

From the Inside Out
Learning to presence my aesthetic and spiritual 'being'
through the emergent form of a creative art of inquiry

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ABSTRACT

From the Inside Out

Learning to presence my aesthetic and spiritual ‘being’ through the emergent form of a creative art of inquiry

This is a unique account of first-person research, a transformative inquiry into the presencing of ‘being’ through the emergence and development of a creative art of inquiry.

I contextualise the creative energy and dialogic rigour of this practice as a fluid synthesis of the discipline of *Marshall’s* (1999, 2001) inquiry practice and the attentional qualities of the dialogic principles of *Bohm* (1985, 1992, 1996), *Isaacs* (1999) and *Grudin* (1996). I place it alongside an understanding of the ‘emergent learning’ of *Senge & Scharmer* (2001), *Jaworski & Scharmer* (2000a) and *Jaworski* (1996) and offer it as a unique form of first-person inquiry, able to construct knowledge from:

- Intuitive structuring
- The unfolding of an embodied truth
- Intentional and attentional patterning
- The living expression of language
- Respectful and generative listening

I remain permanently at the edge of my own knowing, confident in the ability of my authoritative voice to define the fluid boundaries of my inquiry.

I hold my changing sense of the world clearly at the centre of my learning, my sense of spiritual and aesthetic belonging expressed as a sense of ‘exquisite connectivity’. I develop a notion of ‘live’ and ‘life’ meanings as I begin to explore my understanding

of its emergent possibilities, holding a fragile sense of a connected world side by side with the generative capacity of my dialogic voice.

I create an intricate patterning of personal stories and dialogic inquiry process, forming a sense of coherence from the juxtaposition of emotional images with the clarity of a reflective and cognitive dialogue.

I develop a style of written text that reaches beyond the boundaries of presentational knowing, creating a new understanding of a living expression of an emergent sensibility to a connective world.

And I allow generative questioning to take my inquiries into new and unanticipated places, holding open the boundaries of a woven truth to qualities of relational sense-making and learning to listen attentively to the richness and creative possibilities of the responses.

I share my personal story in the spirit of enabling and mutual dialogue. I offer my thesis as an original contribution to an appreciation of inquiry as a creative art.

INDEX

Preface

Mapping the Journey

**Part 1 How can I make sense of this feeling of disconnection?
Tracking the formation of my inquiry practice through
the emergence of my aesthetic and spiritual connectivity.**

- Chapter 1 Introduction
Journal: A church in Place
- Chapter 2 Exploring the boundaries of my disconnection: working with a meta-
image of healing and self-transformation
Journal: Whose ‘practice’ is it anyway?
Journal: Learning to ignore my self
An Account of Relationship: Anne
An Account of Relationship: Andrew
An Account of Relationship: Christine
An Account of Relationship: Karen
Journal: Three aging adventurers
Journal: A Transformative Encounter
- Chapter 3 Re-tracing spiritual, aesthetic and musical images
Journal: Sounds of Music
Journal: A Sales Training Event

Journal: First Glimpses

Journal: Amroth

Journal: Further Glimpses

- Chapter 4 Sharing the emergent qualities of my aesthetic and spiritual connectivity
- 4.1 Celebrating the life-affirming energy of my own ‘exquisite connectivity’
 - 4.2 Developing language as a living expression of my aesthetic and spiritual consciousness
- Chapter 5 Emergence of a Researcher
- Chapter 6 Forming a notion of inquiry as a creative art
- Chapter 7 Clarifying the defining qualities of the creative art of my own dialogic inquiry practice
- 7.1 Valuing the transformational uncertainties of self-dialogue
 - 7.2 Trusting the generative and improvisatory qualities of intuitive questioning
 - 7.3 Respecting the authority of my own structuring role
 - 7.4 Developing an awareness of attentive space
 - 7.5 Speaking with courage and emotional honesty
 - 7.6 Engaging in affirmative and generative dialogue with others
- Chapter 8 Concluding Thoughts

Part 2 How can I develop this art of dialogic inquiry as a form of learning and connective relationship?

Chapter 9 Introduction

Chapter 10 Exploring the possibilities of dialogic inquiry as a form of mutual learning and connective relationship
Meeting of the Supervision Group, March 1999
Journal: Hawkwood, September 1998
Gold-fish Bowl

Chapter 11 Reflections

Chapter 12 Exploring the possibilities of dialogic inquiry as a form of mutual learning and connective relationship – two years on

Part 3 How can I offer an evaluative framework for my thesis that honours, tests and explains its generative and improvisatory form?

Chapter 13 Introduction

Chapter 14 Developing a notion of generative coherence
14.1 Integrating intention and attention
14.2 Dialogic patterning
14.3 The power of personal stories

- Chapter 15 Appreciating the living expression of my writing
- Chapter 16 Appreciating the integrative power of my ‘exquisite connectivity’
- Chapter 17 Evidencing an authentic ‘I’
- Chapter 18 Learning to engage with others
- Chapter 19 Responding to questions of quality and value

Part 4 How can I position my own distinctive form of dialogic inquiry practice as an original contribution to an appreciation of inquiry as a creative art?

- Chapter 20 Introduction
- Chapter 21 Explaining the methodological qualities of my work
- 21.1 Explaining methodological choices
 - 21.2 Valuing the transformational uncertainties of self-dialogue
 - 21.3 Trusting the generative and improvisatory qualities of intuitive questioning
 - 21.4 Respecting the authority of my own structuring role
 - 21.5 Developing an awareness of attentive space
 - 21.6 Speaking with courage and emotional honesty
 - 21.7 Engaging in affirmative and generative dialogue with other researchers
- Chapter 22 Developing new relational qualities in my work: engaging in affirmative and generative dialogues with others

- 22.1 Evidencing a dialogic form of improvisatory self-realisation
- 22.2 Learning through conversation with others

- Chapter 23 Contextualising the creative energy and dialogic rigour of my first-person inquiry practice
 - 23.1 Appreciating a culture of inquiry
 - 23.2 Understanding ‘inquiry as life process’
 - 23.3 Developing dialogic and ‘live’ thinking
 - 23.4 Aligning to notions of ‘emergent learning’

- Chapter 24 Drawing a theory of ‘living’ knowledge from the evidence of my inquiry practice
 - 24.1 Responding to issues of methodological and epistemological pluralism
 - 24.2 Articulating my own theory of ‘living’ knowledge

- Chapter 25 Presenting an original contribution to an understanding of the creative art of inquiry
 - 25.1 Appreciating the use-value of a particular story
 - 25.2 Considering the pragmatic outcome of my research

Bibliography

PREFACE

Respecting the integrity of my purpose and motivation

As I reflect on the completed form of my thesis I am struck by an unfamiliar sense of celebration - a sigh of relief and joy as I pause momentarily in suspended understanding. I need make no excuse for this celebration. I am simply acknowledging the energy and sense of satisfaction I am deriving from having engaged in an inquiry that fundamentally holds my life and the formation of my living at its centre. *Carl Leggo* (University of British Columbia, 2001) puts it even more courageously in his paper “A Calling of Circles: Living the research in everyday practice”:

“Living is the stuff of everyday. So, our research ought to focus on a curriculum of joy, a curriculum of hope, a curriculum of ecology, a curriculum of community, a curriculum of living, a curriculum of the heart”.

I find resonance in *Leggo*’s expression “*curriculum of living, a curriculum of the heart*”. I recognise the strength of focus that has catalysed my own inquiry, constantly forming and re-forming the questions as I have begun to explore an increasing sense of disconnection from both the identity of my practice and from the ‘I’ that seems so inextricably bound up within it.

When I began my research, in February 1996, it was in the form of a very personal and private process. I had just accepted a position as Head of Organisational Development with a major pharmaceutical company and was fully involved in driving forward a significant business transformation programme following a recent merger. I was busy, successful in terms of my vertical career path and fully appreciated the autonomous role that had been created for me.

But I was constantly carrying with me a sense of loss, a sense of misplacement that was rapidly gaining significance without any real explanation as I increasingly paid attention to the fragile qualities of a world beyond my practice. I began to pick up images that carried with them an intrinsic power of nourishment, to anticipate a sense of renewal each time I breathed my way back into them. As I began to write them down I felt I was reaching out towards a poet's qualities of sensory perception, forming journal entries from the natural fluidity of the remembered images. Sometimes I could keep the images separate, my life held in some sort of bipolar tension that kept things neat and sorted. But other times the images would leak into my practice world and taunt me with their emotional instability.

I wanted to understand, to sustain and nurture these emotional and aesthetic glimpses as an experience of spirituality in my life. Each image engendered a sense of connectivity, sometimes emerging from the aesthetic curve of a natural landscape or from perfumed scents on the wind, and other times overwhelming in the simplicity of human relationship. It could flow simply from a memory of beauty, precious in its cocoon of silence, the silence itself so precious in a cacophonous world. I wanted to feel this connectivity daily - to wake sure in its power, to absorb its energy and nourishment and carry it with me into my work. I wanted to be able to touch and articulate its strength, sure in its source. I wanted to feel the nourishment of its silence - to be able to sit in a quiet world where the pull of natural rhythms around me could hold me suspended in my own authenticity. I began to refer to it as my 'exquisite connectivity' – a fragile and instinctive response to the sensory qualities of a living world, a fundamental connection with my own innate ability to form and share music.

I have begun to think of it as a need to find my own space for belonging. It is about creating attentive space in my life, and in my 'practice', as a way of 'being' in that life that keeps me open to the possibilities of these new connecting spaces. It is about inquiring into the development of my own practice of connected 'being'.

For nearly four years I continued to pursue these images from within the encompassing activity of my professional practice, holding separately onto an emerging sense of aesthetic and spiritual connectivity whilst coping with painful realisations of repression and collusion, and only gradually making tentative steps towards a new wholeness. My identity was continually re-forming, fragile and vulnerable in its dialogic uncertainty but surprisingly robust in its spiritual and aesthetic intent.

In the early stages I did have support, from both my academic supervisor, Dr Jack Whitehead, and members of my supervision group at the University of Bath (Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice). This supervision group consisted of four male fellow-researchers – Paul, Geoff, Ian and Eden – and myself. We had self-selected ourselves to form the group and met regularly in these first four years, attempting to both support and challenge each member's individual work.

The questions became increasingly difficult though. I became covert in my inquiry, deliberately concealing the personal nature of the work in an attempt to protect and sustain my capacity to fundamentally transform my life. I found it increasingly difficult to share the personal details of my inquiry. I felt vulnerable in my questioning, exposed by the sensitive images of my journal. As I learnt to cope with the emotional exposure I became increasingly protective about the potentiality of my research, carefully guarding it from the influences of existing sense-making and academic framing. I began to retreat, literally, first dropping away from my commitment to the supervision group and then in October 2000 leaving my professional role. I could no longer sustain the full implications of my inquiry within the familiar confines of my public life, could no longer balance the apparent certainties of my professional role with the increasing uncertainties of my emotional remembering. I retreated to the relative security of my own domestic setting.

As I reflect on my decision to continue my research in this solitary space I feel I may have begun to understand the significance of *Torbert's* (2002) notion of “*upstream*” and “*downstream*” flows, appreciating his explanation of “*upstream*” as the critical movement in attention that can engender developmental transformation. I recognise now that I needed to travel much further ‘upstream’, to move back towards my own source, to try and understand where this core connectivity was. I needed my period of retreat to achieve this.

As I began to rely on the power of my own inquiring dialogues I felt encouraged by *Isaacs' s* belief that:

“Dialogue addresses problems further ‘upstream’ than conventional approaches. It attempts to bring about change at the source of our thoughts and feelings, rather than at the level of results our ways of thinking produce”. (1999: p.20)

I similarly found support in *Grudin's* (1996) belief that we can develop the ability to free ourselves through the dialogic processes of a single mind, a “*freed awareness*” that allows us to conceive projects of renewal. In each of them I recognised the powerful promise of an ability to move towards experiences of self-transformation. But as I stepped out from the relative security of my professional career in my mid-forties I could only experience the sheer panic of instability and financial insecurity that threatened to erode the determination of my journey.

Emerging a new future

I did not set out with any rules for my research. I was aware of an obsessive habit of questioning, my life constantly recorded in journals as a pattern of uncertainty and inquiry, but I did not have a specific method or strategy in mind.

I was driven by a need to understand and live out my own natural and instinctive connection with the living world. I wanted to find a way in which I could express a voice of awe and reverence, could balance the busy thrill of ‘doing’ with the ‘exquisite connectivity’ of my ‘being’, a sense of connectivity that is clear in its experiential nature and distinct in its sensory grounding. I wanted to find a way in which I could belong in a connected and authentic and gifted way, to live out my own aesthetic and spiritual sense of the world. I wanted to create attentive space in my life, to nurture a living and connective consciousness that could balance my ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds. And I wanted to develop the attentional qualities of aesthetic and spiritual ‘being’ as the formative qualities of my practice, re-shaping it gently ‘from the inside out’.

This is therefore an account of a particular and personal journey, a transformative inquiry into the presencing of my ‘being’ through the emergence and instinctive development of a creative art of inquiry. I have found a way in which I can write the story of my own renewal, the intricate craft of my writing and the living expression of my voice becoming for a moment my music, an active, living and moving form that takes me forward into another, more conscious world.

I have learnt to sustain and develop a self-transformational state of attentive and dialogic learning, allowing both my intention and attention to hold together the questions within the wider strength of the passion and energy of my clear purpose and motivation. I can articulate an emergent sense of my ‘self’ as an attentive and connected human being, sometimes passing very closely to vulnerability as I learn to be resilient to the inherent risks. I can hold separateness and connectedness side by side in mutual dialogue, lightly holding the creative possibilities of respectful and reciprocal connectivity as the embodiment of human relationship. I have an ability to form and to listen generously to the power of generative questioning, awarely understanding the world from my own experiences.

These experiences have been recorded by my innate habit of journaling, developed to the point where I can access a rich record of much of my life, the collected images, reflections and constant questioning drawn in by the improvisatory form of my inquiry.

The personal data of my research is presented in the form of extracts from this Journal, much of it shared as the descriptive accounts of images of aesthetic response, of musical resonance, and the emotional experiences of meeting very special, ordinary people. These entries have been written spontaneously and are un-edited. In most of these accounts I speak as 'we', acknowledging the presence of another as I unfold my own sense of 'exquisite connectivity'. Throughout the body of the research I leave this identity undefined, the significance explained in my understanding of 'presentational knowing' rather than in the formation of the accounts. This 'we' is in fact formed by my partner, the accounts written immediately after our shared experience of the events. What is critical to me in their telling is that I achieve a balance between the resonance we felt, the shared memory of the visual imagery, and our separate abilities to continue to form meaning from their living images. I refer to it as a 'catalytic resonance', developing the notion more fully in the final part of my thesis within the context of an extended epistemology.

Other accounts are constructed from autobiographical detail juxtaposed with emotional glimpses of anger, frustration and loss, these glimpses highlighted by their italic form. In each case they evidence the depth of questioning that their experiences engender, keeping the multiple strands of my research live in their constant ability to move between the attentions of my aspirational writing and the intentions of my sense-making and its subsequent impact on the structuring of my thesis.

Together these accounts form an essential part of my journey, 'intentional' in their fit with my strategy for the research. There is no deliberate chronology, the stories

spanning over twenty years of professional and life practice, their memories drawn into the text as a question raises the possibility of new meaning. My 'truth' and coherence are woven naturally and intuitively by this dialogic and creative art, my evident ability to absorb its emergent questions into the fluidity of my text prohibiting me from deliberately constructing either the form or the boundaries of my work. The authoritative voice of my practitioner-researcher role is heard as the counterbalance of construction and creativity, the quality of the encompassing dialectic gently forming a dynamic interplay between intention and attention. I have learnt to trust the creative potential of this form of dialogic inquiry, appreciating the focused intent of its deliberate questioning whilst respecting its intuitive sense for the significant and generative.

There are also accounts that draw my attention beyond their original meaning, pulling me towards an innate musical sensibility and allowing me to form an 'attentional' exploration around the boundaries of my intended research. Throughout the thesis I make repeated references to this musicality, intuitively sensing its connection with the major theme of my research but unable to absorb it into the flow of my inquiry. I am paralysed by its raw emotional images and hidden memories. It emerges as an 'attentional' inquiry, but then remains undeveloped in the context of this thesis. It becomes instead a 'shadow-inquiry', wrapped around in childhood autobiography and present only as an instinctive ability to shape my text as I would a musical score.

I find myself in an exciting place, energised on the one hand by my pre-defined purpose – my 'intentional' inquiry - and on the other enjoying the anticipation of an unfolding sense of its realisation – the ability to allow the 'attentional' inquiries to grow and take form. I am acutely aware of the focus I need to hold on these parallel tracks of inquiry, learning just when and where to probe – and when to simply allow the questions to unfold.

It is this combination that underpins the emergent nature of the work, an artistic performance that extends beyond the normal boundaries of inquiry and moves forward into a creative space defined by the underpinning principles of dialogue. I have detailed this process of learning out-loud, articulating it clearly in terms of its defining qualities, and gradually recognising the emergence of a unique practice of self-inquiry as I have enacted it in the search for my own connectivity.

I am constantly aware that my persistent inquiry and questioning carries the risks of an obsessive habit of doubt. I am also prepared to accept this risk, valuing its ability to hold me permanently at the edge of my knowing more than I do my own safety. I remain open and welcoming to its challenge, coping with the inevitable feelings of vulnerability, and always acknowledging the doubts and questions even though I cannot always give them my full attention.

I realise now that through this first-person inquiry I have in fact engaged in depth with my own formulation of the rules by which I live. I have created my own distinctive style of learning, a creative mix of reflection, reading, writing, conversation and dialogue, memories and journals. As I use this term ‘first-person’ inquiry I acknowledge its alignment with the first-person research practice defined by *Reason & Bradbury* (2001) as one of the broad strategies of action research practice. They describe it as:

“...the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness and to choose carefully and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. First-person research practice brings inquiry into more and more of our moments of action – not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities.” (2001: xxv)

As I develop my own understanding of this art of inquiry I am also drawn increasingly towards *Torbert’s* (2001) aspirations for developmental action inquiry,

an aspiration towards self-observation in action, an ability to inquire in the midst of the real-time actions of our daily lives. He stresses the development of a capacity to experience a quality of attention that holds in one inquiring behaviour the ability to notice, question, and transform our moment-to-moment experience of ourselves. He traces powerful links between this capacity for inquiry and the possibilities of triple-loop learning, a capacity not only to transform the tactics and strategies of our lives but the very qualities of attention that determine the framing of our lives.

I do, I believe, come close to understanding this aspiration. Throughout the thesis I evidence a growing ability to maintain a singularity of focus on my own self-transforming journey, while at the same time developing the capacity to both inquire deeply into my own personal process and to document its emergent form as it develops. As I have clarified the defining qualities of this emergent form of first person inquiry I have moved towards an understanding of my own self-transformation, tracking the intricate detail of my 'upstream' journey as I have fundamentally shifted my quality of attention in the world.

I contextualise the creative energy and dialogic rigour of this practice as a fluid synthesis of the discipline of *Marshall's* (1999, 2001) inquiry practice and the attentional qualities of the dialogic principles of *Bohm* (1985, 1992, 1996), *Isaacs* (1999) and *Grudin* (1996). I place it alongside an understanding of the 'emergent learning' of *Senge & Scharmer* (2001), *Jaworski & Scharmer* (2000a) and *Jaworski* (1996) and offer it as a unique form of first-person inquiry, able to construct knowledge from:

- Intuitive structuring
- The unfolding of an embodied truth
- Intentional and attentional patterning
- The living expression of language
- Respectful and generative listening

I refer to this formation of knowledge as my own theory of ‘living’ knowledge, placing it alongside *Reason and Heron’s* (2001) extended epistemology and *Heron’s* (1996, 2001) notion of ‘presentational knowing’, evidencing just how far I have extended the boundaries of practitioner-researcher knowledge-creation.

I acknowledge *Heron’s* notion of ‘presentational knowing’ (*Heron* 1996, 2001) as a conceptual bridge between the primacy of ‘experiential knowing’ and the enacted clarity of ‘propositional knowing’. I also acknowledge his intent to sustain the immediacy of the original experience, to sustain the resonance and empathy as we attempt to articulate our first expressions of meaning and significance. But the dialogic form of my own inquiry practice demands a more organic expression, a presentational form that will enable the ongoing creative performance. I focus instead on the ‘living’ nature of my presentational form, on an ability to sustain an active, ‘living expression’. This expression is integral to the gradual unfolding of meaning through and from my writing, to the ability to sense, embody and enact the emergent understanding.

In the early stages of my thesis I consider my role as poet in the context of developing my inquiry form as a creative art. As I re-consider this artistic intent I focus on the generative possibilities of ‘presentational knowing’, on its ability to engender a catalytic resonance, to engender an attentive space where others can engage from within the depths of their own experiences. This aspiration invites me to consider the creation of a new presentational form, one that takes the reader beyond the expectation of established form and instead invites them back toward the primary experience itself, to create a new sense of their own re-vitalised images.

I offer my emergent understanding of ‘presentational knowing’ as a contribution to the ongoing development of *Reason & Heron’s* (2001) extended epistemology.

Anticipating a generative response

This is a journey that constantly holds my authentic 'I' in creative process, its identity moulded into changing shapes by my lived experiences, the whole an 'experience of authenticity' (Rowan 2001). I share the authentic expression of that changing experience through the generative and improvisatory form of my text, holding open the boundaries of my woven truth to the transparency of my dialogic sense-making. And as I have just one voice, modulated by intentional and attentional questioning, I express it with the courage and emotional honesty that is integral to my true sense of 'self'.

As I consider how I might now draw you into a generative response to my work I am struck by the energy and passion of *Carl Leggo's* (2001) invitation

“to cry out like trumpet calls an urgent invitation to listen to the light, to wake up, to know the world differently, outside the typical parameters and predications.”

His sense of urgency connects with my own confident claims to originality of thought and my determined ability to construct my own sense and meaning through emergent, dialogic and relational forms of knowing. I am aware of traditional questions of validity and legitimacy, of the live arguments around the formation of theory and knowledge and do want to join them. But I also want to join them in a dialogic way, with my own unique voice and with the certainty that my place alongside fellow-researchers will be both acknowledged and appreciated for its difference.

I realise I must achieve a respectful and generative balance between my own perceptions of the work and yours. On the one hand I am keen to guide you through the appreciative lens of my own evaluative framework, while on the other I wish to invite you to engage with my work through your own. I see this delicate balance of mutual attention as an integral quality of dialogic engagement, allowing each of us to

exercise our own standards of practice while at the same time learning from the differences generated between them. *Bohm* describes this generative practice very clearly in his work 'On Dialogue' (1996):

“When one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies, the first person sees a difference between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering the difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants”. (1996: p.2)

I value his reference to 'new content' and absorb his meaning into my own understanding of the woven 'truth' of my inquiry practice.

Lincoln (1997) appears to challenge this ability to enjoy the qualities of mutual attention. As she considers the possibility of extending her influence beyond the academic community she raises questions around the potential variation in meaning that will be engendered by trying to connect with diverse stakeholder groups. She appears to express concern that these outsider groups will take on the characteristics of an “*interpretive community*” (p.47) and somehow distort the originally intended meaning.

I realise that I do not consider this an issue. In fact, I consider it an opportunity, a rich opportunity to invite others to come alongside the experiences of my inquiry and to be open to the potential catalytic effect of both its similarities and dissimilarities. I therefore expect responses of two types. First, I expect a quality of response that seeks to understand and appreciate its meaning for me. And then I shall expect the

dialogic and generative response that enables new questions around its meaning, its scope and ultimately its use-value for us.

I am therefore prepared to accept that once expressed in a public voice my research may take on meanings beyond my control and beyond my original intent. I shall value that creative process. But I do also want to ensure that the voice of my own originality is heard out loud, that its “*trumpet-call*” (Leggo 2001) is heard above the echoes of fellow-researchers and that my own unique qualities and principles help shape your dialogic response.