. But I do now believe that *Bohm* (1985) is right when he proposes that dialogue itself can engender the qualities of relationship.

More and more I have begun to return to a notion of silence as 'listening space'. As I continue this inquiry and re-visit accounts of significant relationships in my 'practice' I am beginning to challenge the nature of my silent choice and compare this silence to that in my earlier accounts. I detect qualities of difference which reassure my position. I review the qualities of attention advocated by *Bohm* (1985)

and Isaacs (1999)¹ and gradually re-consider the inclusion of silent participants as a new and enriching dimension of participation. I return to this quote from *Ben Okri*²:

“It is not the size of the voice that is important: it is the power, the truth and the beauty of the dream” (1997: p.102)

and feel reassured.

¹ Detailed in Chapter 6

² Okri, B., “A Way of Being Free”, Phoenix 1997

Chapter 12

Exploring the possibilities of dialogic inquiry as a form of mutual learning and connective relationship – two years on

As I reflect on these images of over two years ago and hold them side by side with the voices of current dialogues with my fellow practitioner-researchers I feel encouraged by the distinct changes already evident in my practice. As I continue to form new questions around the generativity of dialogue and its capacity to develop connective and mutually sustaining relationships I again return to *Bohm's* work on dialogue (*Bohm* 1985) and particularly to his assertion that dialogue can create

“the very nature of consciousness in which relationships arise”. (1985: p.175)

I think I might understand that now and attempt to explain *Bohm's* position in my own words. Dialogue defines the way in which we experience bringing our consciousness into the space of others. It is a form of exploration that demands the ability to let go of preconceived notions of certainty, to let go of controlled expectations of outcomes and to trust the organic nature of the emergent themes and questions. It demands an ability to loosen the grip we may be holding and to allow questions to emerge from new fragments of understanding, to freely admit the possibilities of new truths. It creates a condition in which we can truly form the reciprocal nature of our connection, creating a relational space in which we each care for the other and value the mutuality of our knowledge creation. Quiet words, generative questioning, attentive silence, mutual learning and respect – each listen side by side as ideas and questions merge. Certainty is replaced by uncertainty, and then again by certainty, and we are each in turn surprised by the unanticipated turns in our understanding.

I shared this emergent understanding with Jack³ recently and received this emailed reply:

³ Dr Jack Whitehead, my supervisor at the University of Bath

“What I’m wondering – and this is very tentative – is whether the art of inquiry is engendered through a spiritual and aesthetic connectivity with the other (and one’s self) that is immediate and direct and not mediated through the art of inquiry.” (email 28/02/02)

On first reading Jack’s response he appears to be challenging my new certainty, suggesting that it is in fact the value-laden behaviour of the interpersonal experience that engenders the relationship and not the actual art of inquiry. I also think he infers that I might be guilty of manipulation if I focus too strongly on the art and treat the values of the relationship as only secondary. This is very much in line with our previous interchange of emails in which he comments on an impression of control and inflexibility he detects in the accounts of Chapter 10.

In my responding email I both disagree and agree with him:

“I really liked your point about the risks of mediating a spiritual and aesthetic connectivity through the art of inquiry instead of allowing the art of inquiry itself to be engendered through a sense of ‘exquisite connectivity’. It throws me back to the questions I had right at the beginning when I came across Bohm’s claim that it is the quality of the dialogue that engenders the quality of the relationship. I do think you are both right – it’s the emphasis on the ‘qualities’ (which of course I now understand also as the embodiment of my ‘exquisite connectivity’) that is important here... this is exactly how I see my aim of trying to put my ‘being’ to the forefront of my engagement in my practice”. (email 1/03/02)

I stress my intent on putting my ‘being’ at the forefront of my engagement, holding on to the sense of ‘exquisite connectivity’ I have developed through the inquiries of Part 1. It is this quality of awareness that is playing a mediating role as it is embodied in my inquiry practice. In a previous email Jack had affirmed his understanding of my intent and had encouraged me to see how I could now bring

these connective qualities into my inquiry partnerships with others. His email is actually in response to reading Chapters 6 and 7 for the first time:

"Your writing captivated my imagination through the poetic quality of your language and you ask a fascinating question:

'...as I begin to sense that I am in fact describing an art, an art of dialogic inquiry, I form the next and inevitable question around my connectivity. Can this art of inquiry engender the mutuality and creative partnership of human relationship?'

Your writing establishes, for me, the conditions for enquiring with you in a mutual exploration. From what I understand of your spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity I feel invited into a relationship which will not violate my sense of identity or integrity but which will be open to explore the possibilities that life itself permits." (email 5/2/02)

Speaking very strongly from his own educational perspective Jack then went on to encourage me to consider *Buber's* insight into the qualities and boundaries of educative relationship (*Buber 1958*).

"I'm drawn to Martin Buber's insight at this point that the educative relationship can never be fully mutual because it is the responsibility of the educator to 'see' the student from the student's point of view...Buber says that when mutuality is reached the educative relation either busts asunder or changes into friendship – I like this. I do feel that in sharing our recent thoughts we have been engaged in a mutual exploration and that I am being profoundly influenced by my growing understanding of your (this) art of inquiry which holds together your exquisite connectivity and spiritual and aesthetic ways of being. I think that in working together our arts of inquiry have engendered the mutuality and creative partnership of human

relationship. What a delightfully peaceful response at the end of the day. Thanks for the music in your words.” (email 5/2/02)

Taking *Buber's* (1958) notion of this potential extension of an educative relationship, and his inference that to achieve mutuality then the educative relationship must inevitably become friendship, I again question my own certainty of a mutual learning partnership engendered by the quality of dialogue and inquiry. In an email to Jack I share this aspiration and belief. I had earlier suggested that ‘we’ could be responsible for the origination of an idea, an example of the full mutuality of learning partnership. He had responded that this felt strange and that he felt more comfortable with a sense of sharing our arts of inquiry. Jack wrote:

“Where I feel we are sharing our arts of inquiry is through the quality of your questioning, in which I feel directly addressed by you, and through my desire to answer in a way that relates directly to your question. Your question also stimulates my creativity and engages with my own enquiries in ways that move me on. Great.” (email 6/2/02)

It is through his response that I have been able to clarify this in my own responding email:

“I was particularly struck by the realisation that I have been carrying an assumption that ‘learning’ is about a creative construction of something new, a creative, in the moment experience of mutuality, not necessarily forming the same creative output for each of us but still binding us in some way through the relationship engendered by the shared experience”.
(email 8/2/02)

I have also been able to add to the certainty. A few days later Jack gave me a copy of a paper jointly edited by himself, Pam Lomax, Moyra Evans and Zoe Parker⁴ in which they each share their frank responses to their inability to engage in collaborative learning. He asked me to comment on the text from my new perspective on dialogic learning. I wrote this email to Jack:

“Just thinking of our conversation yesterday...responding to a piece of work that has emerged from my inquiry, suggests a form of collaborative inquiry that probably wasn't considered in the article you gave me yesterday. My understanding here is that we are each responding and working creatively with the same material and through that creative process both evidencing and moving on each of our own personal inquiries. In that sense it's a collaborative learning activity isn't it – working separately with autonomous identity and then inquiring together around the creative output, so that each moves on both separately (in terms of our own lifelong inquiries) and together (in terms of facilitating the presentation of my thesis with a context that is unfamiliar to me and experiencing that from within my perceived issues, questions, obstacles etc). There is no experience of controlling – or of needing to set ground-rules etc – provided there is a quality of generous listening (or is that a ground rule?)”. (email 14/2/02)

Jack's response draws my attention back to the significance of my questioning and the qualities of that questioning:

“I also associate the quality of your present questioning as characteristic of an educator in the root sense of educare to draw out. By living and speaking/questioning firmly within your spiritual and aesthetic values (qualities) you offer me an educative relationship within which I feel drawn to respond in a way that both seeks to answer your question while

⁴ Lomax, P., Evans, M., Parker, Z. & Whitehead, J. “Knowing Ourselves as Teacher Educators:

speaking from within my own spiritual, aesthetic and ethical ways of being. I felt addressed by your questions in a way that carried your own 'care-ful' response". (email 17/2/02)

I think this begins to define the form of influence I am comfortable with, the nature of the partnership of mutual learning I am talking about – and ultimately how I see my thesis contributing over time. But it is too easy to accept these comfortable responses as the only potential response, and to remain within the self-oriented boundaries of my inquiry. I know that my self-inquiry is clearly driven by an articulated purpose and constantly energised by the authentic motivation of my own healing and transformation. But I also know that as I move outward and onwards, and increasingly move towards a re-connection with my own professional community, I will need to be able to evidence a quality of dialogue that goes beyond self-revelation and understanding. I need to test out my ability to live by my own emergent principles, to trust the generative and improvisatory qualities of my own form of dialogic inquiry and to help form and sustain those qualities of attention that are already evident in my self-dialogues.

I have therefore begun with this emailed invitation to my own practitioner-researcher community:

"I'm hoping that you will respond to this invitation to help me with the final phase of my doctoral inquiry. For the last four years I've focused on 'inner dialogues' with myself as I have researched my own learning in coming to understand my self. What I have not done yet is explore my learning in connection/relationship in dialogues with others.

I have just written a section that sets out to share what I refer to as my 'art of inquiry', exploring it in terms of its aesthetic and forming qualities... These are some of the qualities I am seeking to embody within my practice of 'being'. On reflection though I believe it actually goes

joint self-study through electronic mail". Educational Action Research, Volume 7, No. 2, 1999.

beyond its own intention, and begins to offer a much broader inquiry into the possibilities of my own dialogic engagement having some form of connectivity or sense of mutuality with others. It's this sense of mutuality, this promise of both separate and shared meaning, that I'd like to invite you to explore with me.

On page 28 of the attached section I form this question: "Can my dialogic engagement grow and sustain my connectivity with you?" My phenomenological inquiry has brought me this far but it is no longer sufficient to enable me to move the inquiry forward. By the very nature of the question I now need to step out from my focus of self-study and move towards the potential connectivity of mutual exploration. I've talked it over with Jack and he has encouraged me to invite you to help me enact the shift, by engaging with me in this part of my inquiry. I'd very much like you to do so!

If you are interested in doing so then could you read the section please and as you do so reflect on your own creative and generative responses to it? I believe this is what Pat D'Arcy refers to as "an engaged and appreciative mode".

I will be extremely interested in your own instinctive and individual responses to it. I am also particularly interested to hear whether it engenders any fresh insights for you, whether any resonance in the text helps shape your own certainties. You might also like to consider whether it creatively challenges your own perspectives with new threads of ideas and possibilities, and whether you then integrate any part of it into your own learning.

I'll look forward to your emails." (email 31/1/02)

As I issued the invitation, along with a copy of Chapters 6 and 7 (Part 1), I was aware that I was holding these questions in my mind:

- To what extent am I ‘testing out’ my ability to hold my ‘exquisite connectivity’ at the centre of my shared inquiry, exploring my capacity to connect with others in a way that is consistent with my authentic ‘being’, what I believe *Buber* (1958) describes in this extract as a ‘living Centre’:

“The true community does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Centre.” (pp.64-65)

- To what extent am I aligning my expectations to *Shotter*’s (1993) concept of the reciprocal nature of ‘being’ and listening and therefore looking for the community behaviour that could help realise my ‘self’, the communicative opportunities that *Shotter* believes we all require if we are to realise our own distinctive modes of being?
- To what extent am I looking to test out my own assumptions about generative dialogue, its potential to engender a creative construction of something new, a creative ‘in the moment’ experience of mutuality, not necessarily forming the same creative output for each of us but still binding us in some way through the relationship engendered by the shared experience?
- To what extent can our arts of inquiry engender the mutuality and creative partnership of human relationship, realising the promises of both separate and shared meaning and helping me grow and sustain my connectivity with you? (*Bohm* 1985)

Moira⁵ is one of the first to respond, causing me to think very clearly about the context and purpose of the invitation. It is through her clear list of questions that she causes me to think about the form of influence I might be seeking to achieve and my reasons for making my journey public. These are her questions:

"I have read it through and feel I must ask some questions before I can begin to understand it. Hope that's all right.

- 1) What is your context(s) for the paper?*
- 2) What are your standards of practice and judgement?*
- 3) How would you like me to respond to what you have written?*
- 4) What do you consider action to be?*
- 5) Why does your work matter? To you? To others?" (email 2/2/02)*

I responded thoughtfully and carefully to her email, responding separately to each of her questions. I focus on my response to her final two questions here as I feel that they have had the most significant impact on me:

"4) Now this one is really hard – but a great question! I think I am working with a premise that action is anything that changes outcome. It can begin with an experience (many evidenced in Part 2) and then reflection through writing and dialogue that then causes me to move into the next experience of my life with an altered angle or a changed motivation, expectation, intention etc. It can also be writing itself, a creative action of forming sentences, building the right length phrases, pausing where it feels right. It's a brief response to a very searching question and I appreciate its generativity. I will be interested in hearing your own sense of action, and your meaning in including it here.

⁵ Moira Laidlaw, Ph.D. (University of Bath)

5) This final question, generating all sorts of thoughts around motivation, purpose, significance, contribution etc echoes the question I have been asking myself all along 'why does it have to be expressed out loud?' I haven't yet articulated a formal answer to this question which fundamentally is one that I expect the academy to pose, and which obviously I will address in the final presentation of the thesis. But it is interesting to consider throughout the process, as I'm sure you found. I have particularly asked it when I've felt de-motivated and wondered why I was carrying on! To answer it simply would be to say that I personally needed to pursue the inquiry for the sake of my 'being', I needed to form a discipline in my inquiring that would take me along a journey that I would know was authentic and real. I have undergone a tremendous shift in the axis of my life through the experience, sometimes very scary in parts, but because I have carried it out in the virtual company of others I have felt some sort of care and support along the way. I also know that I am not alone, that other people all over are articulating their own journeys, and in that context I would like to feel that my own can contribute in the questions it might spawn. I also work within commercial contexts where huge debates are taking place around the 'soul' of our 'resources'. I have so far felt unable to take an influencing role in the debate, so disconnected from my own sense of soul that I could not come near to forming any notions around organisational health and sustenance. I may not be returning to work with any 'answers' and certainly don't set myself up to try. But, I do have a certainty that I am realising my own 'power', that is the source of my own energising beliefs, and maybe from this place I can at least stand up and be counted.

I am also prompted by this last question to open it up to you too and to ask one further question: does my inquiry matter to you and if so how?"
(email 4/2/02)

Moira's reply was forwarded to me a week later:

"...My first response to the text was bewilderment which set up frustration. My problem. I haven't read anything like this before, so it confounded my expectations. So I knew that I had to get past that, so I asked you several questions which I needed your response on to infiltrate my own biases. And as I said, your spiritual integrity shone through in a way I could relate to. So I read the text again with your comments squarely in mind.

And still I felt unnourished somehow...

Your research has shown me an individual exploring how inner workings might be externalised. It is clear and incisive, but does it matter to me? I'm not sure how to answer that. Directly relevant perhaps not, but I'm not sure that direct relevance matters ever in this kind of research. I don't look to enquiries to answer my questions directly, I suppose, though, I anticipate insights into some human values around research, education, improvement and development, which may enable me to see more clearly. I can't demand that, but I would expect some things to click as pertinent and sharable. In saying you wanted to preserve your spirit, nurture it etc. I could identify with this and it made me think about my own spiritual life and preoccupations. However, that struggle points outward, into the world, not inward into the self, and I found myself constantly wanting the text to be at a further point. This struggle, what happens in the world, and between the world and you as you struggle to retain and develop something so very precious...I want to see your special, unique individuality in dialectical relationship with others, not just with yourself. It is surely in relationship to others that we come fully into our own individuality...So, in order to appreciate your research I need to know what effect you have on others, because I don't believe in an autonomous

consciousness. I don't believe in any certainties. I don't believe that action can be limited to the self. I'd like to read more of what you're writing, however, because I sense there is a lot more for me to understand, and that somewhere along the line, something else will resonate.

I enjoyed reading the section. It has challenged me, not only because of your brilliant writing style, but because of your analytical and aesthetic integrity." (email 11/2/02)

Geoff⁶ seems to echo Moira's last point in his emailed response. As a fellow-member of my supervision group at the university he is able to compare my current writing in these chapters with a piece of writing he responded to over two years ago. That piece of writing, and Geoff's response to it, is included in Chapter 4.2, Part 1. Geoff was also a participant in the supervision group meeting described in Chapter 10 and has known and worked alongside me for over five years.

"...How to respond to your writing? First off...my reaction to this was quite different to the impact of your 'emerging spirituality' piece several years ago. Then I was profoundly moved by the vulnerability and human quality of your narrative. Now I am impressed by the brilliance of your thinking. 'Brilliance' in the sense of a certain gem-like quality, sparkling and multifaceted. What you write is fascinating and so different from my own experiences of inquiring and sense-making (for example the musical metaphor which recurs so often in your writing is one that – as a non-musician – I find hard to access) that I found it quite difficult to connect with your inquiry process, though there is one particular passage that I loved and can relate to very easily:

⁶ Geoff Mead, fellow-researcher at the University of Bath.

'But it feels too neat, too constructed, and ignores the immense sense of intuition and instability that actually permeates the inquiry. There is a human element missing, the acknowledgement that "I" as a researcher can be immensely fickle, gullible to a multitude of influences and amazingly inconsistent in focus and intent'.

Elsewhere in the text, you speak about being wary of the risks of 'therapeutic wanderings' and yet it seems to me that seeking self-affirmation and self-healing is a completely legitimate purpose of first-person inquiry. I know much less about your 'outer arcs' of inquiry, of how your personal and professional practice have changed, are changing, as you integrate the learning from your inner dialogues with your desire to do good in the world..." (email 7/3/02)

Although I appreciate some of the affirmation of Geoff's response, and am struck by his reflection on the sharp contrast in my writing style, my attention is really caught by his last sentence. Like Moira he appears to be expressing a sense of something missing, an expectation of a balance of 'inner' and 'outer arcs' (Marshall 2001), an evident change in personal and professional practice possibly being enacted as a desire 'to do good in the world'.

I have not yet responded to Geoff. I am still trying to articulate just what it is that is possibly different in our expectations and experiences of practitioner-research. I am though challenged by his prodding questions, and as I prepare to write the final part of my thesis, in parallel with these informing dialogues, I do I believe carefully respond to his implied concerns around the contextualisation and relatedness of my inquiry practice. Meanwhile the quality of his response, and the clear question he is helping me form, encourages me to respond to Moira with a new sense of energy and belief. My attention is now firmly drawn to questions of purpose and outcome and possible influence:

“...I find your use of the word ‘unnourished’ both interesting and concerning. Interesting in that I’m not sure if you are communicating an expectation of something that I have promised and not delivered; concerning if you are expecting something you would normally find in an inquiry and I am not paying attention to it. Reading through your subsequent response I think I might understand it but do please let me know if I have missed the point. You appear to be expressing a fundamental belief in the external and relational and demonstrably active nature of action inquiry – expecting evidence of a connectivity with others as an intrinsic part of learning and inquiring. I think this is then qualified by a personal belief that consciousness cannot be autonomous, cannot be defined without connectivity with the consciousness of others?

This caused me to really question my own beliefs, to really challenge the inspiring source of my inquiry. I realised that I do in fact believe that there is a healing space in my life where I have needed to find a defining connection with something ‘other’, something other than colleagues, friends, partner etc. In this sense I am not proposing a ‘separate’ self, simply a self connected in some other way. For me that has been the forming experience of my ‘being, holding my own separateness in dialogue with a different source of connectedness until I felt that I had reformed my ‘I’ in such a way that I could seek a connectivity with others that respected and honoured its expression. It is only from this awareness of my separate/connected self that I can now try to work with others with a sense of mutuality and generative experience, while at the same time honouring and respecting their own expressions of ‘self’.

Whether that choice of separateness affects or diminishes my ability to influence or have an effect on others poses a new question. I fully realise that any action I take does have an effect, and include both writing and questioning within that category of action. I also know that as I have

worked my way through my inquiring I have changed my form of engagement with others and now very awarely engage dialogically and with a habit of inquiry. I have wondered for a long time about Bohm's belief that it is the quality of this dialogic engagement that engenders the qualities of relationship. I think I am gradually beginning to believe and experience that, and am now viewing my potential influence from within that belief.

We may well come 'fully into our own individuality' as you say in relationship with others. In that I see an extension of identity, qualitative growth and reinforcement of something individual and precious. I think that is what I am now trying to explore at this stage of my research as I try and extend the dialogues outwards, all the time holding on to the qualities that I feel express my authenticity. I know there are huge questions to ask around this relational experience but I needed to start much further back than that. I could not take my 'self' for granted. So, it is only as I get to the ending of my thesis that I am now able to engage with its possibilities..." (email 22/2/02)

As I compare the confidence of my reply with the tentative question I pose in Chapter 2:

'can I enhance my separateness with connectedness?'

I realise that I am in fact still seeking to answer it, but now with a different quality of attention.

Throughout Part 1 I track the healing of my fractionated self, gradually articulating my own living form through the language and the self-affirming energy of my accounts. My self-development is served by this concentration on a sense of my own separate 'being'. As I develop the explanation of my dialogic

inquiry habit in the final chapters I concentrate on articulating its defining qualities, realising that as I do so I am in fact beginning to describe very clearly the embodied expression of my own living self.

Now I feel that my understanding has moved on yet again. I feel that I can start to claim with some confidence that I have begun to re-form my own art of living, to centre my life in my own 'exquisite connectivity', and have begun to enact it through the experiential quality of our shared dialogues. As I allow my learning to be formed by their questions I am increasingly being pushed to extend my understanding of this connectivity, to listen to their broader perspectives of community and relational belonging. New inquisitive questions are pulling my attention towards a continuing practice of living, a connected and integrated practice of 'being' and relating and 'doing'.

Eleanor⁷ is particularly helping turn my attention to this potential balance of connective relationships. She has responded to my invitation with this email:

"What is your intention, where does your commitment and motivation for this work come from? What makes you crazy and with excitement, so excited that you become careless? What is it?"

I ask carelessly, in rebellion against the respectful partnership that you seek – the list under the heading 'Engaging in affirmative and generative dialogue with other researchers'. I want to push you out of your reason. And then I apologise for being a bully, for not controlling my adrenaline rush. But then that is also the shadow side of my excitement that has been generated by your writing. Isn't it that which makes it all so scary – opening up our vulnerability means that the unexpected comes when it is not so easy to deal with it? And that can be a transformatory dialogue too.

⁷ Eleanor Lohr, fellow-researcher at the University of Bath.

So what sustains and supports you in all of this? The 'unthinking world' I think of as the world of silence and stillness and within the spiritual realm, with the regions bounded by theology and philosophy. Spiritual practice and sacred ritual help both to sustain me and to provide balance in the deep inner work where language ceases. I think that in my case spiritual discipline helps to address the danger of the 'pre-programmed' response. You refer to music and balance; do you have a muse?

.....I am starting from my perception, which is one that works inwards with one set of parameters that are connected to meaning making and mysticism, and which is mirrored by another set of different parameters that are questions going outwards connected to action research and action inquiry.

So I guess my question is about the nature of your self-questioning – your 'dual role of voice'. Does the voice go inward and outward with same or similar forms, or is there a qualitative difference between both the methodology and the questions generated by the inward and outward experience?

As I write this I am beginning to hear my own thoughts on this, to clarify my thinking about my own inquiry." (email 3/2/02)

Eleanor's questions prompted me to be more specific in my description of integrative consciousness as I responded to her questions of balance and stability:

"I appreciate and value your response to my writing, and particularly to the care you show in respecting the fragility of some of its parts. Your own writing feels as if it comes from a similar place.

You raise an interesting question around a sense of possibly 'too much transformation' in paragraph 5 and through your question helped me realise two things. First, there is actually a constancy that flows throughout my life, an aesthetic connectivity that has helped form and express my spiritual sense of the world and which I explore and share in the preceding section. The question you raise, asking how I might be living with this high element of uncertainty, echoes the fundamental motivation of my thesis. I have attempted to live, for a very long time and not always deliberately, by holding two parts of my 'self' apart. As I have tracked through twenty years of accounts I have come face to face with my own disconnection, an attempt to live my commercial life separately from my spiritual and aesthetic life. It was the pain and sheer loneliness of this experience that moved me to start to write out my journey.

As I have progressed through it I have found support and reassurance in returning to this inner core, this sense of 'exquisite connectivity' that for many years I have ignored or devalued or starved. Now it is beginning to sustain me through the cacophany of my self-dialogues, filling me with a calm sense of belief and certainty around my belonging that now allows me to grow I hope in my relatedness to others.....

As I read through the second half of your response I am increasingly challenged by the questions, and particularly by questions of the potential difference between the language of inner dialogues as opposed to its expression 'outwards connected to action research and action inquiry'. You cause me to ask whether the voice is in the same form, whether there is qualitative difference. It is a wonderful question. If I do express the same voice out loud then I know I risk misunderstanding, and I do even have evidence of the negative effects of this exposure. But I also know through my experience that masking the voice or even suppressing it is even more

degenerative. At this stage of my inquiry then I feel that I am holding on to a notion of the voices being the same.” (email 4/2/02)

Eleanor responded with this email:

“Thanks for your stimulating last message...My question about your Muse – I should have spelt it with a capital letter – was an inquiry about the nature of your inner core. You call it an aesthetic connectivity, a spiritual sense of the world, and I was asking what your beliefs are about this essence. A Muse is ‘a force personified as a woman, who is the source of inspiration for a creative artist’ – Concise Oxford Dictionary. The reason I ask this question is related to the issue of pre-programming. What belief (mental model) is it do you think, that stops you going around in the circles that can be created by self-dialogue?

My underlying premise is that there needs to be (for me) some ‘other’, some inner reference point that causes the creative spark to both dialogue and action, that is different from – not part of – personality or my habitual way of seeing or doing things...” (email 7/2/02)

It took me two weeks to respond to Eleanor, partly because she had caused me to ask a whole series of new questions and partly because my attention had been temporarily drawn to the experiences of a couple of interviews. Through my response to her I find myself paying particular care to the exact experience of my self-dialogues:

“I hadn’t initially intended taking so long to respond but faced with the options of either responding without due thought or waiting until I could re-focus myself on our inquiry I felt I had to take the second option. Interviews have taken a great deal of my energy and attention this week, and it’s only now that I feel I can re-frame and open up the conversation.

Can I respond to your questions around a Muse and issues of pre-programming first? I thought about this for ages, wondering if I was in fact fully understanding it. But then I realised that the struggle I was having was due to the fact that I don't actually hold any such notion – I don't think I manage to avoid the circles or that I awarely hold a mental model that would allow me to do so. But, do I therefore go round in circles? I prefer to think in terms of spirals, with their inference of gradual progression despite their attendant regression. I know I hold on to my own sense of inner peace and purpose, to a belief that I can and should constantly improve my ability to think, care, act etc. but I think that is the sum of my awareness.

In responding to your question I have become more aware of the sense of integration that I hold at my centre, the balance with which I start from this core and then investigate and explore my action from this perspective. I think this is what now prompts me to question the way in which you describe your own inquiry. I may be misunderstanding but it does appear to show an intention to start from the outside world, from your own enactment in the world, and then to ask questions retrospectively around your inner core. Does that frame your inner core as an affective agent rather than as a source of inspiration?" (email 22/2/02)

As I write it I realise that I am actually asking this question of myself. Have I sufficiently evidenced in Part 1 the accounts of my own fractionated enactment in the world? Have I respected the fragility of my own emergent consciousness in amongst those accounts in a way that has protected and strengthened its inspirational power? Have I clearly shown the shift of balance, the delicate handling of an emergent sense of 'being' slowly counterbalancing an obsession with 'doing', that is now helping me form a new practice 'from the inside out'? Have I evidenced enough of the depth of my inquiry patterning to enable me to

offer my own personal journey of transformation and healing as a contribution to an understanding of the power of a creative art of inquiry?

A question from Paul⁸ has caused me to consider some of the implications of this claim, and to continue to focus on the nature of influence implicit in this form of self-study:

“Another rather potentially heretical thought I have reading your paper...I have wondered...to what extent we are all simply living life as opposed to living life as inquiry. What I’m trying to get at is that the processes of reflection we write about as part of our inquiries could be happening to us anyway whether we are doing PhDs or not. We are the kind of people who continually sift our experiences for meaning. So the question I have for all of us is – how and in what way do the processes of inquiry we write about make a difference to our lives and our practices? What are we doing in these inquiries that is different from the usual processes of reflection and mulling over and processing of experience that I think we all do anyway. I suppose this is another way of asking about where is and what is the nature of the discipline in the inquiry.” (email 4/2/02)

I responded to him immediately:

“It is your ‘heretical’ point that particularly grabbed me – the fundamental question around living life as opposed to living life as inquiry. I continually ask myself the same question, trying to link it to notions of validation, standards of judgement, legitimation etc. and then rejecting them all as they start to feel invasive and degenerative. Maybe the discipline is embedded in the way we live it out? Maybe the discipline is defined by our awareness of the process? I think this is something of what was behind my intention in writing the section – I needed to be able to describe my

⁸ Paul Roberts, fellow-researcher at the University of Bath.

own natural and innate behaviour as a 'process', with explicit qualities forming its definition.....But of course I do then end up back at your own point and have to ask within the context of this thesis whether or not I have sufficiently presented my case for a natural inquiring habit to be acknowledged as...well, what? Is it a 'valid process'? A valid 'method'? The more I work with my own preference for qualities of generativity, of mutual attention, then the more I believe that it is the quality of the habit, my own 'creative art of dialogic inquiry', that counts." (email 4/2/02)

In his brief response Paul pursues this concept of a 'quality of habit', one which I am increasingly experiencing as a synthesis of 'inquiry as life process' (Marshall 1999, 2001) and the attentional qualities of the dialogic principles of Isaacs (1999), Bohm (1985, 1992, 1996) and Grudin (1996):

"I don't have much to add to your reply except to wonder about your final point about the quality of the habit that counts. I like the phrase 'quality of habit' and wonder if you could pinpoint more this quality...If indeed such a quality could be 'pinpointed'". (email 17/2/02)

His reply caused me to ponder and then to re-read Bullough and Pinnegar's (2001) guidelines for self-study⁹. In the introduction to their guidelines they emphasise the challenges of working with a hybrid methodology, warning of the added burden on researchers of:

"...establishing the virtuosity of their scholarship within and through the writing itself; lacking established authority each researcher must prove herself as a methodologist and writer. The challenge of virtuosity is not only a matter of skillfully employing established research methods. It also involves the form in which the study is organised and the skill with which an argument is made and a story told." (p.15)

⁹ Bullough, R.V. & Pinnegar, S., Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research, Educational Researcher Vol. 30, No. 3, pp.13-21 (2001)

As I respond to Paul, briefly and with a focus on the six defining qualities articulated in Chapter 7, I realise that my understanding of my contribution has changed. I know that I have clearly demonstrated the rigour and integrity of a valid inquiry process, based on the evident discipline of my inquiry in Part 1. I know that I have articulated the subsequent emergence of its defining qualities. And I know that I have begun to enact them as embodied qualities of my 'exquisite connectivity' in these accounts of my collaborative learning.

I can now show that I am in fact making a significant contribution to an understanding of the ability to presence my 'being' through the emergence and development of a creative art of inquiry.

I share the arrival at this stage of my journey in my email response to Paul:

"I'm now trying to pull my ideas together around this habit as a connective behaviour, its potentiality as a catalyst for mutual learning. Moira Laidlaw has challenged my propensity to stay with an internal inquiry and the difficulties I might face in now trying to bring the inquiry to a relational and external context. I think it is probably a question we are each asking as we present some very personally motivated inquiries as public material looking to deliver questions of wider relevance." (email 22/2/02)

Moving On

I want to resist the conclusions that my original four questions might now lead me to draw. My intention at this stage of my research is not to seek answers. That would be too hasty and disrespectful to the complexity of the relationships forming alongside my text. There are some answers, and there are inevitably some new questions, but they must remain expressed simply as open invitations to future development and learning. What is important is that as I have begun to hold on to each aspect of my thesis with a much lighter hand, valuing an alertness to new and external ideas over the usual inspirations of an inner sense, I have quite clearly moved on.

I can only share the sense of that progress through these simple images from my Journal:

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I am free, detached yet connected, a participant but intact. The music has slowed but the rhythm is strong. I have learnt to listen. I have learnt to breath. I begin to sense the process of my own creativity, understand its need for nourishment. I have a notion of white space, silent, waiting expectantly for the first ripples of knowing. Sometimes the flow remains a trickle, babbling peacefully in the depths of my mind until the balance shifts and it is absorbed by the current of a much stronger source. Other times a single drop will push out the concentric circles of conscious thought until they merge with the rings of another mind. The coupling creates its own momentum and the next question is born.

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We ache for the sheer immensity of the landscape and strain to hear the familiar and eerie sounds of its living movement. The white crystal images of the mountain ranges stand clear in front of us, framed each morning by the limits of our window but endless in their landscape as we lean over the rails of the open decks. We gaze silently at the jagged, translucent green of the broken ice. Sunsets and rainbows colour the reflections in the sea, drawing clear lines through the hazy images of upside down mountains. We stand at the foot of a glacier, quiet waves gently touching the glacial beach as the canoe is secured. And we each stand and stare, utterly silent and transfixed by our own pure wonderment.