9 Holding the process of engagement

9.1 Framing

Thus far in this thesis I have sought to evidence the kinds of challenges and tensions often experienced by people when seeking to engage with ecological challenges. I have reflected on my collaboration with various groups, and have identified that a challenge generally experienced by participants was that of *holding* and *staying with* the tensions and questions raised, and that of sustaining their engagement with these challenges in the long-run.

Following such ecological thinkers as Spinoza, Naess, Macy, Mathews, Berry, Bender, Fisher and Roszack, I have argued that it may be necessary to re-evaluate the nature and role of the human as part of the cosmos, so that we can continue to work with commitment and joy (of a kind) in the face of the urgency, complexity and devastation which we must also acknowledge. I have argued that the concept and practice of repose may contribute to this process of re-evaluation, and to the development of our capacity to engage with such challenges in more life-affirming ways.

Specifically, in Chapter Eight, I reflected on my experience of participating in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and on the kinds of qualities, both personal and relational, which may give form and substance to a practice of repose. As I conceptualise it, the principal qualities of repose could be summarised as

- A grounded understanding of our own positioning and of the anxieties and tensions which affect us (and the manner in which these affect us);
- A willingness to actively engage with such tensions and anxieties, and the capacity to do so in creative and sublimatory ways;
- A readiness to encounter and meet the unknown/other, in its/his/her difference and inscrutability, while acknowledging the possibilities for conflict and suffering that this holds;
- A commitment to quieten the restlessness which we may experience, and to find a resting ground from which to particularise our offerings and from which to then move into action.

I briefly suggested that in seeking to develop the above kinds of qualities we might do well to

- Hold the process of engagement moment to moment, understanding this as a practice of personal development and spiritual unfolding; as well as
- Develop the emotional competence to hold anxiety, distress and vulnerability, while remaining open to and appreciative of the joy and blessedness which we may *also* experience as we engage with these challenges.

In this chapter, I expand on the above two points, and I argue that *holding the process of engagement moment to moment* and *openness to joy and blessedness* are crucial in developing the capacity to respond to ecological challenges from a position of repose. I ground my arguments in my experience of collaborating with the Luhimba Project group, as I explain hereafter.

9.2 Grounding: My collaboration with the Luhimba Project

In the present chapter, I present a rather detailed account of my experience in Luhimba, Tanzania, which I visited as part of my collaboration with the Luhimba Project charity. There are a number of points I would like to make in order to justify my inclusion of this detailed account as part of the thesis, and its positioning within it. These are as follows:

1. I began my engagement with the Luhimba Project at around the same time as I was closing my engagement with my other fields of practice (those described so far in this thesis). Indeed, at the time of my visit to Luhimba in August 2004, I had not only formally ended my various other collaborations, I had also spent some time reflecting on the various challenges and questions which had been raised for me as part thereof. By this point, I had already come to believe that *sustaining* our engagement with complex ecological challenges was important, and that seeing this as a process of personal development and spiritual unfolding may help us to hold the many tensions evident in this kind

of work, and to do so with curiosity, joy and commitment. As I suggested in the concluding parts of the previous chapter, I believe that these latter qualities are important if we are to see this as a process of personal development and spiritual unfolding, and that a more curious and gentle approach may go some way towards sustaining our continued engagement with these issues. The ability to act with gentleness and curiosity is one which I am consciously seeking to develop as I gain experience as an action researcher, as I demonstrate in this chapter.

In my engagement with this field of practice, then, I sought to *hold the process of engagement moment to moment*, or to carefully attend to the emergence of possibilities in the present moment and/or context, and to respond according to what appeared to be called for there and then. I consider that in seeking to hold the process of engagement thus, I was able to bring qualities of repose, attentiveness and groundedness to my inquiry practice, of a kind which had not been evident in my previous collaborations. Moreover, I believe that the qualities of attentiveness and curiosity which I brought to this work allowed me to see more clearly how I might sustain *my own* engagement with such complex challenges, again in a way which I had not been able to appreciate before.

Hence, one of the reasons why I choose to include a detailed account of my experience in Luhimba is that I wish to evidence such shifts. Presenting such a detailed account also allows me to show *how* I sought to hold the process of engagement with these questions and challenges moment to moment. One of the ways in which I believe I was able to do this was through extensive journaling. Indeed, my collaboration with the Luhimba Project group was the space in which I most intensely engaged in a practice of journaling and also in experimenting with drawing as a presentational form. Throughout this chapter, then, I draw on extracts from my journal as a way of evidencing the quality and manner of my engagement with various tensions and opportunities.

2. A further reason I include this detailed account *at this point* of the thesis is because I believe that it may be valuable to compare the experiences of participants in the Luhimba Project with those of participants in my various other fields of practice. In particular, I argue that participants in the Luhimba Project may have been better able to draw on the emotional and spiritual

energy necessary to keep on engaging with the challenges they faced and that it may in fact be easier to sustain our engagement with ecological challenges of the kind contemplated by the Luhimba Project group. By this I mean that it may be easier to engage with challenges which affect human beings more specifically (such as the marginalisation of persons and communities or the unequal distribution of wealth) rather than those which relate more intangibly to the more-than-human world, with which we are arguably less able to relate in modern times.

Indeed, I suggest that a key difference between the Luhimba Project and the Ecological Thinking intakes, the MSc programme and the Sustainable Farmshire initiative is that participants in the latter three may have been *less* able to see tangible evidence of the worth of their efforts (something which is arguably more available to those involved in the Luhimba Project). In putting forward this argument (which I develop towards the end of this chapter), I suggest that one of the questions to which we may give further attention is that of how we may become more sensitive to our connectedness with the more-than-human world, so that our engagement with pressing ecological challenges may be nourished and sustained, and so that our place as part of the natural world and the cosmos may be appropriately re-evaluated and re-invented.

9.3 Holding the process of engagement moment to moment

My aim in this section is to demonstrate how adopting qualities of repose allowed me the space and the energy to *stay with* the many questions which were raised for me during my visit to Luhimba, and to hold the process of engagement with these moment to moment, in what I came to understand as joyful and life-affirming ways.

In particular, these questions revolved around my role and potential contribution within this context, and how these might be understood by myself and others. It seemed to me that, although all of us involved may have had some preconceptions and assumptions regarding what my/our role(s) here might be, there was also much potential for this to take shape in different ways. With this in mind, I sought to attend to how my role and contribution unfolded through the choices that I made in

the immediacy of each moment: through my inter-relating with others, through the stories, interpretations and possibilities which were inscribed upon me or made open to me in a variety of ways, and through my ability to engage with these in ways which allowed me sufficient freedom to both accept and/or challenge these. Thus, throughout this chapter, I seek to show how I sought to evidence particular qualities of repose, including self-aware and context-aware reflexivity, mature understanding and intuition, and the courage and creativity to engage with complexity and uncertainty and to respond appropriately.

9.3.1 Adopting an appreciative stance…and making room for problematisation

The questions at the forefront of my mind when I arrived at Luhimba, after many months of planning this trip, included:

- What does my being here mean to me/them/others?
- What does it suggest or signal to others around me?
- What stories and/or patterns does it serve to reinforce and how helpful is this?
- In which ways do I reinforce and/or challenge these patterns, and to what end?

I sought to focus on these questions in making sense of the opportunities I was given to speak with the students at the Nguluma Secondary School in Luhimba. The following are notes from my diary regarding the second day Paul and I spent in Luhimba, when after a hearty breakfast, we were ushered to the village's secondary school, where both students and teachers warmly welcomed Paul back, and where I was formally introduced to them:

Journal entry: 5th of August.
Reflections on conversations with students at Nguluma Secondary School (4th of August).

I'm conscious of the choices that I made in talking to the different groups of students. I chose to introduce myself as from Argentina, as from a Southern country that is also facing some similar problems to Tanzania. I also felt it

was important to respond to their welcome for us, and to let them know how their singing had made me feel. It had been beautiful singing, and somehow haunting. What I had sensed in those moments, when they had all stood in formation around the Tanzanian flag, in their red and white uniforms, and had sang the national anthem, their school song and other local songs of welcome, had been pride; pride in the school, in being there at this moment of time, and in their country. What was haunting for me was how I made sense of the pride and dignity embodied by this group of young people, when what I had seen so far suggested to me that there were many challenges and needs which they experienced. I knew that the basic text-books and lab equipment which I had taken for granted during most of my schooling were virtually non-existent here; I knew also that their living quarters were basic and somewhat over-crowded, and that their water and toilet facilities were congested and unhygienic. I wondered whether I was working from an assumption that such needs could have an abrasive effect on the dignity and pride of a people, and I remembered also that never have I been so conscious of the way that this tension is held than with my compatriots in Argentina, and what I was sensing here, albeit fleetingly, was that same ability to hold dignity even in situations and contexts which seem undignified.

I was conscious also of the way that I had been presented to the student body by the Head Teacher that first day. He had said 'Please speak honestly to Patricia, that her findings may help us…' and moreover presented me as a role model with regards to my academic achievements, and drew particular attention to my relative youth and to my being a woman. The Head Teacher welcomed me profusely and told me that the students were anxious to speak to me, and proceeded to give me many opportunities to speak to them. I wondered at what agendas might lie therein, and how it was possible that he believed that what they might tell me would reinforce his own message to us, regarding their need for financial support from us in the UK. And this was my strongest impression regarding the time I spent at the Secondary School: it felt to me that those in authority, including the Head Teacher, the School Board Chairperson, and other senior teaching staff were involved in perpetuating a deficit-orientated, problem-focused culture, and that the story that was being inscribed onto the less senior staff, the students and any visitors was one which reinforced the notion that the school had many needs, and that it was relatively helpless and unable to do without outside support.

A theme which seemed to emerge in conversation with the people of Luhimba, time and time again, was that of local people's relative sense of power and/or powerlessness. During our visit, I had much contact with Mr. Joseph Simsokwe, the village agricultural officer, who has for some time been closely involved in the Luhimba Project, and who was amongst those responsible for setting up and running the heifer project, and more recently, the small business loans initiative. Joseph agreed to speak with me in depth regarding his views on how the villagers in general perceived their own capacities, and their own sense of power. In this instance, I found that Malcolm Parlett's (2003) *five abilities* framework was a useful starting point for discussion.

Parlett's (2003) *five abilities* framework emerges from a gestalt psychotherapeutic perspective, an approach based on the idea of mind and body as an integrated whole, and the objective of which is to enable a person to creatively engage with the world, and to heal and expand their own vitality in the process of doing so. Parlett (2003) identifies five abilities, or strengths, upon which human beings draw as part of living in a contemporary world. Briefly, these are *responding* (relating to leadership, agency and commitment), *interrelating* (to do with building relationships and meaningfully sharing with others), *self-recognising* (relating to the capacity to 'know oneself', how we affect others and how particular beliefs are guiding our choices), *embodying* (involving living more fully as a whole being, integrating body, mind, spirit and emotions) and *experimenting* (related to moves beyond established patterns and into new territory). While these abilities are, according to Parlett (2003:1), 'central to the success (or not) of all worthwhile human endeavours', they are often 'imprisoned', 'locked up' or 'out of commission'. Parlett suggests that:

> On these occasions and in situations where the abilities seem almost to disappear, one can see that – on both an individual and collective level – there is general deterioration of human existence. Quality of life declines; morale dips to low levels; the physical environment may not be cared for and then detracts from any feelings of hope and respite. Regressive cycles set in and there are often serious mental health problems. (Parlett, 2003:2)

I explained the framework to Joseph, and we spoke at length about each of the abilities, what they might mean, and how they might be evident or not in this system. Although I was conscious that I might be taking a risk in trying to shape our conversation around what is quite a theoretical model, Joseph showed willingness and an ability to engage with this framework, and kept referring back to the relevant page in my notebook, pointing to each of the abilities in turn, and giving his view as to how they might be evidenced in Luhimba. He concluded his analysis by saying:

> 'The main ability that we need to develop here is "self-recognising", especially people recognising their potential. Many people here are ready to work hard, and they have skills; they are carpenters, builders, farmers, tailors etc. They are eager to learn, and want things to change; they want things to get better for the community. But many times we find that they lack this "self-recognising", because they feel that they are so much inferior. People feel that they are nothing, that they can do nothing which is good. Especially in this village, the negative qualities are that some people feel so inferior that they feel helpless; they feel they need to be helped! But if you sit down with them and you discuss with them the situation of the village, and you look for the solution together, then people feel involved. People then feel involved in recognising their problems and it's easier for them to act on this, because they are participating in their own development, instead of being dictated to. If we focus on the strengths of the people, then we can all act on this…'
> (Personal communication, August 2004)

My interactions with the leaders of the secondary school suggested to me that such feelings of powerlessness were indeed evident. Working from this general impression, I made certain choices when I was given the opportunity to facilitate a discussion with seven students. I was conscious that one of the senior teaching staff would be present for at least part of the discussion, and though his presence would at times be valuable as part translator, I also feared that the focus would naturally turn to what the 'problems' were, and how 'we' could help 'them', which seemed to be the kinds of conversations hoped for by the school leadership. While I wanted to understand how they themselves made sense of the challenges facing them, I did not wish to reinforce patterns which suggested that the most important

resource they could draw on was that of financial support from a small, UK-based charity. Rather, I wished to acknowledge the dignity I had sensed in their singing, and which I felt might also contribute to how they approached the challenges they faced. After a round of introductions, during which we shared our names, ages and where we were from, we worked our way through the following kinds of questions:

- Why did you choose to continue with secondary education?
- What are your expectations from secondary education?
- What are your aspirations for the future?
- What are the strengths of the school? What are the things about the school that make you happy? What works well? What makes you proud?
- What would you say the students here are good at? What are their positive qualities? What are their talents?
- What are the teachers good at? What are their positive qualities, their talents?
- What might the teachers need to do to develop the quality of their teaching?
- What are the strengths of the people of the Gumbiro ward (or your own village, ward or region)? What are they good at? What other skills might they need to develop?
- What is your vision for the future of your community? In twenty years time, what would you like it to be like?
- How do you feel you might be able to contribute to get it there?

Interestingly, they seemed to warm to these questions and to the conversation as the hour went on. Although some seemed quieter than others, they all seemed to be engaging with the questions, although it did seem to me that these were not the kinds of conversations they often had – for example, we had to discuss and negotiate at some length what we meant by strengths, positive qualities and talents, both in English and Kiswahili. I found that, once we had become immersed in the conversation, these young people were able to demonstrate a degree of openness, criticality and insight which I had not yet witnessed in my more official dealings with the school leadership. For example, when talking about what the strengths and qualities of the students and the school were, one person responded (and the others agreed):

> ‘I am learning about many different places, because all the students here come from so many different regions. I learn about others, I learn different things, and it leads me to understand other characters, so that we can live together. We must exchange opinions and ideas, otherwise we cannot understand and live with others. We cannot develop.’

When talking about how the teachers may develop the quality of their teaching, they responded:

> ‘They must have good relationships with other schools, so that they can share materials with other teachers…There should be teachers’ meetings outside the school, where teachers go and exchange ideas, so that there is further education and training for the teachers…We could exchange teachers, and have visits from other teachers from other schools, so that we learn different things.’

I was particularly interested to hear this response, as it showed a willingness to own and engage with one of the key challenges facing them (quality of teaching) in a way which contrasted to that of the Head Teacher, whom so far had focused his conversations with me around the lack of resources, books and buildings, and the need for donations from people in the UK in order to deal with these problems.

In response to my question about what the strengths were of the people of Tanzania, or of their region, a couple of students formed the following answer:

> ‘Some regions are not hungry. Ruvuma is a good region, because it is fertile. The people here produce a lot of crops, maize, beans and rice. They keep the crops well…People work hard in farming. They also keep animals; cattle, goats, sheep, chickens and dogs also.’

Again, this response was a marked contrast to a view repeatedly expressed by both the Head Teacher and the School Board Chairperson , encompassed in the following statement:

> ‘The main problem in Africa is that people do not work as hard when compared to Europeans and Asians. The climate favours us. We

> have a lot of land to cultivate and we don't need to put much effort into the land, everything grows just like that! The people are lazy, and parents may stay out drinking until the late hours. Some parents don't know if their children have eaten or not during the day... There is inactivity and lack of initiative, despite the farming opportunities.'

I found it interesting that throughout our time in Tanzania, we were exposed to many mixed messages regarding people's willingness to work and to draw on their own resources. While these supposedly much-varied attitudes might, quite possibly, be evident in any country, what was interesting to me was *the concern and interest that people had in thinking about the extent to which people were or were not making use of their full potential*. I found the Head Teacher's interpretation of the potential of local, rural people to be disheartening, not so much because I could not understand the basis of this interpretation, but more importantly, because I was aware that in his communicating this view to others, and particularly to students, he might be reinforcing and perpetuating an unhelpful stereotype of the people of this region.

When talking about how they themselves could contribute to making their future vision of Tanzania possible, one student responded:

> 'When I go home in the holidays, I find that many people in my village are uneducated. I can tell my friends there about how to prevent HIV, by using condoms or by having one partner only. I can show them how to prepare a farm, how to cultivate the land in order to yield more crops. I tell my friends it's no good to burn the forests. I tell them to use modern science instead of relying on satanic power when their children become sick. The more you teach, the more you learn, and I love teaching too much.'

I do not flatter myself that in this one hour's worth of conversation, I significantly shifted the way that these young people understood themselves, or their own potential. Nor do I feel that such shifting is entirely necessary. From my conversation with them, I feel that these young people showed significant awareness regarding the challenges facing them as individuals and as a community, as well as a willingness to envisage a different future, and to plan for how they might contribute to their own flourishing. Nevertheless, I believe that the choices I

made, regarding the focus of the discussion and the questions that I posed to them, did serve to open up space for a different kind of conversation to happen, and that the most important thing that I could do here was to give value and worth to their contributions, as someone who is of a similar age group to them and who is wishing to hear and learn from their experience in these matters.

I found myself sharing my own thoughts and experience also, with regards to the strengths and potential of people in Argentina, my own vision for the futures of Argentina, of the UK, of the world, and my own emerging understanding as to how I might best contribute to these. I believe such openness on my part was possible because I appreciated their openness and their willingness to engage with me, and because I sensed that, both on my part and on theirs, we were connecting at a different level than that to which we were accustomed in similar situations. Both in slanting the focus of the conversation in this way (which I had the power to do, facilitating as I was the discussion) and in sharing with them my own tentative understandings around these questions (which became possible for me because they were willing to engage with me in trying out something different), I believe that I was stretching my own ability to push the boundaries of what at first sight seemed possible here, and at least in part, to re-pattern some of the qualities they may well have come to expect from interactions with 'outsiders'.

This tension between re-patterning as in 'doing something different' and re-patterning as in 'keeping something the same' was most evident to me as we were drawing the session to a close, when the senior teacher, who had joined us again some few minutes previously, asked the group not to leave before telling me what the needs and the problems of the school were. Each student contributed by adding one item or another to this list of needs, which consisted by and large of material resources for which they did not have sufficient funding, including some means of transport in a case of emergencies (should a student need to reach the hospital in town, some 32 kilometres away), text-books and other learning resources, access to clean water, technical lab equipment, sporting equipment, desks and chairs, and more sophisticated and efficient farming tools.

Rather than feeling frustrated at the conversation being channeled in this direction, I was able to meet this incident with curiosity and interest, as well as with compassion. I felt a momentary pang as I asked myself whether it was simplistic or moralistic of me to ask them to focus on the strengths, possibilities, and their

own potential contributions and responsibilities within all of this, when actually some of the needs these young people were facing were so basic that I had never myself, while at school, entertained the idea that I held some personal responsibility for making these resources available. I decided to hold on to that thought, and explore it further at a later time, and instead gave my focused attention to what they had to say regarding these needs. Again, I found myself seeking to validate these contributions, to demonstrate to them that I empathised, but I also consciously refrained from promising to try to find these resources for them (which seems to be the pattern of conversation that the school leadership has developed with the Luhimba Project partners from the UK). Nor did I push the question of where they saw that these resources would come from; again, I felt that this question could be understood as validating their (possibly well-founded) belief that their only source of income (on this scale) was sponsorship from donors in the UK.

Journal entry: 5th of August.
Reflections on conversations with students at Nguluma Secondary School (4th of August).

Later on, I spoke to all the girls of the school as a large group. I found this experience rather daunting, for many reasons, but mostly to do with how I was going to be understood in this space. As I walked towards the large group, all of whom were sitting on the ground outside, I found myself thinking: What are the expectations of me here? Am I a role model, as the Head Teacher would have it, or am I a novelty to them, someone different, from a foreign country, with whom they might like to speak? I found myself, in a way, acting to fulfill both of these roles, but also acting to shape these into something with which I felt comfortable. As a potential role model, someone they might well have been instructed to 'listen to' and 'learn from', I saw that perhaps there was an opportunity here to influence in some small way, or perhaps more importantly, to say something different, something that they would be able to hear.

I chose to sit on the earth as they were doing, conscious as I was of the dust and of the fact that I couldn't see everyone's faces from this height, and that I was still in front of them, arranged as they were in a semi-circle around me. I chose not to sit on the desk and chair that had been dragged out from one of the classrooms for my benefit, although I knew that from that

position, I would have had a better view of everyone. In hindsight, I wonder whether part of me would have felt a sense of protection and security from sitting behind the desk. This is a more familiar position for me than sitting on the ground, and it would have familiar connotations, both for me and for them. Sitting on the ground with them, much nearer to them than the desk had been positioned, made me feel more vulnerable and exposed. I was aware that they could probably see any fidgeting and fumbling on my part. Also, I was aware of their whispering, giggling and laughing and I found myself wondering what it was about. But I was also pleased to notice that I was not worrying too much about this, and that I could stay with it and be relatively comfortable with the sometimes slow responses to my questions. I was pleasantly surprised to notice that I was able to be kinder with myself, happier just to put something forward and give sufficient time and space for something to happen, rather than filling up the silent space straight away. I was content also to know that I was perhaps connecting with only a few of them, to see only some engaging with me, and not to worry about the other distractions, about the fact that a number of them were evidently more interested in throwing glances at the male students walking and play-fighting on the path behind me. It felt liberating to realise that I could be kinder to myself by not approaching each interaction with another human being as a possibility to either 'get things right' or 'get things wrong'.

I began by telling them something about myself, about why I was there, what I hoped to talk about with them. I again framed this around the kinds of questions that we focused on in the smaller group discussion. I also asked to hear what questions they had of me, what they wished to speak to me about. As a starting point, I asked again about the strengths of the school and the qualities of the student body of which they were proud. Instead, first one, and then another, and then another young woman stood up, introduced her name and the region or village she came from, and prefaced her comment with 'The problem of the school is…'. Again, I noticed with curiosity how much easier it seemed to be to enter into conversations around the needs and the problems, and again I heard many valid points, regarding the lack of a dormitory for the boys, the fairly unbalanced diet they followed, and the need for additional housing for the teachers, to name a few. I stayed with this, and particularly noticed that there was much clapping and cheering by the other girls after each comment, as if congratulating the speaker for her courage and assertiveness in speaking, and as if valuing and validating each other's contributions.

This in itself felt like an important learning point to me, and I wondered whether I could make sense of this as them claiming this space as their own, and using it to voice concerns which were of grave and immediate importance to them, to someone whom they might see as somehow having some part to play in the dynamic they faced. We carried this through until all those who seemed to wish to speak had spoken, and this time I tentatively framed a question around what Tanzania as a whole could understand as the strengths or resources it could draw upon, a question with which they now seemed more ready and willing to engage. People mentioned 'good leadership from the government', 'trust of the government by the people', 'animals, forests and mountains' and 'peace and love', for example. Although the group as a whole seemed less forthcoming and less animated when talking about these issues, there were nevertheless some interesting moments, when I feel some boundaries were pushed a little bit further. For example, one young woman asked me what I considered to be the strengths and qualities of both Tanzania and of my own country. Another young woman asked me to tell them how I could help them to fight HIV/AIDS in Tanzania. I found both questions challenging, but I also welcomed them as holding the potential for shifting the quality of this interaction, towards one that was more mutually engaging and mutually revealing, and which opened up more opportunities for us learning from one another. I see now that part of seeking to enhance my ability to experiment, push boundaries, and disrupt accepted and unhelpful patterns of interaction, was about learning to live with discomfort and stay with the unexpected, in the hope that possibilities for something different might emerge in the moment, and that myself and others would learn something about ourselves in how we chose to respond and engage with these. Hence I understand myself as developing qualities of repose moment to moment through this engagement.

In reflecting on my interaction with these young women, again I wondered whether the shift I had been seeking to enact was a valid and helpful one. Was it naïve of me to expect them *not* to focus on those problems which they felt we could help them with, financially or otherwise, particularly when the school leadership seemingly construed our visit as a rare opportunity to draw from a limited pool of funds and resources? Was I romanticising their situation, or somehow insulting their intelligence, by asking them to think about how they might draw on their own qualities and resources in seeking to respond to the challenges facing them? How do I balance appreciating others, their contributions, worth and knowledge, with

challenging them in useful ways and when appropriate? What right *have* I got to challenge, and how do I challenge without jarring, without feeling as if I have the answer? Most importantly, how do I engage with people in an exploration of the situation we are in, from a place that is curious and searching and mutually respectful? These questions were at the fore of my mind during my interactions with the Head Teacher and other school leaders throughout the week.

9.3.2 In search of mutuality?

I begin this sub-section with the following extract from my journal, in which I reflect on our first official meeting with the staff at Nguluma Secondary School:

Journal entry: 8th of August.
Reflections on meeting with staff at Nguluma Secondary School (3rd of August).

In that first day spent with the staff and the Head Teacher of the Secondary School, I found that so many things jarred with me. The focus on problems and needs, the deference and dependency which seemed to underlay this whole situation, seemed disappointing. It did not help that we had heard rumours about the possible dishonesty of this particular group of people, warnings that 'they want to trap you'. Perhaps the speed with which we had become embroiled in local politics blurred my judgment, or rather, made me feel as if I was in a position from which to judge. It bothered me that the school leadership had structured this meeting with the wider staff to be so official, and the set-up of the room made me uncomfortable, with us at the front and the main board members and senior staff surrounding us, and the less senior teachers to the sides and the back of the room. The language bothered me, the fact that the less senior teachers were given permission to speak, and that they were asked specifically by the School Board Chairperson to 'give their comments and views about the problems of the school'. The space did not feel to me to be conducive to them feeling able to speak (and few did comment); nor did it feel to me to be the kind of space that welcomed contributions or interventions of a kind other than those that had been called for.

[With the benefit of hindsight, I am now able to make sense of what I describe above as relating to cultural differences, and I wonder at the extent to which I was unreceptive to this at the time, and how unable I seemed to accept this as a characteristic of the context in which we were situated—how willing I seemed to be critical of the behaviour I observed.]

Also, the conversation centred around them asking Paul about what funds he had raised, and what was available for them, and they prefaced many of their queries with 'You promised us…'. I could feel that both Paul and I were on the defensive here, and I wondered at the subtle power plays that were being acted out in this room. It is interesting that though at first glance it might be construed that the balance of power in this room was concentrated with us, the project partners from the UK who 'held the purse strings', there seemed to be subtle and yet significant ways in which the school leadership could also claim power. I thought back to my reading of Aili Mari Tripp's 'Changing the Rules', and particularly to her suggestion that 'quiet forms of resistance' or 'weapons of the weak' receive little attention because of '…a more fundamental problem with the ways in which politics and power relations are perceived as nonreciprocal and asymmetrical' (1997:9). I remembered also that Agri Mosha, a Tanzanian woman who works extensively in the NGO sector in Dar Es Salaam, had spoken about 'milking the donor' as one of those weapons. What became evident to me was that despite the way in which this relationship could be interpreted as one between an all-powerful donor and relatively powerless groups of recipients, different types of power and political ploys were enacted by all those involved. For example, the school leadership planned much of our programme for the week, and were able to direct our attention to the kinds of conversations they wished to have, which revolved largely around their own material needs and requests for more funds, accompanied by an apparent unwillingness to engage with us in the kinds of conversations which we wished for.

I knew that it was important to Paul to discuss during this visit how the relationship between the Secondary School and the Luhimba Project might develop in the future. In this general staff meeting, he pointed out that over the last twenty years the pattern which has been established with other projects (including health care, primary school education, access to water, small-busines loans, heifer and other farming projects) had been to help raise the initial funds to build and equip these

projects as requested and planned by the villagers, and to cover costs for necessary training and skills development for the local project owners and implementers (all self-appointed local residents). Taking into account that by the following January the number of students across forms 1 to 4 would exceed 550, Paul's fear was that the Secondary School was growing at such a rate that it would be impossible for the Luhimba Project charity (which consists of a group of 5-6 volunteers in the UK) to continue to fund its ever-growing needs.

We were aware that now that the school had reached a certain standard (three years after opening), the Regional Education Board had approached the school board with an offer to take over the school. This shift from private to government status would mean that the school could rely on some government funding to cover teachers' salaries and some basic building materials, allowing the Luhimba Project funds to be redirected towards building up resources such as books and technical equipment. The decision as to whether to remain a private school or not ultimately rests with the school board, nevertheless, Paul considered that he had to be clear about the levels of support which the Luhimba Project could continue to direct towards the school, so that they would be able to make an informed decision. The school leadership, including the School Board Chairman, were fairly silent on this issue, and evidently did not wish to say much. Similarly, in response to a question from me regarding the relative difficulty of collecting the remaining fees from those students who were outside the ward (and who were therefore not sponsored by the Luhimba Project charity), they were not forthcoming with any details. In theory, the school should itself be income-generating, and the funds donated by the Luhimba Project should form only a small percentage of total available funds. In practice, what they were communicating to us was that they relied almost solely on our support.

As recipients of such mixed messages, Paul and I found ourselves in a deadlock. We wished for mutual trust and transparency in this situation, and on our part, had provided extensive detail regarding the funds available to the school (and to every other project supported in Luhimba), how the money had been raised, as well as details of future fund-raising strategies. In the recent past, there have been questions raised regarding misappropriation of funds by previous Head Teachers and school board members, and the lack of transparency we encountered in this visit meant that not only were we unable to warrant against this, we were also unable to enter into conversation with them regarding the difficulties they

encountered in attempting to tap other potential sources of income, such that we might all better understand the situation the school was facing.

Paradoxically, despite wishing for such transparency, we felt unable to make unqualified demands for it, nor to pursue our felt dissatisfaction with the way these conversations were unfolding thus far. I believe that this was largely down to the way Paul and I problematised the role that we occupied in this relationship. Over the last ten months, my involvement with the Luhimba Project volunteers in the UK had revolved largely around inquiring into the nature of the relationship which has evolved between themselves and local project owners in Luhimba. Through these conversations, we had built an awareness of the kinds of dynamics which could be played out in such relationships, and in particular, had focused on the ways in which certain power relations and power differentials might be established within the context of aid. The UK-based group of trustees and volunteers, and particularly Paul, had evidently held concerns of this kind for some time, and having recognised the ways in which they might be understood to hold a significant position of power in this relationship, expressed a wish to think about the choices being made in acting for a more mutual partnership.

My visit to Luhimba allowed me to take part in these relationships first-hand, and the general pattern of interaction I noticed was a tendency on the part of Paul and myself to draw back from situations which invited us to exert our power in overt ways. Encouraged as we were by a number of villagers and other Tanzanian project partners to demand more transparency from the school regarding the use of funds, we felt uncomfortable with the situation, often asking ourselves whether we had a right to request that kind of information. Whereas we both felt that we would have been able to make this kind of request from a partner organisation in the UK, the fact that we were ultimately visitors in an African context, which was so evidently laced with the ghosts of colonialism and the subtleties of neo-colonialism, made us unsure as to what would further our intended outcome of a relationship where power is more fairly distributed between all partners. Thus, I can see that the kinds of tensions which became apparent for me through the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, and which revolved around my/our understandings of what authentic collaboration and authority might mean in practice, were also ones we grappled with in seeking to make sense of our relationships with the people of Luhimba.

Furthermore, I wonder whether in this particular interaction with the leadership of the school, unskillful interventions on our part also served to reinforce the pattern which made a more mutual exchange of ideas and greater transparency improbable. For example, when I asked the aforementioned question regarding the difficulties (or otherwise) they faced in collecting the remaining fees, I sensed that I was speaking from a defensive, frustrated place, and the Head Teacher could well have responded to the antagonism in my voice by further withdrawing. I was aware, in the moment, how quickly I had been drawn into the existing dynamics: I felt that we were meeting the demands placed on us to be transparent and open as to what our goals were, what funds were available, how else we might fund-raise, but that we were being told next to nothing as to how the school leadership understood this relationship, nor how they wished it to develop, beyond further requests for funds. Rather than disentangle myself from this situation, and seek to act with curiosity and skill in facilitating a different kind of dialogue, it may be that I acted in opposition to my intended results. Similarly, our inability to assert certain ground-rules might also have served to maintain these patterns of behaviour; indeed, by not being explicit around the shifts which we wished to see we were perpetuating power dynamics which were still non-reciprocal and unhelpful.

Most interesting to me, though, is that I am able to reflect on this instance and look upon it from a curious and thoughtful place. I feel that, to some extent, I have been able to shift the way that I look at my behaviour in this kind of situation, and that I can be less judgmental of myself and more gentle in teasing out the learning which lies in this experience. In what seems a significant transformation for me, I feel increasingly less concerned with 'getting it right' and 'being good at this' than with seeing how each experience will help me to further develop as a thoughtful participant in a complex universe, and furthermore to make sense of the challenges with which I am choosing to engage. Through cycles of action and reflection, and through a greater willingness to experiment and to hold lightly my intentions and the outcomes of my interventions, I feel increasingly able to see my first-person practice as the process through which I engage with and am present to that which matters to me; the process through which I open myself to connecting with others and to offering something of myself to the world. Through my PhD inquiry, and even as I write this thesis, I am developing an appreciation of the nature of the challenges we face in current times, as well as some emerging understanding of the kinds of shifts that may be necessary as we seek to respond to these. I suggest that

it is in the testing, living, embodying and unfolding of this understanding that I can participate in the world with a sense of ever-renewed purpose:

> …Words such as participation, democracy and inclusiveness might, in themselves, represent idealised values, which need to be given meaning and life as they are taken up in daily interaction. This ongoing creative engagement and process of discovery may in itself be the special purpose that we can serve. In this sense (if not in the sense of finding solutions), we may be able to act in joyful engagement, and discover how we may offer love, respect, awe and reverence in the process of ongoing relating with others (include the more-than-human world). (Gayá, 2004)

9.4 Sustaining and nourishing our engagement

In the above paragraphs, I suggested that it is helpful for me to understand my ongoing creative engagement with complex challenges as a significant quality of my offering to the world, and of the special purpose I might serve. In this section, I wish to focus on what it is that might sustain and nourish me (and others) in my/our ongoing engagement with such complex challenges.

9.4.1 Compassion and joy in engaging with the other

I begin with the following extract from my journal, in which I reflect further on the challenges I encountered while engaging with the Head Teacher of Nguluma Secondary School:

Journal entry: 8th of August.
Reflections on further interactions with Head Teacher (4th and 7th of August).

On the day after that first official meeting with the staff, Paul and I made our way to the school early in the morning. We had arranged that I would speak to some of the students that day, and on our arrival, we were shown into the Head Teacher's office, this being the main reception area of the

school. The Head Teacher greeted us and immediately handed us a letter from himself, addressed to both Paul and I. Part of the letter assured us that they would actively pursue other sources of income. With a sinking feeling, I found myself wondering whether this could be understood as evidence of the power that we held in directing his actions, and/or whether he was saying what he thought we wanted to hear. But what really struck me, and Paul also, was a line in the letter which said something to the effect of 'At times, I have felt alone and nearly in despair…', referring to the difficulties that he has encountered in his role as Head Teacher since he took over in February of this year.

Something of significance happened for me in that moment. For the first time since meeting him, I felt that I had been able to connect with him at a heart level. I empathised with him, and felt that after all, we were not so dissimilar! I wondered whether I had valued him as a human being up till that point, as someone who was also trying to make his way through the complexities facing him, someone doing a difficult job with limited resources and with seemingly little support. I wondered at the carelessness with which, on the previous day, I had sought to make space for this group of people to appreciate and value the potential that they held in this situation, while speaking from a position of slight superiority and irritation at the way things were. Perhaps after all, it was the Head Teacher who had made possible something different, in seemingly exposing himself in this way. The outcome of this action (and of the way we chose to make sense of it) was to immediately shift our willingness to continue to interact with the Head Teacher. It also helped me to engage with the students during the small group and large group discussions in a more curious and compassionate way [as already described above]…Later on that day, I began noticing some of the things which I felt the Head Teacher did well. Although quite authoritarian, he spoke encouragingly of and to the teachers and students, and acknowledged their part in making the school a success, for example.

Later in the week, the Head Teacher asked us to accompany him to Peramiho Girls' School, a private school established fifty years ago by the Benedictine missionaries (and still under their control and sponsorship). Peramiho town was some fifty kilometres away, and this being our last day in Luhimba, there were other things we wished to do. The Head Teacher told us that it would cause offense if we were to opt out of this trip. Reluctantly, we participated in this outing, but throughout the long and

tiresome drive I could feel my resentment towards him growing again. When we finally got there, it not only transpired that we could have cancelled without causing offense, it also became apparent that the purpose of this visit was for the Head Teacher to point out to us how much better Peramiho's facilities were, and how much more was possible due the higher levels of funding which the school received from the Benedictine missionaries. The visit consisted mostly of the Peramiho Head Teacher showing us around and saying 'This is a science lab…', 'This is the girls' dormitory…', 'This is the dining hall…', and so on. We considered this to be of little value to us, particularly compared to some of the more interesting, learning-full conversations that we had had throughout the week with various other project groups and local residents, conversations which we could be pursuing further on this last day. I felt that I had to be firm with the Head Teacher, and to let him know what else I needed to get out of the day, and I had to find a way to do this that was not unnecessarily sharp. I found that I had to summon all the grace I could to be civil with him, and eventually, when back at his home, to show appreciation for what he was offering to us at the time (lunch with his family).

I had made a decision not to challenge him in Peramiho, not to push him to tell us how he felt this visit might be of value to all of us, and not to ask how he was going to make use of the example that was Peramiho to further the standards of his own school. I feel that I was right in making this decision at that moment in time, for the following reasons:

- *I was conscious that I was feeling resentful at the apparent waste of time, and more importantly, annoyed at what I saw as an inability for us to engage in conversations regarding what would be of value for all of us. The long, uncomfortable drive had made me feel ill, and I knew that if I spoke, I would again be challenging him from a hostile place. I do not feel that, in that moment, I could have skillfully initiated a conversation that would be useful to either one of us.*

- *At the same time, I was attempting to understand his perspective, why this might be important to him. I was seeking to find some way to connect with him again, so that even if I did not agree with his point of view, I could at least appreciate that he may have had reasons which he believed to be important, even if he wasn't able or*

willing to make these explicit. What I sought to do was to hold the possibility that through this visit, albeit indirectly, we might be able to learn something more about one another, about the way this relationship was taking shape and about the situation the school was facing.

During lunch at his home, the Head Teacher shared with us his belief that there had been underlying personal agendas in the Regional Education Board's offer to register Nguluma as a government school, and that the offer was not as legitimate as it appeared. (We were also conscious that there may well be personal agendas behind the Head Teacher and school board's wish for it to remain a private school, not least the fact that their roles and positions of relative privilege might be jeopardised following any change of the status quo.) It appeared that one of the underlying reasons for which the present school board wished for Nguluma to remain private was the fact that, in this way, they were able to lower the entrance standards required, so that primary-school leavers from the ward area, who generally under-performed in secondary school national entrance examinations, would nevertheless have an opportunity to undertake secondary education. In Tanzania there is a severe shortage of secondary school places, so that a large proportion of primary-school leavers who do succeed in reaching the pass mark for entrance examinations are nevertheless unable to secure a place in secondary school.

Again, I felt compassion for the seemingly difficult decisions these people had to make. On the one hand, I knew that lowering standards in order to accept local students meant that others who had managed to meet the national entrance standards would be denied a place in the school. I wondered at how fair this was, and also at what this meant for the academic standards of Nguluma. I also felt that this was a less than ideal solution, since it did not address the roots of the problem, namely, the severe lack of resources and poor quality of teaching which is evident in many of the area's primary schools. I felt moved by the recognition that these people found themselves in a quandary, with limited courses of action available to them, trying to work their way through a difficult situation. One of the advantages of registering as a government school would be the increased funding available, which would help in alleviating the urgent need for learning resources and adequate facilities. A serious disadvantage, as far as the school board was concerned, was that it would make it more difficult for the school to serve its

original purpose, which was to provide opportunities for secondary education to local youths.

The tensions described above, regarding how we made sense of our relationship with the school leadership, suggest to me that rather than worry about how we can get it 'right' with regards to these relationships, we might more usefully approach the process of inter-relating with conscious awareness that both we and those with whom we seek to engage are complex human beings, each with our light and shadow sides, and that together we form part of a complex dynamic. The challenge, as I have come to understand it, may not be getting it right, particularly when it is difficult to draw any definitive lines around what is 'right' and what is 'wrong', and when the very context and form of our relationship could be both problematised and celebrated. Rather than continuously strive towards and measure ourselves according to hazy standards of openness, collaboration, and equality, the challenge might be to seek, in every moment, some way of continuing to relate to one another; a foundation from which to continue to form connections; a renewed desire to connect and to come to know; and a willingness to honour and respect the place and knowledge base from which the other is speaking. This is directly related to the development of repose, which would enable us to be kind with ourselves and understanding of others, so that our engagement with complex problems is judged not in terms of an intended outcome such as 'more equal power relations', but is instead understood as being sustained, nourished and cultivated through ongoing exploration in relationship, with curiosity and joy at being present to one another and to the challenges facing us.

Indeed, it seems to me that this ongoing process of inter-relating, and of finding a way to connect with others is what keeps Paul and other Luhimba Project volunteers in the UK deeply involved and committed to this project. Through our discussions, it emerged that it is in the building of personal friendships and relationships with the people of Luhimba that they see themselves as being energised and their work as taking on further meaning, which extends beyond giving aid. As we reflected on this visit prior to leaving Tanzania, Paul shared the following with me:

> 'The love of it is a mixture of elation and excitement and frustration, but mostly it's about having that opportunity for contact with people, an opportunity for immersement in the place and in the people. It's a

> feeling of being part, of being wanted by them and of wanting them to be a part of me…There is such delight in it, in the way that you can be surprised by people, and also in the way you can be let down by them. After all, we're the same in that we're all human, with our strengths and weaknesses and hopes and habits… It's about being in intimate contact with these people, and when we are in the village, it's about how vulnerable and exposed we are, and how we rely on them also.' (Personal communication, August 2004)

During my time in Luhimba, I spoke to Innocent Mbwalla, the former Monikiti (Chairperson of the Village Government, and therefore officially the political leader of the village) who, alongside English engineer Michael Carey, played an important role in initiating the Luhimba Project in 1984, and who has been closely involved in the project since then. Innocent shared with me his belief that the relationship between Luhimba and the project volunteers from the UK could be described as being on two levels: firstly, as a relationship between two communities or groups of people, specifically between the village government (through which village life is often organised) and the Luhimba Project charity in the UK. Secondly, and according to him, most importantly, it could also be described as a collection of friendships which have been developed over time between particular people, including himself and Michael initially, and since 1992 onwards, between Paul and a number of other villagers who are closely linked to the project. He expressed his belief that these one-to-one friendships are the heart and the back-bone of the project, and that it is the love and respect which he has experienced in these friendships which means that he would be forever part of the Luhimba Project. With much vigour and feeling, he explained to me:

> 'It would be shameful if the project failed while I was alive. If the project failed, it would be as if I were dead. It would be as if Michael and all those involved in the project were dead. If the project is not alive, then you know that we are not alive, and that our friendship is not alive.' (Personal communication, August 2004)

The former Monikiti's words reminded me of a discussion I had earlier in the year with the project leaders and volunteers in the UK. In response to a question from me regarding how they understood the nature of their relationship with the people of Luhimba, they made sense of it in the following ways:

> '…The strength of this project is that it is bounded, it is local, in the sense that what is happening here is mostly person to person, not just organisation to organisation…'
>
> '…Our charity is small, it's people-based, and what they see when we visit them is people, and what we see is people also…'
>
> '…There is a selfish pleasure, a satisfaction, in connecting in this way…'
>
> '…Throughout its lifetime, this project has been based on personal contact, firstly from Michael's visits, and then through Paul building a house in the village. He is a resident there now, and they see this house as a physical sign that he is part of the village; he is there for the long-term. We are not strangers there…'
>
> '…The actual running and organising of the project is mostly through conversations and meetings with the villagers when we are there, and through personal communications between individuals when we are apart. There is very little formal documentation or record-keeping of any kind…it's all through talking, and word of mouth…'
>
> '…It's not all about the money. There are far more important things than money in this. There's the process of learning to understand one another, and that's something really exciting…' (Meeting with Luhimba Project volunteers: Jan, Paul, Michael and Wendy, February 2004)

Throughout my inquiry, the following question has served as a thread tying together my experience in the various fields of practice: *When facing and acknowledging the complexity of the challenges facing us, what gives us the energy (emotional, physical, intellectual, etc.) to keep on engaging?* I sense that many of those who have been involved in the Luhimba Project over the years are fairly clear that, for them, this is something to do with mutual curiosity and with a wish to connect and to appreciate and learn from one another. On both sides, participants

in the project seem willing to admit that, over the years, the project has experienced many frustrations, setbacks, and misunderstandings, and that the intensity of the relationship sometimes 'takes a lot out of you – in terms of emotional, physical and mental energy' (Paul Temple, personal communication, August 2004). Nevertheless, it seems to me that, at least in part, these people see *the possibility for engaging and connecting with others in worthwhile work* as what gives them the energy to keep on working, with what they evidently understand as commitment and joy.

9.4.2 Openness to moments of grace

Following on from the above, it seems possible to argue that some well-meaning projects and initiatives may fall by the wayside because of participants' inability to draw on psychic energy of this kind so as to sustain their engagement with these challenges. This might be particularly true when working with those ecological challenges which are especially poignant to the more-than-human world, with which we are arguably less able to relate to in modern times. When making sense of this with my CARPP tutor, Donna Ladkin, we wondered whether the difference between the Luhimba Project and the Sustainable Farmshire initiative might have been the latter's inability to see tangible evidence of the worth of their efforts (something which is more available to those involved in the Luhimba Project), as well as a felt discontinuity and disconnectedness with the natural world which, in theory, was to be at the heart of our Sustainable Farmshire project.

If we have limited ability to connect with the more-than-human world in any meaningful way; if we are unable to see how we inter-relate and participate with one another; if we find it difficult to see and hear and smell and feel the urgency and the devastation felt by the planet, then from where might we draw the psychic energy which allows us to persist with the difficulties and challenges encountered in trying to make our lives and those of our communities more sustainable? How, then, might we understand what it is that makes this work worthwhile, and for whom, if as Thomas Berry (1999:22) suggests, 'we think of the Earth more as the back-ground for economic purposes or as the object of scientific research rather than as a world of wonder, magnificence, and mystery for the unending delight of the human mind and imagination'?

It is in this sense, I believe, that participatory, nondualist perspectives can offer us a different kind of experience, and therefore a different kind of wisdom, in how we might build the capacity to engage with ecological challenges. Such wisdom might be rooted in an emerging ability to engage with the more-than-human world in more meaningful, more evocative ways, so that we can experience with greater consciousness and with greater empathy our participation in the natural world. Again quoting Berry:

> We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socioeconomic arrangement than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to some numinous presence manifested in the wonderworld about us. (Berry, 1999:20)

Berry (1999) suggests that we are currently experiencing a defining moment in time, which he refers to as a *moment of grace*. Such moments, he suggests, are privileged moments, during which great transformations of the universe are possible. In the history of the world, such determining moments have included supernovas, the evolution of life, as well as the moments when spoken language was invented and when the great visionaries were born, amongst many others. I find the notion of moments of grace to be a powerful one, and one which helps me to vocalise what it is that keeps me engaging with this work, despite the disillusionments and frustrations I have experienced as I began to think about how I may be of value to the world in these challenging times.

More and more, I choose to interpret moments in my own life as micro-phase moments of grace, moments which I feel are defining in the creativity and potential and poignancy that they hold. Such moments might be those in which I sense an opportunity and an ability to connect with, and to be open to, something or someone else, a moment of meeting, communion or encounter which makes alternative forms of being and of inter-relating possible. I feel that such moments may also be *grace-full* in the sense that I understand Gregory Bateson's (1972) use of the term, as holding awareness of our embeddedness in an ecology of mind and recognition of a wider pattern which connects. For example, such moments of grace would be those whereby I sensed a shift in my ability to connect with the Head Teacher of Nguluma Secondary School. Such instances allowed me to develop an emerging understanding of how, together, we participated in a wider

dynamic and in an ongoing unfolding of possibilities, the qualities of which we were involved in refining, moment to moment. These instances might also be understood in relation to Ladkin's (2001) exploration of the tension between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', or between the 'self' and 'other', in action research. Drawing on Goethian perspectives which advocate a move from an 'analytic' mode of consciousness (focusing on distinction, separation, and the experiencing and manipulation of solid bodies) to a 'holistic' mode (described as non-linear, simultaneous, and intuitive rather than verbal-intellectual), Ladkin (2005:121) suggests that the constant interaction between self and other might be 'slowed down and consciously attended to'. She continues:

> In doing so, aspects of the other (or even of ourselves and our patterns of perception) which are habitually ignored can reveal themselves, leading to the possibility of a fuller knowing or truth arising between us. (Ladkin, 2005:121)

Indeed, Ladkin (2005:118-119) argues that one way in which the researcher can ensure that self-reflection does not degenerate into unhelpful self-indulgence or solipsism is to 'balance awareness of self with curiosity and attention to "other"', and following Marshall (2001), 'to "reach out of" him or herself'. I believe that attending to and learning from such moments of fuller knowing and of 'reaching out of' oneself—which I refer to as 'moments of grace'—is another capacity which we may seek to develop as we sustain our engagement with these challenges:

> The challenge (and opportunity) for creating repose might lie in us becoming skilled in asking difficult questions about our own actions, as well as in recognising and honouring the gracefulness and creativity of our being, moment to moment, in our interactions with others. (Gayá, March 2004)

The following journal entry describes a particularly poignant moment during my time in Luhimba, a moment of grace which held much creativity and energy for me, of a kind I have seldom experienced.

Journal entry: 6th of August.
Reflections on drawing the night sky.

Last night we were sitting around the dinner table. We had lingered over the evening meal, with visitors arriving in ones and twos and joining us, as was usual each night. The younger women had brought sodas and peanuts to share with me, some of the men were sharing a few bottles of the local beer. From time to time, some of the women would burst out in song or laughter, and everyone seemed to be speaking loudly, throwing remarks from one end of the table to the other, and I could hear scatterings of English, Kiswahili and the tribal language of the Ndendeule, the tribe to which the majority of the locals belong. As much as I was enjoying their company, I felt I needed some space. Silently, I left the table, and went outdoors, onto the backyard, where the evening meal had been prepared and where some of the younger girls were busy chattering and giggling around the dying flames of the fire.

In that moment, I felt as if my breath had been taken away. The night sky was awe-inspiring, beautiful, like nothing I have ever seen before. I had never in my life seen so many stars, so much brightness, enveloping the whole of the sky, as far as I could see. Never have I had such a sense of the grandeur of the universe. I stayed for a long time, bathing in this sense of beauty, and then, with a decisiveness I have not experienced before, I knew that what I wanted to do was capture this feeling in some way. I went inside, to the bedroom where I kept all of my belongings, avoiding contact with all the others sat around the dining table. More than anything, I wanted to stay with this feeling, I wanted no interruptions, nothing to invade this precious moment in which the universe seemed to have shifted for me. I got out my sketch pad and colouring pencils, and slipped outside again. I sat on the doorstep, so that I had some faint light coming from the house behind me, and I set out to draw the night sky. I haven't ever felt as if I was 'any good' at drawing, and I do relatively little of it (or anything of that kind, for that matter). And yet in that moment, there was nothing I wanted to do more. Sitting there, on the stone floor, with the earth firmly beneath my feet, I felt as if I was free to do anything… I could hardly see the paper on my lap, could hardly see which colours I was choosing from the box of pencils, and that was OK. I gave myself plenty of space on the paper, and all I had was a sense of what my hand and fingers and pencils were doing, how they were moving across the paper. I had no idea how I could ever represent

such beauty, and in that moment, I felt content to let my fingers do the talking.

After some time, I looked up, and saw that the three young girls had gathered around me, and were watching with interest what I was doing. Initially, this felt like an intrusion. I felt that I wanted to guard the silence of this space…or maybe what I wanted to guard was what was on the paper. I wondered at why I should feel this way, and moved by their curiosity, I silently handed a pencil to each of them, and pointed down at the page, signaling them to join in and to help me draw. When they eventually understood what I was inviting them to do, they responded with warm laughter, and with apparent incredulity at being asked to join in. I pointed at the night sky, and they seemed delighted and surprised that this is what I was drawing. Their glee and enthusiasm in drawing touched me also, the way they gave each other space to draw, the way they watched I was doing and what one another was doing also. I knew, in that moment, that this had not been an intrusion; instead, they had become part of this moment for me, part of this memorable evening, part of the drawing. They had given their own creativity to it. I found myself wanting to include them in the picture also, to signal to them that they were part of it, part of what I was attending to, but also aware that this would bring 'humanity' back into what, up till that moment, had been a drawing of the splendour of the more-than-human, relatively untouched and unharmed by humankind. I realised that part of what I had been trying to do up till then was to escape from the boisterousness and noisiness of the human world, and that the silent, awe-some world outside had given me this space. I realised also that I could not separate the human from the more-than-human world, that as much I might wish to escape it, they were entwined together, inseparable in this moment.

I drew three oval faces, each with dark skin, dark eyes and dark hair, and I drew in the bright colours of their clothes, so as to differentiate each girl in my drawing. I pointed to each of them and back to the drawing, trying to communicate to them what it was I was doing. At first, they seemed to misunderstand, and seemed to think that I wanted them to copy me and to do the same, so they too started drawing ovals around the edges of the page. I contemplated on how else I might communicate with them, and decided to draw myself, a slightly lighter oval face with long dark hair. I wrote my own name underneath, so that they might relate the drawing to each of us. The mirth which they expressed when they finally understood

what I was doing again touched my heart. They each wrote their own names underneath the corresponding pictures: Ashura, Prisca and Mwanaidi. They pointed upwards and said two words—'Nyota' and 'Wingu'—and wrote these on the drawing also. I gathered (and later confirmed) that by this they meant 'stars' and 'sky'. Some time later, a fourth girl approached, and added her own name to the drawing: Orestha.

There is something about this experience which touched me in a way that I find difficult to describe. There was something about the way in which I feel I connected with the earth, the sky and the children in that moment, which felt to me to be energy-giving, life-affirming, and soul-nourishing. Much of what had been background for me during that visit so far shifted to the foreground: the outdoors world where the children helped to prepare the food, versus the inside world of adult noisiness and discussion; night-time which was dark and mysterious and full of stars and the music of crickets, all of which were lost upon us in the busyness of the day-time; something humbling about communicating and connecting through drawings, through basic signals and signs, through being taught and repeating words in a foreign language, versus the civility and political maneuvering often apparent in adult conversation. There was something about that moment which was pre-verbal, non-conceptual and immediate, which shifted my quality of attention and engagement, so that I felt I was connecting with something more real, more present, more worthy of attention at this moment in time. It felt to me that I was so present to that moment, that I had immersed myself so fully in it, that I could not easily abstract or distance myself from what I had experienced; and I wonder whether this is another way of understanding grace, as an inability to separate oneself from the world about us, whether human or more-than-human.

I thought back to a question posed to Stephan Harding at Schumacher College by one of the MSc participants, along the lines of 'If the planet is going to die at some point anyway, then what is the point of us worrying about it now?'. I recall also Stephan's suggestion that such questions serve to abstract us from what is happening here and now, and from the responsibilities we face within all of this (see Reason, forthcoming). I wonder whether the immediacy and experiential knowing which becomes possible in such moments of grace, when we open ourselves to the wonder of the universe and to the joy of connecting with others, serves to do the opposite, to ground us and immerse us in what is real, what is present, what it is that we need to be attending to, what it is that we are part of,

moment to moment. In a closely related vein, Donna Ladkin (2001:11) also speaks of 'magical "Aha!" moments' whereby 'the nature of our possible participation with the cosmos is thrown into vivid relief'. She goes on to suggest that '…we don't have to just wait for them to happen…we can initiate participative engagement with the cosmos too'. Ladkin describes walking as one way in which seeks to do this, and through which she attunes to the spaciousness, richness, and rhythm and dance of the world around us. As I bring this stage of my inquiry to a close, I increasingly find myself attending to the methods and means through which I might seek such active, aware, and reverential participation in the cosmos.

By way of ending the present account of my experience in Luhimba, I would like to share the following poem, which I wrote to express what felt to me to be a significant experience; a moment which, fleeting though it was, touched me and seemed to alter the shape of things to come for me:

This is where I come to rest; like a kaleidoscope, shapes and colours shifting
and escaping, and then coming to a resting place.
A fleeting moment, gone the next, and I keep on wading through the messiness,
until the next moment of grace.

In Appendix Two, I include a further poem I wrote in response to this experience.

Figure 2: Night Sky

9.5 Conclusions

I wish to take a moment here to summarise the key points I have made through this thesis so far: Through my PhD inquiry as part of various groups, I have become particularly interested in attending to how we might develop the capacity to respond to ecological challenges facing us, and moreover, to sustain our engagement with these issues in the long-run, so that we can continue to work with commitment and joy (of a kind) in the face of the urgency, complexity and devastation which we must also acknowledge. I have come to believe that developing qualities of repose are important if we are to sustain our engagement with such challenges, and that seeing this as a process of personal development and spiritual unfolding may help us to hold with curiosity, lightness and commitment the many tensions evident in this kind of work.

In this chapter, I have sought to evidence how I am developing the capacity to hold the process of engagement with such challenges moment to moment, and to reflect on my attempts to bring qualities of attentiveness, groundedness, as well as a willingness to encounter difference, conflict and complexity, to my developing inquiry practice. I proposed that we might usefully consider from where we might draw the emotional and spiritual energy to keep on engaging, and I suggested that we might understand 'moments of grace', or moments of encounter with and openness to others, as giving such energy.

One of the questions to which I am turning my attention in these latter stages of my PhD inquiry is that of how we might become more sensitive to such moments of grace in relationship with the more-than-human world, so that our engagement with pressing ecological challenges may be nourished and sustained, and so that our role and place as part of the natural world may be re-evaluated and re-invented. I believe that the qualities of attentiveness which emerge out of a sense of restfulness, or repose, might enable our openness to and participation in such moments. Indeed, the practice of 'noticing' which Ladkin (2001) describes below is one which I find myself cultivating, and which affords me with the joy and energy necessary to sustain my engagement with complex challenges:

> Noticing is the starting point for communication with Creation. At a mundane level the sun once again rose this morning regardless of my

presence to witness it. Nonetheless, my life is completely dependent on the ongoing attraction between earth and her star. The fact that I am here, breathing, is likewise, utterly reliant on the tiny grasses and giant trees which produce oxygen for me to breathe—whether I notice or not. If I choose not to notice, I can imagine I am alone. Paradoxically, in that lonely state my sense of importance expands, but my world is limited by my belief that I am the source of my own energy. If I choose to notice, I am at once exhilarated and humbled. (Ladkin, 2001:10)