

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions and new questions

Introduction - The questions for this chapter

This is the last chapter of the thesis. I will use the chapter to draw conclusions and suggest new questions for the future. As I reflect on the meaning I am taking from the doctoral journey I will direct my attention towards three aspects of the doctoral journey.

The first aspect concerns the questions with which I started this thesis about my own existence. How has my process of first person action research helped me to locate exciting questions, and to re-visit sources of life energy? What have I learned about finding vitality and change in my fifties? As I engage with these questions, my first person research process helps me to continue to ground my response in a fuller understanding of my current life world. As I look more deeply at my life world in this chapter, I come to understand that being more clearly who I am is itself a source of energy and excitement, and also provides firmer ground from which to change. A richer engagement with my own ground proves to be energetic. This energy comes in part from understanding more clearly new opportunities, or possibilities; but also from realising that some things in my present may need to be engaged with more fully. In other words, the answer to my questions about energy and excitement may not necessarily lie in movement into new things, but also in a more heart felt steadiness in the present. The metaphor that comes to mind in this respect is that of a farmer tilling his soil so it might enrich the life that nature will bring. I think that by documenting my life world over the years from 2001-2006 and then returning to that ground now in this thesis (July 2006 –March 2007) I have been tilling the soil of my life, and preparing it for richer growth. It has felt like vital ongoing preparation. In this chapter I take this thought forward.

The second aspect of the doctoral journey to be addressed here concerns what I have learned about inquiry, especially as it relates to experience and knowledge. How might we inquire into the experiential realm? How might the theoretical speculations with which chapter four ended be applied in practice? In responding to these questions I introduce two further developments in my consulting practice that also reverberate into my private life. One is concerned with training I undertook in 2005 into a process for working systemically with families and organisations called *Constellating*, and the other is an event that occurred in a consulting case with a multi national corporation. Engaging in the practical realities of training and consulting reciprocates with the intellectual re-framing I described in the last chapter to clarify the nature of my inquiry journey. As a result of this interaction between practice and theory I identify two broad dimensions to my inquiry. I use these dimensions as loosely held focusing, and inquiring devices, rather than seeking to assert them as tightly defined conclusions from the thesis. Through their use, I seek to gather sense together, without over determining meaning. The two dimensions are related to the question, how do I participate in the world?

- The first dimension concerns participation through belonging. This concerns the importance of place. I examine how I am *intimately located*, and what this might mean for action research. I ask, how do I belong?
- The second dimension concerns attentional discipline and examines the idea that we participate in the world by wandering, or roaming, in a particular way. I remind myself (and other inquirers) of the value of staying close to the point where sense begins the process of determination. I ask how do we trace the emergence of things to us?

My third set of questions concerns this process of doctoral journeying: what has been my experience of being an inquirer? How has it been to engage with writing as a process of first person action research? What have I learned about my own style as a researcher? This enables me to consider the way writing has opened up my life world for inquiry, and to also consider how the work of writing has sharpened my attentional discipline, and revealed what has been present, but invisible, in my life.

In terms of the overall doctoral journey this chapter covers the last phase from the time of transfer from MPhil to PhD in February 2005 until I began to write this thesis in a café atop mount Floyen, overlooking the city of Bergen on July 9th 2006.

The chapter is divided into four sections:

Section One, *A rhythm of distance and closeness*, describes how my engagement with Constellations, through training and practice (including constellating aspects of my own family dynamic), highlights desire for a fruitful balance between proximity and distance as a source of energy for me.

Section Two, *The dead men in the pipe*, draws on a consulting case from late 2005 to deepen my questions of myself in the territory of truth. I ask myself do I stand in my own truth?

Section Three, *Resolution: participation, experience and knowing*, makes use of Merleau-Ponty's thought to inform an inquiry into how I participate in the world. The section concludes with a map of significant themes emerging from the doctoral inquiry.

Section Four, *Resolution: re-capping, fresh questions and new directions*, uses a recap of important aspects of the doctoral journey to inquire into the new questions that emerge, and the new directions that suggest themselves. What will I now attend to?

5.1. A rhythm of distance and closeness.

This section explores my desire to find a generative balance between closeness and distance in respect of myself, and ‘other’. I propose that this “desire: has been present throughout the thesis, becoming progressively more explicit as the journey of writing the thesis has unfolded. This section serves the thesis by continuing to explicate this ‘desire’ into a theme, relating to my fundamental questions concerning energy and excitement.

The occasion for clarifying the significance of my search for balance in this regard is my involvement, during 2005, with a process for inquiring into systemic themes within families and organisations called *Constellating*. In this section I first describe the constellating process, and what it meant for me to engage with it in 2005. Then I examine more closely my personal involvement, as I became a subject of constellating processes. Finally, I show how the question of balancing distance and closeness emerges from the reciprocation between my experience and my thinking.

Why is my engagement with Constellating important for the thesis?

In the following paragraphs I describe how I came to know the Constellating process. I do this primarily by re-visiting a description I provided in January 2005 in a paper called *Body and Process*, which I included as part of my papers for transferring from MPhil to PhD. This description was based on my preliminary engagement with the Constellating process as I described it in Chapter Four in relation to the ‘W’ case. I had attended two Constellating workshops during weekends in October and November 2004, and had used this training to influence the design I developed for the ‘W’ case (1st December 2004). Over this period in the autumn of 2004 and early 2005 I was supplementing my experience with reading, and with writing. The writing for my transfer in January 2005 was part of a process of enriching and securing my understanding of the constellating process, and its implications for me professionally and personally.

The close proximity between the Constellating weekends, the W case and then writing the transfer paper, *Body and Process* is significant. What I wrote was from the perspective of having not only experienced the Constellating process, but also having tried to assimilate my understanding into practical use in a consulting assignment. In consequence, although ostensibly the writing was about Constellating it also discloses something about my consulting priorities at the time. I think that the writing also takes on richness because it comes at a time when I was deeply engaged with absorbing phenomenological concepts, and re-working my Gestalt understanding. In this sense what follows *is* a report of what I was taking from my engagement with Constellations at that time in January 2005, *and* it also discloses an emerging manifesto for my own consulting, *and* an insight into how phenomenology and re-worked Gestalt were beginning to leak into my ways of thinking about practice.

These overlapping possibilities in my writing are influenced by the specific purpose that I brought to gaining a fuller understanding of Constellating. My attention to Constellations had a particular focus on the *process* of working. I had no intention of becoming a family therapist, which is the purpose for which the method was first developed. My questions, as I became engaged with Constellations, were about what I might take to integrate into my own consulting practice. In one sense this repeats a pattern, because ten years earlier in 1993-1994 I had attended a Gestalt training programme with Sonia Nevis on couples and family therapy. My experience was that creative thinking about how to interact with groups as complex as families, had potential learning for working systemically in organisations: as I got to know Sonia Nevis after the training programme, I became used to the idea that there could be a helpful transfer of knowledge between working with families and working with organisations. As I looked towards Constellations for inspiration I was repeating this pattern.

My focus on the *process* of Constellating also involved me in ignoring other aspects of Constellating that I found less savoury: the practice is based on some very normative assumptions about what is right or wrong in families, which are called the “Orders”. An example is the rule that those who were in the system first have priority (Franke, 2003: 93); another is a focus on finding and knowing one’s place (Beaumont, 1999: 15). This “ordering” has implications of a normative and conservative nature. This is a specific manifestation of a general theme in family therapy, which is towards the holding forces of family groups¹. I mention this here because this style of engaging with the process and ignoring some of the substantive, political and social implications of the process, also repeats a pattern. It is a pattern that will be important for me as I ask later in this chapter, what do I stand for? Is my process consultant’s focus on *how* things are achieved at the cost of *what* it is that is being done, and does this effectively block a source of energy and excitement for me?

The focus that Constellating brings to the holding or conservative forces within families, also highlights, and reinforces for me, a theme that I discern in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and in my interest in the ground in the Gestalt figure/ground. As such the stance I take towards Constellating is both a consequence of the re-thinking I described in Chapter Four and a reinforcement of it. The overall effect is to emphasise a growing interest in belonging, and being in place: my experience of constellating helps me to identify this as a point of specific interest in my re-thinking of how I am situated in the world. As I will explain in this chapter my attention to the belonging/being in place aspect of Constellating proves to be focusing on

¹ “All relationship systems are conservative. Their logic demands that the member’s shared investment of care and concern should serve to balance out all injustices and exploitations. Through both the unchanged-ability of genetic relatedness and the continuity of obligation accounts, families constitute the most conservative systems of all relationships” (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973:11).

only one half of what is being revealed. As my experience of Constellating develops during 2005, I achieve a fuller understanding of how the ‘being in place’ aspects exist in counterpoint to a commitment to paying attention to experience in the present moment; and to the potentially liberating consequences of such attentional discipline. In this sense, the movement of my understanding in relation to Constellating, mirrors the movement of a wider understanding that is thematic for the thesis.

How did I understand Constellating in early 2005?

Constellating is a process for representing the complex dynamics of family situations through placing people in physical relationship to each other. It looks like a form of psychodrama (Franke, 2003:47) except the processes of movement are more stylised, and there is very little speaking. It is normal for the family situation brought to be considered within the Constellation to be a trans-generational one. The constellating process is concerned with historic patterns and entanglements, often involving the representation of people who are deceased. In this sense the work of Constellating builds on the work of family therapist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy² and his collaborators (1973; 1986), who drew attention to the way families re-created patterns of entanglement across generations.

I want now to quote four paragraphs from my 2005 paper to illustrate how I was making sense of the Constellating process at this time. Let us read the extract first. Then I will offer some observations that will tie this account into the preliminary remarks I have offered at the beginning of this section.

What you see when constellating takes place is typically a space encircled by interested participants. This space forms a kind of stage on which some of the participants model a human system by representing parts of that system in relationship with each other. As well as being a physical, practical space it also takes on the qualities of a special experimental space in which slightly different rules of engagement with other people prevail. Here in this space those who bring issues or represent parts of systems being modelled are encouraged to make figural their embodied feeling and sensing states, and to hold back their cognitive intellectual functions.

The constellating process starts with someone bringing an issue to do with a system that is typically not represented in the room [i.e. only the issue holder from that system is present]: this might be the issue holder’s family of origin or a department in an organisation, but in any case the constellating will not normally be done with those who are themselves members of the system to be modelled – even the issue holder is represented by another person. It needs to be emphasised that the representatives usually have no previous knowledge of the system being

² Iván Böszörményi-Nagy (born Budapest, May 19, 1920; died Glenside, Pennsylvania, January 28, 2007) was a Hungarian-American psychiatrist. He emigrated from Hungary to the United States in 1950. He developed the contextual approach to family therapy, which emphasizes the ethical dimension of family development. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iván_Böszörményi-Nagy.)

modelled. The issue holder is usually encouraged to say only a little about the problem he or she has with the system. The information the issue holder supplies is mainly embodied in the way in which they make an initial placement of the representatives; the angles and distances that relate the various components of the system. These representatives typically stay still until moved by the facilitator, acting on information supplied in response to questions s/he asks of the representatives, and in an attempt to find a place that feels better for the representative. In this way the constellating process seeks out knowledge, which is contained in the configuration of the system, and which is unlocked by relative strangers through their bodily responses to that system as it is modelled.

The constellation looks like a highly stylised form of drama, where the movement takes place in a very considered and measured, way normally under the direction of the facilitator. Each movement is considered for its total systemic effect. It is not unusual for the facilitator, having been told by a representative that they want to move, to ask them to move one third of the movement they want to make, and then to check with the other representatives, “what has changed for you?” or “Is this better, worse, or the same?”

The representatives are briefed to report changes in bodily state such as feeling cold down one side, or weak or strong, or changes in perception, such as the room looking brighter, or distances feeling further or shorter. [I then quote from advice provided to those who take on the role of representatives in a Constellation].

“If you are a representative, it’s really important to say what you are experiencing. Try to bracket out your beliefs and your preferences. You don’t need to forget them. It’s enough to pay attention to what is actually going on in your body, and in your heart and in your soul while you are representing someone in a constellation. In some families, you may feel something that is taboo or forbidden, a sexual charge, a murderous rage, or you may begin to weep. It is important that you give us that information, but we ask you not to offer your theories about the family. That’s information that is not helpful for this kind of work.” (Hellinger and Beaumont, 1999: 15). (Transfer Papers 4th February 2005)

Taken as a whole this piece of writing supports the view that in early 2005 I was most interested and engaged with the *structural aspects* of the Constellation process. In this piece of writing I place emphasis on: a) the structuring of space; b) the slow and measured pace of the process, and the way this reveals the interlinked nature of the whole system (e.g. by careful exploration of the potential for consequential impact arising from small movements by one person); and c) the abstract qualities of the performance, which can be seen through phrases such as “stylised drama”, and “angles and distances that relate the various components of the system”. I do also mention the way the Constellation focuses attention on bodily experience; however these references are all related to the experience of the participants. This is particularly evident in the quotation from Hellinger and Beaumont that I include at the end of this piece. There is no mention of the experience

of the Constellator/facilitator. From the perspective of this account the Constellator is playing the role of a sensitive stage director. I am underplaying, through omission, the part they are playing. In a sense this bias recreates the design I produced for the W case, where I set up an intervention, and then withdrew to observe. This also had resonance with the approach I had taken in my supervision group as reported in Chapter Three.

Re visiting this description of the Constellating case shows me something in my process during the doctoral journey that was not apparent to me at the time in 2005. I believe now that the description, when read in the context of my intervention in the W, case shows me seeking the generative aspects of an established aspect of my consulting style. It shows me detaching from the client situation, so as to create useful space for the client, and to lessen the opportunity for my own egocentricity to become enmeshed unhelpfully in the client's situation. In my writing and my practice from this time I am recognising, and illuminating, aspects of my own capability and practice: configuring them in a positive light. In writing about them, directly and indirectly (the 'W' case and my description/understanding of Constellating), I perceive the world of my consulting more clearly from the perspective of a skilful facilitator of others. The description from 2005 brings this aspect of my self more clearly to light. I see myself as identifying a resource in myself that I might set alongside my introspection and self-absorption. This is a resource that is being seen differently as I engage with the existential aspects of phenomenology and this particular practice of working with families. I myself am seeking an antidote to the neediness and self-indulgence that seemed to come so strongly to the fore in 2002/3, and *I am doing this by looking to what is already present as a capacity of myself*. I take to constellating in part because I am already a Constellator: arguably this is what I was doing in the strategy case in 2001. As I recognise myself in the constellating process so I come to understand that in my search for energy and excitement I may not need to look for what is brand new: I may need to look closer to hand at what I am already skilful at³. Does my competence have another side? Is my competence blocking my energy?

The sense I make of this now as I look back on the stream of activity, and its associated writing from early 2005, is that the course I was exploring had a double edge. I understand now more clearly, that heading in the direction of a more detached stance towards my clients opened up another aspect of myself, which is deeply connected to the theme of energy and excitement in

³ Argyris identified the potential for professionals to defeat their own learning efforts by clinging to competence, and avoiding the potential embarrassment of making themselves vulnerable, by publicly recognising error (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985: 280-281; Argyris, 1992: 27-34; Argyris and Schon, 1996: 75-78). Although there are aspects of public disconfirmation involved in my journey, my focus is more on a more private journey. I seek to re-shape the fundamentals of my own reasoning process through my engagement with Merleau-Ponty, and to discover unacknowledged resources within my own ground.

my life. This side is symbolised by the feedback from B, and my reaction to it as I re-read it as part of writing this thesis. I see that the “selflessness” of my response to my clients also contains a worm in its heart. This is the “worm” of detachment and its personal consequences for me – and my clients. What is exposed is my capacity for “disappearance”. Bridget spoke of how painful this had been for her, and others, who have given me feedback, have noticed how it affected the energy and quality of contact between myself and other people. This awareness of myself as potentially ‘disappearing’ deepens my feeling for the complexity of my situation. On the one hand I see myself moving from self absorption towards a more detached focus on systemic relations. As I do I begin to notice that my apparent selflessness connects to a less generative aspect of my style – my capacity to ‘disappear.’

A perspective from the action research literature helps me

The dilemma I am framing for myself is an intensely personal one. However, it is also one that is articulated at another level within the qualitative inquiry literature. Engaging at this level helps to flesh out the nature of the dilemma, and put it in a larger context. Here is one way of expressing the double-sided nature of the choices facing action researchers that resonates with my own dilemma.

If classic ethnography’s vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other (Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong, 2000: 109).

Here we have a presentation of generative and de-generative aspects of the same qualities: detachment may become indifference; reflexivity may become self-absorption. On the one hand the authors notice that when relatively privileged researchers are inquiring into the lives of those who have been marginalised, then high levels of self-reflexivity by the researcher may silence the research “subject”. The research becomes for the researcher and their own development, not for the client. They also graphically illustrate that a lack of reflexivity may be problematic by quoting Ruth Behar:

We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable (ibid)⁴

This presentation helps me to see more of the potential complexity in my own situation. Encouraged by this article I ask myself whether my self-reflection can dip into self-absorption; and whether healthy detachment can dip into disappearance? Also whether the degenerative aspects of both these dimensions might not reinforce each other.

Disappearance ----- Detachment

⁴ Behar, R. (19

with Esperanza’s story.

Boston: Beacon Self absorption----- Self reflection



The reference above to vulnerability also raises the question about whether I am being defensive (Argyris and Schon, 1996: 75). The reference to “vulnerability” is particularly pertinent as I spend much of my time working with organisational leaders, where being open to learning, despite the ramifications of power, is vital to the social utility, and sheer effectiveness of the organisations in which they lead (Torbert, 1998: 235-239). Does a design like that created for W show me being vulnerable? Or is it being competent and powerful? I think here of a question I asked myself at the EGOS conference (July, 2006) to which I will refer again in this chapter: “am I just being clever and powerful?” Also from the perspective of early 2005 I can see my detachment as a tendency to not participate with my clients in the work. It is not so much a case that I am doing research “on them” (Heron and Reason, 2001: 179), but that I am not joining them in a shared enterprise. I am detached rather than exploitative. Within the action research literature I might say that this relates, in part, to qualities in the second person aspects of my work. My inquiry *with* the client is muted.

This discussion of the ethical issues relating to how the action researcher positions them self in relation to the client system, helps me to clarify my own question in two ways. First it opens me to the potential subtlety of the issue at hand in respect of myself. It reinforces and clarifies my intuition that my skilfulness might, in some way, be working against me. How does my competence have another side? How is my competence undermining me in my search for my life energy? This line of questioning takes me towards re-framing the questions I am asking of my self, as I will show shortly. The other line of questioning opened by Fine, and colleagues, relates directly to how I participate, and in particular how I bring myself into the inquiry situation with my clients. An important aspect of this concerns the question, what is a healthy and energetic way to bring my own subjectivity to bear in my consulting, and more generally in my life? My inquiry into this question about the use of my own subjectivity is subsequently shaped by a change in my experience of the constellating process, as I transition from being a trainee seeking new methods and technique into becoming a direct participant. Through my participation I come to understand my own dilemma more clearly, and also to see the skills of the Constellator differently. In consequence of this change of perspective I not only see something different in the Constellators skills but also recognise resources in myself that might support me towards a healthier engagement with myself and others.

I experience a constellation as an issue holder

In the following paragraphs I describe how my experience of directly participating in a Constellation reveals how intensely personal they are and

illustrates the necessary competence of the Constellator in bringing attentional discipline to bear. I see how the constellation is both structural *and* personal. This awareness contributes to my reflection on my own circumstances by opening the possibility that I might draw on my own capabilities for paying attention to help plot a more generative path for myself.

During the second half of 2005, an important aspect of my inquiry was that I engaged twice in a constellation as an issue holder. Both situations being constellated involved my family: one was exploring my relationship with my sons, and the other with my parents. Reporting on these involves some difficult issues, because I have been cautious about providing a full explanation of these Constellations publicly. I have also been cautious about sharing the full story of the Constellations with my sons or my parents partly from a desire to not impose on them material which, while it may be important to me, may be less so to them. I have shared parts of what came up with parents and sons respectively, but not the detail. I would like here to speak about the case as they relate to my ongoing inquiry without producing the case studies.

The picture that emerged from both constellations was one of a stuck male energy within the male line of our family. The root of this was the death of my grandfather in an accident when my father was seventeen. My father had gone to war shortly afterwards, and had stayed away from home for seven years. Many of his friends were also killed in the war. Both Constellations pointed back to my father's premature loss of his own father as a blocking force in the trans-generational relationship patterns among the men in our family. The Constellation revealed the possibility that my father's loss was still operating in our family in some way, and I resolved to speak with my father about this. The Constellation also opened up in me intense feelings for my father, which were stronger than those I was aware of in my contact with the real man. I realised how much I loved him, and also how stuck that love had become. The resolution in the Constellation did not offer much optimism for radically changing this situation in the time my father and I had left. However I did take from it some clues as to future lines of inquiry: a) I have made a determined effort to re-cast my relationship with my father while taking care to respect the extent to which he does and does not want to be involved in such an enterprise. I'm motivated in this partly by the insight provided by the Constellations that this will have a benefit on my relationship with my own sons; b) the experience led me to inquire into the attitude and skills of the Constellator which has consequences for how I re-connect to my own capacities as a human being.

I'm deciding not to offer a lot of detail about my inquiries with sons and father but I do want to mention some of this in order to emphasise the personal nature of this systemic inquiry. This serves the overall thesis by filling out important aspects of the intimate way in which I am situated, both as a person and as an action researcher. In this sense the account I now offer

fleshes out the question, what does it mean to be situated in a historic context?

About ten days after the Constellation concerning my relationship with my mother and father (which occurred on the 3rd November 2005) I went down to visit them at their home in Devon with Bridget, armed with a tape recorder. I asked my parents if I could record the occasion of their meeting as a piece of family history. I said that eventually I might have it transcribed for others in the family (I have not done so yet). I wanted to make it seem like a piece of family research (They knew that I had been compiling a family tree) to position it in a relaxed way, but also to keep a focus. I hoped that the tape recorder would keep us on subject. In the event they talked with real enthusiasm for just over two hours. Bridget and I took them to a pub nearby that had a quiet restaurant. I asked them first to explain how they met, got married and spent their early life. This was amusing because they had different stories. They laughed and disagreed. I had never heard this detail before. When later I spoke with Bridget she said that she had never spoken with her parents about these private aspects of their life. Since then I have discovered that many of my colleagues have never talked in this personal way with their parents. Then I asked about my grandfather.

I knew some of the story. He had been gassed in 1916, and subsequently had difficulty working full time, because his lungs had been damaged by chlorine in the gas. Partly as a result of this my father's family were not well off. I also knew that my grandfather was killed in 1940 in a road accident during the 'blackout' when he was knocked off his bike by a bus. This much I knew but now my father told me much more. I learned that at the time he had been waiting for my grandfather in a nearby church where they were both choristers, and other more private details. This part of the conversation was held quietly, but without visible emotion. It was un-dramatic but serious. My mother knew the story, but she listened intently. In fact that was the atmosphere of the moment – intense listening. After this my mother insisted on telling lots of detail I really didn't want to hear, about what a difficult birth I had been, which caused amusement for my wife and father. We went home, and Bridget and I stayed the night before heading home. We spoke about them as we drove. The life they had led, and what we might have to do as they got older. We decided to let our sons know in outline the story of their great grandfather. The story has entered our family life. Not with great drama, but just quietly as one of the things that gets mentioned from time to time. When I see my parents I look for an opportunity to mention him.

Later that year I took my youngest son back to Nottingham to visit my father's sister and we stayed in a hotel directly opposite St Mary's church where my father had waited for his father all those years before. We visited the church and I told my son about my father and his father. About the death and a little about what I thought it might have been like to lose a father like that at such an age. It was not a long conversation but it felt as though my relationship with Joe was being reinforced a little just by bringing Arthur's

name into a realm where we might speak about it. April 17th 2007 was my parents sixtieth wedding anniversary. As the oldest son I made a toast. I referred to Arthur and my other grandparents, bringing them into the room by saying that, if they were here, how proud they would be of my parents' achievement in their life. I felt my own presence as a son, and also as a father, as I spoke. It felt right. Now in our family something long gone is now spoken of, and this has changed the situation for me (and I fancy for others). I feel more like I 'represent' something, and that in this way my life as father, and also as son, has been enhanced.

Since the Constellation I have become more attuned to how paying attention to quite small moments of contact within the family can be a source of joy and connectedness for me. These are often not dramatic moments of high emotion; rather they are 'ordinary' in the sense of being about the normal practicalities of being a family. However, through them I feel more grounded in my life within my family – as if something had been restored to me. I am not so very different in other ways. Still showing a capacity for detachment, but somehow this seems to have been transcended. Ordinary life has many moving moments once it is attended to, and I don't need to be a process consultant to get joy from them. Here is an example of a family event concerning Alice, which I recorded in my notebook in early 2006. I like it because it still shows me slightly on the edge of things, but in a healthier way. I take heart from this so I want to show it to you.

Haircutting Ceremony

In Alice's room [in the Churchill Hospital in Oxford] this afternoon. I visited her with Joe. She already had a visitor – Sarah – a buddy from diving... Alice proposed we should help her cut her hair which was starting to fall out- this was upsetting her. She wanted to take control of the process. We gathered around her bed. First Sarah started to cut with scissors. Then Joe took up an electronic shaver he had brought with him [he and Alice must have pre-arranged this but I knew nothing about it], and he shaved her scalp. As her hair dropped to the ground a new face appeared. The eyes and the smile seemed much more pronounced without the softening frame of the hair. I could cradle it [her head] easily in my hands as I bent over to kiss the top of her head. There was laughing and joking about the wearing of hats. Alice thought we all needed to buy her silk scarves. I will buy her some tomorrow [over the next few months I did especially when at airports]. It was moving for me to see Joe carefully shave his sisters head; to see the natural familiarity with which they moved together...Alice dropping her chin to expose the naked curve where the head shapes into the back of the neck. Joe, holding her head, and moving the clippers gently over the scalp. To be with her like this.(Notebook, 13th January 2006, vol. 8: 221-222)

These moments of gentle conversation, physical proximity and contact were moving for me. I felt re-awakened to all of my children through the experience. Finding small things to do together, and creating new opportunities for interaction between friends and family has become a tradition of Alice's chemotherapy.

This event had another consequence. I told a friend about the haircutting ceremony, and he contacted another three friends, who suggested to me that we form a men's group to provide me with support through this time of illness in my family. We met in February, 2006, and have met at approximately three monthly intervals since then. The group has never just been about supporting me, although my circumstances have provided some start up energy. We talk about our lives as men, especially about our children, and our relationships (Two, including myself are married, one is gay and the other is divorced and in a long term relationship). When we met near Aberdeen in Scotland in September 2006 we spent the weekend working around a story that had been brought by one of our number. We cooked meals together went on walks and talked about our lives. I have been impressed by this restoration of simple friendship, and I have begun to think about the value of friendship and conversation as a key social capacity in organisations. As a consequence of the meetings with my friends, and the simple events with Alice, some very familiar things have begun to appear differently to me. For example when I went to Stavanger to meet a long standing coaching client in June 2006 I accepted an invitation to visit her in her home and meet her husband and all her children. Before I would have felt this was crossing self imposed boundary against too much intimacy. It was revealing to experience the broader context of her life and to talk with her husband and children. These are simple things but they are invested with energy for me; I feel this 'energy' as a stirring and significant re investment in what is human. Is this what it is to be situated? To belong?

Re-visiting the Constellators.

In these paragraphs I want to return to what I learned about the role the Constellators were playing in the Constellation process. This leads me to clarify my understanding of the balance between detachment and engagement by seeing the way that the Constellators seek to use themselves in service of the client. Through this I come to a fuller understanding of what it might mean to use my subjectivity healthily, and also to recognise that some aspects of what I see resonate with aspects of my own training. Have I forgotten? Is there more in my ground that might be remembered? How much is development in my fifties a question of remembering what has been forgotten?

My experience of having my own family issues Constellated caused me to attend differently to the Constellating process. I was moved in two directions. One direction was to get more interested in what the Constellators were saying concerning what they were trying to do in a Constellation: how were they seeking to use themselves? The second direction was to seek to integrate insights from this inquiry into my own practice. To some extent this involved me in discovering things that seemed familiar as if I was re-organising what I knew as well as taking on board new things. I want next to say something about what happened as I began to read about the Constellators and to think about their practice in relation to my own learning about phenomenology and Gestalt.

As I looked to the literature I discover that the Constellators were deeply interested in their own phenomenological experience. Bert Hellinger is one of the founders of the Constellation process. Here is what he says about the stance he is seeking to take.

Phenomenology is a philosophical method. For me it means subjecting myself to larger contexts and connections, without needing to understand them. I accept them without any intention of helping or proving anything. I submit without fear of what might arise, and the horrifying things that do come out don't frighten me. I face everything, exactly the way it is. In a constellation, I look at everyone, including those who aren't present. I keep them all in view, and then, exposed to this picture, I get a flash of what lies behind the phenomenon....Something takes form that is an essential factor in the behaviour of the people in the family. This essential quality may not be visible, but it's illuminated through the observation of the phenomenon. It comes out into the open, into the light. That's a phenomenological approach. (Hellinger, 1999: 22)

Hellinger is here advocating a two-pronged practice strategy that, as he says, is fundamentally phenomenological. The first step is immersion in the object of his intention – in this case the broader systemic connections of the family system he is in the presence of. He speaks of “subjecting” himself and of how he aims to “submit without fear” and of “facing everything exactly the way it is”. He is trying to comprehend the whole system so he says that he looks at “everyone, including those who aren't present”: in other words he wants to take in as much of what is present as possible. He is deeply attentive. Intertwined with this is the second element of his practice strategy, which is to put aside any “intention of helping or proving anything”. These twin prongs are directly comparable to an important aspect of Ladkin's illumination of phenomenology for action researchers (2005: 108-126)⁵. Ladkin identifies two inter related aspects of phenomenological experience which can “help action researchers take a full account of their subjectivity while simultaneously seeking to more fully understand the other as they engage in inquiry processes.”

Drawing in particular on Husserl and Heidegger Ladkin directly connects phenomenological method with the familiar (to action researchers) concept of critical subjectivity. In service of this connection she suggests that an inquirer seek to adopt “critical subjectivity by noticing how our own consciousness contributes to what we perceive and seeking to suspend our beliefs etc through a process of “bracketing” (ibid: 119). This is what Hellinger is seeking to emphasise when he too speaks of putting aside any intention to prove anything or even to help. In other words to even put aside that which is probably most personally pressing – how can I help this family? The second limb of Ladkin's strategy is immersion in the object

⁵ Ladkin asks how can I, “*while holding on to my subjectivity*, also put it aside, so that I can be open to the other in a way that enables the other to reveal something of itself to me?” (ibid: 113. Emphasis added)

towards which her consciousness is directed. Drawing on “Goethian method” she suggests that the “perceiver puts all of his or her attention into active seeing by plunging into the qualities of the things being observed” (ibid: 120). The idea of immersion is also consistent with Hellinger’s focus on taking in as much of the family system as immediately and directly as possible. This limb of the strategy Ladkin suggests will directly reinforce the first limb, as the perceiver’s pre conceptions fade under the intensity created by the deliberate direct encounter (ibid: 121)⁶.

Hellinger, in his account of his practice, goes on to highlight an essential tension in this stance. On the one hand to, “look at this person with love and without judgement, and wait until he or she was illuminated” so that the observed person is “changed before our very eyes” (Hellinger, 1999: 23). On the other to ensure that there is, “a certain distance. If you jump in – and many helpers jump in-you can’t maintain awareness”(ibid). This is a kind of immersion that is committed to the reception of the other – it is a highly open stance that is being advocated here. Both Hellinger and Ladkin are cautioning against premature action when we are almost bound to move from a particular stance such as – in the case of a therapist - being a helper. Ladkin adds the thought that this difficult process of giving something very full attention while simultaneously holding one self back in terms of one’s own desires wishes etc., might be experienced as a process of slowing down:

What these phenomenological methods are trying to provide, perhaps, is a means by which this interaction can be slowed down and consciously attended to. 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: 120)

This is reminiscent of the description of “sensual abstraction” introduced in Chapter Four. Stewart used a slightly different metaphor when she writes, not of slowing down, but of trying to “cull attention to moments of legibility and emergence” (Stewart: 1027). She seeks to pay attention to the moments when things emerge into sense. Merleau-Ponty would refer to these as moments of dehiscence, encouraging a comparison between the emergence of sense, and the breaking open of a seedpod. Through these metaphors

⁶ My Gestalt heritage also lays an emphasis on the energetic aspects of being alert to our own subjective experiencing of things:

“It is all too easy to depart from the flow of immediate sensuous reality and disappear into thoughts images, rehearsings, worries, fragments of memory – that ongoing mixture of free association and conversation with self, conducted at a sub vocal (or sub-sub-sub-vocal) level, which has the capacity to fill minds interminably. We can remain in this realm of consciousness (or rather semi-consciousness) for long periods – witness those times when we have driven long distances along familiar routes and have only woken up when we arrived. ‘How did I get here? we ask’ (Parlett, 2001: 44).

these scholars all convey the potential benefits of developing disciplines of attention, and the double-sided nature of this attention: illuminating the self and the other.

In this thesis I have sought to use the written form to describe how things have emerged to me. This has involved me in seeking to describe both what is happening to me, and to also open myself to “other” so that I might illuminate “other” through description as well. In this sense the thesis follows an intuition of the doctoral journey where I sought to describe my situation before I really understood the significance of what I was doing. Sonia Nevis advised me to “say where I am” and I have tried to turn this into a methodological principle. As I have struggled with this I have slipped both ways at various times in the doctoral journey. I have over focused on myself and slipped into self-indulgence particularly in 2002/03. I have also slipped the other way as I have become remote and detached. Now I am being shown a practice that seeks to sustain an illuminating balance – for that is what it is. What these phenomenologists in practice clarify is that by opening myself to other so I will also illuminate myself. I cannot get to a closer understanding of myself by introspection alone, and I cannot get there by removing or hiding myself. It is only from my engagement with the ‘other’ that I will also come to see my self more clearly; also this is the only means to discover what is exciting and novel for me at this time in my life, for it is only in relations to something other than me that energy arises. This is what my phenomenological journey seems to be revealing to me as the healthy relationship with my subjectivity. How though did I start to practice this insight as I gradually acquired it during 2005? What follows is an account of a Consulting case from the autumn of 2005 in which I sought to apply my revised perspective on the use of my own subjective self. As I do so I make another discovery that relates phenomenological method directly to my interest in energy, and excitement in my life.

5.2. The dead men in the pipe

This section illustrates me making use of my own subjectivity in a consulting case from the autumn of 2005. From the perspective of this thesis the case is double edged. On the one hand it *does* demonstrate me engaging more fully in the moment of an important exchange in a meeting with a corporate client. However the case also illustrates how, in a later account of this situation at an international conference, I deny myself; I stand back from the full truth of what I was trying to do in the moment of my exchange in the corporate office. This is another form of the “cleverness” to which I have alluded before, and it causes me to think through the consequences of behaving in such a way as to “deny myself”. Using my newly found understanding of what truth might mean from a phenomenological perspective I ask, do I stand in my own truth? In responding to the question I realise that having the courage to be simply truthful requires being alert to the way my own desire to appear competent and clever might sabotage me. Do I beguile myself away from my truth? Have I enchanted myself in some way?

This case occurs on September 20th at the same time as I was deepening my understanding of Constellations to include the way in which the Constellators were making use of their own subjective experience to support their clients. In describing the case I will draw on the text of an article I have prepared for the Gestalt Journal. I intend this case to provide a contrast with the more disembodied, and remote story, recounted in the W case.

The issue that led directly to my presence in the UK office of a large multi national in September 2005 was one of safety: four men had died inside a 54” diameter stainless steel pipe in gas processing plant being built in Egypt. The four men had all been asphyxiated by Argon gas used in the welding operation to prevent oxidation of the steel. The official report records the bare bones of the event.

Between 1430 and 1440, a grinding technician and a welder made an unauthorized entry (no Confined space Entry Permit was requested nor issued) into the pipe. It is believed they entered the pipe to perform a seal weld on the interior side of the weld.....Shortly thereafter, the grinder died inside the pipe as he descended the slope at the end of the pipe. The welder exited the pipe and raised the alarm. Upon hearing the alarm the pipe fitter, a grinder and others entered the pipe in a rescue attempt. Attempts to stop workers entering the pipe were made by a manager and a supervisor at the scene, but rescuers forced their way into the pipe. Three would be rescuers died inside the pipe..... ” (Confidential Company Report quoted with approval on the basis that the name of the Company is withheld)

I had been invited to the meeting because the Company was interested in inquiring into cultural features that might be contributing to unsafe working

practices within their own and contractor operations.⁷ I was sitting silently absorbing as much as I could, trying to figure out how might I contribute.

As I listened I noticed my own shocked response to the story. I remember imagining briefly the turmoil of thought and feeling that must have gripped the men in the pipe and the feelings of pity and anger that arose in me. I was aware that I was controlling my feeling, looking for signs that the men in the room felt some compassion for those who had died so I could remain balanced. As I listened it seemed clear that those present were indeed highly concerned; however, the conversation was a little like the report quoted above: on the whole it was dispassionate and impersonal (no names for example), which was not how I was feeling. What sense could I make of the contrast between what seemed to me to be a disembodied dialogue and my own disturbed feelings? There were clear risks here that if I spoke I might sound self-righteous or indignant, which would be likely to lose my audience. What I did was to wait while I tried to distance myself from my feeling state, or, in that telling phrase, to collect myself. As I did so I noticed something slightly different: in their concern to take action to prevent repetition of this accident, there was an inclination to present the men who died in the attempted rescue as being at fault. They were in breach of procedure, had ignored their supervisor etc. It occurred to me that there might be some value at this early stage in the process of retaining a fuller sense of the incident so I offered these thoughts: "I wonder if we should also notice that these men seem also to have acted selflessly and courageously in caring for their fellow worker? Has this been recognised and honoured? It also seems to me that without people caring for each other then we will find it hard to have the kind of safe environment you desire. Perhaps the real question for the Company is how can we make it safe for men to care for each other in this way?" It's not so easy to remember now precisely the impact this had. I did at the time just "know" that it was the right thing to say at the right moment - partly because of the thoughtful silence that followed, and the way I was included in the movement into action. The conversation turned to a consideration of different human and cultural contexts for safety (e.g. is caring a natural human response), and at the end I was hired to visit some of the company sites around the world to develop ideas for bringing aspects of cultural inquiry to their safety effort (Farrands, R. (2007). In preparation).

⁷ My contact with the client was a rather tenuous one. I had been asked by a Director to continue coaching him when he moved here from another organisation with which I consulted regularly, and I had had slight previous contact with the OD manager. The OD manager had invited me to this meeting following a couple of preliminary telephone discussions on the question of Corporate culture and safety on which I had done some previous work. Meetings like this are set up to not over commit either of the parties; they get a bit of a look at me from several angles – the Group HR director, the Head of Safety etc. while I have the opportunity to see if I might have something to offer. Sometimes there will be no energy for doing anything together, and there will be a kind of dance of dissolution (a couple of small meetings, perhaps a bit of a written proposal, but really going nowhere at all); other times a connection will begin, leading to a more substantial piece of work.

The flash of initial shock, associated with my passing contact with the situation in the pipe, aroused me. I felt “pity” and “anger”. Now I think back to the scene, I seem to remember that my body was shaking slightly as I heard the story – vibrating. This awareness was constructed partly out of what I saw (“looking for signs”); also what I felt. My whole body was present to the situation and it all responded⁸. I also realised a risk, from my own history, to be strident and self-righteous in situations like this. This double awareness of something outside my self, and also of something that was a part of my style arrived mixed up. It was not easy to tell what was arising from my ground and what from outside in my contact with ‘other’.

As I sought to take choice-full action I owned my own predisposition, and also my own feeling response. In taking ownership I also took some distance from my feelings and my automatic inclination to respond in a particular way. The way in which this “taking a distance” was expressed was by using a questioning format to make an impact, and also to manage my surge of indignation, and incipient self-righteousness. The question gave me sufficient distance – I put out my feelings, but also put them away from me in the form of a question⁹. The question grabbed attention (not only the content, but also something I think in my voice – a strong urgent speaking¹⁰), but also landed between us – what should *we* do it asked? Shortly after the meeting I was told by the OD Manager, “your question made us think – that’s why you got the work”. For myself I wonder if I could have been stronger in speaking up for the men who had died, and for justice for their families. This wondering arises partly out of what happened ten months later when I spoke of this case at the EGOS conference in Bergen, Norway in July 2006.

⁸ When I did my training in Gestalt I worked with a small group of others. Towards the end of our time together we took it in turns to sit in front of the rest of the group, not to receive feedback in the normal way, but for each member of the group to say what was evoked in themselves, by our presence to them. Rather than directing our attention to them we were being asked to receive them. I’m reminded of that here as I “receive” the whole of this situation, including the feeling that goes with my brief imaginative re-creation of the men struggling to reach their comrades and dying in the attempt.

⁹ At the EGOS conference where I reported on this account I said:
 “I also notice that the question form is in part a political response to help me to deal with the risk of alienating the audience by appearing “self righteous”; a question seems to provide me with a little more emotional self control – keeps me well away from a rant. I’m managing distance through inquiry.” (Gestalt Organisation and Validity, 2006: 5)

¹⁰ I have no evidence from this apart from how I felt and the following comment from the Organisation Development Manager. My being at this moment in this meeting is memorable for me. If I think about standing in my own truth I try to re conjure this moment. Writing about it also helps to consolidate it as part of my experience.

At the EGOS conference I presented extracts from the paper in which I discussed this case and made a number of “Quality Comments” on the paper. One of them referred directly to how this meeting was reported.

Overall I think I’m more concerned with impact than with genuine inquiry. This of course has its uses: this is a potential new client who I want to engage me. Judged in this light the questions work, but it is as well to be aware of this and not kid myself that I am doing something (e.g. opening a space for the dead men) that I am not in fact doing. I begin to reflect on older personal patterns and needs about making a good impression and how I respond in novel social settings. This takes me back to an earlier Gestalt article submitted to supervision right at the beginning of the doctoral journey. Is making a good smooth impression one of Rob’s quality criteria? Am I just being clever and powerful is the disturbing question that lingers. (Gestalt Organisation and Validity, 2006: 5)

I look back on this comment with sadness. It strikes me now as a dangerous half truth – a subtle denial of something important for me, and, as such, a refusal to step up to my own truth. The point of sadness is the way I discuss my own motivation for saying what I did say about the dead men. It is not that the point about making a smooth impression is incorrect, but that it is incomplete. Can you detect what I am doing? For example my slightly dismissive and distancing tone in the first sentence?

In fact I *was* moved by the story of the men; I *was* touched and angered. I *did* want to open up a space for them. I *did* think of justice for them and their families. In the September meeting in the Corporate HQ, I balance these desires against other factors, and ask a question. Later, at the EGOS conference, when faced with an audience of academics (I think now as I look back from April 2007), I play to that audience, and in so doing deny something important. I say only what I imagine the audience might like to hear from a well paid consultant. I seem to be so concerned not to claim a desire for truth and justice that I collapse into a kind of sceptical cleverness. Again I do not deny the truth of the statement about “making a good impression” for the story seems to illustrate me doing just that. But I want to shout out also that it is a half-truth; moreover, one that is bad for me, and bad for others too. How can I live more of my truth, not less of it?

In the context of this case this question about my truth settles profoundly for me. It feels substantial. Savouring brings thoughts of courage. My supervisor thought she saw some possibility in me during the problems with my supervision group. Have I let down CARPP as well as myself? I think of what it means to be courageously in my truth: the quality of constancy. To stay true not just to live it when it suits another agenda. I have made a lot of money from this one moment in the office – a whole client system opened up before me. But I have not achieved what I most wanted in that moment. I was soon diverted onto other things. I don’t know what happened to the families of the men who died. To live in the world in courage constancy and truth: what might it take to participate in the world in accordance with such values?

In some way in the moment of speaking in that meeting I had participated in the horror in the pipe. I had reached across and made contact with the situation. It was only a passing glimpse but I think it invested my presence with something that I have found memorable and which caught the attention of the others present in the room. My subsequent EGOS experience, although essentially disappointing on this point, helped me to reflect back more fully on what that moment was about. Was it that in that moment of participation I was able to speak fully from my own experience? Is this what it means to live in my truth?

5.3. Resolution: participation, experience and knowing.

In this section I use Merleau-Ponty again to help me think about the questions and dilemmas being posed by the thesis as a whole, and this last chapter in particular. He has been my companion in the last half of the journey: I call upon him to help me in these final reflections. How will thinking with him help me to a fuller understanding of the complex dilemma sketched out at the end of the previous section. I think also of how I was moved at the end of the previous section to remember my commitment to CARPP. How can my thinking at this stage in the thesis be for myself and also for my friends and colleagues in CARPP? I would also like to offer something back that in addition to reflecting on my questions around energy and excitement also offers something about the process of my journeying: what have I uncovered about first person inquiry and its relationship to the wider field of action research?

As I face these questions, I am aware also that I can continue to write in a way that is open to what emerges. In this way my writing may yet take me to unexpected places – even as the end approaches. These reflections release me to seek synthesis and conclusion as I don the habit of ending.

Participation

In these paragraphs I am going to look more fully at the question of how I participate in the world, as a device for seeking out connections between action research, phenomenology, and Gestalt. I do this in the knowledge that participation means something in all three domains of thought, and also out of the awareness that participation has surfaced out of my reflections so far in this chapter. I am relying on an intuition that this will be a fruitful device, in the knowledge that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I hope that this reflection will help to pull together the rich themes that have emerged so far and enable some synthesis in service of responding to the questions concerning life energy and action research that were posed at the beginning of this chapter.

According to the way I was taught Gestalt my subjectivity comes alive as *I act* to satisfy needs and desires. Experience arises out of acting – acting and experiencing are correlated in this modelling of human being. My understanding of this idea was subsequently modified through my engagement with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, when I came to see that needs may not appear as determinate thoughts, but may arise as part of an embodied response to a situation – an embodied way of locating ourselves. Also, that our own self may appear in other ways than simple needs – particularly as prejudgements, or habits about how to be in a particular situation. For example, a desire or inclination to act like a “helper”, which Hellinger wrote of in relation to Constellating can be considered a mode of acting in particular situations, and therefore as a way of experiencing the world. In short, in the case of an existential phenomenology such as that presented by Merleau-Ponty, needs, preconceptions etc come less from a storeroom inside our head, and more from our way of relating to our

situation in the world: "...man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself." Expressions such as this worked in me gradually, throughout the second half of the doctoral journey. As they did I began to appreciate that I might find resources, and energy, through engaging more fully with my situatedness in the world. This gradually enriched my idea of what it was that I was involved in as I engaged in first person inquiry. I especially began to understand "critical subjectivity" (Reason and Marshall, 1987: 113; Heron and Reason, 2001: 184; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Reason and Torbert, 2001) as being less concerned with introspection, and more with opening to my connection to the world. What does this mean – to appreciate critical subjectivity through connectedness? To respond to this question I need first to address exactly how I am coming to understand my connectedness.

One formulation of such a "connection" to the world that figures in the action research literature is that of participation. Reason and Bradbury place "Participatory Worldview" at the centre of their understanding of what differentiates action research from other modes of research, and shapes a fundamental set of beliefs concerning epistemology, action, and purpose for action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 6-8). The same underpinning theme also appears in Reason and Torbert's article on the "Action Turn" in action research (2001: 7-8), and is essential to an understanding of the work of other action researchers: for example John Heron's work on collaborative inquiry (Heron, 1992 and 1996), and Marshall's work on the essential connectedness of "Living Systemic Thinking" (2004: 305-308). Participation also appears as a feature of the more general field of qualitative inquiry, as is illustrated by Kincheloe & McLaren's consideration of performative styles of direct intervention (2005: 314-315), and Bishop's reflection on Maori approaches towards creating knowledge (2005: 118-120), and the colonial roots of positivist approaches towards anthropological research *on* other peoples. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 33-35) also identify a participatory mindset as being an essential aspect of action research as they locate it within the wider field of academic research.

Inspecting the literature reveals a mixture of truth and desire. On the one hand participation is taken as a core metaphor for revealing the state of human beings relationship to the world:

We participate in our world...the 'reality' we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 6-7).

On the other hand participation is also a compelling metaphor for epistemological and methodological concerns (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 8-9; Greenwood and Levin, 2005: 58-60; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 33-34;) designed to "produce radical, democratizing transformations in the civic sphere" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 34). In this way "participation" symbolises both an underpinning *world-view* (a 'truth'), and also a fundamental epistemological and methodological *commitment* (a desire).

How can I now use this mixture of truth and desire to take my own inquiry forward?

I have also come to experience participation as a feature of Gestalt and phenomenology. Participation is arguably a fundamental aspect of a part whole configuration: how does the part participate in the whole? This aspect seems to me to be fully taken up in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as he addresses how we are situated in the world. As I have engaged with Merleau-Ponty I have experienced his commitment to participation as one that is absolutely immediate: not a spiritual, rather distant, wish, but a practical everyday reality of living a life. On the other hand I have come to understand with him that the world is a strange place where I can never locate myself with absolute clarity. I simultaneously participate in the world as if it was my place – my home, and also as if it was a strange land to be explored. These two primordial modes of participation found two movements of inquiry. One that turns towards my home to understand better my participation in that home: another that turns away from home, to better understand how I participate as a wanderer in contact with what is not me.

A growing realisation of the double edged, and slightly paradoxical, nature of my participation in the world caused me to step back from the first draft of my thesis in January 2007. I launched into an 18,000 word inquiry into *belonging* that, seemed strangely disconnected from the first draft: it seemed instead to connect to something working below the level of the words of the draft – something in the ground of the thesis. I intend to draw on the material I wrote during January and February 2007 here, in this section of the thesis. *How has my doctoral journey intersected the metaphor of participation? What does my journey say about participation? Also, what does my encounter with notions about participation say about my 'truth'?*

Participation and belonging

In these paragraphs I revisit the thought of Merleau-Ponty to ground my reflection in the intellectual development that has accompanied the second half of my doctoral journey. How can Merleau-Ponty accompany me now? As I call on Merleau-Ponty in the context of participation I need to address his thought from a different angle than that of Chapter Four, what does he tell me about how I participate? How do his insights connect with those from Gestalt and action research?

I wish to begin where I imagine Merleau-Ponty would begin - with the fundamental phenomenological concept of intentionality. This concept, as developed by Husserl, proposed an *essential interdependence* between acts of consciousness (remembering, asserting, inquiring, wanting etc), and objects¹¹ of consciousness (the memory, the idea asserted, the object of

¹¹ I am using 'object' here as a slightly less clumsy way of saying 'thing other than me'. I'm not wishing, at this point, to get involved in the distinction between object and phenomena.

inquiry, the thing we want etc). According to Husserl's presentation of this interdependence, I never just look at some object in the world as if I was a blank screen receiving an image of the object, but always bring to the 'looking' some preconception or frame within which I encounter the object. My experience of the object then feeds back to adjust the frame I have of it, and to modify how I "intend" it the next time I perceive it (Sokolowski, 2000: 8). Merleau-Ponty's radical move was to de-intellectualise "intentionality" by describing how the intentional relationship operated between an *embodied subject*, and objects in the world. He referred to this as *motor intentionality*. According to this re-conceptualisation the intentional relationship between a person and an object of attention was no longer just a process of thinking. The person *participated* with objects in the world pre-personally and pre-reflectively. In this sense, the body was no longer thought of as just an object guided by a mind like a pilot steering a ship, but as a fully participating subject in the world – an embodied subject. The picture that emerges, through this re-conceptualisation, is that of an embodied subject thoroughly entwined with the things outside of itself that constitute the person's situation in the world. I want to explain my understanding of this entwining in a little more detail to draw out the implications for our *primordial participation* in the world.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates bodily intentionality with examples of practical relationship to objects. He notices how very complex bodily processes act in the background to support and underpin apparently simple operations, such as lifting a mug of tea to my lips while reading through what I have just written, or weaving my way through a crowded restaurant while attending to Bridget's smiling and welcoming face at the distant table. In these circumstances my body is normatively adjusting to its situation, based on habitual knowledge of how to raise the mug to the lips, and how to balance against gravity, as it manoeuvres between and around objects in the world. In relation to these types of physical tasks his conception would be similar to what sportsmen might call muscle memory. However, Merleau-Ponty also maintained that the same type of bodily account holds true for more complex states of being. Now, instead of our body reaching for the familiar mug in just the right way, or slipping itself through a crowded room, it leans into a familiar inferiority complex, or an oblique deflective emotional style, or a lonely, heroic stance to the world. According to his embodied way of thinking to have an inferiority complex means that, "I have made it my abode" so that while it is "not fate" [that is it is not completely set or determined regardless of circumstances¹²] it has "a specific *weight* and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the *atmosphere of my present*."¹³ (1962: 442. Italics added). We are encouraged not to think of

¹² It is not a determined abstract aspect of our character. It still arises in intentional relationship to a current object of consciousness and still rests to be described within this relationship.

¹³ The language of "weight" and atmosphere" evokes something that is felt and experienced through the body not as a concept.

an inferiority complex as a mental state held as ideas in our head, but as a way of practically encountering, and living in, the world. It is a quality of our participation in the world. By this account some aspects of my situation evoke a certain style of response, which, through repetition, becomes even more habituated as part of my style. I do not, says Merleau-Ponty, necessarily deliberately *decide* to act as I do; instead I lean into this way of acting as a ‘natural’ way that feels right to me. The situation and my response are tightly geared. I *participate* pre-personally through being entwined with my situation.

Just how tightly “geared” is illustrated by the way Merleau-Ponty develops his description of how we come to retain a certain way of being in the world. He shows how events lose their specificity, and become general structures that guide our ways of acting, and shape a “*style of being in the world*” (ibid: 83-84). Imagine, for example, that at some young age, on being sent away to school, you¹⁴ move to hug your father, but the move is resisted. You might, as a child, have neither the strength to surmount the resistance, or to abandon the attempt. You remain imprisoned in the attempt, which you might return to time and time again in different ways, either in the form of actual attempts at physical intimacy, which founder (as you now expect them to), or in the form of decisions not to make the attempt in the first place (which is, of course, different from never having had the need in the first place). Merleau-Ponty observes about these types of event in a person’s life that:

Time in its passage does not carry away with it these impossible projects; it does not close up on the traumatic experience; *the subject remains open to the same impossible future*, if not in his explicit thoughts, at any rate in his actual being.” (Ibid: 84. Emphasis added)

You continue, in some way, to be the young boy who sought to hug his father. New perceptions and emotions arrive, but these affect the content *not the deeper structure of experience*. In a sense this past comes to have some priority¹⁵ over present lived experience. If this past event is progressively reinforced by repetition, then, after a while, the general structure of your response may outlive the specific memories: “it is of its essence to survive only as a manner of being, and with a certain degree of generality” (ibid). In

¹⁴ I have deliberately retained the tense juggling that goes on at the beginning of this paragraph. I’m uncertain about whether to talk about myself, be more abstract, or speak with you the reader more directly. In the end I decide to do the latter in the hope that you might think of your own situations and try on this mode of analysis for yourself. The illustrative event of a child going away to school and moving to hug his father, and being rejected is based loosely on a situation in my own life.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty referred to this surviving bodily habit as “sediment”:

“...those events which sediment in me a sense not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the requirement of a future” (Silverman, 1988: 40-41)

other words, in our example of the young boy and his father, unfulfilled emotional completion does not survive as thought, but as an embodied structure that shapes felt responses to particular situations in the world (for example emotional relations to other people – other men, such as sons, in particular). It becomes an “abode” into which the boy continues to lean even as he grows into adult hood. There is no place he can stand to unequivocally see himself acting in this way – it is just who he is, and how he acts, consistently and persistently reinforced by his experience. It is, Merleau-Ponty suggests to me, helpful to see personality as a structure of bodily habits, *which is always related to specific circumstances in the world*. In the case of the boy in the above example, experiencing a failed attempt at emotional contact with his father, the privilege accorded to this failed project loses its specific substance. It survives as a kind of generalised *feeling*, which regulates his behaviour in the world through a *subtle normative process*: it becomes how he responds to certain circumstances presented to him in his situation. This *abstraction of the specific event into a general felt state* settles into a way of being as a kind of sediment¹⁶.

Through this concept of embodied subjectivity, created and sustained by worldly contact, Merleau-Ponty conveys a vision of human beings living in time – that is in history. Each present moment is haunted by aspects of a *lived* past that are retained as general structures that shape each person’s style of being in the world. He refers to these as “temporal structures”, because they are carried forward from our past to be taken up again and again in our present moments. This is the sense in which what we refer to as “personality” can be considered our temporality – our existence in time, or the structuring of our embodied self by the sediment of that historic existence. This “structuring” emerges in the present as a certain patterning that is revealed as I act within the current situations of my life. Such a historic structuring suggests that I *participate in the world from out of my whole situation*. Another way to say this would be that I participate by *belonging* to a kind of home that is continuously reproduced as a patterned response to my current existence. Such a new understanding about how I participate through deep belonging to my situation turns my attention (as the doctoral journey progresses) away from introspection, and private mental models, and more towards the public arena of *bodily experience*¹⁷ and

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty uses an examination of repression to illuminate our healthy state of being. What is repressed becomes a general anonymous structure which constantly pulls us back to certain ways of being in the world:

“All repression is, then, the transition from first person existence to a sort of abstraction of that existence, which lives on a former experience.....until only the essential form remains. Now as an advent of the impersonal, repression is a universal phenomenon, revealing our condition as incarnate beings by relating it to the temporal structure of being in the world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 84)

¹⁷ “I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in a relationship to this structure.....The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, these motivations, but by means of them. For this significant life, this

acting. This is associated with an increasing interest in what is habitual and patterned rather than consciously chosen¹⁸. As I turn my attention towards my situatedness I also come to a fuller understanding of how difficult it is to separate my experience of the natural world from that of my social or cultural world. This may seem surprising as throughout the journey I have from time to time sought to describe the natural world, and its effect on me. What do I mean by it being difficult to separate the natural and the cultural? This difficulty arises because in my situation in the world the natural and the cultural are mixed together. How are they mixed together?

When I stand on my yoga mat and experience the Sparrow Hawk may I claim that as “natural” experience? If you were to look closely at the language you would see terms like “bank” and “yaw” being used, which are clues that I have flown gliders. How are my experiences of the natural object, and my sedimented knowledge of flight interacting here? Can I really pull them apart? You may remember also, that in close accompaniment to the experience of the Sparrow Hawk, came, wrapped in a surge of feeling, the poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins. How was my experience of the bird being influenced by my felt experience of the poet? I can also think of how our cultural life as human persons is affected by basic

certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it. *It is by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward...I can miss being free only if I try to by pass my natural social situation.*” (PP 455-456. Emphasis added) .¹⁷

¹⁸ In this sense I would have to challenge Macmurray, referenced by Reason and Torbert (Reason and Torbert, 2001: 8), as asserting, “Action is not blind”. According to my understanding of Merleau-Ponty then much of the time *it is* “blind”, in the sense that it is not guided by determinate thought. I would also question, what seems to me to be an the over reliance by Reason and Torbert on “conversation” creating social realities, when they quote Ford and Ford with approval:

“The reality of groups, organisations and wider society is a social construction, which is *primarily established and maintained by conversation*” (Ford and Ford, 1995, referenced by Reason and Torbert, 2001: 10. Emphasis added.)

This seems to me to underestimate the depth of embodied socialisation that arises from our deep participation in our world. Does our experience not sediment in us ways of acting on which our conversing is based? This “underestimating” also seems to occur when the authors imply a distinction between natural and social sources of experiential knowing. As I discuss in the following paragraph it may be impossible to know whether our experiential ground arises from social or natural sources. In these circumstances, “political bias which values the experience only of socially dominant or religiously like-minded groups”, may not be behaviour that “fails to honour experiential presence” – it may, on the contrary “be behaviour that is honouring “the fundamental grounding of all knowing” (Reason and Torbert, 2001: 7). Not only do we live in an intertwined social and natural world, but that intertwined world is also ‘in’ us.

shared aspects of our bodily situation. I stand balanced against the constant force of gravity relying on complex movements of hip knee and ankle joints to happen in the background: as I do I induce a flurry of metaphors about our shared “up” an “down”. For example I associate “up” with freedom and spirit. The Sparrow Hawk “lifts” my spirit – moves me I think partly through the accretion of cultural meaning. I also think of a figure as rising from its ground, and allocate the functions of creative imagination to the “up”. The shape of my body also induces a horizontal field with a front that disappears ‘into the future’, and a back that is a mysterious past. I would seem then to participate by *being a part of an interwoven natural and cultural fabric*. This interweaving seems to me to strengthen my sense of being situated, because I cannot somehow appeal to a higher order in nature – at least not unambiguously so: you may doubt the sense I make of the fox on my lawn.¹⁹ In summary, my engagement with Merleau-Ponty from mid 2003 onwards, works within me a transformation in how I see myself. I come to locate myself *as participating in the world in a particularly immediate and vital way*. I belong in a certain way. This “certain way” is through my situation, which is a historic, embodied place towards which I lean, or yearn to return. *Participation as belonging to a place* in the world suggests a conservative or bound nature to my/our human existence. Is this though the whole picture as it relates to my participation in the world? Is this the only way in which my doctoral journey has intersected the idea of participating in the world?

Participation by travelling, or roaming the world

Merleau-Ponty answers this question by showing that, although we are situated in the world we never come to know the world completely. He identifies a basic indeterminacy at the heart of our existence – an ambiguity that is constantly present. This makes our participation in the world more complex than simply belonging. Despite my connectedness I am free to make choices. Throughout the doctoral journey, I struggle with the fact that this is not only possible, but, furthermore, is demanded of me. How will I act in relation to my parents at this time in their life; what will I say at their 60th wedding anniversary? On my understanding, the description Merleau-Ponty provides of how I am situated in the world does not imply a simplistic analysis of behaviour, based on a kind of embodied fundamentalism. We are situated, but we are not rooted. Merleau-Ponty points out that while we have bodies in common, the way we behave with them is far from common. We constantly evade “the simplicity of animal life” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 189), so that highly significant human behaviour deviates from the direction that might be considered “pre-ordained” by biology “*through a genius for ambiguity that might serve to define man*” (ibid). As he says “Everything is

¹⁹ It is not that we cannot find some natural reference points, but that they are open to interpretation. For example our bodily structure and its physical conditions and attributes are shared with others across cultures, and across time – as far as we know, we would recognise, and be recognised, as human by our most ancient ancestors. Yet these fundamentals are so incorporated into our cultural worlds that sorting nature from nurture is complex.

both natural and manufactured in man” (ibid). We are not definitively ‘caused’ to act by our nature, or our social circumstances, just as we are not completely free to move or do as we please.

When I stop developing my draft thesis, and initiate a new piece of writing in early 2007, I use a metaphor in which I am a traveller, following the path previously trodden by Merleau-Ponty. I describe the discovery of an old journal with a faded map, and frame my engagement as an expedition to re-trace his steps. Within the structure of the metaphor of the journey of exploration, I imaginatively create a world in which I *participate in the world as an adventurer*. I leave my place (my situatedness), and adventure forth into a strange landscape. I am alone. I have to find my own way. In this way the metaphor re-creates some aspects of the doctoral journey. The introspective nature of my start as is disclosed in Chapter Three of the thesis, and the failed MPhil to PhD transfer meeting in July 2003. Yet the metaphor of the adventure also shows me engaging with otherness – moving into a strange landscape looking for *someone as well as something*.

The adventure of moving into strangeness provides a counterpoint to the idea that I participate in the world by belonging to a place in the world. Yes, it seems to me that I participate through belonging within a situation, but I also participate by travelling from that ground to encounter ‘other’. I belong, and long to return home, but I am also an adventurer who travels out from that home to contact others: I am sedimented and I am open. In both modes I am in the world. I am not inner and outer, but in motion on the surface of the world: moving back to my home and moving away to encounter ‘other’.

Mapping participation- Equilibrium in motion

As I thought through different modes of participation in the world in relation to my questions concerning energy I conceived of the two modes of participation, revealed through my engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s thought, as two poles within an energetic cycle, and represented this in my notebook as a drawing. This presentation encouraged me to think of the two modes of participation as being fundamental aspects of my journey of existence. A cycling into and out of belonging, in which there is no origin, but just a continuous dynamic like the breath in yoga: as an out breath completes itself, so it naturally turns into an in breath, and so on – the fulfilment of one initiates the other.

There is no longer the originating and the derived, there is a thought travelling in a circle where the condition and the conditioned, the reflection and the un-reflected, are in a reciprocal, if not symmetrical relationship, and here the end is in the beginning as much as the beginning in the end (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 35).

Although the reference here is specifically to “a thought” the same dynamic interdependence accompanies our embodied participation. This “travelling in a circle” asserts dynamic interplay over any origin. While I am situated and bound in place to some degree, this is never complete. Yes, I understand my self through my situation, but I also have choice in how I take up that

situation. Also, while my habitual body shapes my conscious thought, I have choices concerning how I take up my habituated body. I may decide, for example, to put to one side my bodily hesitation, my fear of rejection, my embarrassment, and draw my father towards me into an embrace. In ways such as this I avoid being fully determined by my own history, or by my biology. There is a gap in the effectiveness of any conditioning aspects of my existence, or, to use other words, a penumbra of ambiguity surrounds the conditioning acts. That is why Merleau-Ponty writes of “a genius for ambiguity”. The ambiguous is less to do with lack of clarity (my feelings of embarrassment may be extremely clear to me), and more to do with the advent of choice: the failure of the conditioning aspect to complete its work marks the advent of choice, and, fundamentally, our freedom.

The truly dynamic nature of this ‘system’ is then carried forward by the way the exercise of choice feeds back to alter the conditioning ground. In whatever way my move to embrace my father is received the act initiates a development in the structure of the relationship (this ‘development’ may be a reinforcement of an existing way, or the opening of new possibility), which then provides a changed ground from which the next actions will emerge. This interplay initiates a *process of dynamic equilibrium that is filled with the potential for metamorphosis*.

The key to understanding this metamorphosis is the notion of ‘gestalt’ to which Merleau-Ponty reverts throughout his philosophical discourse, namely, that a condition [the ground] is taken up by and transformed by what it conditions [the figure], such that the whole in which it functions as a condition is greater than and different from the sum of its parts (Burke, 1997: 62)

It seems to me though, that the healthy movement of the cycle of participation might be interrupted. I seem on my journey to have interrupted my healthy movement in two ways.

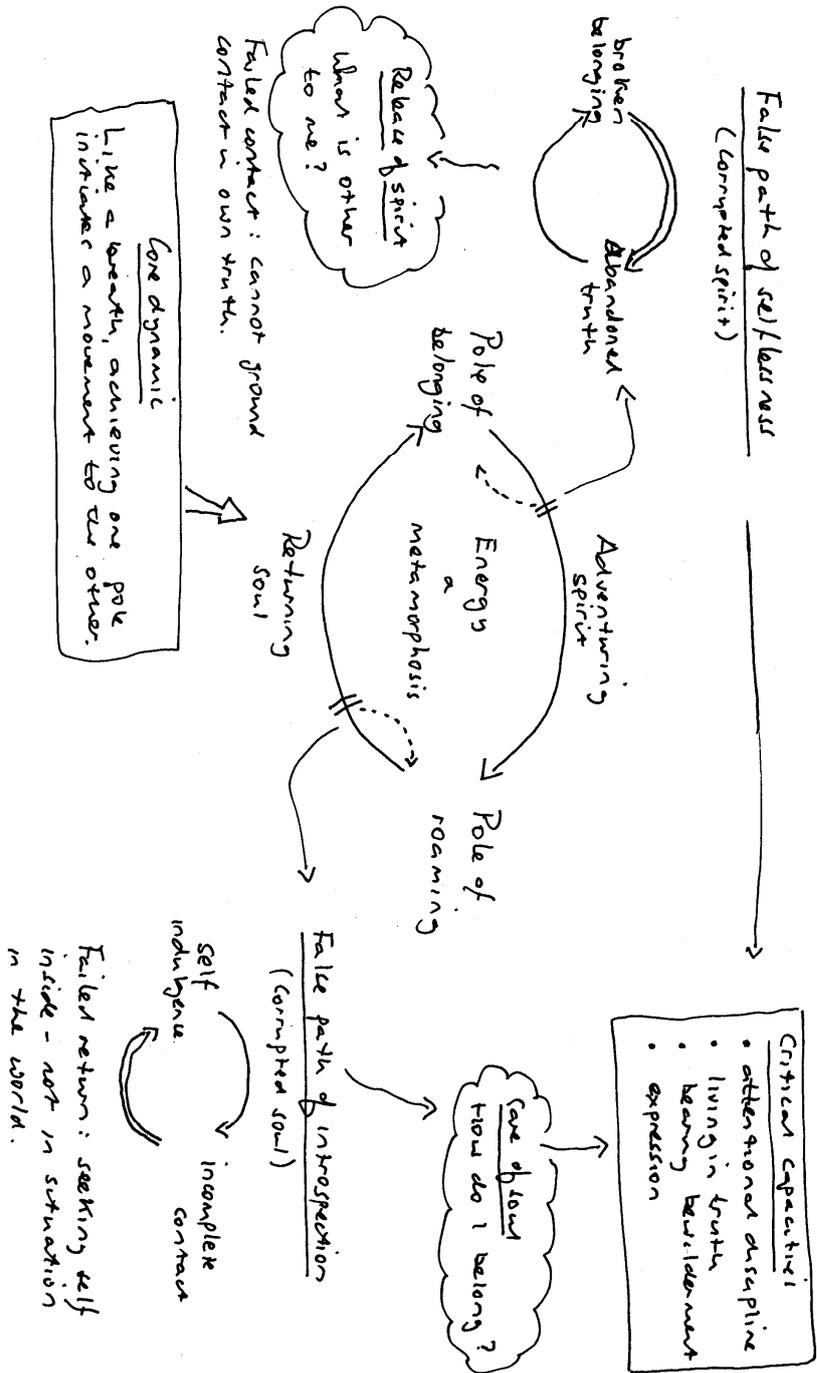
I have fallen into introspection and self-indulgence, and this has deflected me from the path of belonging, because I have sought myself, not in my situation in the world, but inside myself. I have also prevented my movement into healthy contact with others by not standing in my own truth. I have become selfless, and in consequence lost to myself, and this has proved to be a poor basis on which to contact others: they, metaphorically ask, what do you stand for? I am inconstant: I can only respond, “it all depends”.

When I looked back on this mapping I was reminded of a conversation with my friend and co-consultant Margareta in 2005 (as reported upon in the Introduction to this thesis). You may remember that at that time we associated the ground of the Gestalt figure ground configuration with a movement of the soul. We associated soul with what was connected and foundational for each human being, and also for families and organisations, as when we refer to the soul of the family. The opposite of this we associated with what was imaginative and possible. With aspiration,

freedom, and release, vision and dream. Spirit would be Nelson Mandela speaking up inspirationally from his prison cell. Soul would be Ghandi returning to his village and his roots. So, I conceive my participation in the world as two movements: care for soul and a release of spirit. Although the model asserts dynamic movement over origin, I have felt on my doctoral journey the pull to care for my soul as the stronger arc in the journey. I have gone forward with a backward glance towards my place of belonging in this world. I have hoped to find there something of my truth. This is a thesis of the backward glance – of longing to be.

I have deliberately presented my map in its hand written form. I like the transitional quality of this way of showing it, because it speaks to future inquiry. As I seek synthesis new questions are stirred up. Perhaps I will never stop being a process consultant after all. But I must let the map be for now and stop fiddling. What are the new questions that arise? Are there wisps of energy in them?

ENERGY & EXCITEMENT
(Notebook, vol 17, 2007: 10-11)



5.4. Resolution: recapping, fresh questions, and new directions.

In this section I use a process of recapping on significant events in the thesis to reflect on the future. I adopt a structure of four parts as a device in order to facilitate my recollection and reflection. The first domain where questions arise for me is that concerning what it would be like to live in my own *truth*. This is perhaps the most vital and energetic area of curiosity that I am left with as the thesis draws to an end – the most unfinished perhaps? The second domain concerns *ideas*. The thesis has stimulated me to engage with phenomenology and other ideas, and I think that these interests will be pursued into the future; my life has been changed by my engagement with ideas. The third domain concerns the backward glance of which I spoke before – a glancing back to my *ground*. How will I continue on the adventure of exploring my situatedness in the world? The fourth domain concerns my *feeling* sensual self. How will I continue to work with the feeling that I have learned so animates my life world, and informs my creative thinking?

I adopt a further device to support my thinking within each of these domains. I use the metaphoric structure of ‘care for the soul’, and ‘release of the spirit’ proposed at the conclusion of the last section (see the hand drawn ‘map’) to support my thinking concerning activity and process within action research. Having discussed each area I produce a diagram, which proposes two contrasting areas of research activity, and then connect the activities with soul and spirit movements. This device is intended to stimulate thought around orientation, skills and processes for the putative action researcher; also to act as a kind of reminder for myself.

Truth

The case of the men in the pipe connects the end of this thesis with its beginning on the mountain top overlooking Bergen, following the July 2006 EGOS conference. At the EGOS conference I subjected parts of the Gestalt Review article in which the case was written up to a critical review. Then, in this thesis, I turned back to that review to critically examine some of the “clever” comments I made then. I thought that I was denying my truth. Do I deny my truth?

It’s not an easy question to answer. For one thing the whole idea of what is truth has been rendered problematic as correspondence theories of truth have been attacked, and we have adopted a more perspectival view on what is true; we ask true for whom, in what circumstances? I feel this as supporting my own reluctance to examine this question. However, the event in the corporate office proved to be memorable for me. My brief contact with the men in the pipe aroused strong feelings, which motivated my behaviour. I was excited. Should I have shown more of my feeling and my excitement? It subsequently saddened me when I saw myself denying my desire for justice, and the excitement this evoked, in my writing for the EGOS conference. I asked, have I become too sophisticated and subtle? Is it in the nature of the job of a process consultant? When I started the doctoral

journey I was aware that I might over rely on the energy of my clients; also I have reported in the thesis how I felt uneasy about being quite so selfless in service of my clients, and wondered about my own purposes. Has truth become a secondary feature of the process of engagement? Another way I have learned to look at this is by observing how rarely I challenge the broader frame within which many of my corporate clients work, even though I sometimes feel worried by what they do. I think that this doctoral journey has helped me to challenge myself to ask this question about my own truth.

Perhaps the most significant contribution towards my arising interest in truth has come from the approach phenomenology has taught me towards the real. For the phenomenologist what appears to my subjective self is primordial reality: it is a slice of the real. Yes, what appears is a perspective, and what it means is subject to interpretation, but I live in the real world, and everything else is based on this fundamental fact. I have shown how in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body this grounding in reality is reinforced through bodily participation in our situations in the world. This being in touch with the real is also what I understand Ladkin to mean when she discusses Husserl's idea of "objectivity-for-subjectivity" (Ladkin, 2005:121-125). Such confirmation of my essential grounding in reality, invests my experience with more dignity, and myself with more responsibility. It says to me that I bear a unique aspect of reality through my contact with what is other-than-me. At this point the phenomenologist also intersects (and reminds me about) my Gestalt training. For the Gestalt therapist or consultant the starting point is, "to say where you are" – to be fully present. This implicitly suggests that "where I am" is real for me. So, my engagement with phenomenology not only gives me fresh grip on the reality of my situation, it also reminds me that, in the sense just described, this understanding was always in my ground: what has covered it up?

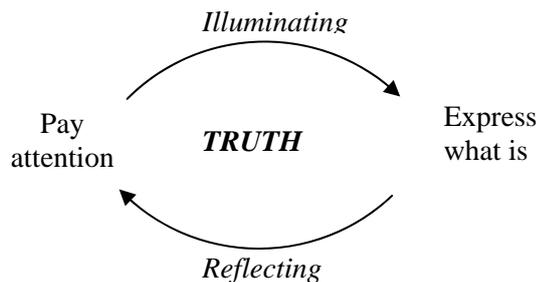
Perhaps it has been honourably covered, as I have sought to find my way in the large and often strange systems within which I work. I think of the strategy case reported in Chapter One – my bewilderment, my "cloaking. Have I, in some way, lost myself through being too responsive? Have I been overwhelmed? Do I now wander blindly?

On the 13th April 2007 I was in Uralsk in Kazakhstan working with a management team with my fellow consultant Michael. We were de briefing each other prior to a wrap up meeting with the client. Michael told me that he had been surprised to see me showing how irritated I was becoming with the group at one stage in the process. We were able to have a discussion about the sources of this irritation, and whether I should have named it in the group. Having disentangled it a little with Michael, I mentioned in the client de brief. The client said that he had noticed, and that he had felt angry with me as a result. This led to a discussion about an aspect of my irritation that Michael and I had identified, which was how the group members seemed to be ignoring, or disregarding each other. The client recognised that some of his anger probably arose from this as well, and we were able to

deepen our conversation about respect and care within the team. There seems to me to be a small clue here of a connection between what excites and animates me and what is true for me. Shall I now commit to showing more of myself, and dealing with the consequences? Will this, in some way, bring me back to a fuller life?

The phenomenologist and the Gestalt teacher join together to firmly, yet compassionately, remind me that I experience the real; and in so doing induce the self-question, *will I be true to this or not?* It is in the context of this question that I look back on the writing for the EGOS conference about my concern for justice in respect of the men in the pipe. Was I true to myself? I think that I spoke a half-truth. I think I have become skilful in half-truths. I ask, can this change?

My diagram for this domain of truth connects attentional discipline with expressing what is (saying where you are). It seems to me that developing skills of attention and expression are mutually reinforcing skills for any action researcher. As I have discovered in this thesis, expression may open the world as new words become like new senses for perceiving; and attentional discipline may illuminate what might otherwise be missed or taken for granted.



This diagram also demonstrates how I have resolved a question I posed at the beginning of the thesis (Section 0.4 – “Writing as inquiry”) on the paradox at the heart of the idea of *writing as inquiry*: the double pull between fully entering into the descriptive moment, and the awareness of the perspectival and partial quality of writing. In my introduction to writing as inquiry I raised this as a particular theme for me. How have I come to resolve this paradox for myself?

As the above diagram illustrates, my starting point has been my resolution *to commit myself to the possibility* of phenomenal perception – that I might know the things themselves, and might bring them to presence through description²⁰. I make this commitment not in the expectation of completion, but in the hope (“possibility”) that it will open myself, and the world, to the mutual intertwining of self and other. For this reason I set out to describe

²⁰ “The real has to be described, not constructed or formed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: x)

not only what I see, but also what I feel – how things intrude into me as well as how I reach out to them. The Sparrow Hawk is a thing to be seen in the world; also something to be felt as a reverberation and a resonance with me. Closely aligned is a separate commitment, which has come to me with particular felt force in the last year of the doctoral journey. This commitment is the other side of my realisation that what I care for is vulnerable, fragile and transient. If things worthwhile have this quality then this reinforces for me their deep question-ability. The way to have things open before me is to question them – not, of course, as an interrogation, but as an exploration or revelation. This double commitment to phenomenal perception and to question-ability takes me back to the idea of figure and ground: description may be understood as part of the process whereby things configure themselves, or “presence” themselves from the ground; question-ability that which returns or holds the emerging figure to its contextuality – returns it to its connectedness with all else, which is also a return to the bulky silent world of felt existence. As we have seen in my discussion of figure and ground the conditioning shapes the condition, but is also itself then subject to being changed or developed by that which it conditions. There is work to be done here in the descriptive effort, and also in the questioning of that which comes from the descriptive effort: it is not work that can ever be declared as finished.

Ground

I spoke at the end of the previous section of this being a thesis of the backward glance. I was thinking then of the way in which the doctoral journey has moved around my engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas concerning my embodied connection to my situation in the world. It has been a powerful intellectual stimulus to understand just how grounded in my own historic existence with others, and the whole of my situation, I am. I have connected the idea of being grounded with being situated in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and a participative world-view in the action research literature. I ask whether this has shown me a source of energy within my own existence. How has Merleau-Ponty helped me to connect to sources of energy and excitement that lie dormant in the ground of my lived existence? For example I have headed into an exploration of maleness within my family in the hope of unlocking something in my relationship with my sons. Also, I have found how memories of Alice as a baby animate me into scary, but also wonderful, surges of feeling. I say “memories”, but this scarcely does justice to the way my whole body can move to the felt presence of the past. I can do it now. I just hold out my hands as if I was cupping her tiny body over a bath of water, and the feelings of love and longing surge in to dispossess me. Is this what it feels like to be caring for my soul? Have I become too cut off from my own ground? How may I reconnect, re-commit? My burst of writing in January and February 2007 led me to think of belonging. The thought returns to me now. Is this the movement that will sustain my excitement? Is excitement and energy to be found in a movement of belonging: to leave, to long (the backward glance), to return, and to leave again?

On the assignment in Uralsk I reported on in the paragraphs on truth, Michael and I also had a conversation at the end of the first day's work. We spoke about our interest in building the right relational framework for the team of men with which we were working, using the event to help them slow down so they might treat each other with more respect. I told Michael about my interest in my relationship with my father and sons, and opened the possibility that this might be influencing my priorities for this work. Michael told me about the death of his father two months before, and of the last acknowledging conversations they had had before he succumbed to the cancer. We spoke together about how these experiences of ours might be helping and hindering our work. As we drew our conversation to a close, we realised that it would be helpful to check out whether our own inclinations were delivering a design, which really met the needs of the team. We put in an extra session at the beginning of the following day in which to open a much fuller discussion with the whole team about the purpose and design of the event. I think that we were taking note of the way our own ground, our situation, was potentially influencing the event – for the good maybe, but in a way that needed checking. During this journey I have become more sensitive to my intuitions and vague feeling states. I name them as my 'ground' speaking to me, and in naming them I honour, and – to some extent at least - realise them.

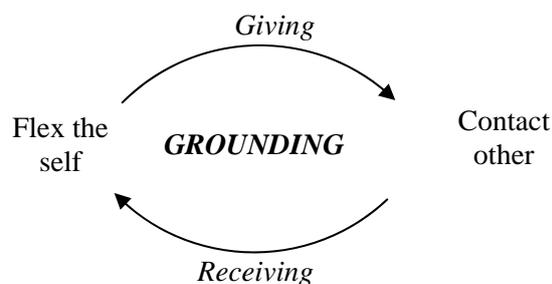
It seems to me that grounding involves a process of being able to see the self in context, and that this cannot be done without contact with others. The thesis shows me reaching for the idea that what is fundamental is a dynamic relationship between self, situation and world (see for example my attempt to explain this in section 4.5). Such a dynamic (participatory) interweaving means that we should perhaps see the perceiving self as a reflection back from the things of the world; moreover a reflection that is as much felt as seen. This "reflection" then founds fresh perception of the world, and picks up on a form of equilibrium in motion (the last paragraphs of Chapter Four), which delivers us a felt sense of a self as a relatively stable entity. Seen in the context of first, second and third person inquiry, this phenomenological positioning of the self intimately enmeshed with the world of "other", supports the wisdom of the action research scholars, who argue for the integration of all three modes of inquiry (Section 0.3 of the Introduction). Indeed separation of the modes would according to the above analysis be impossible, or, at best, a helpful abstraction, designed to support the researcher in focusing her research effort. For example, this thesis proclaims itself to be "first person" in its effort to correct my tendency towards self-absorption, distance and detachment from others; however it is full of second and third person inquiry. A question for the thesis has been what mode should be made figural and what should be left in the background? From the asking of this question, we might deduce that, for an inquirer, the ground to which all inquiry will find itself being drawn back, is the interwoven fabric of first second and third person inquiry.

To illustrate this further allow me to highlight two second / third person aspects of the thesis.

- Perhaps the most obvious and most significant is the accompanying, second person, voice of my supervisor, who is occasionally brought from the haunting shadow into full visibility in the thesis. The e-mail exchange in Chapter Three and the other gentle commentaries of hers that litter the thesis show a style of second person contact that honours her pedagogic style: at once incisive, unsentimental and filled with human warmth. Merleau-Ponty would remind us that this voice of hers is also a gesture and, as such, is the figure emerging from a richer felt ground of contact, which has supported and sustained my research throughout the journey. “Socratic” comes to mind as a kind of felt metaphor for how I have been accompanied.
- We might also see the third person manifested in the thesis through the continual referencing of the significance of place within the thesis: a kitchen overlooking a harbour, an office in The Hague, an oncology ward in an Oxford hospital, a place to practice yoga, a supervision group in a room at the University etc. Sometimes these are places that I help to create in my role as a process consultant, and which I then have to decide how to occupy (or not) with my clients. They are places rather than spaces; already, always filled with affect and human possibility. As social spaces they have a third person role to play, colouring and suffusing with feeling the territory of my inquiry.

Nothing seems to me to illustrate the complex interweaving of first second and third person better than my relationship with the writing of Merleau-Ponty. His “third-person” writings re-stimulate my “second person” relationships across the board, particularly, for example, my contact with the living persons who still constitute my Gestalt community. I occasionally feel that he is watching me like a real living person – an uncanny refreshing experience for a tearful father. I also take his ideas on as a part of my own way to be, sometimes deliberately, as when I try to write descriptively in his honour, and sometimes – and forever – unwittingly from my deeply shifted ground. He has, I feel, entered the ground of my life, from where I receive his gifts, and from where I now reach out to the world differently.

The following diagram abstracts the essential movement of giving of oneself and receiving from other that constitute the inquiry territory, and inform each inquirer’s relatedness.

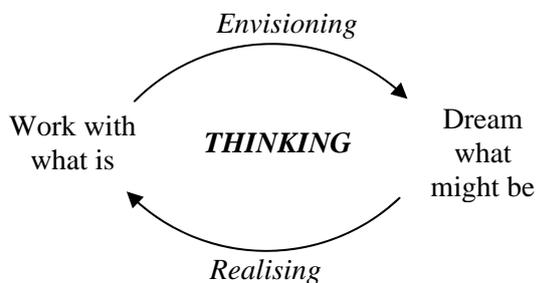


Ideas

The method of this thesis has also involved a backward glance at my own written production. This kind of reciprocation - turning back to my own words to examine them critically - has been a core process for the thesis. I set out to write a thesis around the documentation of my life world. The ideas content of the thesis has also been subject to a similar motion of glancing backwards. I was introduced to the ideas of Merleau-Ponty at a Gestalt conference in August 2003. Before then I had been struggling to write about my Gestalt background. It was hard for me to locate myself in the journey. As I engaged with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and recognised the Gestalt inspiration in his work, I began to centre my gestalt knowledge around the critical idea of the ground supporting the emergence of a figure. There then occurred, throughout the remainder of 2003 and into 2004, a fruitful reciprocation as my knowing self moved between phenomenology and Gestalt, finding that each was being enriched by the other. In the process of this movement and mutual illumination I was re-connected with significant aspects of my Gestalt past as I ventured forward in to the territory of phenomenology. The relationship between what I knew already, and what I experienced as new was, literally, vital. Through this dialogue I experienced knowing as, in part, a process of remembering differently. In this way my intellectual journey reinforced my interest in the ground of my life; also in the idea of a dynamic exchange between areas of knowledge; also my present with my past.

Despite the role played by recovering what I already knew, there has also been energy for me in the freshness of the phenomenological ideas with which I engaged from 2003 onwards. From an ideas perspective the doctoral journey marks a major investment of time and energy in the direction of the works of Merleau-Ponty. I have taken up his thought as a lens through which to glance into my own life world – not just Gestalt, but every thing else has gradually been subject to this lens. For example the case of W shows me trying to bring W within the whole of her situation, which is arguably an inspiration from Merleau-Ponty. Shortly afterwards I involve myself in Constellations training, partly out of a desire to explore bodily connection – again showing the influence of embodied phenomenology. During this training I also work on my own situatedness, particularly in respect of my relationships with my sons, in the historic context of my relationship with my father and his with his father. Through Constellations work, and continued reading of Merleau-Ponty (and others too), I become more sensitive to locatedness and emplacement: this sensitizes me to other aspects of qualitative inquiry, such as that provided by 'new' authors such as Ivan Brady (2005: 979) and Kathleen Stewart (2005: 1027), who emphasise being in place, and emergent sensual responses to location and otherness. Sitting on my desk now are a clutch of books culled from examining their bibliographies. I'm excited by the prospect of being able to connect up my own poetic leanings with these anthropologists. How will I sustain the energy of the intellectual engagement that I have discovered on the doctoral journey? How might these new interests leak into my consulting work?

Thinking has for me also become irrevocably associated with writing as a result of this doctoral journey. I have always written, but never like this before; never in such a sustained and concentrated way. I have also never written within such a supportive and critical situation as has been provided by my supervision group. I will miss this. Writing is now a fuller part of my life. I write several times a day in my notebook, which is my constant companion. I seek in my writing to develop my capabilities in describing what is happening to me: I have even started to regularly write poetry as a result of this doctoral journey – a strange outcome from a doctoral journey perhaps. I have come to see my thinking as connected to working with what is – crafting, hewing, articulating; also with what is possible through imagining, dreaming and creating afresh. Processes of realising – bringing to life- and also envisioning the possible have been important to me on the journey, so I have included them as fundamental processes of thinking in my chart.



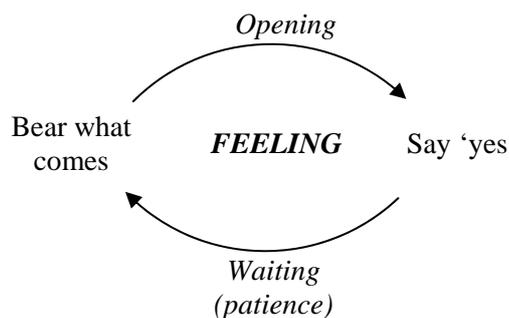
Feeling

The questions concerning truth in the first paragraphs of this section connect directly to my feeling responses. In the meeting in the corporate headquarters my response was a felt one. I struggled to contain the surge of feeling. What was true for me at that moment in the office, did not come coolly as an idea or a concept, but wrapped in feeling, just as Rilke, Merleau-Ponty and Sonia Nevis would tell me to expect. I would not say that on this doctoral journey I have learned to feel. I think I started out as quite sensitive to my feeling states. However, what I think has happened is that I have been given a fuller frame within which to understand the significance of my feeling self. I am more alert to my feelings, because I recognise their epistemological value. I have become reacquainted to the sheer significance of bodily feeling in human life. I can see more clearly that my bodily animation is exciting in itself, and that it is doubly so because my carnal response offers a route through to my truth. How can I continue to utter that invitational “yes” and to bear what comes?

It is rather strange that I have been reawakened to the significance of my sensual self through ideas about feeling: strange that a philosopher now dead should have helped to prepare me for the sad and difficult events of 2006. I have reflected on this ‘strangeness’. I have spoken with my supervisor about it, and also with Bridget and others. It remains a bit of a mystery to me. He is a philosopher not a counsellor to a disoriented and

bewildered father. I think one thing that has attracted me to Merleau-Ponty is that he has offered me a compelling vision of how to get closer from a distance. His style is remote yet he engages me completely. He convincingly argues for a carnal and sensual component to human existence in a way that is logical and seemingly detached²¹. This might be seen as a criticism, but I think it is an approach that coincides with exactly what I needed as I struggled with a surfeit of feeling, and disorienting emotion. He has kind of normalised extremes of feeling for me, and I have found this a very supportive way to engage with them. I didn't need to be taught how to feel, but I did find it transformational to have feeling so honoured, and given such a respectful place in processes of knowing.

I find that, as a result, I am experimenting with both being more open to my own feeling state, and also subjecting it to more inquiry. This involves two discrete moments. I deliberately seek to keep my mind at bay if I feel an upsurge of emotion, adopting the stance that I will, "let it come". I also allow my body to move under the stimulation of the sensual; also I experiment with moving my body to stimulate felt responses (like holding my hands 'just so' to re-encounter my child when she was little). I construct this for myself as a kind of emotional yoga, drawing on the idea of keeping thought at a distance – opening a space for the bodily experience. Once the surge of emotion (typically, during 2006, this would be unexpected tears, but there have also been other more pleasurable sensual encounters with the world) subsides I find that I am now more interested than I was in 2003, in thinking through what has happened. I tell myself that I must make a space for both aspects of my existence whilst also carrying from yoga the mantra of the voracious greediness of thought. I want to incorporate this into my attentional disciplines, improving both my ability to feel and to think, partly through a process of recognising the integrity of both.



But a chart does not seem right for "feeling". Not the right way to end the thesis either. Too abrupt, too distant, to remote! So here is a little story about feeling, and about being in place – being situated in my life world.

On Easter Sunday 2007, Bridget and I were visiting a friend in Penrith, Cumbria, for his birthday party. In the morning the two of us set out alone

²¹ I mean by this detached from his own life for his books reveal very little about him or his personal feelings.

from Mungrisdale village, where we were staying, and headed up the side of Lonscale fell towards the mass of Blencathra. As we climbed in the early morning sunshine, the talk was of Alice. Of her forthcoming scan, and how we might prepare her, and ourselves, for whatever news would come. Slowly the village was left behind, and we were on our own, ascending the side of the mountain. I thought of our life together: our meeting at eighteen, our long marriage, our transformation into parents, and now this test with our daughter. I felt these pasts as a part of me, yet also realised that they were not me. Now was now. Here in the sunshine, on the gradual ascent up the fell, we were living a life together, working out how things would be for us, and our daughter.

Now we were alone with just the rounded mass of the ancient hills. But even here nature and humanity were intertwined. These hills were once deeply forested, but were stripped bare in a sixteenth century burst of shipbuilding. It is said that Francis Drake's ships were made with trees from these hills: culture and nature woven together. As we walked, Bridget was forced to carefully negotiate the small streams that occasionally intersected the path – her shoes were not quite good enough. Walking on, we began to make a game of navigating the damp parts of the hillside. We started to plan routes across streams and muddy patches. Having identified a chain of dry stones, or clumps of dry grass, we proceeded to leap, laughing, from stone to stone, grabbing at each other for support.

Caress
Up the side of Bannerdale's naked slope
Towards the bulk of Blencathra,
Picking a path with Bridget.

From out of Mousthwaite Comb,
A memory stirs
Haunting my body's slope,

Angling my arm towards her face;
Hand, caresses the folded fell of her neck,
Stops her, turns her to me. (April 20th 2007)