8 Repose in action for sustainability

8.1 Framing

In this chapter, I reflect on the Sustainable Farmshire initiative as described in the previous chapter, and I consider some key themes which seem to me to represent what it is that I/we learned about the process of engaging with ecological challenges through this particular experience. This chapter, then, could be understood to present the thesis' conclusions regarding the nature of the challenges (and the opportunities) faced in inquiry and action for sustainability.

The argument in this chapter is structured around the following key points:

- I begin by explaining that a key challenge we identified was that of learning how to organise ourselves and our time together in ways which would allow us to appropriately engage with the concept and practice of sustainability. I suggest that organising for sustainability is difficult, mostly because we lack experience of organising ourselves in response to such complex challenges.

- In addition, it could be argued that as a group, we experienced significant challenges in articulating and particularising the values, visions, and intentions which we understood as guiding our work, and that this was also unconstructive.

- I suggest that our inability to unambiguously articulate and particularise our visions and intentions could be partly explained by our conscious and unconscious attempts to collapse difference and to accommodate various perspectives under a blanket/umbrella understanding, and that this might be underpinned by a desire to avoid tension, anxiety and conflict.

- Furthermore, I suggest that this inability to particularise our understanding of sustainability could also partly be explained by the tendencies towards idealisation and abstractiveness inherent in many ecological movements. I propose that these tendencies might be rooted in the complexity and

seeming ungraspability of the ecological crisis, which make it difficult to engage both with its systemic and its particular qualities.

- Finally, I suggest that to the extent that we experience a sense of urgency in relation to ecological challenges, we might also find ourselves experiencing restlessness and seeking, in Berry's words, the attainment of immediate paradise. I argue that such tendencies might explain why it was that, in the case of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, we found ourselves constantly oscillating between different possibilities rather than particularising and following through on a specific course of action.

- I suggest that all of the above themes help me to develop a grounded understanding of what a practice of repose might look like. Qualities of repose might therefore include an adequate understanding of the anxieties and tensions which affect us (and the manner in which these affect us); the holding of tension, complexity and difference; and the development of robustness and emotional competence, amongst others.

I now consider each of these key points and/or challenges in turn.

8.2   On organising for sustainability

In this section, I want to make the point that some of the difficulties we experienced may be partly explained by our uncertainty regarding how we might organise ourselves and our time together in ways which allowed us to appropriately engage with the concept and practice of a Sustainable Farmshire. Thus, I suggest that a key challenge for people working in this field may be to learn *how to organise for sustainability*.

In a line of thought that has parallels with Harman and Hurley's (1996) observation that learned incapacity and helplessness is a problematic global tendency, Banks and Mangan (1999) reflect on an action research/community development project in which they were involved in a small Canadian town, and suggest that rebuilding the capacity to act and to organise effectively is a central challenge for local communities in current times:

The central concern that we had identified was the development of a broadly based organisational capacity to act. In a world of global competition, in which the state is abandoning concern for the welfare of vulnerable people to local communities, people need to regenerate that capacity for neighbourly action (see Banks and Mangan, 1996). To a large extent, the innate organisational skills of people acting in communities have been weakened and destroyed by decades of abuse at the hands of both private capital and the bureaucratised welfare state (see Saul, 1995). (Banks and Mangan, 1999:28)

I propose that, especially in the area of sustainability and ecological challenges, with its apparent complexities and depths, we may find it difficult to make decisions about how best to organise our efforts, so accustomed are we to seeing this as an area of concern for 'expert' others, whether local government, policy-makers, scientists or environmentalists. Environmental philosopher and psychologist Shierry Weber Nicholsen (2002:1) makes the point that despite virtually everyone valuing and appreciating some aspect of the natural world, the public mind seems by and large content to 'relegate matters of the environment, which is the ground of our whole lives, to the periphery of concern, as though they were the private interest of a group called "environmentalists"'. In part, such an attitude may be due to the incredible difficulties we perceive when we begin to consider how we, as ordinary people, may respond to such momentous challenges. For example, in a thought piece delineating some of the issues raised for researchers into sustainable development issues, Ballard et al. (2003) argue that the complexity and lack of consensus around the problems faced raises particular challenges for researchers (and presumably, for ordinary people also seeking to engage with these issues in thoughtful ways):

The problems faced are very complex and there is no single guiding paradigm within which research can be conducted. Researchers are working in field where even the leading thinkers do not agree about what we are trying to achieve, and where there are good reasons why it might not be possible to agree on many issues yet. Taken for granted assumptions, such as the centrality of economic growth or as to the future shape of our society, need to be held lightly. Political agreements such as Kyoto or even the current Government's Energy

Strategy (according to some voices) fall short of what is needed.
(Ballard et al., 2003:1)

8.2.1 'Best practice' in community participation?

While seeking to organise ourselves in the early stages of the initiative, we gathered what we believed was relevant information regarding how other similar initiatives had unfolded and been shaped. We often spoke about learning from (and hopefully being able to contribute to) best practice in the field. For instance, we regularly welcomed advice from Local Agenda 21 officers as to what else was going on in the area and how we might learn from and potentially make links with such efforts. On the one hand, then, we clearly felt that it was possible to learn something from the experience of efforts related to Local Agenda 21 and community participation as promoted and facilitated by local government. On the other hand, I believe that we also held questions (both implicitly and explicitly) regarding such models of community participation and social change. Indeed, it is possible to critique local government's efforts around Local Agenda 21, with some commentators suggesting that such efforts are, by and large, bureaucratic, overly-prescriptive and representative of rhetoric rather than meaningful change.

For example, around the time of our first open meeting, RF (one of the team at Conservation) shared with us an article which had been recently published in Green Futures (July/August 2002). The article's title was *Sit still while I empower you…* and the summary on the first page of the article makes the following points:

> As turnouts tumble, the question of how to get local people involved in local decisions is increasingly vital. The best stakeholder dialogue techniques address this by empowering local communities – and helping them really get to grips with sustainable development. Without proper leadership, though, many such techniques simply lead to further disillusionment – and some question the democratic validity of the whole approach. Such scepticism risks throwing out the good along with the bad… (Tuxworth, 2002:32)

The author suggests that calls for wider public participation in local issues now form part of accepted government rhetoric, and that one would be forgiven for assuming that the process nut had been cracked. He argues that the contrary is true, and that there is still massive confusion about the many methods which could potentially be employed in order to involve the public in decision-making, and that community groups and public sector bodies alike are 'still at the foot of a rather steep learning curve' (2002:34) when it comes to drawing on and facilitating these techniques. Tuxworth (2002:34) points to what he believes is a need for skill, experience and leadership in relation to attempts to foster community participation: 'The dim realisation that participation is a craft requiring a consistent approach and a skilled tradesman is drowned out by a splurge of DIY bodging as dozens of individuals jab at the community with a range of inexpertly handled tools'.

A number of questions were raised for me on reading the article, including the following: How do we make community participation happen in practice? What models and frameworks might we usefully draw upon? How will we be able to judge whether or not this is a success? To what extent have we got access to the 'proper leadership', 'consistent approach' and 'skilled tradesman-ship' that the article suggests is necessary? Does it matter that we are all pretty much new to this way of working? From our early meetings, it became apparent that initiating processes of community participation and engagement around sustainability was likely to prove challenging, with some questions around how do-able this might actually be, how we might harness the levels of energy and effort which would be required to make this happen, and how we might learn from other communities' attempts to do this.

8.2.2 Establishing governance structures and organisational frameworks

My sense is that we broadly envisaged that we would organise our efforts around the kinds of procedures which Beth Lachman (1997) suggests are the most common steps adopted by communities seeking to develop sustainability initiatives (based on research on sustainable community activities across the United States). These include:

- Developing ongoing governance structures for the sustainable community efforts;

- Creating a sustainable community vision;

- Setting goals and objectives along with indicators;

- Developing sustainability guiding principles;

- Designing and prioritizing potential activities;

- Choosing and implementing activities; and

- Evaluating progress and revising activities accordingly.

I believe that we struggled with each of these points, not only because of our relative inexperience, but also because each of these might be understood to give rise to serious challenges and questions. For example, the narrative of *what happened* in this initiative (presented in the last chapter) could be understood to demonstrate our ongoing struggle with the first of the above points, that of developing a structure capable of providing ongoing governance and direction to community efforts for sustainability. Throughout the lifetime of the initiative we engaged in various conversations regarding the relative merits and drawbacks of some of the different ways in which we might position ourselves in the local context.

Approximately three months into the initiative, we decided to position ourselves as a network hub, a decision we critically appraised in the final reflection phase in which we engaged as we brought the initiative to a close. At this point it became apparent that we held a number of questions regarding how we might best have organised ourselves and most appropriately sought to act for sustainability. For example, throughout the lifetime of the initiative we had sought to maintain permeable, flexible boundaries around this group, believing that this would allow us to make connections with the wider community, and might therefore facilitate the wide-spread community involvement which we were after. It was only in the context of the reflection phase that we explicitly considered whether maintaining such permeable boundaries was limiting and/or unhelpful in any way. Furthermore, we wondered whether our vision of a Sustainable Farmshire might have best been achieved through engendering action groups; educating and raising awareness within the wider community; creating spaces for community-wide reflection and dialogue and/or through developing our own individual (and collective) capacities to act for sustainability in informed and thoughtful ways. We

also considered how do-able and practicable each of these alternatives actually was.

The point I wish to make is that in setting out on this initiative, we experienced difficulties in developing a *structure* and/or *framework* capable of holding and bringing to fruition the various intricate, ambitious and ambiguous intentions we brought to our work. (I explore the causes and the implications of this intricacy, ambition and ambiguity later in this chapter). Related to the difficulties we encountered in establishing appropriate processes, boundaries and remits, we also experienced difficulties regarding issues of governance, leadership and accountability. Questions were raised (both within and outside the group) regarding the extent to which we were legitimately able to represent and speak for the wider Farmshire community, the extent to which we felt able to rightfully occupy the positions of community leaders and change agents, and the extent to which we could act with assertiveness and authority in relation to these issues.

In addition, I suggest that there were other unintended consequences regarding the ways in which we sought to organise our efforts. Somewhat strangely, given our repeated assurances that we wished to invite different perspectives and territories of experience into the initiative, it might be that the structure(s) we *were* able to engender were not necessarily the most effective for connecting with such a variety of experiences and perspectives. On a practical level, our attempts to root these meetings in community life by giving them a set space and time (much like the many village clubs and societies did) had the unintended consequence that only those people able to commit to those kinds of timings were able to attend, whereas many others who were otherwise engaged during the day were not. Moreover, the processes we had established, however loosely and/or informally, nevertheless revolved around meeting for *discussion*. While this may have been an effective way to engage in conversations of a more propositional kind, we might have more effectively made space for the other kinds of engagement we allegedly wished to encourage, including the emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, physical, and so on. My sense is that for a long time, we left alternative spaces and arrangements unexplored, and saw the discursive meeting space as the cornerstone for the project.

8.3　　On particularising the concept of sustainability

Alongside conversations about how we might organise and position ourselves in relation to the wider community, throughout the various open meetings we often attempted to describe what we meant by sustainability. It could be argued that the challenges we experienced in this respect revolved around *particularising* what it was that we understood as 'sustainability', and in articulating a *concrete* vision of what a Sustainable Farmshire would look like and how such shifts may be facilitated and/or enacted *in practice*.

For example, we drew on definitions of sustainability which emphasised attention to economic, environmental and social factors, and in our first meeting it was proposed that sustainability had to do with 'people developing a healthy and balanced approach to life'. We identified that we were interested in addressing significant environmental challenges in the 'think global, act local' sense and that it was important that the initiative did not 'just become a "buy local" campaign in support of the local community, but that larger environmental problems are addressed'. In later meetings, we heard from one of the Local Agenda 21 officers that 'a common set-back of community sustainability initiatives is that it is very easy to focus on predictable, long-standing concerns, such as dog-mess, and not so easy to look at the wider picture of environmental problems', and we agreed that taking a systemic perspective on sustainability was important. These could be interpreted as rather abstract and wide-ranging articulations of the visions and intentions leading our work.

Moreover, on several occasions when seeking to connect with the wider community, we decided to talk about sustainability in similarly general terms. Both in relation to the Village Magazine and the Parish Plan Exhibition, we purposefully drew on rather generalised definitions of sustainability, including: 'A Sustainable Farmshire might be one where we are able to meet our needs and live to our potential, while preserving the diversity and richness of our environment for the future'. In preparing our first contribution to the Village Magazine, we decided to talk very generally about sustainability in Farmshire, and only briefly mention our ideas and/or action proposals at the end of the piece, inviting people to be in touch if interested. This seemed to be partly underpinned by a desire not to impose our ideas onto others (a tendency which I explore in greater detail later in this

chapter). Arguably, it could also be explained by a desire to *moderate* the complexity inherent in issues of sustainability. Indeed, having made an effort to refer to specific plans and proposals in an early draft of our first entry to the Village Magazine, the minister of one of the local churches (who was also involved in the initiative) made the following comment regarding this version:

> 'If I have a criticism it is that it is a bit too technical for a lot of people. You speak of concrete plans and they seem quite complex. I wonder whether you need to mention all the plans or if you do just spell out a bit what one or at the most two might mean. i.e. I imagine someone saying...."What does that mean?"' (Personal communication, February 2003)

Throughout the initiative's lifetime, we seemed largely to agree that we might most appropriately understand sustainability in fairly broad, all-encompassing terms. We repeatedly assured ourselves that it may be possible to act for sustainability at many levels and in different spheres, and that it was acceptable for each individual and/or group to 'be going about it in their own particular way'. Nevertheless, in our process review meeting (held eight months after the beginning of the initiative) we felt compelled to ask the question 'what does sustainability mean anyway?'.   In reflecting explicitly on this question, we quickly agreed that what was important was that we contribute to forming 'a broad picture and a fuller perspective' of sustainability within the Farmshire community. We agreed that it would be fair to say that our work so far had been guided by a fairly general, open-ended vision: we had broadly talked about finding ways of working together, across the wider community, to create a Sustainable Farmshire, but had refrained from defining what this would look like in any depth or detail.

My experience of the ways in which we came to articulate the visions and values guiding our understanding of sustainability is that:

- The vision of a sustainable community which we created was fairly abstract and broad-spectrum, and that this was in some ways unhelpful. The collective answer at which we arrived when we considered the question 'what does sustainability mean anyway?' in the review meeting could be understood as similarly intangible. Likewise, I believe that we struggled to identify 'sustainability guiding principles' (Lachman, 1997), beyond those which were

similarly unspecific, including for example our claim that sustainability is 'as much about spiritual awareness as it is about practical or technical approaches'. Having made this link publically, both in the Exhibition and in the Village Magazine, we left this claim largely unexplored for the remainder of our collaboration.

- Partly as a result of the above, I believe that we also experienced difficulties in 'setting goals and objectives along with indicators' (Lachman, 1997). Our sense of purpose seemed to encompass such objectives as developing personal capacity, creating spaces for dialogue, fulfilling the role of network hub and triggering action projects, all of which might be understood as fairly ambitious objectives. Regrettably, we did not give due attention to formulating indicators, despite our theoretical awareness of the importance of indicators in the context of sustainability (in terms of gathering system feedback, for example). It is arguably not surprising that we eventually found ourselves dissatisfied with our progress, and unable to make judgements as to how useful our interventions may have been. Indeed, in the final reflection process we undertook we identified that some discomfort had been felt (by those within and outside the initiative) at what was perceived as a lack of clarity in stated goals and purposes. Following Banks and Mangan (1999), it seems that the initiative's open-endedness and un-boundedness could have opened it to criticism as being poorly organised and articulated.

8.4   On collaboration and the collapsing of difference

In this section, I would like to consider additional ways to make sense of the difficulties we experienced in articulating a clear, coherent and practical vision or understanding of sustainability, drawing from perspectives on group dynamics, the social construction of meaning and psychoanalysis, and making links between these and the development of an inquiry practice. In particular, I wish to focus on the tensions we experienced in seeking to enact authority, collaboration and autonomy in ways which we considered to be appropriate and effective, and on the strategies which we arguably employed in order to deal with these tensions.

Early in our collaboration we realised that the terms 'local champions' and 'community leaders' were ones which were often used in referring to the people who became involved (usually on a voluntary basis) in community action. The fact that we came to be identified thus encouraged me to think about what this might mean. Indeed, a key question which I grappled with from the early stages of this initiative was that of how one might attempt to facilitate or lead this kind of change in a community setting while maintaining a commitment to qualities of participation and democracy. In other words: is there a tension (and if so, of what kind) between the intention to foster participation, collaboration and inclusiveness and the taking up of leadership and decision-making roles? And what does this tension mean for the practice of action research, if one of its quality criteria is that the 'research design and execution are therefore participative and democratic processes, ideally involving all stakeholders' (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1)?

My past experience of participating in generative spaces and creative groups (of the kind described by Randall and Southgate, 1980) suggests that of course effective leadership and direction is key. The challenge or tension I am more concerned with is that of enacting appropriate forms of leadership, authority and decision-making, *of the kind that complement and contribute to the development of opportunities for meaningful engagement and active participation by all involved*. In his writing on co-operative inquiry, Heron (1999) suggests that a successful inquiry group would have an appropriate balance between valid forms of authority, collaboration and autonomy. Reason (2002) expands on this point:

> A creative group is also characterized by an appropriate balance of
> the principles of hierarchy, collaboration, and autonomy: deciding
> for others, with others and for oneself (Heron, 1996). Authentic
> hierarchy provides appropriate direction by those with greater vision,
> skill and experience. Collaboration roots the individual within a
> community of peers, offering basic support and the creative and
> corrective feedback of other views and possibilities. Autonomy
> expresses the self-directing and self-creating potential of the person.
> The shadow face of authority is authoritarianism; that of
> collaboration, peer pressure and conformity; that of autonomy,
> narcissism, wilfulness and isolation. The challenge is to design
> institutions which manifest valid forms of these principles; and to

find ways in which they can be maintained in self-correcting and
creative tension. (Reason, 2002:213)

It is possible to argue that those of us at the core of the initiative (as well as people
at the fringes) held a number of questions and concerns regarding the ways in
which we might appropriately enact authority and seek to consult, represent and/or
speak on behalf of the wider community. I consider that not only were we unsure
about what valid forms of authority might look like, we might also have been
uncertain as to what effective collaboration would mean in practice. Again, I feel
that I contributed to perpetuating confusion and ambiguity around these terms by
not making space to explicitly explore what these might mean. So even though we
explicitly referred to 'collaboration' and 'community-wide participation' as
qualities we wished to work towards, we did not spend the necessary time
unpacking what these might mean in theory and practice. Therefore, in reflecting
on how we might have understood and construed these qualities in this sub-section,
I draw primarily from what seemed implicit and/or tacit in the ways we talked
about these. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, these are questions which
we began to consider more explicitly in the final reflection phase.

I suggest that we may have equated collaboration with a commitment to
accommodate and be inclusive of different perspectives and opinions. Thus, the
initiative's relative open-endedness and un-boundedness could also be explained
by our predisposition to amalgamate various perspectives and understandings (of
what sustainability might mean, for example, or how we might best position
ourselves) into a broad vision capable of acting as an umbrella for all of these. I do
not, of course, assert that seeking to be inclusive of multiple perspectives on
sustainability, or on what might constitute appropriate action in this context, is in
itself problematic. Instead, I suggest that the *uncritical* inclusion of multiple
perspectives as *a method of collapsing difference* (and specifically the *tension* that
this raises) is a strategy which, whether undertaken consciously or unconsciously,
demands critical consideration.

8.4.1 Acts of affirmation and productive difference

One way of giving such critical attention to this dynamic is to consider Kenneth Gergen's (2003) work on the relational construction of meaning and orders of democracy. Gergen is a professor of psychology with particular interests in the social construction of meaning, particularly as this relates to our understanding of the self in relationship with others, which he refers to as *relational being* (see Gergen, 1999). Gergen advocates that engaging in critical reflection and seeking to understand the socially constructed nature of taken-for-granted assumptions holds the potential for emancipation and for the choiceful construction of new futures. Specifically, Gergen (2003:44) maintains that constructionist dialogues 'point to the possibility of augmenting the individualist tradition – in which the individual self serves as the fundamental atom of society – with an appreciation of relational process as the fulcrum of societal stability and change' and that 'we may replace the view of the individual mind as the center of meaning and action with a reality of relationship'. He proposes that from a constructionist perspective it is useful to understand democracy not in terms of individual expression, but rather, as emerging from the relational process of generating meaning. Gergen does *not* represent an ecopsychological perspective (as defined in the concluding sections of Chapter Six); nevertheless, I find his ideas relevant to my exploration of how we might develop an understanding of self (and of our place in the world) which is transpersonal, relational and, significantly, life-affirming for the relationships in which we participate and the communities to which we belong.

In making sense of our processes of relating with one another as part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, I draw on Gergen's (2003) recognition of the potential of action research and participatory inquiry processes to make space for 'first order democracy'. First order democracy practices are those that 'bring people together under conditions in which they are positively disposed to each other…[and] encouraged to listen affirmatively to the voices of others' (2003:48). Gergen suggests that both *acts of affirmation* and *productive difference* are defining characteristics of virtually all first order democratic practices. The act of affirming fulfils many important purposes:

> To affirm is essentially to ratify the significance of another's
> utterance as a meaningful act…to grant worth, honour and validity to

the other's subjectivity…in affirming an utterance one also generates

the primitive bond from which further co-ordination may ensue.

(Gergen, 2003:48)

However, Gergen (2003:49) notes that affirmation is not the same as duplication, rather, productive difference must also exist, since 'the conjoint creation of meaning depends on the generation of *difference*'. Gergen (2003:49) argues that 'The meaning making process is rendered robust by virtue of distinctive voices. [Participatory research] practices excel in their setting the stage for the expression of difference'. This resonates with Stephen Kemmis' (2001:100) suggestion that, in action research practice, communicative spaces are 'constituted as issues or problems are opened up for discussion, and when participants experience their interaction as fostering the democratic expression of divergent views'.

I suggest that we may not have given as much attention to the possibility for productive difference and the expression of divergent views as we did to acts of affirmation. Evidently there is a balance to be struck between these, for as Gergen (2003:49) suggests, first order democracy practices seek to 'generate a shared vocabulary (an interpretive stance) and most particularly a vocabulary that establishes a common set of values or goals', and that, 'although differences among people are required, ultimately these must represent variations around what might be called a "common cause"'. My sense is that the difficulties we apparently experienced in establishing a *concrete, detailed* and *well-defined* set of values or goals were partly underpinned by our inability and/or unwillingness to engage with productive differences in critical and inquiring ways. Arguably, in seeking to affirm others' contributions and to advance possibilities for working together, our wish to be inclusive of multiple perspectives did not take the form of seeking to understand, analyse and reflect on what these differences might mean. So for example, we did not ask questions as to what the underlying values and assumptions in different conceptualisations of sustainability might mean.

8.4.2 *From anxiety to method*

It is possible to further understand our tendency to collapse difference by drawing on George Devereux's (1967) perspectives on anxiety in the behavioural sciences. Devereux trained both as an anthropologist and a psychoanalyst, and was

responsible for coining the use of the term 'countertransference' in relation to research in the behavioural sciences. Originally used in psychotherapy to describe the therapist's unconscious reactions to the patient as a person (Rowan, 1981), countertransference in social research refers to the potential for 'research situations to stir up anxieties and other feelings at various levels within the researcher, some of which may have much more to do with the researcher's own problems than with anything going on out there in the world' (Rowan, 1981:77). Devereux (1967:xvii) proposes that in a degenerative attempt to ward off the anxieties aroused by behavioural science data, social researchers may employ a 'countertransference inspired pseudo-methodology', a manoeuvre which he describes as 'responsible for nearly all the defects of behavioural science'.

Devereux argues that rather than ignore or downplay anxieties aroused by social science, the researcher would do well to develop qualities of self-awareness and self-reflexiveness which allow him/her to consciously understand the defense reactions which are mobilised by engagement with the data, and to attend to the manner in which he/she proceeds to interpret and/or distort the material. One such manner of distortion may be that of 'an anxious clinging to "hard" facts and a total refusal to interpret facts in any but the most "obvious" way…that is, in the way which one particular scholar believes to be "sound", simply because he can tolerate that particular interpretation, while considering all other (psychologically "intolerable") interpretations unscholarly and erratic' (1967:46). A further way in which such distortions might occur is illustrated by Devereux's example of two-stage theory-building (as described by Rowan, 1981):

> The first stage consists in the formulation of a theory which accounts adequately for the *less* anxiety-arousing portion of the facts. This segmental theory then usually serves to discourage inquiry into the other – *more* anxiety-arousing – portion of the facts. At the second stage this segmental theory is systematically elaborated, in order to create the illusion that it is complete, thereby further discouraging attempts to face the disturbing aspects of the facts which one professes to have explained. (Rowan, 1981:78)

Thus, the developmental challenge Devereux poses for the researcher (that of acknowledging his/her own subjectivity and the anxieties which he/she may feel, and that of creatively engaging with these as fundamental data, 'not to be evaded,

but to be exploited at the utmost' [1967:xvii]) could be understood to sit comfortably next to Mathews' (2003:113) critique of the repressive and manipulative strategies of the *autoic self*, 'the self dedicated to its own protection via strategies of repression and control'. We might also interpret Devereux's argument as complementary to the perspectives articulated by such thinkers as Spinoza, Naess, Macy, Fisher and Roszack, all of whom would appear to condemn the suppressive, defensive and self-limiting strategies employed by individuals in an effort to evade the experience of anxiety and side-step challenging questions regarding their role and place in the world. Macy, for example, argues that letting go of the perceived need to resolve distress and despair may make space for the proper experiencing and processing of such feelings, which are the healthy and natural responses to the planetary situation:

> Despair is tenaciously resisted because it represents a loss of control, an admission of powerlessness. Our culture dodges it by demanding instant solutions when problems are raised. My political science colleagues in France ridiculed this, I recall, as an endemic trait of the American personality. "You people prescribe before you finish the diagnosis," they would say. "Let the difficulties reveal themselves first before rushing for a ready-made solution or else you will not understand them." To do this would require that one view a stressful situation without the psychic security of knowing if and how it can be solved – in other words, a readiness to suffer a little. (Macy, 1991b:18-19)

It might be possible to interpret some of my/our patterns of behaviour within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative as fulfilling the role of what Devereux refers to as an *ataractic* (or an anxiety-numbing practice). In the following paragraphs, I consider some of the ways in which we might be understood to have engaged in such practices.

In discussion, we seemed to fairly *speedily* reach pronouncements and/or conclusions which allowed us to define the visions and guidelines leading our work (for example, what we understood by sustainability or what might form part of a Sustainable Farmshire) in ways which would *encompass* the various view-points and suggestions which had been put on the table. Again, I am not suggesting that seeking to be inclusive and pluralistic is problematic; rather I wonder at the relative

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haste with which we seemed to come to such conclusions, often without having given critical attention to whether and/or how different perspectives might relate and/or compare to one another, the different assumptions upon which they might be based, and so on. Such a practice may be understood as anxiety-reducing in a variety of ways.

- Firstly, it could be understood as a form of conflict-avoidance. Our intention in co-founding this initiative was to find ways of working in collaboration with one another, for what we understood as the common good. We might have equated working collaboratively with the affirmation of others' perspectives and the reaching of consensus. This claim might be further supported by the fact that when we eventually experienced opposition and an adversarial challenge to our position, we seemed unable to deal with this conflict in ways which would allow us to proceed with our collaboration and our plans.

- Secondly, it might be that we fell back on blanket understandings of sustainability because we experienced the process of seeking to *articulate* and *particularise* our visions, goals and understandings as anxiety-provoking, and that this was due to the ungraspability and complexity of ecological challenges. I explore this point in further detail later in this chapter.

8.4.3 Anxiety in my own research practice

Of course, as the only full-time researcher in the group (and as the author of the interpretation presented in this thesis) one may also consider the extent to which *I*, as an individual, have engaged in the ataractic practices of the kind problematised by Devereux. Recall that Devereux does *not* express disapproval of the experience of anxiety, nor of the natural wish to appease such feelings; indeed, he proposes that 'every thought-system – including, needless to say, my own – originates in the unconscious, as a defense against anxiety and disorientation' (1967:19). His argument is that it may well be appropriate for the researcher to apply methodology in ways which are capable of containing and/or transforming his/her anxiety as long as such a strategy is not *primarily* and only *unconsciously* designed to be

ataractic: 'What matters, therefore, is not whether one *uses* methodology *also* as an anxiety-reducing device, but whether one does so *knowingly*, in a sublimatory manner, or unconsciously in a defensive manner *only*' (1967:97). (In psychoanalytical thought, sublimatory practices are those through which psychic energy is channelled away from negative outlets towards more positive or socially useful/acceptable outlets, and is generally considered to be the most productive of the defence mechanisms, which also include repression, displacement, denial, intellectualisation and projection). Devereux continues:

> It is legitimate for the scientist dealing with anxiety-arousing material to cast about for means capable of reducing his anxiety to the point where he can perform his work effectively and it so happens that the most effective and most durable anxiety reducing device is good methodology. It does not empty reality of is anxiety reducing content, but 'domesticates' it, by proving that it, too, can be understood and processed by the conscious ego. Moreover, it reduces anxiety itself, through insight, to a scientifically useful datum…Understood anxiety is a source of psychological serenity and creativeness, and therefore of good science as well. (Devereux, 1967:97)

I acknowledge that throughout my PhD inquiry I have often found myself experiencing much anxiety. Hence, my interest in the concept and practice of repose is directly relevant to my own experience as well as my interpretation of others' experience as they attempt to engage with ecological challenges. In my collaboration with the Sustainable Farmshire initiative and with the MSc group in particular, I regularly experienced anxiety regarding my role and place within the group(s) and in relationship with other facilitators; around the expectations and intentions by which I felt bound; around my own grounding and sense-making in relation to the challenges and tensions I was identifying; and around my own capability to deliver on what I felt I was offering (albeit sometimes loosely and somewhat unclearly) to each inquiry space. For example, in relation to the MSc group, I felt constrained and nearly unable to articulate a concrete offering to the group regarding how we might together engage in inquiry (arguably in much the same way that we, as a Sustainable Farmshire group, experienced difficulties in clearly articulating and following through on concrete plans of action).

I believe that I progressively became better able to recognise and attend to my anxiety, and to see this as a valid experience from which I could learn. (In my collaboration with the MSc group, for example, I sought to experiment with various forms of action and non-action, such as making various tentative offerings, including facilitating some short discussions and giving brief presentations around my inquiry/research practice to the group, and I sought to carefully attend to my experience of doing so). Having given much time and space to reflecting on my participation in these initiatives I can make sense of my experience in the following way: As I engaged with each inquiry space, I began to consciously hold questions regarding my own sense of agency, power, purpose and intentionality, and as I delved deeper into such questions, I felt increasingly overwhelmed by the complex and conflicting pressures I experienced - much in the way that participants in the Ecological Thinking programme seemed to experience such tension.

In hindsight, I wonder whether such questions—regarding my own grounding, purposes and capabilities in engaging with this work—resulted in my feeling more cautious and diffident, and increasingly hesitant to assert that I might be able to offer something of value to the group space. For how might I, struggling as I sometimes did (and sometimes continue to do) with questions around the very worth and significance of engaging with these challenges, so entrenched, complex and far-reaching do they appear to be, take responsibility for facilitating what might quite possibly be a challenging, demanding and distressing inquiry process around our place and role in all of this?

In the question I have just formed, I see that there is evidence of a self less comfortable with conflict, and somewhat preoccupied with taking responsibility *for* others, and for helping them to *arrive at* answers and solutions. Faced with an understanding that this was not only impossible in the face of the challenges we were considering, but also that the very desire for a more straight-forward, less messy process was problematic, I can make sense of why, in each of these fields of practice, I would be hesitant to propose anything at all. Indeed, I believe that in the light of what I have discussed so far in this thesis, it is *through the process* of seeking to develop repose in myself, and of grounding my own sense of self within an appropriate sense of humility *and* an appropriate understanding of my own agency and potential contribution to the world, that I am *better able to open myself* to the possibility of engaging in such challenging processes with others. Linking this back to Devereux's argument, I suggest that learning to work with my own

sense of anxiety and (in)capacity has formed a core aspect of my PhD inquiry, and that doing so has allowed me to develop a better understanding of how I might appropriately position myself and act as an action researcher and as an aspiring change agent in relation to sustainability issues.

Of course, I have to consider the possibility that the interpretation I present in this thesis (including my ideas around the concept and practice of repose) might actually be rooted in (as of yet) unconscious, unacknowledged attempts to alleviate the anxiety I continue to experience as I seek to make sense of the data, and/or to cover up other, more anxiety-arousing aspects of my experience (in a manner similar to that of the two-stage theory-building model which Devereux proposes may be employed as an ataractic device). This is a possibility. I am aware that the argument that I develop in this thesis (around the need for repose and the value of acting from a position of repose) could be understood as an attempt to construct ways of thinking about my work which acknowledge the generative potential of what I/we learned in various fields of practice (rather than focus on the less-generative potential of some of the processes in which we engaged). Acknowledging that this is a possibility means that I also need to consider ways in which I might develop my capacity to *not* fall back on such primarily ataractic practices. For example, Devereux proposes two main ways for overcoming the problems of countertransference in social research. These could broadly be described (following Rowan, 1981) as *self-awareness* and *real friendship*. Rowan explains that for Devereux self-awareness comes mostly (although not solely) from being psychoanalysed. Indeed, Devereux argues that:

> …the behavioral scientist must be helped to realize that his data arouse quite as much anxiety as clinical facts do, and that he has to *face* his anxiety, so as to resist the temptation to scotomatize parts of his material. A personal analysis usually helps one to do so, although a level-headed scholar, who is willing to empathize with people and can tolerate anxiety, is often able to handle this problem quite as well as an analyzed field-worker… (Devereux, 1967:99)

I would argue that the development of such self-awareness might also be facilitated through action inquiry or first-person inquiry practices, and as Rowan (1981:78) suggests, by 'having one's own therapist, supervisor or review group, to whom one can talk about one's countertransference reactions in research'. I feel that I have

been able to develop greater awareness of the ways in which I might be engaging in anxiety-numbing and avoidance practices through the challenges posed by Peter, my PhD supervisor. For example, in response to an early draft of one of the chapters for this thesis (in which I attempted to develop my arguments around the need for repose), he made the following comment:

> There is something that disturbs me about all this: 'other alternatives' expressed only in this language of repose, sounds like it *could* be understood in terms of Randall and Southgate's destructive relaxing…Like you don't just learn from your experience and go back and do it better, attending to power and to participation and negotiation and the like, you have to go to a new grand theory of panpsychism to say something like 'in a better world' (when the Messiah comes) we will work together in a wonderful way because we are in repose! I am not knocking the idea of repose, but I do want to challenge what seems a potential one-sidedness in the argument. A parsimonious argument would be that you as a group cocked it up, as we all do. I think you need to deal with this, as an action researcher, in its own terms (as well as deal with these other ideas). Otherwise the whole thing is ungrounded. (Personal communication, April 2005)

I feel that Peter's above comment and related feedback
- prompted me to recognise the ways in which I might (un)consciously and (un)knowingly be ignoring particular aspects of my experience which were also anxiety-provoking, and
- specifically challenged me to reflect on and deal with these experiences so as to develop a more mature, critical and well-grounded interpretation of what emerged through my participation in various fields of practice.

Over the last year, as I have reflected on my earlier writing and put together this final version of the thesis, I have worked hard at conceptualising repose in ways which emphasise the potential it holds for *activeness* rather than *passivity*, while acknowledging the challenges which a commitment towards activeness presents for me, as well as my tendency to embrace passivity as a form of anxiety-avoidance. I have also sought to acknowledge the limitations of the inquiry practice(s) which I was able to develop in various spaces. Moreover, I have worked hard to ensure

that the argument I put forward in this thesis is not merely a soothing abstraction, or intellectualisation serving as a defence mechanism; rather, I have sought to develop a theoretical perspective capable of shedding light on my lived experience and, significantly, of informing the development of my practice so that in future I am better able to deal with the kinds of tensions and anxieties I encountered here. To the extent that I have been able to do this, I hope that the line of reasoning I present in this thesis might be understood as generative, valuable and appropriately sublimatory, in a manner similar to that described by Devereux:

> As a rule, the behavioral scientist feels impelled to develop professional stances and procedures capable of protecting him against the full impact of his anxiety-arousing data. At the same time, since a scientist is not only a vulnerable human being, who automatically seeks to avoid anxiety, but also a creative individual capable of sublimation, many of the procedures which he is (unconsciously) impelled to develop in order to protect himself form anxiety *also* have genuine value for science. (Devereux, 1967:99)

More specifically, my hope is that having engaged in this inquiry, I am better able to acknowledge the fear and anxiety I feel in relation to the ecological crises now facing us, and hence better able to form appropriate responses to these, as Macy suggests we might be able to do:

> All the while, there is an unformed awareness in the background that our world could be extensively damaged at any moment. Awesome and unprecedented in the history of humanity, the awareness lurks there, with an anguish beyond naming. Until we find ways of acknowledging and integrating that level of anguished awareness, we repress it; and with that repression we are drained of the energy we need for action and clear thinking. (Macy, 1995:243)

8.4.4 Conflict avoidance and the unitive self

So far in this section I have considered some of the ways in which it is possible to make sense of our experience within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative by drawing on

- Gergen's (2003) perspectives on acts of affirmation and productive difference, and
- Devereux's (1967) work on anxiety and countertransference in social research.

While considering each of these perspectives, I suggested that the tendency to uncritically accommodate and/or collapse difference might in itself be underpinned by the desire to avoid conflict, tension and anxiety. Indeed, on reflection, I can see that I was relatively unprepared for the experience of conflict and tension as I joined and co-created this group space. In setting out, I expected that it would be possible for us to work together as a community and to reach a level of consensus as to what needed doing, and to then companionably work together to make it happen. I admit that this expectation was at best naïve, at worst presumptuous. The significant point to make, though, is that for the majority of the time that we were working together, I for one felt that we were 'on the same team', that our hopes and intentions were by and large aligned, or if they appeared somewhat different, that they could nevertheless be accommodated alongside one another. Hence, I can see that I contributed to the implicit sense that collaboration was broadly characterised by goodwill, consensus and comradeship, and that this was the ideal towards which we needed to be working.

I can further make sense of my anxiety around conflict by drawing on panpsychist philosopher Freya Mathews' (2003) notion of the *unitive* self. In opposition to the *autoic* self (the modern, defensive-aggressive self dedicated to its own preservation via strategies of repression of self, instrumentalisation of world and manipulation of others), the unitive self seeks peace, bliss, refuge even, in its identified unity with others and with the world at large. The unitive self seeks to pacify, merge, dissolve boundaries and transcend differentiation, indeed, to achieve selflessness, as a way of pre-empting and short-circuiting erotic engagement with the world, with all its possibilities not only to energise and electrify us with the 'fizz and

crackle of contact' (2003:107), but also to make us vulnerable and to expose us to the 'clash of boundaries, [the] force of collision and recoil' (2003:108).

Mathews' critique of the unitive self has some resonances with eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood's (1993) critique of what she refers to as *the death of the other* in environmental and particularly deep ecological movements. Plumwood (1993) criticises the indistinguishibility of self implied in deep ecological arguments, for example, in the notion of the extended self. Plumwood (1993) argues that leading deep ecological thinkers, staunchly subscribing to the view that the universe is a seamless whole, proceed immediately to conclusions of sameness and merged boundaries, which ultimately deny differentiation and lead to the death of the other. (Interestingly, Plumwood's argument could be understood to concur with deep ecologist Frederic Bender's (2003) suggestion that monism - in which all things are understood to exist in undifferentiated unity - is *not* compatible with the non-dualist metaphysics by which the 'depth' of ecological movements should be judged.) Plumwood (1993) argues that this perspective is unhelpful to the extent that it suggests that our environmental ethics should be based on our identification with others, and on their sameness and their likeness to us:

> Respect for others involves acknowledging their distinctness and difference, and not trying to reduce or assimilate them...We need to acknowledge difference as well as continuity to overcome dualism and to establish non-instrumentalising relationships with nature, where both connection and otherness are the basis of interaction. The failure to affirm difference is characteristic of the colonizing self which denies the other through the attempt to incorporate it into the empire of the self, and which is unable to experience sameness without erasing difference. (Plumwood, 1993:174)

For me, Mathews' and Plumwood's critiques raise a number of questions relevant to my practice of action research and to my understanding of work for ecological justice. For if what we strive towards is collaboration with others, towards welcoming others to join us in working for a vision of sustainability, what becomes of our intentions when we come across the other as differing, disagreeing, unwilling to merge boundaries with us? What happens (as in the Sustainable Farmshire experience) when we realise that those that we identified and embraced as 'allies' in our 'quest' (and here I am drawing on the kind of language we used in

our discussions) had actually not acquiesced to play the role we were ascribing onto them? I return to these questions in Chapter Nine, when I reflect on my collaboration with the Luhimba Project.

8.5   On abstractiveness and ungraspability in the ecological movement

In this section, I propose that the difficulties we experienced in articulating a clear and coherent vision for our work is not unique to the Sustainable Farmshire group, but that developing, particularising and owning a vision or understanding of sustainability is generally experienced as a difficult thing to do. My sense is that, generally, we often fall back on official definitions of sustainability (including, for example, 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' or 'sustainable development as development which takes into account economic, social and environmental concerns'). I suggest that the complex and systemic nature of the ecological crisis might make it very difficult to grasp what sustainability means *in practice*, and how it might be made a reality. Indeed, Joanna Macy suggests that the imperceptibility of the ecological challenges facing us often leads to disbelief and denial:

> Although much of my life is taken up with the environmental
> movement, I often find it difficult to grasp the reality of the dangers
> facing us. The toxins in the air, food, and water are hard to taste or
> smell. The spreading acreage of clear-cuts and landfills are mostly
> screened from public view. The depletion of the great Ogallala
> Aquifer and the destruction of the protective ozone layer are matters
> of concern, but are maddeningly abstract…And the more perceptible
> changes, like the smog layer over my city or the oil globs on the
> beach, accrue so gradually they seem to become a normal part of life.
> Although ubiquitous, these changes are subtle, making it hard to
> believe the gravity and immediacy of the crisis we are
> in…Conditions worsen in many dimensions simultaneously…
> Although each issue is critical in its own right, it is their interplay
> that most threatens our biosphere, for they compound each other

systemically. However, it is precisely these systemic interactions
that are hard to see, especially for a culture untutored in the
perception of relationships. (Macy, 1995:242-243)

Although I do not feel that we necessarily experienced disbelief or denial, I suggest that we experienced difficulties in making sense of ecological challenges in ways which appreciated both its systemic and its local nature, as well as its subtlety and its enormity. My sense is that we had not created the kinds of spaces and processes whereby we could stay with the complexity and intricacies we encountered when we spoke about the issues in any depth or detail. I suspect that it is easier to rely on official definitions and more general understandings of sustainability partly *because* they tend to be more vague, amorphous and indefinite, and that trying to particularise and flesh out understandings that are meaningful and appropriate to our contexts demands more effort and energy, as well as the ability to actively engage with complexity and hold the tensions which materialise.

This tendency towards idealisation (or towards retreat from the detailed complexities and particulars of the issues) may present a significant challenge to people seeking to act for sustainability, especially as they attempt to make sense of their roles as self-appointed change agents. Within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, I believe that we explicitly and implicitly understood ourselves as seeking to occupy the role of change agents. In the review meeting which took place in June 2003, we talked about our understanding of change and change agency in the following way:

> The important point here is that we can choose to take on the role of
> visionary change agents, while at the same time recognising that this
> will necessarily entail some time and effort and that larger-scale
> change is not something that happens overnight. Framing our role
> and our sense of purpose in this way may be a good starting point.
> (Extract from notes of meeting, June 2003)

As I have stated already, I believe that at the time of the review meeting there was a significant degree of dissatisfaction felt with the ways in which the initiative had unfolded so far. The above extract suggests that we had begun to develop an awareness of the difficulties inherent when seeking to act for change. Eight

months after the initiative had been founded, there seemed to be a general sense that we were not making much progress in making Farmshire more sustainable, as well as a felt anxiety regarding how we might sustain our engagement with this project, given our fairly modest actions and interventions so far. Thus, our discussions around significant change not happening overnight were partly, I believe, about reassuring ourselves that such change was possible, in the long- if not short-term. At various points throughout the first eight months of the initiative, we had considered different, mostly action-oriented strategies for how this initiative may evolve. The following extract from the minutes of the review meeting demonstrates the kinds of suggestions and strategies we were contemplating at that moment in time:

> It was suggested that if we wish to deliver long term social change (change in attitudes and in the way people live their lives), and in order to achieve that critical mass where it becomes the norm, it is important to identify achievable, realistic, time-based smart targets and projects, which work and which can be rolled out professionally and incrementally, and then gradually built up from there. (Extract from notes of meeting, June 2003)

The above was presented as a possible strategy for taking the initiative into the future, and seemed to be accepted as such. At the time, I found myself torn between a number of different tensions. On the one hand, I felt considerable discomfort with the straight-forward purposive-ness that was being evidenced and championed in the above discussion. At the same time, though, I was aware that there might be a call for purposive-ness of this kind, that there was a sense in which it was important to maintain momentum and enthusiasm for this initiative, and that results or outcomes of some kind would be necessary in order to prove to ourselves and to others that engaging in this kind of work was worthwhile. If anything, the suggestion to move forward by pursuing action-oriented projects might succeed in particularising our own broad and somewhat hazy visions of what might be possible. The following extract, which also summarises part of that same discussion, suggests that we experienced some tension between seeking to hold an inspiring, over-arching vision of the kind of change we were after *and* actually articulating what our values, purposes and visions were in the first place:

These projects could in themselves be framed as part of a larger social movement, or an overarching vision of sustainable living which ties these different things together. At the same time, we wondered whether this would require the statement of a very clear, definable purpose. What we are trying to do is to turn community focus into becoming sustainable…but does this need defining? It is possible that the word 'sustainability' means all things to all people?

… Although we do not have a fixed definition of what sustainability is, it may be that people do have a vision of what a fairer, more sustainable and more just world would look like, and of what a community could do to make this happen. We also agreed that we cannot get to this by just talking about it, and that we may need to focus on this one step at a time, at a local, practical and concrete level. (Extract from notes of meeting, June 2003)

The line of reasoning recounted above could be understood as evidence of an emerging awareness that there appear to be no clear, certain or predetermined ways to make sustainability happen. The conclusion at which we arrive (regarding the need to bring our engagement back to the local, practical and concrete level) indicates also that what we now hoped to work towards was a more particular vision of sustainability for the parish. Nevertheless, with hindsight, I wonder whether it might have been possible to *further* particularise and/or localise our efforts and attention, so that rather than begin from the assumption that somehow, quite enigmatically, *we* could 'deliver…changes in attitudes and in the way people live their lives', we could have taken the opportunity to ask less speculative, more meaningful questions regarding the choices and opportunities for engagement which lay before *us*, in this moment (rather than for the nameless others we are trying to change, in some unspecified future time). Others in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative had also begun to ask these kinds of questions, and during the final reflection phase, a number of people suggested that it might have been more appropriate to start from a focus on *ourselves* and on how we might act for sustainability, as a small group of concerned individuals, rather than aspiring to bring about changes in patterns of behaviour within the wider Farmshire community.

The focus on influencing the *wider public* and on shifting patterns in *wider systems* could be understood as a characteristic of the environmental movement in many of its forms, and arguably rightly so, seeing that the issues are indeed so pervasive and systemic. At the same time, though, I believe that subscribing to such large-scale objectives (either explicitly or implicitly) gives rise to significant challenges for people seeking to act for change in this field. For if we value the process of engaging with these questions insofar as it allows us to bring about significant, far-reaching social change, then how do we deal with the disillusionment which arises when we realise that such change is not easily forthcoming? How might we come to grasp and articulate what our own grounding and contribution might be, if the value of our interventions tends to be measured against somewhat hazy, grand visions of change? And moreover, how do we sustain our engagement with such challenges when it appears that we are not having the effects for which we were hoping? How do we make sense of the concepts of success and failure, and of the standards and outcomes through which we judge the usefulness and worth of our lives and work?

8.5.1 *Abstractiveness and affirming the given*

It is possible to explore some of these questions by drawing on Mathews' (2005) critique of what she considers to be modernist abstractiveness. The tendency towards abstractiveness, arguably characteristic of the modern individual and society, could be defined as 'a matter of finding one's starting point for a course of action in the realm of the abstractly conceived or imagined rather than finding it within the reference frame of the actual' (Mathews, 2005:27). From such a perspective, that which is esteemed and prized as agency is the actor's intentional intervention in a course of events *with the very aim of superimposing on it a set of abstractly conceived ends* of their own. This is a distinctly different attitude to that of *affirming the given*, which Mathews suggests is called for in a panpsychist universe. Affirming the given requires that we 'acknowledge the basic rightness of things as they are, independently of our interventions, and allow them to unfold unimpeded' (2005:25). Instead, Mathews suggests, we (especially in Western cultures) have come to judge our worth, and measure the success of our life's endeavours, in accordance to the extent to which we are able to make the world around us comply to our desired image and to get to where we want to be. What

makes this attitude problematic and potentially dangerous, suggests Mathews, is the likelihood that the intentions and visions which shape our actions and our being in the world originate not from *within* that world, within the ground of our actual experience, but rather tend to be de-contextualised, arbitrary and manipulative; working not *with* the grain of reality but rather seeking to transform it, make it anew.

On this reading, striving to *save the world*, to *make things better* even, is problematic to the extent that such framings might be understood as 'rationalization(s) for continually replacing one regime with another' (Mathews, 2005:37). Mathews suggests that the concepts of power and agency to which we subscribe in our wish to 'save the world' are rooted in the same ethos of domination and control which arguably lies at the core of the ecological crisis. In this sense, our alleged wish to change the world is paradoxical, since such a desire serves to further embed us in an ethos of dominion and supremacy, whereby our ability to change the world, and the appropriate-ness of our seeking to do so, is taken for granted. Mathews (2005) argues that a tendency towards abstractiveness might serve to further distance us from engagement with the world *as it is*, and to inhibit our ability to curiously and reverentially *encounter* the world.

Mathews suggests that a wish to *encounter* the world, in its irreducible and unknowable complexity and mystery, might go hand-in-hand with an attitude of *letting-be*. An ethos of letting-be rebuffs modernity's 'definitive ambition…to remake the world' (2005:37) and instead trusts in the conativity of matter and in its own will to maintain and increase itself, so that, left to themselves, things will by and large unfold in ways which ensure their own actualisation, and those of the greater systems to which they belong. Mathews does not suggest that things should not change and should, as if by magic, stay always the same. Rather, the understanding of change which she envisages as being healthy and congruent with an attitude of encounter and of letting-be is one which '[carries] us gently and smoothly into the future, respecting the cycles of creation, decay, and regeneration' (2005:34). Such change seeks not to 'raze the old and superimpose on the space that is left something unrelated to what preceded it', but rather '*[grows] from within the shell of the given*' (Mathews, 2005:34, my emphasis).

Those of us concerned with ecological degradation and social injustice might quite understandably wish to shift these patterns. The important question might then

become what *kind of* change are we after? Are there models of agency, power and pro-activity that do not serve and reinforce the very patterns of anthropocentric dominion which we are allegedly seeking to challenge and transform? How might I more helpfully understand my own role and positioning as someone concerned with these issues, if as Mathews (2005:37) suggests, 'environmentalism, even in its deep ecological forms…needs to extricate its legitimate concern for nature from heroic modernist assumptions about its own world-changing, world-saving role'? Mathews recognises that in posing a deep challenge to the mindset of modernity, the attitude of letting-be must also prescribe positive modes of agency. Indeed, she suggests that

> …the principle of letting-be is not, as it turns out, entirely inconsistent with certain modes of proactivity, including modes of resistance. The modes of proactivity in question are those that work with, rather than against, the grain of the given…This is a mode of agency that I have elsewhere termed *synergy*. In synergistic mode, the agent can pursue ends of her own and can even seek to transform the status quo, but not by abstracting from the given and trying to replace it, holus bolus, with an arbitrary design of her own. She does not seek to erase the given, or contradict it, but by joining her own conativity to its she elicits from it a new response, a spontaneous unfolding in a new direction. (Mathews, 2005:40)

As an example, Mathews suggests that in the context of the environmental movement a third, synergistic way exists between outright interventionism (or abstractiveness) and mere 'letting die' (which is possible if the principle of letting-be degenerates into a rationale for neglect). She refers to this as environmental *healing* which, 'in a synergistic sense, would involve not mechanistic intervention—the substitution of new parts or suites of species for old—but the reactivation of a system's own conative energies. Healing draws upon forces or powers already present within the existing state of things to restore the system in question to dynamic equilibrium' (2005:41).

Mathews' critique of modernist assumptions regarding change and agency helps me to further make sense of my experience as part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative. Perhaps understandably, given our identification with particular models of change and benchmarks of success and failure, our expectations were quite high.

We hoped to initiate a significant process of social change, engaging many others across the community, and expected that we would be able to work in partnership with other actors in order to make this kind of change happen. Not unexpectedly, we made assumptions regarding what such partnerships would look like, and how they might be enabled. I have already acknowledged that we might have usefully given greater care and attention to exploring, unpacking and understanding what it was that we meant by partnership and collaboration *in this particular instance*. Taking into account Mathews' critique of the tendency towards abstractiveness and idealisation in the environmental movement (in many of its guises), I wonder whether I might have more appropriately approached my involvement with this initiative from an attitude of affirming the given, from a more modest wish to come to know and understand the subtleties and detail of what was actually happening in Farmshire, and what was imminent in the natural unfolding of this place and of this community.

I do not suggest that this in no way formed part of our aspirations or plans. Indeed, as a group, we held considerable local knowledge, and we often spoke about making connections with other things happening locally. Nevertheless, my sense is that we were unable to *stay with* this wish to really come to know and understand in some depth and detail what was going on. Instead, my sense was that we were oscillating between different possibilities, opportunities and visions of what might happen, rather than resting and grounding ourselves in the flesh and detail of what was happening already or of what we might usefully offer *in the moment*.

I believe that this apparent restlessness may in part be linked to the urgency which is arguably experienced when seeking to respond to the ecological crisis. As I participated in the initiative, I became quite conscious of time pressures and time-scales, and I (along with others I believe) came to judge passing time as an indicator of where we should be at. Given this sense of urgency, it does not seem astoundingly surprising to me that we did not take *the time* to really explore and get to grips with what such concepts as sustainability, partnership, dialogue and so on would look like. After all, these are arguably complex, multifaceted concepts, and their practice even more uncharted, so that an exploration of 'what we mean by these and how we live these out in the world' may have called for the kind of time and effort which we may have felt unable to afford.

8.6   On restlessness and the attainment of immediate paradise

There are strong links between the urgency and restlessness I experienced here, and my subsequent reading of Thomas Berry's critique of the journey archetype, to which I now turn. Berry reflects on the long-standing and pervasive narrative of the spiritual journey, common to so many cultures and historical eras, and suggests that without it 'we cannot find meaning in our present venture through time, nor can we find the support needed for sustaining the sorrows and anxieties of life' (Berry, *Historical Spirituality [HS]*:14)[5]. In this ancient archetype, Berry proposes, lies a means through which we might develop the spiritual and emotional capacities to engage with present challenges. As such, Berry's analysis is immediately relevant to the question I have come to consider as crucial through my inquiry, that of how we might develop repose in ourselves, so that we are able to healthily sustain our engagement with ecological challenges. The primary elements of the archetypal journey, Berry suggests, are 'the awakening to the present as a strange and unsatisfactory setting for human existence, the need for seeking a new form of life, battles to overcome destructive forces at work, and, finally, the achievement of liberation, attaining the true self, and arrival at a sacred paradise' (Berry, *HS*:14). Thus might we describe and make sense of our motivations and aspirations as we set out on the initiative which we envisioned could lead us to a Sustainable Farmshire.

One key aspect of the journey narrative is that of the Hero, the 'higher human personality' (Berry, *HS*:16-17), which Berry identifies as one-and-the-same with the Cosmic Person, the Sage, the Cosmic Christ, the 'hero of a thousand faces' (as expressed by Joseph Campbell, 1904-1987). I would suggest that, in embarking on this process that was the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, the core of us involved in setting up this initiative saw ourselves as occupying a central, agentic role. Though not overtly heroic, we did at times explicitly refer to ourselves as catalysts for change and visionaries.

Berry suggests that, alongside the heroic central figure(s), a further key aspect of the journey narrative is that of the death-rebirth symbol, increasingly experienced

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[5] Quoted with permission of author Thomas Berry from an essay pending publication. Date unknown.

in the form of periodic social-historical convulsions rather than in the seasonal and cyclical sequences of nature. This, Berry argues, is particularly so since the advent of the Biblical experience, where the Easter ritual, for example, celebrates the destruction of the world and its renewal at the time of Noah, and where the Day of the Lord heralds a 'total earthly renewal', as in the Descent of the Heavenly Jerusalem:

> These millennial symbols of transformation and final healing of the human condition have given to Western societies our exceptional historical drive. They have been particularly powerful during periods of human suffering on an extreme scale…[However] this expectation has vastly increased our sensitivity to our human condition, made us irreconcilable with ourselves and more than ever desirous of total transformation both of ourselves and of our environment. Evolutionary processes themselves have become intolerable. There must be immediate paradise. (Berry, *HS*:22-23)

Insofar as the journey narrative has, over millennia, provided human beings with a way of making sense of the spiritual transformative process humanity in general feels moved to undertake, it is a useful symbol from which to draw strength and courage. But to the extent that the narrative of the journey has, particularly since Biblical times, been associated with the attainment of *final healing* and *immediate paradise*, it may be understood as incommensurable with the complexity of the ecological and social challenges now facing us, and thus, an inappropriate source of wisdom. The drive to bring about change, to transform the less-than-ideal circumstances in which we find ourselves, might therefore be understood as problematic, founded as it often appears to be on conceptions of change and agency which emphasise the desirability of quick-fixes and instant gratification:

> Indeed the clash between the gradual and the immediate, the evolutionary and the revolutionary is the abiding tension in Western historical society. It is the cruel ambiguity in the prophetic enunciation of the Day of the Lord. The increasing tempo of history has led to increased sensitivity to the time span to be endured before the day of bliss arrives. The sense of urgency, in turn, has led to repeated triumphs of revolutionary moments over more evolutionary methods…In relation to the total change desired, all minor

improvements are inadequate. There is no time. Centuries of slow improvement would never lead to the alleviation sought…Nor does it seem that such an evolutionary process fulfils the requirement of the hero myth, resting as it does on the engagement of demonic forces in decisive combat leading to the supreme treasure, the beautiful maiden, the authentic self, the divine presence. (Berry, *HS*:23-24)

The tension between restlessness and close attentiveness is one with which I have grappled throughout my attempts to engage with the ecological crisis. For instance, both in my collaboration with the Sustainable Farmshire initiative and with the MSc group, I experienced a tension between urgently feeling the need to *do* something, to act in ways which were quite concretely and specifically *dealing with the problem*, and at the same time, becoming increasingly conscious that such a sense of intentionality might, in itself, be problematic, testimony of more of the same kind of thinking. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, after the decision had been made to bring the Sustainable Farmshire initiative to a close, I experienced time as taking on a different quality, as if, no longer anxious to get somewhere, we could afford to take some time and space to think things through. Others also seemed to have struggled with the apparent sense of urgency we felt, as the following quote from the final reflection phase shows:

> '…and maybe we needed a much better understanding of the long-term nature of this process, I mean, we met once a month, and I'm not sure that was helpful. We could have met less frequently, maybe once every four months, and actually made more effort in making these "weak connections" in between, you know, touching base with people to keep things going; things you can't measure, but I still think these are important moves. Meeting every month kind of made it feel as if we needed to achieve results all the time, and I don't think that was helpful, not really.' (RF, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

Developing a sense of repose is, I believe, one way in which we might seek to assuage and quieten our tendency towards restlessness. Earlier in this thesis, I briefly suggested that our ability to develop repose or peace of mind may rest on understanding this as a practice of personal development and spiritual unfolding. Thus I concur with Berry's suggestion that the journey archetype may be useful in

giving meaning in our present venture through time, and in giving us the support we need to sustain the sorrows and anxieties of life. I also concur with his critique of the emphasis increasingly placed on revolutionary forces and immediate bliss. Instead, I adhere to notions of spiritual and personal development which emphasise this as an ongoing, deepening process, without an end-point. Indeed, I wish to be clear that I do not see repose as an end-point or even as ideal state. What I am suggesting is that we may find repose, *or a resting ground from which to particularise our offerings/intentions and then move into action*, in the process of engaging with such challenges, and in committing to this as an ongoing spiritual journey and as a practice of personal development. I join integral ecologist Darcy Riddel in suggesting that understanding our work in this way may enable us to engage with ecological challenges in sustained, joyful and life-affirming ways:

> When activists can experience the challenges of their work as part of a path of personal, spiritual unfolding, the work takes on added meaning and depth. Cultivating this ongoing transformation is an antidote to the subtle superiority, alienation and despair that often accompany activism. (Riddell, 2005:75)

In the chapter that follows, I consider how it is that we might hold our engagement with this work moment to moment, and I seek to describe how my own experience of moments of grace contributes to my developing sense of repose, and to my practice in relation to ecological challenges.

8.7   On holding tension and complexity

In Chapter Six, I proposed that developing repose in oneself may be understood as concurrent with increased self-reflection and self-awareness, and with increased consciousness of our own positioning and grounding, and of the effects of our own actions. The development of such an adequate understanding depends, I believe, on our ability and willingness to hold tensions and questions around our place and experience in the world. As I have mentioned already, my interpretation of the manner in which the Sustainable Farmshire initiative eventually ended suggests that I (within my own inquiry practice) and we (as a group seeking to act for social change) were unable to hold the tensions, difficulties and conflicts which emerged through the process of engagement. In particular, we seemed unable to deal with

the tension and complexity which became evident when we experienced an adversarial response to one of our proposals. This claim follows on from the argument I presented earlier in this chapter, where I suggested that through our interactions we may have sought to collapse rather than encourage productive difference. My sense is that, once we were confronted with difference, in a fairly definite and unambiguous way, we experienced this as a stumbling block or as a barrier to engagement with this work. I therefore wish to consider how we might develop the capacity to hold tension and complexity as a significant part of the inquiry process (much in the same way that Devereux considers how one might carry out social research in ways that have the potential to be simultaneously sublimatory and creative).

For me, there is an important link here with the psycho-developmental challenge identified by Mathews (2003:11), that of becoming able 'to face up to the possibilities of suffering in our own lives in ways that do not compromise our openness to encounter'. Of course, this challenge is closely related to those challenges expressed by action research thought and practice, especially as articulated by Torbert (2001) in relation to action inquiry and Marshall (1999, 2001) in relation to self-reflective inquiry practices or to living life as inquiry. For example, Torbert (2001) emphasises the vulnerability of the inquirer, and suggests that

> …one must be willing to be vulnerable to self-transformation if one
> wishes to encourage ongoing, episodic transformation in others and
> in whole structures of activity (Rooke and Torbert, 1998). Whereas
> traditional forms of power (e.g. coercion, diplomacy, logistics,
> charisma) can be exercised unilaterally, transformational power can
> only be successfully exercised under conditions of mutual
> vulnerability. (Torbert, 2001:256)

Along similar lines, Marshall (2001:435) draws on Bakan's (1966) notions of agency and communion, and suggests that these are 'potentially complementary coping strategies for dealing with the uncertainties and anxieties of being alive'. She continues:

> Agency is an expression of independence through self-protection,
> self-assertion and control of the environment. Communion is the

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sense of being 'at one' with other organisms or the context, its basis

is integration, interdependence, receptivity. (Marshall, 2001:435)

Marshall's claim that she seeks to combine both *directed / active* and *open / receptive* approaches in her inquiry practice, and her acknowledgement that at times she experiences significant tensions around this combination, contributes to my understanding of the challenges I experienced in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, particularly revolving around my emerging understanding of what valid forms of authority, agency, directedness, collaboration and participation might look like, and how they may complement each other. It is apparent to me that the tensions I experienced around these gave rise to a significant degree of anxiety within me.

Heron and Reason (2001:179) suggest that a key inquiry skill is that of emotional competence, 'including the ability to manage effectively anxiety stirred up by the inquiry process'. It seems to me that developing the emotional competence to effectively hold and make sense of the experience of anxiety, uncertainty and vulnerability, and the many other tensions that have arisen for me as I engaged in this work, is part of what I seek to do in developing repose in myself. In Chapter Nine, my aim is to demonstrate how I seek to develop such emotional competence, both by holding the process of engagement moment to moment and through openness to moments of grace.

In the following sub-section, I wish to demonstrate how I sought to evidence emotional competence and hold these tensions through the reflective document I prepared and the reflective conversations I facilitated as we ended the Sustainable Farmshire initiative.

8.7.1 Robustness and emotional competence

It seemed evident to me that, through our participation in the initiative, we had opened ourselves to the possibility of pain and suffering, and indeed, participants spoke of feeling angry, hurt, disappointed, anxious and vulnerable as a result of some of what had emerged from this initiative. I suggest that one way to make sense of what had happened was to say that we lacked a sense of repose; that is, we

had a relatively undeveloped ability to hold tension, uncertainty and complexity, as well as a relatively undeveloped appreciation of our lived experience and sense of positive self-knowledge. On the other hand, the reflection phase which followed seemed to give us the space and distance to more critically reflect on what had happened.

Quite clearly, facing up to the difficulties we had experienced, and to the part we had played therein, would be a challenge. My wish, in shaping and containing these spaces for reflection, was to afford opportunities for both problematising *and* appreciating the various intentions and commitments that we brought to this work. With a view to facing up to the difficulties and so-called stumbling blocks we had experienced, I raised a number of questions regarding the part that we had played in bringing these about. The extract below, taken from the reflective document, illustrates how I sought to do this:

> It is possible to consider our interactions with [particular members of the community] in this light. The strong response to our use of the word 'partnership' to describe our relationship with the Parish Council could be seen as a signal encouraging us to take a more exploratory, questioning approach to what we mean when we use certain words. The learning/developmental point might be for us to unpack and check out with one another what it is that we mean by the values that we are seeking to uphold: what would 'working in partnership' with others look like, in practice? How are the choices that we make in daily interaction with others continually shaping and forming what we mean by 'participation', 'inclusiveness', 'dialogue', etc., and what then becomes possible (or not!) in these spaces and relationships?
>
> The challenge might be for us to become skilled in asking difficult questions about our own actions: How are we contributing to the adversarial response that we are experiencing?…How does this then match up with our understanding of 'collaboration', 'mutual respect', and so on? Are we able to generate an open, creative interchange of ideas and perspectives in this instance, given our history together?…And is there a feeling that we cannot rush ahead and speak about dialogue and participation in general terms if we are

> not able to make a go of it in this particular instance? (Extract from reflective document, December 2003)

A key concern for me, throughout my PhD inquiry, has been that of remaining open to the need for engaging in thought and work of this kind, despite the challenges and complexities which evidently do arise. In writing the reflective document, I was conscious that a proclamation of 'why we must keep going' might be understood as a wish on my part to smooth over the disappointment and anxiety we had experienced, to tidy up the messiness that we had encountered in trying to act for change, or in Devereux's words, to engage in ataractic practices.

And at the same time, I felt it was important for me to articulate my own emerging understanding that we need *not* retreat into feelings of apathy, inadequacy or defensiveness and that along with the seeming intractability of the ecological challenges facing us, it was possible to experience a kind of joy, nourishment and blessedness in choosing to *attend to* these challenges, and to questions regarding our appropriate place and role in the world. I therefore briefly shared, within the reflective document, my own budding understanding of the need to attend to that which sustains us in this work:

> …What is becoming apparent to me is that, in order to sustain and take care of myself through this kind of work, I need to engage in processes which help me to develop an appreciation of the contribution that I/we *can* make, however small. This is about acknowledging and valuing our own activeness, creativity, achievements and processes of living, as Arne Naess argues. It may be about realising that we may not be able to heroically 'save the world', but that we may be amongst many working along a 'long wall of change', all contributing to shift things a little bit.
>
> I would suggest that we need to be aware of what it is that sustains us through this work, and what we believe 'is in it for us'. For example, other action researchers working for change with local communities have suggested that they see their work as 'an important means to address [their] own alienation' and as a way 'to struggle to get back in touch with a sense of social interconnectedness that [they] find sadly lacking most of the time'

With time, I am coming to understand, in greater detail and grounded-ness, what it is that sustains and delights me in this work, as I show in the chapter that follows. My intention in this sub-section has been to emphasise that I see *both* the development of emotional competence (of the kind that allows us to hold our experience of anxiety and vulnerability), *and* an openness to the joy and blessedness with which we may also be presented as we engage with difficult challenges, as important qualities of a practice of repose.

8.7.2 Acting with intention into the unknowable

In further reflecting on what it might mean to hold tension and complexity and to develop emotional competence as part of an inquiry practice, it helps me to consider Patricia Shaw's (2002) complexity approach to change. Shaw's scholarship (and that of her colleagues at the Complexity and Management Centre of the University of Hertfordshire) seeks to explore organisational practice from a complexity perspective, 'in which the inevitable paradoxes and ambiguities of organisational life are not finally resolved but held in creative tension' (http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/prospectus/faculty_bs/uhbs/research/complexity-and-management-centre/complexity-and-management-centre_home.cfm, Accessed 13 March 2006). Drawing on evolutionary and systems theory, social constructionist thought and various psychological understandings of the dynamics at work in human relationships, Shaw and her colleagues emphasise the *self-organising potential* of ordinary conversation in which people reflect together on their personal and interpersonal experiences.

In some respects, Shaw's (2002) complexity approach to change could be understood to be analogous to the practice of encounter advocated by Freya Mathews (2003, 2005). In a similar vein to Mathews' (2003) critique of the modernist tendency towards abstractiveness, Shaw (2002:10) is critical of perspectives on organisational development and change which suggests that managers, consultants and facilitators should propose well-designed patterns for interaction *in advance of* interacting: 'Thus they fill the looming openness of the

future with exercises, frameworks, structured agendas, matrices and categories, as though, without them, there will not be a useful structuring of interaction'. This legacy of mainstream management and organisational development thought and practice serves, she suggests, to *distance* our attention *away from* the evolving form of our organisational experience, and our ongoing participation within it:

> Most of what managers, leaders, consultants, and facilitators are asked to do is 'to get ahead of the game', 'to be on top of the mess', 'to manage the process', 'to set boundaries', 'to delve beneath the surface to change the deep structure'. It would seem that we want to think of ourselves anywhere other than where we are, in the flow of our live engagement, sustaining and transforming the patterning that simultaneously enables and constrains our movement into the future. (Shaw, 2002:5)

Instead, Shaw suggests, what she and her colleagues at the CMC are attempting to do is to

> …develop a way of thinking which emphasizes the self-organizing patterning of communicative action in complex responsive processes of human relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2001). It is a way of thinking that invites us to stay in the movement of communicating, learning and organizing, to think from within our living participation in the evolution of forms of identity. Our blindness to the way we participate in fabricating the conversational realities of organizing is compounded by the difficulty we have in *thinking from within, in thinking as participants, in thinking in process terms*, above all, *in thinking paradoxically*. (Shaw, 2002:20)

Shaw's approach to change suggests that we might usefully participate *attentively* in conversational processes, understanding that in conversation we perpetually sustain and change the possibilities for going on together (much along the lines of Mathews' practice of encounter, although of course Mathews' panpsychist focus is on conversing with a communicative, soulful universe, whereas Shaw focuses more specifically on human networks).

Of particular significance to the present discussion is Shaw's suggestion that in living *with* and *in the midst of* the immediate paradoxes and complexities of organisational life, we must *act with intention into the unknowable*. This requires that we accept the essential uncertainty of participating in evolving events and that we attend to the creative possibilities of such participation. From this perspective, and indeed from an action research/inquiry perspective, it may be less relevant to think about what kinds of shapes and structures we may usefully have given to the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and more useful to think about how we may have encountered the evolving processes of interacting with one another with attentiveness and curiosity. Indeed, I consider that developing my inquiry practice involves reflecting on the ways I contributed to shaping the organisational forms, realities, and special arrangements (Marshall and Reason, 2006) which grounded and patterned my interactions with others in my various fields of practice.

Similarly, from the perspective that in conversation and interaction we perpetually sustain and change the possibilities for going on together, our concern with the possible tension between giving direction and making space for other community members to become involved seems to miss the point. The issue is not whether an individual or a small group might appropriately assert authority and/or set direction in what is construed as a democratic, participative context; rather, the challenge is to maintain attention to the generative and/or degenerative potential of each moment and to how we contribute to this, either by our action or inaction, by the assertiveness we demonstrate or the input we withhold. Ospina et al. (2004) make a similar point in relation to their experience with the community leaders (which I first referred to in Chapter Three). They recognise that

> …by owning our expertise, and by challenging awardees' knee-jerk
> reaction based on their assumptions about us…we could have taken
> more steps to work out issues of authority at the micro-level of
> interaction, where power manifests itself. (Ospina et al., 2004:63)

This attentiveness and presentness to the micro-level of interaction may be part of what acting with intention into the unknowable is about.

There is something about the notion of acting with intention into the unknowable which interests me. As I mentioned earlier, in contracting to be part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, I had a sense of intentionality: I felt that what I

wished to do was to engage with others in second-person inquiry around the challenges of sustainability. My sense is that the challenge for me lay in acting into the unknowable. My main anxiety in acting into the unknowable was that I might get things 'wrong', that I may alienate others or that my suggestions might be ill-received; indeed, this seems to mirror the anxieties I have already acknowledged feeling in relation to conflict, difference and disagreement. So I notice that there seems to be an interesting interplay between acting with intention (with a sense of purpose and perhaps even with objectives in mind) *and* acting with gentleness and curiosity, while tolerating the uncertainty of not knowing how our interventions will be received and/or what may unfold in response. It is apparent that this would require a degree of maturity, robustness and, I believe, the ability to be both present and actively participating in the moment while at the same time being able to *stand back from* one's own purposeful participation.

My experience of approaching the Sustainable Farmshire initiative with particular aspirations was that I very quickly felt that I had a vested interest in seeing the project succeed (which of course was wrapped up in certain understandings of success). This preoccupation with success led, I believe, to my experiencing the kinds of self-absorbed anxieties which Spinoza refers to in his critique of the human condition, including doubts regarding my own sense of self-worth and worries regarding all that I might or might not achieve. Thus, one way in which I can make sense of my experience is to say that I lacked qualities of repose in engaging with the uncertain and evolving processes which formed part thereof – again, much as the Ecological Thinking participants grappled with the uncertainty and complexity they experienced as they engaged with the course material.

A practice of repose would, I believe, involve being able to stand back from one's own expectations, intentions, hopes and fears *while at the same time* seeking to develop one's capacities for self-awareness and for effective action. This is not the same as *not* seeking to influence what goes on around one; rather, it is to do with acting with intention to (for example) establish, support and contain processes in appropriate ways, but not vesting one's own sense of self-worth, groundedness and power of acting in the outcomes of these interventions. Again, this is not equivalent to *not* caring whether our actions are effective or successful. Rather, it is about seeking to maintain one's sense of repose or peace of mind as one acts into the unknowable, and as one's hopes and aspirations are thrown into disarray and called into question. The ability to do this may rest, I suggest, on holding the

process of engagement with such challenges moment to moment, understanding this as a practice of personal development and spiritual unfolding, and on sustaining our engagement with this work through openness to moments of grace and to joyful living. I explore these practices and processes in some depth in the chapter that follows.

To summarise, in this section I have argued that the capacity to hold tension and complexity is key to the development of an effective inquiry practice and to appropriate activeness in relation to ecological challenges. I have suggested that in seeking to develop the capacity to hold tension and complexity, I may need to develop a sense of robustness, emotional competence, and the ability to act with intention into the unknowable.

8.8   Conclusions

In this chapter, I reflected on my experience of participating in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and in particular on what we might learn about the process of engaging with ecological challenges through this initiative. I drew on the concept of repose as appropriate throughout the chapter, and used it as a lens through which to make sense of these challenges and to consider how we might appropriately respond to these.

One of my aims in this chapter was to critically reflect on the kinds of qualities, both personal and relational, which may give form and substance to a practice of repose, and to demonstrate how a *practice* of repose may contribute *both* to the development of an inquiry practice and to the ways in which we understand and choose to relate to current ecological challenges. I suggest that in seeking to respond to the kinds of tensions and challenges I have described in this chapter, I might helpfully seek to enact qualities of repose, which would include:

- Establishing a grounded understanding of my particular strengths and weaknesses; of the fears and anxieties which affect me (and the manner in which these affect me); of what I may be able to offer to the world and what my developmental needs might be.

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- Establishing a satisfactory understanding of others and of world, including context and political awareness, and the appreciation of and respect for difference and the unknown in others.

- Acknowledging the creative tension (and the possibilities for degenerative conflict) to which this may give rise and maintaining my composure as I position myself in relation to the world, and of course, to others working in this field.

- Attending to and seeking to quieten my sense of restlessness, and understanding that in engaging with such challenges moment to moment, and in committing to this as an ongoing spiritual journey and as a practice of personal development, I may find the resting ground from which to particularise my offering and from which to then move into action.

- Developing the emotional competence to hold anxiety, distress and vulnerability, while remaining open to and appreciative of the experience of joy and blessedness with which we may be presented as we engage with these challenges.

- Acting with intention and seeking to develop my capacity for effective action while at the same time standing back from my own expectations, intentions, hopes and fears. Not vesting my sense of self-worth, groundedness and power of acting in the outcomes of these interventions.

Having drawn some conclusions regarding the nature of the challenges and opportunities faced in action and inquiry for sustainability, in the chapter that follows I reflect on my own positioning and experimentation in relation to these. In particular, I aim to evidence how it is that I seek to enact and experiment with the above qualities in my developing inquiry practice and in my ongoing efforts to appropriately respond to complex ecological challenges. Thus, one of my key objectives in the following chapter is to draw some conclusions regarding what I am learning about my own inquiry practice, my own sense of activeness and my own sense of place and purpose in the world.