5 Agency in relation to ecological challenges

5.1 Framing

In this chapter, I reflect on the experiences of the Ecological Thinking intakes with whom I engaged. I suggest that it is possible to interpret a number of key themes as emerging from course participants' responses to the questions I invited them to consider as they made their way through the course. These key themes, I believe, revolve around many participants' sense of helplessness and powerlessness as they engaged with the material raised by the course, and around doubts they expressed regarding whether they could 'make a difference'. Additionally, many participants acknowledged the difficulty they experienced in attempting to deal with the perceived murkiness and complexity of ecological issues, and repeatedly expressed their desire for answers and for practical solutions.

I argue that these experiences are not unique to Ecological Thinking course participants, but are representative of the kinds of challenges evidently raised for many groups and individuals seeking to act for change in the area of sustainability. Indeed, my own experience, and that of many participants in the various fields of practice in which I participated, is that it is possible to feel overwhelmed and even debilitated by feelings of anxiety, distress and helplessness as we engage with the complexities and uncertainties raised by ecological challenges. In order to evidence this claim, in this chapter I also provide a brief account of some of the challenges and tensions experienced by participants in the *MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice* programme, with whom I also engaged.

In the latter part of this chapter, I begin to consider some of the ways in which we may reflect on and make sense of these experiences, in such a manner that we are able to continue to engage with the questions and challenges raised, and to *hold* rather than retreat from, smooth over, or resolve the tensions experienced. I propose that part of doing so involves asking questions about how we conceptualise and understand our sense of *agency* and our positioning in relation to complex ecological challenges, and also involves developing a more appropriate sense of agency.

5.2 Grounding: The experience(s) of Ecological Thinking course participants

I wish to ground the arguments I make in this chapter by drawing on the experience of the Ecological Thinking intakes with whom I was involved in 2003 and in 2004. As I explained in Chapter Four, within this space I sought to draw attention and facilitate noticing around the kinds of questions and challenges that emerge for course participants as they begin to develop a critical awareness of ecological challenges, and as they consider how they might respond to these challenges, both personally and professionally. To this end, I invited short written responses to questions at various points during the course.

I am choosing to begin the present discussion by drawing on my work with this group due to the following reasons: I too participated, as a final-year undergraduate, in the Ecological Thinking course, and the experiences of the 2003 and 2004 intakes do not seem to me to be dissimilar to my own, and that of my peers, in 2001. Indeed, it was through partaking in this course in the second semester of my final year and the Emerging Patterns course in the first semester, that I discovered the space I needed to attend to questions of purpose and meaning in my life, and to questions regarding how I might appropriately reframe my sense of place in the world. I therefore find that the kinds of questions, concerns and experiences evidenced in my interactions with course participants in 2003 and 2004 are indicative of my own initial grounding when I first began to seriously and systematically consider how I stood in relation to current ecological challenges.

Having collated and spent time with course participants' responses to my various questions, my sense was that key themes could be seen as emerging from the data. I believe that these themes were evidenced in the responses from across both the 2003 and the 2004 intakes. As part of the inquiry process, I conducted a feed-back session towards the end of the course programme, where I presented these key themes to course participants and invited analysis and dialogue around their experience of participating in the course. In the conclusion to this thesis, I draw on my experience of facilitating these sessions and argue that this formed an important part of my developing practice, both as an inquirer and as a person seeking to respond to the ecological crisis. In this section, I present the key themes which I

believe emerged from my inquiry with the Ecological Thinking intakes, and show how these gave rise to particular questions, which I then considered in some depth. The themes could be summarised as follows:

1. Grappling with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness: How can we make a difference?

2. Reflections on this course as part of a management programme: Appreciation of space for thinking/being differently.

3. Desire for answers and practical solutions: The challenge of living with uncertainty and complexity.

4. Choices for the future: Where do we go from here?

In the remainder of this section, I build on the themes presented above by drawing from the responses offered by Ecological Thinking course participants.

5.2.1 Grappling with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness

Many of the responses gathered from the Ecological Thinking groups are poignant in capturing participants' sense that they are grappling with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and asking questions around the very possibility of 'making a difference'. These are questions which I myself have held and continue to hold throughout my inquiry. For example, in response to the first question I invited participants to answer during the first lecture of the semester, namely '*Why are you choosing to do this course? What are your hopes and fears as you embark on this course?*', the following responses came to light:

> 'I hope this course shows me the way to being more ecologically responsible. I am very worried about forcing myself to acknowledge the damage that I could be doing and am afraid that I may feel helpless regarding problems/issues raised.' (ET, 2003)

> '…Hope to gain better grasp of what can actually be done, but fear the outcome is that we will have little control unless there is a large collective movement to get things done.' (ET, 2003)

> '…The main questions I'm asking at the moment concern how we are going to save the environment and if this is even possible. As an individual, I feel powerless to make a difference, with so much power being concentrated within a few corporations. I am becoming much more aware of the damage I am making to the environment and feel guilty a lot of the time!...' (ET, 2004)

And in response to the second exercise, specifically, '*What are your impressions of and reactions to the course at this stage? Is the course challenging, exciting, disconcerting, etc.? If so, in what ways? What aspects of the course are having these effects?*', I gathered the following replies:

> '…Disconcerting…have started to question my own identity…I feel too that I am one person with some people (can talk for hours about shoes/clothes) – it doesn't feel right "inside" but I feel if I talk about the things I really feel and how meaningless it all is – perhaps I will be left with no friends at all...Angry with others when they ask me what is the point of caring…and with myself, when I still go shopping (still a consumer contributing to the problem)…' (ET, 2004)

> 'The course is a bit disconcerting because I'm stumbling across many examples of corruption and ecological damage. It feels frustrating to read these examples yet being unable to do anything…It would be encouraging to know that people taking this course can make a difference.' (ET, 2003)

In addition to the responses shared above, participants spoke of the 'penalising effect' of 'feeling incapable of doing anything' (ET, 2003), and of feeling 'desperate to make a difference but don't know how or where to begin' (ET, 2003). Let me be clear: these kinds of replies were not uncommon. Indeed, according to deep ecologist Joanna Macy, feelings of despair and distress are well merited and even healthy responses to the ecological challenges facing us, and they abound

when people begin to seriously consider the state of the world. The challenge, then, may be understood as follows:

> In the face of what is happening, how do we avoid feeling overwhelmed and just giving up, turning to the many diversions and demands of our consumer societies? (Macy, 1991b:4)

Along with Macy, I have come to believe that there is a need to consider the inner resources and (inter-)personal capacities which we might develop in relation to such challenges, and which might allow us to engage and to *stay* with these, despite the many difficulties which arise as soon as we open ourselves to awareness of the ecological crisis. Macy (1991b:4) suggests that developing this inner capacity is partly about learning 'to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be, for no healing can begin until we are fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze'. This, in my mind, is reminiscent of the challenge identified by panpsychist and ecological philosopher Freya Mathews (2003:11), which I consider at various points throughout the thesis, of '…how it is possible to sustain an erotic engagement in the world…in full knowledge of the possibilities of suffering and death that this world holds for us'.

5.2.2 Appreciation of space for thinking/being differently

Throughout my engagement with the two Ecological Thinking intakes, I collected many replies which expressed affective responses (of anxiety, fear, hope and excitement, and so on) *to the very process* on which course participants were being asked to embark, and *to the very fact of being asked to engage with* the material and questions raised by the course. Indeed, I understand many of the responses to be linked to the real difference experienced by course participants between what they were being asked to do in this course, and what they had become accustomed to throughout their university careers so far, as evidenced by the following reflections:

> 'I have to admit that I arrive at the end of my studies and I am annoyed and frustrated with logistics and marketing lectures. I chose this course because I want to open my mind to such issues as I fear

> we are not really able to have interests in them in our professional lives.' (ET, 2004)

> 'Outlet for thinking outside "normal" boundaries. Possibility to challenge "normal" thinking that most courses insist upon. Main worry is of still obtaining grades needed to get 2.1 degree. Would not have taken course, even though most wanted to, if I wasn't so secure on my degree, coming into this final semester. There is a security in taking "normal business" (profit assumption) courses that allows me to answer essays and exams in a way that I know the lecturer is looking for.' (ET, 2003)

Judi Marshall suggests that in the context of education for ecology, it is important to '[match] form to content', to '…develop educational forms that are robustly congruent with the issues addressed' (Marshall, 2004:197). My sense is that some participants on the Ecological Thinking course seemed to develop an appreciation of the intentional matching of form and content in the way that the course was structured, and seemed to find comfort in this emerging understanding. There was also a sense in which the opportunities and space provided by the course (to look at things differently, to engage with assignments in different ways) were appreciated:

> 'Although the course appears at first very disjointed it is becoming apparent that this isn't so. The course structure seems to reflect the systemic thought processes, and is therefore less disconcerting. I am excited by the number of options we have for our portfolio and lack of barriers. The progression of the course and consistency in teaching despite the initial appearance of inconsistency (until you understand the subject) is helping to make me feel secure and less anxious. Having early coursework is also helping me to focus my learning so I am not becoming overwhelmed.' (ET, 2003)

> 'A very important aspect is the portfolio. Because it is recommended to think and read about subjects every week and write your findings in the portfolio, you are "into" this course from week one onwards. You go to bed and wake up thinking "ecologically"…' (ET, 2003)

While engaging with the Ecological Thinking intakes, key questions for me, as a budding academic and educator, have included the following: How might I appropriately speak about these questions and issues in a way that stretches the boundaries of what is considered normal discourse in a management programme, and which challenges participants, in the words of a couple of students, 'to step out of the DBA[1] Bubble' (ET, 2003), and to 'look at problems from a number of angles rather than the black and white approach most courses take' (ET, 2003)? And, significantly, how do I balance such a challenging, question-posing approach with providing support and with somehow enabling others to explore these issues? How do I create the kinds of spaces where people feel able to *stay* with these questions and able to continue to *opt into* such a practice of encounter with the state of the world, despite the discomfort and suffering to which this may give rise? In Chapter Ten, I return to these questions, and consider how they inform the ways in which I seek to position myself as an educator in the context of management education and education for ecology.

5.2.3 The challenge of living with uncertainty and complexity

A key challenge that seemed to materialise for course participants was that of *living with uncertainty and complexity*, particularly when they realise that straightforward practical solutions (which many expect from the course) are not forthcoming. Arguably, the desire for answers, solutions, tool-kits and prescriptive models is seen as a legitimate expectation of the educational process in current times, and is in itself a pedagogical stance which needs interrogating. To illustrate, I draw on the responses of three Ecological Thinkers to my first question of the semester, regarding why they are choosing to take this course, and what their hopes and fears are in relation to it. These responses are a few of the many which repeatedly expressed a desire for answers and practical solutions:

> 'Hopes – to develop a tool-kit to deliver responsible practices in my own business activities.' (ET, 2003)

[1] DBA is the popular abbreviation for the undergraduate course, the BSc (Hons) degree in Business Administration.

> '…It will be fascinating to discover sustainable ways of living and what needs to be done in the world in order to know what actions will be taken. Hence, this is my main hope for the course – to understand what needs to be done so that we can apply this knowledge in the future.' (ET, 2004)

> 'I have read No Logo and found it very interesting but was frustrated by the fact that it offered limited solutions to such massive problems. I hope to get some answers or ideas from this course as to how such huge problems can be tackled by individuals in a realistic way. I have studied economics and sociology which point towards individuals adopting selfish/egotistical attitudes. I find it hard to decide if anything can be done but hope I will be proven wrong!!!' (ET, 2003)

Halfway through the semester, in response to the second question I asked, regarding their impressions of the course so far, a number of course participants acknowledged the challenges they experienced in attempting to live with the uncertainty and complexity raised by these issues:

> 'I find it both challenging and disconcerting. I am slowly beginning to realize the complexity of these issues…In attempting to write the essay, I find that for every answer I think I've found endless questions are generated. At the moment, the course is leading me from question to question; about why things are how they are, why I am as I am and why I do so I do so little despite being aware of so many issues…' (ET, 2004)

> 'There are so many obstacles, it seems, in the way of everything that I originally hoped to get from the course. I think I thought there would be prescribed answers to my questions but instead I am coming up against more questions…I keep wondering if I will ever be able to make real change in my life and the world. It seems so difficult and somewhat impossible to me at this point but it has forced me to think more!' (ET,2004)

> ‘Being frank and honest, I feel slightly frustrated by the course – I know it is virtually impossible to fully structure the material that we’re covering, but I think it would be really useful if we were working towards establishing some kind of list of the most important challenges, and what was to be done about them. I also have to say that I am virtually constantly disappointed by the lack of correlation between ecological ideals and real, practical solutions.’ (ET, 2003)

Again, let me emphasise that these types of responses are not unique, but rather, are representative of a significant proportion of the responses I received.

5.2.4 Where do we go from here?

For some course participants, complexity, tension and uncertainty seemed to be experienced not only in relation to the content of the course, in the present moment, but also in relation to what this meant for any choices they may make in the future, and the direction that their lives and career paths may take. For example, the following responses suggest that course participants experienced difficulties in understanding how they may act on what they learned through the course, and how they may sustain their interest and commitment to these issues in future:

> ‘… I hope I have the courage of my convictions to act responsibly based on my beliefs rather than follow the path of least resistance or most money in my career.’ (ET, 2004)

> ‘… It also overwhelms me trying to think of a way forward for this problem… I wonder how many of the students will go and change their way of behaving and act on thoughts stimulated by the course. I wish there was more time to continue discussions…’ (ET, 2003)

Others appeared to worry about the possibility that through engaging in the course their career prospects and plans for the future may be disturbed:

> '… I fear that I will not like everything I hear and question my future plans and current motivations – maybe my priorities might change?' (ET, 2003)

> '…Fears – worried I may question standard business practices too much and I will panic.' (ET, 2004)

> '…Fears – that I won't want to work for a global firm in the future!' (ET, 2003)

> '…Fears – becoming too cynical of business as about to embark in a career of this nature!' (ET, 2004)

> '…Fears – how will this help me in my career? I.e. although very important and fundamental, does a course that won't develop "hard" skills, such as Accounting/Finance or IT carry weight in the business arena? Hopes – that my fears are not true! An opportunity to gain clarity on certain issues in preparation for career.' (ET, 2003)

Reflecting on these responses, and on my own experience of partaking in the undergraduate Business Administration programme, I believe that engaging with ecological issues can be experienced as challenging because of the realisation that aspects of our lives which we accept or which we feel fairly confident and assured about can be problematised. Arguably, participants on the Ecological Thinking course had worked hard at developing their lives in particular ways, and were quite understandably protective of the paths and objectives they had thus far fashioned for themselves. My sense is that some course participants felt that engaging with this material had the potential to unsettle the stability and positioning they had succeeded in securing up to this point. As one student suggests, in response to a question posed on the last data-gathering exercise of the semester, '*What about the course hinders you from engaging with these issues in a way that is appropriate? What is unhelpful?*':

> 'Suggesting a career with not much hope and future is not appropriate for the majority of [Business Administration] students in Bath. Students in a top business school are looking for a "career".

> More emphasis could be laid on successful “careers” and businesses in sustainable development.’ (ET, 2003)

At the same time, it interested me to see that some course participants seemed willing and able to hold such tension and complexity in what appeared to be a curious, even joyful, manner:

> ‘I am enjoying the course very much and am really enjoying the fact that my norms and mindset are being challenged. It is both exciting and worrying though to try and deal with the conflicts and contradictions that I see myself being a part of. It has really opened up my awareness to ecological issues and is generating conflicts about my career direction, which I will have to deal with. I find Judi’s teaching quite inspirational, and the reading I have done around the subject is really motivating me to try and challenge the direction in which my career and future is heading.’ (ET, 2003)

I now turn to the experience(s) of the MSc group with whom I also collaborated. My intention in doing so is to demonstrate that participants on this educational programme also experienced significant tensions and challenges as they considered how they might appropriately respond to the problems and questions raised by the programme.

5.3 Grounding: The experience(s) of the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice

I believe that the kinds of themes and experiences which I argue became figural through the experience of the Ecological Thinking groups are manifested in a variety of responses commonly associated with the ecological crisis. My sense is that feelings of powerlessness and futility are often experienced by people seeking to act for sustainability, and that tension and anxiety are also generally experienced in the face of such seemingly enormous challenges.

Indeed, I would suggest that a key challenge faced by self-appointed change agents seems to be that of holding the tension that comes from recognising the immensity

and urgency of the planetary condition, whilst appreciating that these patterns may be incredibly difficult to shift and may demand persistence and time which we may feel ill able to afford. Participants of the MSc programme seemed to frequently grapple with this tension, with initiatives such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting being referred to as 'rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic', for example. Similarly, it became evident that whilst some participants in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative could draw strength from systemic notions of small wins and Arne Naess's metaphor of 'the long wall of change', others found it difficult to continue to persist in the face of what they saw as their apparent inability to shift systemic patterns in ways which they considered to be sufficiently significant.

In this section, I give a brief account of some of the tensions and challenges experienced by participants of the MSc programme, while in Chapters Seven and Eight, I describe in more detail the kinds of questions which were raised for participants in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative.

The tensions which seemed to be experienced by participants on the MSc programme could be understood to revolve around *how we might understand the nature of the challenges facing us* and *how we might position ourselves in relation to these*. Very briefly, such tensions seemed to include:

- Experiencing a sense of agency / experiencing a sense of humility;
- Experiencing the possibility of change / experiencing stuck-ness;
- Understanding urgency / understanding this as a long-term developmental process;
- Positioning ourselves as inside/outside, as covert/overt, in our organisations and our fields of practice;
- Opting for action / opting for non-action.

And tension also seemed to be experienced, more broadly, with regards to the role of humanity and our place in the world:

- Humans as plague/cancer, and/or humans as saviours, and/or humans as part of the healing.

Having joined course participants for the majority of the MSc programme, my impression is that participants' very progress through the course (and related processes of inquiry) *both* challenged *and* enabled them to hold such tensions, so that these could experienced in ways which are both unsettling *as well as* potentially creative and generative. I seek to evidence the above claim by drawing on particular episodes from the course.

For instance, I believe that for some course participants at least, the 'Ecology and sustainable development' workshop at Schumacher College brought to the fore the subtle interplay between experiencing *both* a sense of agency *and also* a sense of humility. In our collective reflection session at the end of the workshop, we spoke about experiencing humility through the act of scrambling through the forest and the banks of the River Dart. One participant summed up her experience by saying that she felt

> '…more solid… and also more humble… I can contribute my part, but something much bigger than me is going on!'

Feelings of awe and wonder were also evidenced. As one participant said:

> 'We live in such an amazing world… I kind of knew that but it was good to know it again'.

Throughout my inquiry, and particularly through my journey alongside this group, I have found myself wondering whether awe, wonder and reverence are the kinds of qualities which might help one to maintain such a delicate balance between agency and humility. Later in this chapter, and again in Chapter Nine (when I reflect on my experience with the Luhimba Project) I consider this question in some depth.

Later in the programme, as part of the workshop entitled 'Humanity and enterprise', Peter Hawkins, (a leading consultant and researcher in organisational learning, the management of complex change and the development of organisational culture) spoke to the group about 'going in' (as a consultant/facilitator) not having taken the moral high-ground, but rather, with compassion. He talked about not going in as the avenging hero but with humility, and about needing to find a place from which to simultaneously feel compassion

for apparently opposed actors/groups. Again on this occasion, I felt that a delicate balance/tension was being enacted, with which I feel participants in the group empathised. I would argue that the tension between taking an adversarial position and seeking to connect with others becomes particularly poignant as we (as self-appointed change agents) consider how we might go about influencing systems and bringing about change in the organisations and contexts in which we participate, as all of those on the MSc programme arguably sought to do. Indeed, this is a tension which I argue also played itself out within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and which became particularly prominent for me during my time in Tanzania.

Along with these various tensions, there seemed to me to be a more all-encompassing tension experienced by some participants in the MSc group, specifically around *who we are* and *our place in the world*. I recount the following stories because they felt to me to be particularly poignant and even distressing (and in the next chapter, I explain how such questions and experiences have helped me to determine my focus for this thesis, particularly in relation to the literature and theoretical perspectives with which I have chosen to engage).

As part of the 'Sustainable corporate management' workshop (Workshop Four), the group was asked to engage in a Future Scenario Exercise, and to put ourselves in the place of social historians circa 2050, considering the following questions:

> *'How did governments help un-stick the situation and help take things forward? How did the rest of society (NGOs, business, community) help enable that?'*

We divided into two groups, and within my group, we had animated discussions. We established that more than half of this group believed that there was no affirmative way for this to happen, and that a highly visible, catastrophic ecological crisis (perceived to be of similar significance to the terrorist action of September 11th, 2001) would be required to actually shift current patterns. Others favoured an enlightened dictator who would take control and force change upon others. The guest speaker had been thought-provoking and contentious in his view that communities could be understood primarily as a grouping of selfish, greedy consumers and that governments would not choose to act in ways which might be considered political non-runners.

I was saddened (along with many others, I believe) by the mood that prevailed in this conversation, and I wondered (and continue to do so) what seems possible or not possible when we understand humanity primarily in this way, and how we might understand human potential and capacity differently were we to reframe our understanding of human nature. Miko, a visiting award-winner from Japan who had joined us for this session, and who had been mostly silent throughout, put forward the following question to the group as we were drawing our discussions to a close:

> 'Can you tell me, what is your happy view of this sustainable world in 2050?'

At the time, it struck me that Miko's sole contribution could be considered a timely offering, in that it interrupted what felt like an unconstructive pattern and challenged us to imagine a different vision of what might be possible.

In my mind, the strong response evidenced in the Future Scenario Exercise was juxtaposed with something that had happened earlier in that workshop. Following a session entitled *Taking Stock – A Story of Unsustainable Development*, in which the guest speaker spoke knowledgeably about the depletion of fish-stocks off the coast of Nova Scotia, there were a number of responses from the group. One participant talked about the depression and pessimism that he felt because (in his words):

> '…every way you look at it, it's all going belly up.'

Someone else chipped in:

> 'What hope have we got?'

And then another participant spoke and said something along the lines of

> 'I feel optimistic. I think that there is something in the kinds of stories we choose to tell. Do we tell depressing stories or beautiful stories? And what are the possibilities if we change that?'

And someone else built on this and said that she felt that this kind of mourning was part of the natural grieving cycle. She asked:

> 'But do we get stuck there?...We can learn from this and develop and mature and grow. That terrible place is the start…where do you go from there?'

We then carried onto David Ballard's session *The End of the Slave Trade in the UK*, which was at various points referred to as potentially a beautiful story.

For me, these two stories/instances from this particular workshop raised a number of questions and tensions which I proceeded to hold and explore throughout my inquiry, and to which I return at various points in the thesis, including the following:

- How might the MSc course (and related educational processes and practices of inquiry) be understood as facilitating and/or encouraging a process of personal development whereby we are able to balance an understanding and appreciation of both the beautiful stories and the difficult stories showing stuck-ness? How might we understand that both are real, both are possible? How might we move on from that understanding?

  For example, when we spoke about complexity (also in Workshop Four), a participant asked:

  > 'So is it possible to hide behind complexity?'

  Whereupon a discussion emerged around how complexity *also* says that 'everything makes a difference'.

  Thus, I suggest that a key capacity we might seek to develop might be that of appreciating both the challenges and opportunities inherent in a complex world. Throughout the thesis, I seek to demonstrate how I attempt to work with this tension in various fields of practice, as I come face to face with difficulties *and* with opportunities, with the experience of pain *and* of joy.

- How might we understand what happened in these two instances in Workshop Four, in the light of Geoff Mead's session on story-telling in Workshop Five? When thinking about our (humanity's) place in the world, are we aware of the stories which are being inscribed upon us? How might we critically understand the power of stories in shaping our thinking, for example, around humanity as centre of the universe and around humanity as a cancer to the world? Is there a call for re-storying ourselves (both personally and as a wider human community)?

  I return to these kinds of questions in the following chapter, when I explain my rationale for engaging with a number of theoretical perspectives on the human self (including the self in relation to more-than-human nature, and the role of the human in the cosmos) and on personal and spiritual development. I suggest that the perspectives upon which I draw are capable of affording us great ecological wisdom and insight, especially insofar as they challenge the all too common belief that human beings are solely to be understood as greedy, destructive and narrowly egotistical actors. Instead, the thinkers and writers with whose work I choose to engage seem able to both deconstruct and problematise the human condition and the current state of the world, *while also* presenting possibilities for different qualities of engagement with the natural world and different ways of thinking of our role and place within it.

- Is our experience of tension somehow related to our sense of *purpose* and to *why* it is that we choose to engage with the ecological and social challenges facing us? Is our purpose to bring about change? What kinds of transformations are we looking for (of self, others, wider systems, and so on)? What kind of change do we consider to be significant? Is the change we are looking for possible? Can we even pin it down? Is it the primary outcome of engaging? How do we grapple with experiencing a need/urgency to bring about change and realising that this might not be as readily forthcoming as we had hoped? How do we come to terms with this? Does this require a re-shifting of purpose in our engagement with these issues?

  The above questions were also core to our experience as part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and in Chapters Seven and Eight, I consider these in some detail.

The kinds of questions and challenges which moved into the foreground for me as I reflected on the experiences of course participants on the MSc programme therefore revolved around:

- Participants' (perceived) (in)ability to respond to ecological challenges in ways that were appropriate and effective;
- The experience of hopelessness, pointlessness and 'stuckness' which participants sometimes described; and
- Participants' attempts to come to grips with the lack of straight-forward solutions and the seeming intractability of the situation (Ballard, 2006).

In the following section, I begin to show how I seek to make sense of these questions.

5.4 Making sense

In this section, I build on the themes presented thus far in this chapter, and show how I am attempting to make sense of the experience of holding various questions, centering around:

- Our understanding of ourselves as change agents; and
- The frames and assumptions underlying our conceptualisations of change.

One way in which it is possible to make sense of the experiences and questions I have described so far is to consider how these represent and/or mirror trends in more global contexts; for instance, how these fit within a broader context of people acting for sustainability. I believe that this is helpful in that we may learn to see our experience not as an anomaly, but rather as being symptomatic of wider systemic patterns. For example, many commentators (see Harman and Hurley, 1996; Korten, 1995) have identified learned incapacity and helplessness as one of the problematic characteristics of the human condition in current times. Arguably, such incapacity and helplessness means that, even where there is awareness and concern regarding the far-reaching ecological and social challenges facing us, people often feel unable to act or respond in meaningful ways. In a paper

delineating the special challenges encountered when strategising for sustainable development, David Ballard (2006; see also Ballard, 2005) suggests that 'low awareness sustained by perceived difficulties in responding' is one such challenge:

> Most people prefer to remain unaware because they think they have no 'agency' – i.e. there is nothing meaningful that they can do about the sustainability crisis. This is not surprising: the more we look at the issue, the more intractable, urgent and serious it can seem. It can indeed be painful to hold awareness unless we find a meaningful way of responding. (Ballard, 2006:1)

Accordingly, Ballard (2006:3) recommends that 'no initiative should be undertaken as part of any strategy without explicitly considering both the likely agency and awareness of those participating and without setting up appropriate processes to reinforce either or both of these areas'.

Similarly, Elizabeth Ryland (2000) points to a sense of helplessness and anxiety as being at the roots of wide-spread passivity in the face of ecological challenges:

> Research reveals a widespread lack of sustainable activity, even among professed environmentalists. The 1990 Roper Organization revealed a clear disconnect between environmental attitudes and behavior, as well as an overwhelming sense of individual helplessness and loss of control. This large gap between attitude and behavior exists both in the United States and abroad (De Oliver, 1999; Dunlap & Mertig, 1992; Finger, 1994; Gardner & Stern, 1996; Hallin, 1995; Scott & Willits, 1994; Uusitalo, 1990; Widegren, 1998). In the presence of growing environmental dangers, people typically respond with passivity while being prey to anxiety, fear, pessimism, and helplessness. (Ryland, 2000:382)

Following Finger (1994), Ryland (2000:382) recommends that 'environmental educators focus on individual experiences of fear and anxiety because these are the feelings preventing people from going beyond standard environmental behaviors'.

5.4.1 Reframing our understanding of agency

The kinds of themes and experiences which emerged from my inquiry with the Ecological Thinking and MSc groups could therefore be understood as relating to wider issues around how we understand our sense of *agency* and our positioning in relation to complex ecological challenges. The following are the kinds of questions that have become prominent for me as I make sense of my experience (and that of other participants) in various fields of practice:

- What is the nature of the agency and capacity which we must arguably feel we hold in order to feel moved to respond to ecological challenges?

- How, if at all, might such a sense of agency be developed or reinforced?

- How might we understand the experience of agency as being related to feelings of anxiety, fear, helplessness, and so on?

- If agency is related to the capacity to bring about change, then what is the nature of this change? What model of change might it represent?

- How might we understand the experience of agency if, following Macy (1991b), we do not see this as synonymous with assuming personal guilt for the state of the world, nor personal responsibility for its resolution?

The notion that we might re-describe and reframe our sense of agency is, I believe, an important one. For example, it may be valuable to reframe the way we understand our feelings of helplessness, and consider these not as shortcomings, but as valid experiences which must be acknowledged and processed. This may include asking what we mean when we claim that we feel helpless or hopeless and asking ourselves: when do I or do I not feel helpless? What keeps me feeling this way? In what ways could I understand my actions differently, as being helpful and valuable? And so on.

In a similar vein, we might also reframe our positioning in relation to these challenges, so that rather than understand ourselves as eco-warriors, change agents or stewards of the Earth, heroically and self-righteously acting in pursuit of change

of grandiose proportions, we may understand our sense of purpose as being to *engage with* and *be present to* the challenges facing us. Claire Foster (2004), National Policy Adviser on Environmental Issues to the Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, suggests that for too long the notion that humans are endowed with a special purpose has been taken as license to harm much of the natural world. She joins polemical philosopher John Gray (2002) in suggesting that the special purpose of human life may be 'simply to see'. This resonates with social ecologist Murray Bookchin's (1980) view of humanity as 'nature rendered self-conscious' and raises questions as to how we might differently understand ourselves as rejoicers, celebrators or full participants witnessing and attending to the state of the planet.

My sense is that such reframing may be hugely challenging for both myself and others, so caught up are we in ways of thinking which encourage us to see our role in the ecological crisis alternatively as perpetrators or as stewards seeking to solve and manage these problems. And it is of course possible to probe and problematise the new frames with which we seek to replace old ones. So for example, we could ask what it is that we might celebrate or rejoice about, particularly in the face of the devastation which we must also acknowledge. And we might also ask questions regarding how we might understand our witnessing and being present to these challenges as being of value. What would it mean, for example, to engage and to stay with these issues, and to seek to understand and acknowledge and attend to 'the way things are'? What is it that I can meaningfully offer to the world through this process of engagement? What would the nature of this offering be, if not to directly bring about the change that I desire and believe is urgently needed? And how might I hold the tension between acknowledging the urgency and enormity of the challenges facing us, with an appropriate sense of agency and of my positioning in this?

5.5 Conclusions

I would like to end this chapter by clarifying that, through my inquiry, I have become increasingly conscious of the challenge of *holding* the distress and anxiety I experience in the face of the ecological crisis *alongside* the experience of joy, beauty and connectedness with the natural world which I also regularly experience,

and which I find nourishing and sustaining. I drew the picture below at a moment when I was feeling particularly conscious of the need for holding tensions and for holding the process of engagement with ecological challenges. Some time on, it still feels to me to meaningfully represent my experience of engaging in this inquiry.

Figure 1: Holding

My inquiry has therefore revolved around the question of how we might learn to hold our gaze in the face of the pain and distress experienced in the world, while at the same time taking care that we neither burn out nor retreat into the joylessness that Naess (1995) suggests is often experienced by environmentalists and serious-minded, socially responsible people. Indeed, the notion and experience of *joy* or *joyfulness* became a key aspect of my inquiry fairly early on. In particular, having experienced significant difficulties as part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative (as I show later in the thesis) the following became a key question for me: How might we develop the emotional competence and the (inter-)personal capacity to *keep on working, with commitment and joy*, to shift unsustainable patterns of thought and action? I held this question for some time, sensing that it was an important one, and that I would find it of value to stay with it.

While I was doing so, I came across contemporary ecophilosopher Arne Naess's (1995) paper *The Place of Joy in a World of Fact*[2], through which I first became aware of seventeenth century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza's notion of *repose*. I felt drawn to Naess's argument that self-acceptance or repose in oneself is a quality that tends to be missing in current times, and that this makes it even more difficult for ordinary people to engage with environmental problems. Since then, I have given much thought and time to the study of Spinoza's and Naess's notions of repose. I have come to believe that this is an important concept, with the potential to help us in forming an appropriate positioning in relation to ecological challenges. In the chapter that follows, I begin to explore the concept's relevance and significance for how we might be moved to respond to ecological challenges in current times.

[2] First published in 1973, reprinted in 1995. Throughout the thesis, I refer to the 1995 reprint.