

**Excitement, bewilderment and emergence: exploring a life
world through writing as first person inquiry.**

Volume 1 of 1

Robert Miles Farrands.

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In CARPP we supervise each other in groups, and, as you will see in the thesis, my supervision group plays an essential part in my research story. I feel like apologising to those who have been in my group over the years, for I fear I have, on more occasions than I would have liked, been a bit of a pain. I particularly admire the persistence and critical minds of Kathleen King, Sue Porter and Chris Seeley.

My Gestalt heritage looms large in this thesis, and indeed in my life. Certain teachers such as Sonia and Edwin Nevis, Judith Hemming and Malcolm Parlett are referenced directly, and quoted in the thesis. These and others such as the original Gestalt psychologists also haunt the pages, showing their presence through my abiding interest in the emblematic idea of gestalt form. I hope I might be able to offer something back to these compassionate, questing friends.

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Lastly I think of this place, my home, and of my dog Feste. The latter has accompanied me on many walks in many states of the weather: he has also

had to endure many a monologue on Merleau-Ponty – if there is a next life he is sure to be a philosopher, or a therapist.

Iffley, Oxford
May, 2007

Abstract

Excitement, bewilderment and emergence: exploring a life world through writing as first person inquiry

How can I find vitality and change in my 50s? How can first person action research help me to locate the exciting questions in my life, and help me re-visit the sources of my life energy? Responding to these personal questions leads me into other areas of inquiry concerning my experience of life. How are processes of knowing related to experience? What is it to participate in the world?

As I engage with these questions I am drawn into a re-engagement, and a re-ordering of the intellectual structure of my life. I discover the existential phenomenology of *Merleau-Ponty*, and use the freshness of this encounter to reinvigorate my historic connection with Gestalt; also to provide a perspective on action research. The interaction between these three domains of knowledge provides the intellectual stimulus for the thesis.

The core research material for the thesis is the documentation of my life world, as recorded in series of thirty papers, produced and reflected upon in group supervision, between March 2001 and July 2006. This material describes a stream of activity from my life, including my consulting and family life. *Paying attention* to my life world, and *describing* it in *writing* are central features of my research method. I engage with writing as an *emergent* form of inquiry.

The thesis that describes, and inquires into, this documentation of my life world was written between July 2006 and March 2007.

INTRODUCTION

In this Introduction I set out the research themes within the context of my approach towards action research. This leads me to frame the thesis in terms of dynamic processes, which support my inquiry into energy and excitement in my life. I then explain in more detail the part that writing plays in my first person inquiry. I close by introducing some of the other people who appear in the thesis, focusing attention on those who it would be helpful for the reader to know about at the very beginning of the thesis.

The thesis was written in the period from *July 2006 to April 2007*, and describes a programme of research, which commenced in *March 2001*, conducted under the auspices of a part time doctoral programme at the Centre for Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath (CARPP). It is primarily a first person study using the description of events in my life world as the core research material. Maintaining a chronological flow is one of the structures of the thesis. However, it has not always proved appropriate to stick to a strictly linear sequence, as other priorities have intruded to re direct the narrative. For this reason, in the following paragraphs, I set out an outline of key events occurring during the period covered by the research, as they relate to this work. I intend this to act like brief preparatory description of the journey to come.

I entered the doctoral programme in *March 2001* in confident mood. In September 2000 I had completed an MSc course at Bath University for which I had been awarded a distinction, and shortly afterwards I had produced my first ever piece of published writing (Farrands 2001). To be quite frank, I rather thought I would sail through the doctoral programme, relying on descriptions of my process consulting (as with my published article), allied to the wisdom I thought I had accrued with age, and consequent life experience. With hindsight my initiating research interests were a little underdeveloped, which was one sign of my over confident state. I was conscious of the way that my role as a process consultant had contributed towards heightened responsiveness to my clients needs, and to a consequent sense that I had lost my own direction. I asked, where am I in this life of mine? I asked this question naively as I was shortly to discover.

To some extent the doctoral journey may be described as a tale of hubris, as I fell from this rather over confident initiating state, to discover what it was like to really ask serious questions of a life. The falling aspects of the doctoral journey gathered themselves together into two events of great significance for the journey. These events have shaped the whole progress of the research, and are not now so easy to see around as I look back. It seems clear, however, that the first event was predicated on a rapid expansion, during 2001 and early 2002, of the scope of my doctoral interests, as I was encouraged to bring a more inquiring eye into the whole of my life – not just the professional aspects. I began to write more personally, and to bring more and more of my private life ‘into play’ in the research: I became much more intimately invested in the work. On the back of this increased personal commitment, in *March 2002*, I introduced a clever

idea from my process consulting, into a review of my writing conducted in a meeting of our CARPP Supervision Group. This thoughtless experiment (described more fully in Chapter Three) led to a significant crisis in which I discovered myself totally unable to prevent a collapse into a kind of graceless, juvenile behaviour; my claimed skills in human process proved to be of no use to me in that moment. I was embarrassed and metaphorically stripped bare by the experience as I describe in Chapter Three. This event was followed by an increase in personal writing, and by a period of increasingly centripetal energy in the doctoral journey, which culminated in my failed attempt to transfer from MPhil to Phd status in *July 2003*¹. With hindsight it looks as though this period from March 2002 to July 2003 was a necessary step on the journey, but at the time I felt lost and blinded as to what was happening to me. I responded by writing of how I felt, and by turning my gaze back towards important aspects of my past, including my training in Gestalt therapy.

The second event was more life shaking. It provided a grim background to the whole process of writing the thesis during 2006, and still resonates strongly in my life. In *November 2005* my eldest child, Alice, was diagnosed with cancer. In the struggle to help and to understand I was shown a great gift: that what I cared for in my life was vulnerable, fragile and transient. I began by realising this in respect of my daughter, but eventually I looked up at the world around me, to notice that this simple, but profound, fact had always been there on the surface in respect of everything worthy of love and attention. Alice's illness obviously carried consequences and concerns that went beyond my doctoral research, and I felt extremely nervous on the question of how to publicly relate what was happening. In the end I elected to excise from the thesis much of the direct description of events with Alice and my family, focussing instead on impacts and consequences for me, which, in my opinion, had direct relevance to the work of the thesis. Perhaps the most significant of these "impacts" and "consequences" for this thesis is that the events of late 2005 and 2006 acted to confirm the importance in my life of phenomenology, and, in particular, of the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

I had stumbled across the work of this French philosopher and phenomenologist in *August 2003*, at a Roots of Gestalt conference in Paris. I was fascinated and excited. He appeared to me like an oasis in the desert, and I drank deeply. Through my willing apprenticeship I began to see my Gestalt heritage through new eyes – to value it afresh. Also I learned to

¹ The transfer meeting in July 2003 was one in which I presented papers to an internal examiner. My work was critiqued for being unclear in its purpose, and self orientated; I was asked to do some further writing. In August 2003, shortly after this transfer meeting I encountered Merleau-Ponty and dived into phenomenology. As a result, I deferred completing further writing for the transfer until I had re-shaped my intention for the doctoral thesis in the light of my new interests. I eventually re-submitted papers and transferred in January 2005. The word "failed" here might be a little dramatic, but it accords with my sense, at the time, that I had somehow run into the sand or lost my way; I will continue to use it in this evocative way in relation to the July 2003 transfer meeting.

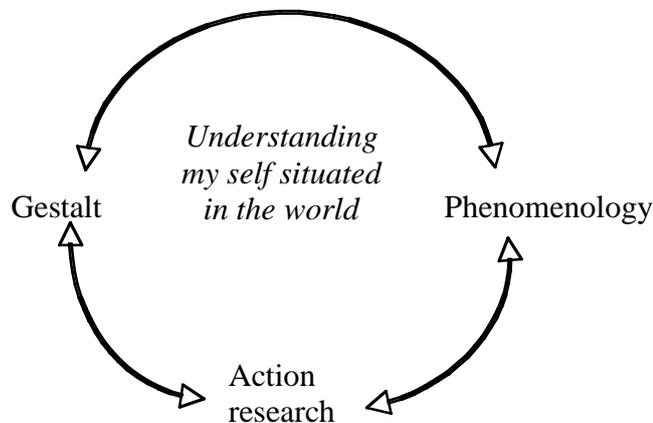
wrench my gaze from myself out into the world of other things. The second half of the doctoral journey is signified by a steady increase in centrifugal energy, and by a re-introduction to my feeling body in its interweaving with the world. It seems to me to be ironic that this middle class Englishman should be shown his carnal, sensual, connectivity through the frequently difficult prose of a French philosopher, but that, I claim, is what has happened. If nothing else he showed me how to weep again at the sheer wonder of what was around me, and, when the time, came I was able to weep again in love and grief.

Focusing on difficult moments of hubris might leave the impression that I have had an unhappy time of my doctoral studies. This would be a mistaken impression as I hope will be seen in what follows. I have discovered new friends, gradually begun to feel a part of a new community of inquirers, and found great stimulation and joy through phenomenology. The ground of my life has been turned over, and new shoots stir.

0.1 Research themes for the Thesis

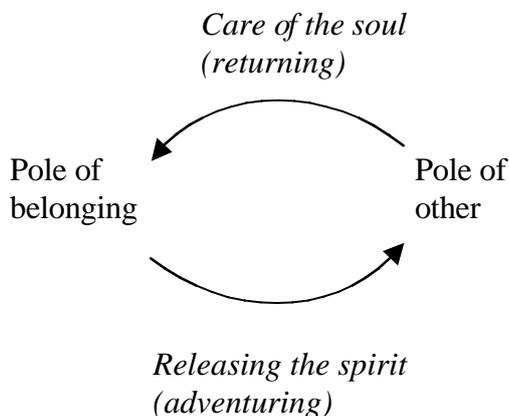
The initiating questions for this thesis are first person: they concern energy and excitement in my 50s. How can I find vitality and change in my 50s? How can first person action research help me locate the exciting questions in my life, and help me re-visit the sources of my life energy? These questions lead me into other areas of inquiry concerning my experience of life. How are processes of knowing related to experience? What is it to participate in the world? Responding to these questions draws me into a re-engagement, and a re-ordering of the intellectual structure of my life. From mid 2003 I enthusiastically engage in a dialogue between new knowledge (for me) about existential phenomenology, and a heritage of Gestalt knowing. This engagement sets up a kind of intellectual force field within which the more personal inquiries take place. The total field is subject to reversibility as the personal and intellectual aspects move in and out of focus.

EXHIBIT 0.1: Intellectual dynamics in the thesis



The personal aspects of this inquiry resolve themselves into a movement towards self-analysis, which at first is focused on my relationships with others: is there something corrupted in my contact with others? I identify this line of first person inquiry as irrevocably connected to another that asks, how am I situated in the world? This sets up a double aspect to my inquiry as I look towards how I am placed in the world, and also to how I move from that place into contact with other people, and the whole world ‘other’ than myself. The energy imparted by the process of re-thinking my intellectual frame leaks into my practice of living, to inspire fresh specific questions about relating to other persons living and dead. How do I love my wife and children? How does my dead grandfather still influence my relationships with my sons? I glimpse the fundamentally dynamic aspects of all these questions: to live is to be in motion. How do I know this movement? There is no complete resolution of this question within this thesis. The achievement is more modestly realised in the form of a restructured set of questions with which to go forward. These questions accentuate the double movement that has developed throughout the thesis: on the one hand reaching back to my placement as a historic being in the world and on the other reaching forward to the adventure of contact with ‘other’. This double movement might serve to symbolise the thematic content of the thesis. In the final Chapter of the thesis I come to present this interrelationship as a core dynamic theme for the whole thesis.

EXHIBIT 0.2: dynamics of self-analysis



I have used the terms “soul” and “spirit” to collect together a number of distinguishing terms that emerge out of the thesis. I use them as a kind of shorthand for two conceptual positions that arise from the way the themes announced in the first two paragraphs above are dealt with. “Sprit” I have taken as synonymous with the move to freedom and engagement with other people, and the more than human, that I take from the way in which Reason and Bradbury speak of the participative world-view in the Action Research Handbook (2001: 10-11). Dynamically I see this as a movement out into the world of contact with others, whereby we “reach for our fullest capabilities”

(ibid). I hold this in contrast with a correlated movement back into the historic, cultural and natural ground of our being; a returning motion towards belonging to a place in the world. This I see as a movement of earth – a return to place. The distinction arose for me as a useful one from out of a discussion my colleague Margareta Marmgren and I had together, and then with a group of leaders on a programme we were running on Cape Cod in June 2005. We had wanted to provide a counterweight in a discussion about vision, and grand purpose by also speaking of the soul work for leaders. My notebook records this from a discussion Margareta and I had:

It is hard to move until attention is paid to what holds the system where it is. [That is] Why we teach starting with what is. Vision work is spirit work – about moving on. What leaders will often miss is the soul of the organisation –it’s primary loyalties. These need acknowledging (Volume 4: 101).

The thinking here clearly shows the influence of my engagement with constellations work in 2005 (Chapter Five). Why do I need this kind of “big” distinction?

Fundamentally, my engagement with the themes I have sketched above involves me in deep troublesome paradoxes. For example I seem to block my energy through being both selfless and self obsessed. How does that work? How do I make sense of it for myself? In the complexity of paradox in which I find myself in Chapters Four and Five of the thesis it helps me to have this broad distinguishing frame as a thinking tool. I use it to map my situation and reflect on the ways in which I defeat myself. As such the distinction contained in Exhibit 0.2 is more of an epistemological tool than a conclusion of the thesis. I introduce it here so that I might use it as I discuss method, and, secondly, so you might be given a glimpse of the type of direction I am intending to travel in by glancing at one of the maps I develop.

Correlation between research themes and my approach to action research

The first person, existential nature of these themes leads me to focus attention on those aspects of action research that emphasise attention to lived experience, and emergent processes of inquiry.

In action research knowledge is a living evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. This means action research cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods but is in Lyotard’s (1979) sense, a work of art. (Reason and Bradbury: 1)

I am attracted to the idea of knowledge as a verb, and to the first person methodologies that flow from such a way of seeing research. This quality in first person inquiry is captured by Torbert when he writes of a life that “aspires towards a continual living inquiry” supported by disciplines of attention that “enable each of us to discover our own capacity for an attention supple enough to catch, at any moment, glimpses of its own fickleness.” (Torbert: 2001). The notion of “fickleness” reflects for me the other side of working with an emergent process. It speaks to the risks that

my research will be deflected, or become incoherent, as a result of “fickle” attention. These risks speak to me of the need for a sustained purpose throughout the research journey, and they touch on an issue, which will emerge towards the end of the thesis particularly strongly, concerning my own sense of purpose and “truth”. I wonder if I am not damaging my relationships with others through “fickleness” in respect of my own purposes, and I ask how do I stand in my own truth?

Marshall also captures the transitional and evolving aspects of action research when she writes of “living life as inquiry”:

By living life as inquiry I mean a range of beliefs, strategies, and ways of behaving which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question....” (Marshall, 1998: 156-157)

Again I notice how I am attracted to the processual nature of the inquiry process as described here. This statement might act as quality criteria for my own doctoral journey and for this thesis. Marshall and Torbert join other action research scholars in describing the essential characteristic needed to successfully live life as inquiry or engage in first person action research. This characteristic is the ability to critically observe oneself as an actor in the world and as an intending agent – it is commonly referred to as critical subjectivity² (Reason and Marshall: 113; Chandler and Torbert: 137; Varela and Sheer: 1). In this thesis I adopt the general strategy for achieving critical subjectivity, and accept that the kind of attention I need to “live life as inquiry” needs a double edge: I need to pay attention to the sources of my own intention, and also to the way I contact other people, things etc in the world. Marshall refers to this kind of double vision as bringing into play “inner” and “outer arcs of attention”. (Marshall, 1998: 157). As the doctoral journey progresses I become more guarded in speaking of an “inner world” as I engage with a more existential conception of being a person, but continue to be excited by the strong image of two arcs of attention sweeping back and forth. Reason and Torbert use a slightly different metaphor when they write of working “upstream” and working “down stream” (2001: 17-18). I like the way this image evokes a strong connection between the two aspects by suggesting they are part of the same stream of attention. It seems to me to open the way for a reciprocal relationship between the two aspects.

The thinkers quoted in the previous paragraph all emphasise the importance of attentional discipline and capability in furtherance of critical subjectivity. For example Marshall asserts that “Inquiry Requires Attentional Disciplines” (2001: 433) whilst I have already quoted Torbert’s reference to “supple” attention. The literature on qualitative inquiry also emphasise the richness and potentiality of the in the moment experience of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 4-6). The focus on attention also resonates with my Gestalt heritage. Gestalt therapy focuses on the therapeutic power of

² “Thus valid enquiry rests on critical subjectivity, on the personal view from a distance.” (Reason and Marshall: 113)

attention (Polster, 1999: 202-218; Parlett, 2001: 43-64). This is largely due to an existential action focused approach, which stresses that the present moment is the place from which change and healing becomes possible. Focus on attention to the present moment also leads to the development of an approach to change based on the belief that “change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become that what he is not” (Beisser, 1970: 4). In this thesis I return to a refreshed engagement with attentional discipline and the implications for change in my own life. Partly this reinvigoration occurs as a consequence of my engagement with writing as a mode of first person action inquiry as I will show shortly.

0.2. First, second and third person aspects of action research

An aspect of action research that differentiates it from most artistic endeavour (the quotation from Bradbury and Reason with which I introduced the previous section refers to “work of art”) is its commitment to more deliberate and ambitious strategies for reaching out from the particular to the general (van Manen, 1990: 19). Whereas a poet or a painter may well object to any attempts to draw general lessons from their work, an action researcher lives in the hope that knowing for me might also be knowing for others with whom they are in personal contact, and for wider communities:

A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and so to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part (Bradbury and Reason: 2).

The struggle to make connections between the specifically personal and the generally applicable in a quality way is a central theme in my action research. One of my most important quality goals is to make these kinds of connections in a careful, aware way. *How exactly* can my own experience found more general claims? *In what ways* may the documentation of my life world be of interest to you, or to others?

One way action research opens consideration of this question is by considering different *dimensions of purpose* for action research. Who is the research for? Is it primarily to improve an aspect of my own life? Do I aim for it to be useful for other people in a community of which I am a part? What about more generally – will my research aim to be of interest to those in the wider world – such as the wider action research world for example?

All good research is *for me*, *for us* and *for them*: it speaks to three audiences, and contributes to each of these three areas of knowing. It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes which elicit the response ‘That’s interesting!’ from those who are concerned to understand a similar field (Davis, 1971)³. It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns of our praxis, is relevant and timely, and so produces the response “that works!” from those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher’s being-in –the –world, and so elicits the response, ‘That’s exciting!’ – taking exciting back to its root meaning, to set in action. (Reason and Marshall: 112-113)

³ Where authors I quote include reference to others who I don’t refer to directly in the thesis I include the reference to their work in a footnote rather than in my bibliography. In this case the reference is to Davis, M. 1964. That’s Interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences*. 1(4), 304-344.

When the distinction into first second and third person inquiry is made all these thinkers make the point that the parts created by such distinctions need to be integrated or kept in balance. Reason and Marshall for example regard it as “unfortunate or degenerate” if any of the three aspects of inquiry “becomes dominant and overwhelms either one or both of the others.” (Marshall and Reason: 113). Torbert sets himself the challenge of inquiring into “*how to integrate* third person scientific research and institutional practice with first and second-person research and practice.” (Torbert, 1998: 223). The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, six scholar practitioners inquiring into the impact of white supremacist consciousness, also conclude that “first person inquiry is not enough”. They explore the ways second person inquiry supports, deepens and enhances first-person inquiry when an emotionally laden identity issue is at stake. (The European American Collaborative etc, 2005: 245-250).

This thesis relates strongly, but ambiguously, to the theme of integrating the different “persons” within my research. I’m drawn to the connection Reason and Marshall make between “exciting” and “set in action”, as this confirms for me my commitment to a first person inquiry. Yet, the thesis also discloses a pattern to the doctoral journey as it relates to second person inquiry. Chapter Three evolves around a confused withdrawal from contact with others in my supervision group that occurred in mid 2002. In the wake of this turbulence, I became cautious about second person inquiry in the supervision group and elsewhere. My heart is not in it. At the time it’s not clear how much this caution/lack of heart is to do with tensions and structural issues in the supervision group, but, with time, these uncertainties fade in significance. From the perspective of writing the thesis in 2006/7 what is more important is the *choice I make to withdraw*. With hindsight my withdrawal in mid 2002 seems based on an intuition that I needed to pull back from contact, although this is not expressly articulated. It is as if I take some distance from my relationships in order to look more deeply at the structure of my connectedness⁴. In this sense the PhD journey is a movement towards a quiet centre in my life. I am still consulting, still working with all the family issues that arise, but the PhD provides another place from which all this might be reflected upon.

This is not the whole picture. It’s an over simplistic presentation of the emphasis on first person inquiry. During the journey from 2001 to 2006 I also engage in second and third person practices. I join a community of family and organisational “constellators” (explained more fully in Chapter Five) with whom I examine fundamental issues in my family; I help set up a men’s group during 2006; and, throughout the journey, I’m involved in regular group supervision of my consulting work. I am also heavily engaged in process consulting as the cases on which I report in the thesis show. In addition I present papers at international conferences of Gestalt and action

⁴ I wonder now if I should not have submitted to this energy more completely and manufactured some form of retreat. Life though had me in its grip and it did not occur to me.

research practitioners, publish articles within my Gestalt community, and review an article for the journal *Action Research*. Yet there is a sense in which this is all background to the first person inquiry journey. I am in a sense *for* others more than I am inquiring *with* them. The ways in which I have become smooth and accomplished with others, through my years in process consulting work is an important part of what comes to trouble me during the doctoral journey. I feel that I am blocking my human connection through a paradoxical mix of selflessness and self-indulgence. As a result I surmise that I am deflected from both standing in my own truth or making healthy contact with others. My effort is to heal myself by looking to the structure of my belonging and my presence to others. Despite my sophisticated ways of relating I become a *novice* and set out to discover what it takes to be ready to enter into a genuinely inquiring stance with others.

As I mentioned in the first part of this Introduction my search for healing is inspired by my engagement with phenomenology, through which I gain a refreshed contact with my Gestalt heritage, and more generally start to re-configure my concept of self more existentially and less introspectively: how do I belong? How do I participate in the world? The intellectual restructuring gradually leaks into my way of existing as 2005 falls into 2006. The year of 2006 is a terrible one in some ways. I'm struggling with the reality of my daughter's cancer, trying to help, but also trying to cope with dispossessive forces of grief, helplessness, and love. But the year also sees me moving to contact my daughter and my sons in a different way, and what starts here begins to leak into the rest of my life. There is no completion – I am arguing for beginnings and wisps – for the emergence of new and differently structured questions, as something bulky in my existence moves, settles. I genuinely have no grand claims to make about this journey, but I will show you a commitment to the journey, and I will show you a changed way of thinking, which evokes the beginnings of a new way for me to live.

Part of the process to heal myself takes place through a *new way to express myself* in writing. This turns out to be fundamental: to preoccupy the first half of the thesis, and to remain significant throughout. I wish now to address the question, how did writing become such an important support to my first person inquiry?

0.3. Writing as Inquiry

The activity stream in this thesis is enabled, and brought to life, through being described in writing. Written accounts provide the basis of the claim to document my life; this documentation is a source of primary research material. On the journey I discover that writing lies close to experiencing and to thinking. The thesis re creates the significance of writing to my research; particularly the discovery of writing as something new and refreshing in my life. Chapter One addresses what I was learning about the method of writing as inquiry. Chapter Two describes how writing intruded into my life. Never in my life had I written so much, or so deeply as on this programme. An aspect of my engagement with the journey and in particular my engagement with phenomenology is to gain increased insight into the power of description.

My writing is multi-layered. In temporal terms the first layer is a series of thirty-three papers that were written (and in some cases re-written over a series of crafting cycles), describing aspects of my professional and private life (Appendix). The second layer consists of the conversations that happened around these written productions as they were shared with others, including, especially, members of my supervision group at CARPP. The third layer consists of the private reflections of myself as I have re visited the first two layers in the preparation of this thesis.

Entering this doctoral programme has been a substantial commitment. In some ways I have experienced it as entering a new world. One that is different in important respects from the world in which I have made my life before CARPP. One of the most significant differences has been the importance I have placed on the written word. I have come to exist as a doctoral student, largely through my written production. My commitment to writing can be shown most clearly through the way I have approached doctoral supervision. The supervisory process on a part time programme such as this one became of paramount importance to me. It is what brought me physically to the University from my home sixty miles away, and it was the occasion to meet with my supervisor⁵ and the other five or six⁶ students in my supervisory group. Before each of these supervisory sessions I would almost invariably submit a paper, which I would receive back from my

⁵ Professor Judi Marshall that is, my supervisor. I will not solve the riddle (I feel it as one anyway) of how to address her throughout the thesis. Sometimes – most times I think – I’m drawn to write “Judi” as this first person naming captures the connection that has arisen over six years and more of travelling along this doctoral journey. Other times I lapse into what might be described as a more second person mode of address of “Supervisor” when I think of her as the person who leads the CARPP 6 supervisory group. Other times I use the third person mode of “Professor” or “Marshall”. My problem with mode of address indicates a fruitful confusion of relationship and role. She has been all these things to me, and I have a hard time neatly differentiating aspects of our relationship.

⁶ The numbers have varied throughout the programme, which I will explain in more detail later in the thesis.

supervisor, and some fellow students, annotated with their observations, comments and questions. My writing would then form the starting point for a discussion when it became my turn in the group to be in focus. This conversation would be recorded, and I would leave the supervision with annotated copies of my paper, plus a recording of the conversation that had occurred in my session. Writing is of course an important part of any doctoral student's engagement with the University, but, in my group, I was the one who most consistently established it as an essential discipline of my doctoral journey. My attention to writing also showed through in having two articles published during the journey: one at the very beginning to mark my entry on the programme (and probably help to reinforce the significance of writing for me), and one at the end to add an unintended symmetry to the journey (Farrands, 2001, 2007). These articles and the other main texts I have produced on the doctoral journey are listed at Appendix A.

As a result of how I took to writing on the programme I can say that becoming a doctoral student has been synonymous with becoming a writer. How, though, does this mark a distinction – surely writing has always been a part of my life? To some extent this is true, but as I have taken up my life within CARPP, I have begun to see the part that writing plays in my life differently: to see distinctions and differences between my life as a writer before and after CARPP. One aspect of my professional life that is thrown into relief by the doctoral programme is the extent to which it has evolved around the spoken rather than the written word. Ever since September 1996 I have made my living as a self employed Organisation Consultant, working in large systems – usually commercial corporations, but occasionally public sector organisations such as the National Health Service. My work is typically to do with how people speak with each other, whether it is in groups, or one to one in more personal, reflective conversations with managers. Who speaks when? Who doesn't get to speak? What is the quality of inquiry and listening like? How effective are our meetings? How do we best assimilate new technologies into our processes of meeting? These would be the kinds of questions that most arise in my work. Moreover, I tend to address such questions face to face with my clients, engaging them in discussion, and setting up frames for conversation to best take place. For example I have just returned (15th April 2007) from Uralsk where I have been working with a management team of a joint Anglo/Italian/Kazak venture managing a large high-pressure gas field. Another consultant and I have worked with thirty managers over two days, and have framed the two days in terms of *slowing* down to have the conversations about *how* they work together, which they don't normally have time for. This was our second meeting. The first was in St Petersburg in December 2006. On both occasions the focus was on conversational skills across functional and cultural boundaries, and with creating small strategic oversight groups that would provide an opportunity to engage differently, and to see the business differently. This is typical. *From the perspective of the work I do* these corporations appear as oral cultures where the main focus is on meeting together.

It is not the whole picture of my professional life (nor of managers working in corporations either). I do write. However, it is noticeable, in the light of the writing I have done on the doctoral programme, how different my professional writing has been. When I have written for a Corporate client the emphasis has usually been on writing to support an oral presentation, perhaps using “Powerpoint” presentational software, or I have been engaged in the conversational exchanges that typify most e-mail traffic. The bias towards conversation rather than writing is one of the ways in which my current professional life connects to my first professional practice as a barrister, where the important training and practice was in public advocacy, and certain kinds of inquiry (cross examination for example). As a young barrister I found myself performing in a courtroom which provided the setting for a stylised conversation in which the written word or even the legal rules were subordinated to a public disagreement over facts and their meaning. As a junior barrister I would be given cases where the law was highly unlikely to be in contention: what would be at issue would be what happened. It is not that barristers do not write, but that their writing is generally subordinated to their speaking. For example I would take free hand notes of evidence in a notebook, and use these notes to prepare for cross-examination. As a result of the doctoral programme I have returned to the habit of keeping a notebook, which has become a close companion – I am writing now from notes prepared in my notebook.

A specialisation in labour law, allied to a series of other life choices, led me into a more practical engagement with industrial relations in a large car firm where, if anything, the emphasis on conversation and disputation was greater than in a courtroom. The situation in which I found myself was one where the formal processes had, to a large extent, broken down so that I was frequently engaged with an aggressive management, and a belligerent shop steward movement, in disputes about what the rules should be concerning entering into and sustaining conversation⁷. The emphasis on the spoken word continued as a feature of my life when later on I trained to be an organisation consultant in the hands of teachers steeped in the active existential values of Gestalt Therapy. In this tradition the conversational moments, particularly those occurring between therapist and client, are the most important ones, and writing is generally associated with conceptualisation⁸ and treated with suspicion. My purpose in referencing these historic moments in my life is to emphasise a continuity of interest in not only the spoken word, but speech in interactive settings such as a court room, a therapeutic consulting room, or a meeting with working people, where speech becomes a conversation in some form, and where disputation,

⁷ Part of my role was actually to write down more of the rules in terms of procedural understandings about how and when to negotiate. I also continued my note taking into the negotiations in which I was involved, mostly because I was working in disputatious situations, where recollections about who said what would often be contested.

⁸ The connection between writing and thinking is one I explore in the next Chapter of the thesis. I also explore in greater depth the way my exposure to Gestalt Therapy has influenced my doctoral themes.

differences of view, are the currency of contact. This conversational bias stands out for me now in the light of how I took up the doctoral programme as one where the main mode of expression would be in writing. Why did I make such a change of emphasis?

The best response I can make to this question is that I made a number of relatively minor choices at the beginning of the programme that interacted to create a significant association between my doctoral research and writing. Immediately prior to commencing the programme I had an article published in a Gestalt Journal (ibid) – my first ever piece of published writing. I had been pleased with how the piece had been received in the Gestalt community. I had also noticed how the written form had helped me to be thoughtful about my consulting work; writing kind of distanced me from my own actions and gave rise to insights and questions about what I was doing in the reported case. (Extracts from this article and some of the questions it raised are introduced at the beginning of Chapter Two in this thesis). Furthermore this piece of writing had been the subject of an e-mail by Peter Reason to the CARPP research community, recommending it – I felt a bit proud. Then when the piece was introduced into my supervisory group in March 2001 I found that it induced interesting commentaries from my doctoral colleagues and my supervisor. Most importantly, I noticed how the commentaries and questions revealed aspects of my style that were not apparent to me at the time of doing the work, or when I wrote the article. Quite quickly I widened the subject matter of my writing to include more and more of my private life, and found that I was excited by the act of expression, and then by the responses I was getting. This was compounded in 2003 when writing played a significant part in how I was deliberately trying to present my self to my supervision group. Events reflected on each other to create a momentum behind my association between writing and my doctoral research.

This effect was compounded as I began to read about writing. This produced a fruitful reciprocation between my writing practice and reading about how others had used their writing. The overall effect of the interaction between my writing and my reading was to reinforce the idea that as I wrote so I explored. This made me both more attentive to what and how I wrote, as well as more resolved to not constrain the writing too much – to try to follow the ‘pen’ as well as guide it. I also felt encouraged to continue to write personally in the confidence that purpose would emerge, or clarify, out of the process of writing. For example, I read Bill Torbert’s book “The Power of Balance” (1991), including the slightly stunned foreword by Donald Schon concerning the way Torbert had mixed his private, academic and working life, and I felt strengthened to be even braver in the exploration of my personal life in my public writing. From Torbert I went on to read the notebooks of Rilke (1949) and Camus (1963), particularly noticing the way they took their own personal experience as the occasion for reflecting on fundamental issues for us all. I fancied a connection here between Torbert, Rilke and Camus. I also re-read Saint Exupery who I had first encountered as a schoolboy, and noticed how he seemed to blur the line between fiction and journalism: I asked did all these things happen to him just like this, and

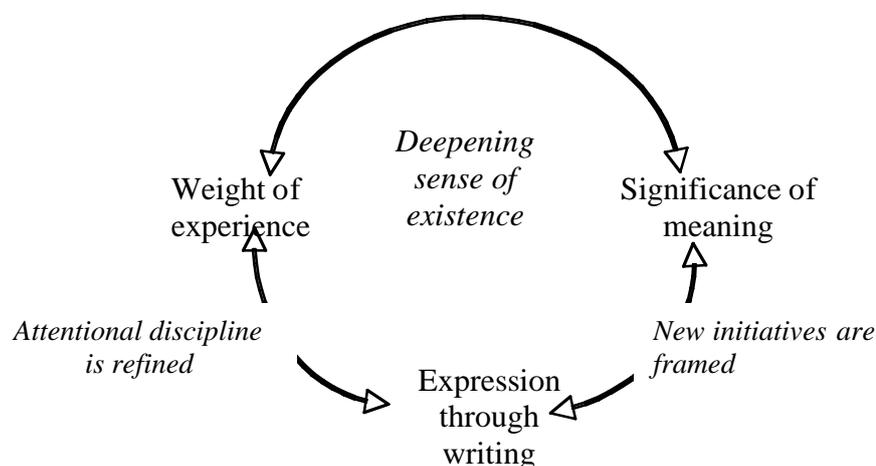
does it matter? (I quote him at some length in Chapter Four). These writers provided me with a growing understanding of what it might mean to richly document a life world by relying on good first person accounts to provide a *felt sense* of what it was like to live in their world. I went on to explore the creative potential of the written word through Laurel Richardson's work on qualitative research processes and writing (Richardson and St Pierre, 2001; Richardson, 1997; Stewart, 1996)); this interlaced with the doctoral supervision as, from the autumn of 2004, we started to include free form writing sessions in our meetings. These readings, and the actual practice of doing so much more writing than I had ever done before, over such an extended period, further raised my awareness to the potential for writing to be revelatory of both my own thought (Weick, 1995; 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 1973) and my own experience (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2003; Manen, 1990; Czarniawska, 1997). In fact the dividing line between writing and thinking and writing and experiencing progressively blurred as the doctoral journey unfolded. These insights fed back into the way I interrogated my own texts when I came to present a paper to the EGOS conference in July 2006, and began to write the thesis based on an examination of my own written production.

Reading about writing as a stimulus to my own writing process has continued as I have written the thesis. The latest edition of the *Qualitative Research Handbook* (2005) dedicates more space than previous editions to writing. I have read with interest, and also a sense of confirmation and recognition, new chapters by Stewart and Brady (2005). I have also seen an advance copy of an article by Marshall, prepared for the forthcoming edition of the *Handbook of Action Research* (2007). Encountering these authors, and setting them alongside my sources in phenomenology and poetry, I have experienced a double pull. On the one hand I am encouraged to open up to my own descriptive potential, while, on the other, I am made aware of the need to be careful of the perspectival partiality of what I describe. Richardson writes that, "paradoxically we know more and doubt what we know" (2005: 963). As a result of this "double pull" I begin to experience both challenge and support from those who write about writing as inquiry. On the supportive side each author encourages me to open to the possibilities inherent in the process of writing. For example Stewart works with the idea that writing might "grope towards embedded affective experience as it tries to cull attention to moments of legibility and emergence" (Stewart, 1037): this affirms me in my own process of describing in writing my actual experiences. Brady introduces an emphasis on *place* for human existence, writing of "self conscious knowledge of being in place" (981): I feel retrospectively supported in the attention I give to place and human constellations during 2005. Marshall advocates "congruence of form and content" (2007, in press): I feel confirmed (again) in experimenting with my own form, including poetry, where it resolves issues within the writing. However, as I have said, I am also challenged by what I see as a second moment in the writing process: to be careful of the constituting force of language; of the "discursive struggles" that take place within the frame of individual writing where what is at stake is "identity and re making memory." (Richardson, 2005: 962). I feel this caution with

particular force as a white middle-aged European man. The messages about the potentially dangerous correlations between power and descriptive capacity seem particularly relevant to me, and I take them to heart. (Denzin, 2005: 944; Bishop, 2005: 110). One theme for this thesis is how I reconcile the moments of description, and critical subjectivity that are opened to me by these authors.

On the doctoral journey I have come to experience writing as a *tool for distancing myself from myself, and for getting closer to myself*. As I have immersed myself in my writing, particularly when the writing has been flowing along, as if ‘under its own steam’, I have felt something like a mode of entrancement. It can be as if I am being written in some way. Before the doctoral journey I would have said that writing was an attempt to transcribe a thought or an experience. Now I would not describe the process like that, but as something nearer to co-emergence of writing, thinking and experiencing. My experience is given weight and presence through being described and in this process of description I refine my attentional disciplines. Writing also oversees the advent of meaning and frames the whole conceptualisation of experience. In this sense writing plays its part in another key dynamic of the thesis. My commitment to writing as a mode of inquiry is present from the very beginning of the doctoral journey. Arguably this commitment readies me for my encounter with phenomenology two years after I begin the programme. Phenomenology reinforces the significance of writing and clarifies its meaning for me as an action

EXHIBIT 0.3: Writing, experience and meaning



researcher.

In Chapter One I introduce the techniques I have used in the writing to emphasise the potential of my writing to support inquiry. The most significant point is more of an attitude than a technique. I have learned to open myself to the potential for emergence within the writing: to try to suppress my editorial ‘I’ and allow the writing to flow. One way this finds specific expression is in my readiness to lift my head and describe where I am and what is happening at any moment. Following Kathleen Stewart I see this as a process of seeking the point where meaning emerges, and tracking

the trace it leaves (2005: 1028). I support this emergence by then being careful with any subsequent editing. I ask myself whether refinement of this particular group of words is necessary and whether it will hide the meaning as it originally arose, and to what effect. This inclination to edit lightly is roughly correlated to the time since the piece was written. If I notice mistakes in the sentence I just wrote I go back and change it without thinking. If I notice something odd when I re-read the material when the particular piece is finished then I am conscious of making a choice to either craft it into better, or more appropriate expression, or comment on what I have noticed. I have made it an invariable rule to not go back and change material once it has been submitted to supervision – I treat it as if it were an article written by someone else. As you will see in the thesis this gives me the opportunity to layer my own text with fresh commentary.

From 2004 onwards I supported the idea that I could separate from my text with the image, borrowed from Mauro Carbone (2004: 47), that my writing was a bowl or hollow within which words and ideas could appear to turn before my gaze. I picture my writing as a closely woven fabric within which things can be inquired into. When a word or concept is brought to attention I picture it settling onto the fabric and causing a depression, bowl or hollow to appear, which gently holds the word or concept. In this way I like to get some distance on something that might not be seen in all its potential because of being too close. I provide several examples of reflecting on words/ideas like this in Chapter four of the thesis. As well as standing back I may also deliberately immerse myself in a word or phrase taking it on as if it were a new sense like seeing or hearing. Think of a blind man's stick as a kind of prosthetic eye and then think of a word as a way of feeling out the world. For example I discover a new word (for me), "oneiric", and it makes more definitive sense of my creative early morning experiences when I'm half awake. As a result of engaging with the word I appreciate this time of my day more fully. I provide myself with pen and paper, a discrete bedside light (so as not to disturb Bridget too much), and a small writing table, to support writing in bed in the early morning. This example illustrates one of the ways in which writing has also been taken into my life, and shifted my way of living. In Chapter Two I describe how I developed rituals and practices around writing, which have the effect of incorporating writing much more fully into my overall existence. Becoming a writer in a particular way is a part of becoming a doctoral student. It is a way of living that is taken on and taken in.

0.4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty....and significant others

The French phenomenologist and philosopher of the body Merleau-Ponty is an influential presence through out the thesis so I would like to introduce him here in this Introduction, and say something about the ways in which he has influenced me. He is someone who I discover in August 2003 when I hear a speaker discussing his work at a *Roots of Gestalt* conference in Paris. The connection between his work and that of the Gestalt psychologists becomes an abiding intellectual stimulus for the thesis. One thing this thesis shows is a developing and deepening commitment to the works of one philosopher in particular. I take on the cloak of his thought and see the world through the perspective of his world-view. In a sense he becomes a guide for me, reintroducing me to my body and to my carnal existence. It is a little ironic that it should take a thinker to show me these things. I don't pretend to exactly know how this works; however it feels as though it is involved with my move to take up writing more fully as part of a doctoral journey. I could have chosen other routes for development at this stage of my life, but I chose one that involved me in writing and thinking. It is as if I understood that some aspect of fundamentally re-shaping the structure of my conception of life was needed. My chosen entry into attempted healing and development is through the gate of thought. I choose a philosopher as a companion and I seek to think with him. As I accompany him I find that I am also drawn to him and his companions as human beings as well as thinkers. They carried their thought into the world underpinned by an apparently deep belief that how they lived and related their personal lives was of significance. I came to admire their commitment to their own truth and the integrity they showed about this. Merleau-Ponty comes to provide me with a beacon of engaged truthfulness.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was borne on March 14th 1908, one of three children. He was raised by his mother his father having been killed in combat in 1913. Despite his loss Jean Paul Sartre reports him as saying that he had “never recovered from an incomparable childhood” (Stewart, 1998: 566). Sartre explains this remark in terms of the influence that his childhood was to have on the development of his thought:

Seeking the golden age, and with that as his point of departure, he forged his myths and what he has since called his “style of life”. It established his preferences – choosing, at the same time, the traditions which recalled the rituals of childhood, and the “spontaneity” which evoked childhoods superintendent liberty.” (Sartre writing in ‘Merleau-Ponty Vivant’ as quoted by Stewart *ibid*).

I am attracted by the deep sense of being situated in the world that invests all of Merleau-Ponty's work. He seems to *move from* a deep sense of being situated out into the marginal world of existence. As such he has provided me with a basis for re-thinking my own connection to the world including my relationships with other people. I have also been drawn to contrast my own peripatetic childhood, disconnected from my own family of origin by breaks at boarding school, and living with my grandmother. I have

wondered if and how my own start in life has contributed to my own skilful working of marginality, and need for connectedness.

As with his father, Merleau-Ponty's life was also interrupted by war, although with less tragic consequences: he was captured in the French retreat in 1940, tortured⁹, and discharged in September 1940, whereupon he returned to Paris to eventually join the same resistance movement, *Socialism and Liberty*, as Sartre. These bare facts are difficult to illuminate further as he appears to have written or spoken very little about this period apart from a few generally dismissive remarks about the resistance group they were in (along the lines of all talk and no action!¹⁰). I wonder what it was like for him to have fought the Germans when so much of his professional life was concerned with German philosophy and culture. I also wonder if his indirect experience of war (the death of his father), allied to his own experience, might have contributed towards a dialectical philosophy that seeks to tread a path between various kinds of fundamentalism. His own deepest positions emerge from the refutation of opposites and the synergy he finds from this double critique (Carmen and Hansen, 2005: 4-5). His stance resonates with me at an emotional level and intrigues me intellectually. The emotional connection stems from something I recognised in my own life position: a kind of horror of violence and extreme positions. In part this arises, I'm sure, from three difficult and influential years in my 30's when working as the Industrial Relations Manager of two large British car manufacturing plants; also from my training in the principles of communicative rationality that underpin the life experience of the professional advocate. Intellectually I find myself pulled on, despite the difficulty of engaging with some of his texts¹¹ and the effort needed to try to join the wider debate within which he is offering his contribution. I can imagine that my introduction to his philosophy and more generally to phenomenology will be one of the most lasting contributions to my life from this doctoral programme.

After the cessation of war in 1945 Merleau-Ponty threw himself into life as an engaged academic founding the journal *Les Temps Modern* with Sartre, and engaging in the turbulent politics of post war France¹². Their complex relationship was to include strong intellectual disagreements particularly (as related to this thesis) in respect of the relationship of the self to the world. Sartre developed the idea that humanity was blessed and burdened with

⁹ The claim is made in Stephen Priest (Priest: 4)

¹⁰ Sartre describes it thus: "Borne of enthusiasm, our little group caught a fever and died a year later, of not knowing what to do." (Stewart: 567)

¹¹ Not just my view. : "His arguments are not systemically organised; his prose is often lush, occasionally hyperbolic; and he delivers few memorable bon mots or resonant slogans by which to identify and recall his considered views." (Carmen and Hansen: 4)

¹² Moreover they [Sartre, Merleau-Ponty] lived during one of the most volatile epochs in European history, which included the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the two World Wars as well as the Korean, Vietnam and Algerian conflicts (Stewart, 1995: xiii).

absolute freedom. This was a feature of humanity's ability to step away from an otherwise totally determined world, and to empty consciousness into a state of translucent oversight. In this situation human beings could always make a choice, and could only have recourse to causes (whether outside themselves in the world or inside themselves such as with aspects of their psychology – perhaps arising from aspects of their history) by being in “bad faith”. Sartre considered that thought freed humanity from being a causally driven object like all other objects in the world. In contrast Merleau-Ponty described a vision of the self that was haunted by its life to date in the form of embodied, habitual ways of going on. As far as Merleau-Ponty was concerned our habitual selves could not be free in the way that Sartre argued, because they were founded on our historic existence in a social and natural world, *which was incorporated into our self hood*. The importance for the thesis is that these different perspectives generate contrasting notions of how we are free, and what exactly it means for human beings to be part of a culture, and a historic tradition. Where I stand in relation to them is relevant to where I inquire when I ask where I might find sources of energy and inspiration; and where I come eventually to stand is with Merleau-Ponty, looking over my shoulder as I step forward.

I have spoken of Merleau-Ponty's connection to Gestalt? How did this connection arise? The Gestalt theorist Aaron Gurwitsch can be of help here, because he not only provides an insight into Merleau-Ponty's contact with Gestalt, but also opens up other interesting connections. Gurwitsch worked closely with Husserl in Freiburg until the Nazis came to power in 1933 when he fled to Paris to spend seven years lecturing on the confluence of Gestalt psychology and Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty attended Gurwitsch's Paris lectures, and these influenced his own dissertation of 1938, produced in 1942 as his first book *The Structure of Behavior* (“Structure” is the word commonly used when “Gestalt” is translated into French.). His second book *Phenomenology of Perception* (published 1945) continued to explore the implications of the work of the Gestalt Psychologists directly referencing the cases of surgeon Kurt Goldstein¹³, and throughout the rest of his works Gestalt theory re-appears,

¹³ Kurt Goldstein was a German-Jewish physician and psychiatrist. He received his medical degree from the University of Breslau in 1903. He taught at the Universities of Frankfurt, Berlin, Columbia, Harvard and Brandeis and practiced neurological and psychiatric medicine in hospitals in Europe and the United States. His assistant was the Gestalt theorist Adhemar Gelb. The case studies Merleau-Ponty relies upon are often the experiences of the patient Schneider, a German soldier who was injured in battle by a shell splinter in the brain. The injury had left him in a position startlingly similar to a caricature of a cognitive (intellectualist) model of a man. He could only perform certain abstract bodily functions by thinking them through like an automaton. When asked to raise his right hand to his head he could do so by thinking through the necessary bodily movements of arm and hand, and by engaging his left hand to then help the right arm into position. However if asked to assume the attitude of a soldier and salute then he could perform that action straight away. In other words, according to Merleau-Ponty, if he deliberately stepped into the form of life of being a soldier then his body could move itself, but while the behaviour remained at the abstract, level then he could only behave like a cognitivist robot. The injury had interrupted his body's ability to move itself without thought. The disfunction had exposed the magic of normal embodied

providing a continuing source of inspiration.

Gurwitsch fled France in 1940 and by 1948 he was lecturing at Brandeis University and living in Cambridge in Boston where, in 1955, he met the American scholar Samuel Todes, who had already made a Gestalt connection when, as a Psychology undergraduate, he was taught by Wolfgang Kohler at Swarthmore College. In 1955 Todes was doing graduate work at Harvard, and teaching philosophy at MIT. Gurwitsch and Todes had weekly meetings “centered on their mutual interest in the Gestalt theory of perception and its relevance to phenomenology,” (Todes: xii). Todes presented his doctoral dissertation *The Human Body as Material Subject of the World* in 1963 two years after Merleau-Ponty’s death on the 3rd May 1961¹⁴: Gurwitsch, and Todes both feature in this thesis. Through these kind of connections Merleau-Ponty not only takes me forward into the new territory (for me) of phenomenology, but also helps me to re-think my understanding of Gestalt. It is congruent with his thought that in my engagement I should both travel back to an important aspect of my past, and also forward into contact with new territory.

My connection to Gestalt

My personal engagement with Gestalt is a double one. Through Merleau-Ponty I travel back to inquire into the work and lives of the pre-war Gestalt psychologists who made such a contribution to German intellectual life in the 1920s and 1930s (Ash, 1998). This particularly takes me to their insights about Gestalt form, and how these correlated to phenomenological thought about perception. I explain the Gestalt understanding about figure and ground more fully in Chapter Three; suffice it for now to know that what especially impressed Gurwitsch and then Merleau-Ponty was the observations of the psychologists that something (a figure) always appeared with something else (the ground). The totality or whole was made up of this “gestalt” of a figure against a ground. Merleau-Ponty takes this as an abiding metaphor for his own thought, and so do I, as I ask: what is in the background, still present and influential, but currently invisible? What hidden resources lie in my own ground? What mode of inquiry is appropriate to discover this knowledge? These questions arise from my return to Gestalt under Merleau-Ponty’s guidance. They are different questions from the ones that arise for me from my training in Gestalt therapy during the late 1980s and 1990s.

functioning.

¹⁴ Todes died in 1994. His thesis was not published until 2001 as “Body and World”. In the introduction to this book Hubert Dreyfus says for a work that offers a detailed account of situated knowledge this book seems strangely desituated. There is no clue that it was conceived almost half a century ago in Cambridge, Massachusetts...Yet his text...enters the current philosophical debates concerning realism/anti realism and the nature of non conceptual perceptual content and its relation to thought.” (Todes, 2001: xi)

I was trained in a post Second World War tradition of Gestalt by teachers such as Edwin and Sonia Nevis (Nevis, 1997) and Malcolm Parlett (Parlett, 2001), who had helped develop an existential therapy around Gestalt principles such as figure/ground. Edwin and Sonia connect back to the story I was telling earlier in this section of the network of connectedness. They were both trained by Fritz and Laura Perls (Perls, 1947)¹⁵, and Fritz was a young laboratory assistant to Kurt Goldstein in the 1930s. Although my Gestalt training has included some therapy training (for example I was trained in couples and family therapy in 1994-95) I have never practiced as a therapist. What I have taken in particular is a focus on paying attention to the present moment (I say more about the Gestalt roots of this in Chapters Three and Four). Out of the rich teaching, what may be summarised as sedimenting out for me can be captured in two injunctions given to me by Sonia Nevis. The first is when she observed me stuck with what to do next in a group. “You need never be stuck Rob.” she said, “Just say where you are!” My attempt to do this might characterise one aspect of my doctoral journey – where am I? the other injunction was offered to me when I was sitting in front of a simulated family on a training programme also wondering what to say next. The family were tearing themselves apart in front of my eyes in a fierce argument. Sonia, sitting just behind me as I watched in horror, lent forward. This time she whispered, “don’t say anything until you can say what is wonderful about this family!” I weep at the simple beauty of it. Later, in May 2004, I joined Sonia on the faculty teaching these family therapy methods to organisation consultants. At the end of the programme I interviewed those on the programme, recording and transcribing the interviews. I was particularly interested in what sense they had made of Sonia’s injunction to start by appreciating something “wonderful” in the systems with which they worked. I went back and spoke on the phone with Sonia about it. Her understanding of this as a place to start with a system was that it enhanced contact between the consultant and the ‘system’. Here is part of an interview with another consultant and friend Lars Marmgren that illustrates the inquiry about contact and affirmation:

Rob: Because there is a – I mean – just to challenge slightly there is a tradition in Gestalt of sometimes being quite brusque. I mean the important thing is what comes to awareness, and if what comes to awareness is a negative then you say it, and you could say there is something rather forced about looking for the positive when what might be overwhelming you in your awareness is the badness. There is something forced for example about thinking of the positive things to do with the Iraq war for example. You might be thinking, “actually Rob that is so far away from the reality of my experience that what I want to tell you is not what is good about George Bush!”

Lars: (Laughs). That’s true. I mean I think there is both sides of Gestalt. We had some reminiscence of it in the Scandinavian programme. The old west coast Gestalt provocative type of interventions where the

¹⁵ Perls’ first book is a critique of Freud: it is dedicated to the Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer

accepting loving side was less apparent, but the teachers I had did not really come out of that – I mean the people I think of as role models.

Rob: It's interesting though because in academic circles, or when looking at science, what gets promoted is a critical mind. The notion of being able to critically analyse so that in any situation of looking at a scientific principle the rule really is that it can't be disconfirmed. So the pressure is to disconfirm or deconstruct – find the fault.

Lars: I think though there is one underlying Gestalt principle that I have been taught. That is – it was primarily based on individual therapy if you like, but you had to start by building contact and trust, and I think the basic idea behind looking at the good side is just another way of expressing that if you like. I mean...

Rob: Well, you said it was more before. You made a distinction – I mean with my help – between what is like a principle of process – of making contact in order to influence, but also you – I think, let me not put words into your mouth – but were you not also saying also that it is more than that. It is a deeper way when looking at human systems of coming to know them?

Lars: Yes. It depends what you put into the concept of making contact I would say. Maybe there is a mixture here of many different schools of thought, but I have a strong feeling that all the great therapists have always stated that when they do good work it is because they touch something in themselves. That is they learn something together with the client. Which is a way of saying: “don't you think you can go in there and believe that you can correct, because if you don't understand that there is some newness in there for you also you are just going to manipulate which isn't (indistinct).....”

Rob: Thank you, mm, mmm (Discussion with Lars Marmgren, 9th July 2004.)¹⁶

My own understanding, as it eventually settled, through my discussion with the other consultants, and with Sonia is that to work with a system it is helpful, necessary even, for the system to open for you, to show itself, and not to close up before your gaze. How do I help this system to open before me? Contact then becomes a kind of mutual opening based on a fundamental care, which can deepen into love. The idea that I might want to be in a relationship with other whereby it discloses itself to me (and I also open) goes deep into me, and surfaces repeatedly in this thesis, as I struggle with my own narcissism, and its implications for truth and relationship. There is a lot more to Gestalt therapy than this, but, when all is said and done, it is for me contact and awareness. In the course of my doctoral journey I have asked again what these simple injunctions from Sonia might mean in my life....and in the lives of other action researchers: “just say where you are!”, and “don't speak until you can say something wonder-full about what you see!”

¹⁶ Lars has agreed to me quoting this in my thesis.

Also in the lives of my family: this thesis shows that the place where my intellectual re-frame starts first to sporadically break into the practice of my life is in my most intimate places. There is some intuition that this might be the case at the beginning of the doctoral journey when I start to describe my personal life, but it flowers into reality later in the journey as I struggle to re connect with what is closest to me.

My Family

My family appears in this thesis from time to time so I would like to introduce them here. You will get to know them more fully as the thesis progresses. I have been married to Bridget since January 1973. We met in 1968 at Lancaster University, and since 1996 we have run a small organization consulting business from our home in Oxford, England. Bridget is trained as a Gestalt therapist and practiced as one before consulting. We occasionally work together, but have our own clients. We have three children. Our eldest child is Alice (borne July 1978), who is just about to submit the first draft of her doctoral thesis to University College London¹⁷. In December 2005 Alice was diagnosed with a rare cancer – for which she was treated with intense chemotherapy during 2006. Just before Christmas 2006 she was given a rest from treatment. She has a scan on April 24th 2007 to review the status of the cancer. We also have two sons, Tom (July 1980) and Joe (1984), who are just completing undergraduate courses. My father Robert (April, 1923), my mother Gwendoline (December 1927), and my father’s father Arthur (1896-1940), also appear in the thesis. I love them but come to wonder how I have loved.

¹⁷ “Interlocking Heresies: Ethics and Politics in the Regulation of Embryonic Stem Cell Research in the UK” (PhD thesis pending submission).

0.5. The shape of the thesis

In this section I want to make a short bridge between the Introduction and the first chapter of the thesis by summarising the content of the Introduction in terms of the shape of what will now follow.

As I have sought to pull together an account of the research journey into this thesis I have begun to appreciate what I only glimpsed as an idea before: precisely how much qualitative research is captured by metaphors of emergence and multiple perspective: researcher as quilt maker or jazz improviser (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 4-5). This appreciation has grown largely out of struggling with issues of continuity in the thesis, brought about by the multi-layered nature of the text. The thesis refers to the documentation of my existence as it was being described between March 2001 and mid 2006. This documentation is the basis for reflection as I “write up” the thesis between mid 2006 and April 2007. However this ‘writing up’ is also subject to reflection as well, as I seek to be consistent to my principles of writing as ongoing inquiry. The distinction between writing about what is occurring as I write the thesis, and what was occurring at some previous stage of the journey is not always easy to maintain. I support myself in maintaining continuity by structuring the thesis in a particular way. I divide it into five chapters, which are in principle set out in chronological order. Each chapter is then broken into a number of sections. The beginnings of each chapter and each section present an opportunity to position the section/chapter within the whole. This helps to maintain continuity particularly when moving between time frames such as when relating something that occurred in 2002 (for example) and connecting it to something occurring currently as I write the thesis. Continuity becomes of particular importance on those occasions when I seek to illuminate some aspect of experience from the doctoral journey through recourse to ideas that were gained later in time: when I ‘bring forward’ material in this way I explain what I am doing, usually at the beginning of the relevant section.

My way of writing constantly threatens the past with the present: what really happened in my problems with my supervision group (Chapter Three)? My answer to questions such as this is to seek to both honour the past, as a discrete moment with its own presence, and also to make it live again in my present experience. This double intention is held within the following chapter frame.

1. Chapter One, *Writing as an emergent process of inquiry* introduces the ways in which I have taken on writing as a research method. In it I discuss the connection between emergence and writing, how I support emergent form, and different aspects of quality as it effects my writing. This includes an account of how I presented learning about quality in research, gleaned from my own doctoral writing, to an international conference.
2. Chapter Two, *Writing as an aspect of lived existence*, approaches writing from a different angle – how has it been introduced into, and

influenced my life? How can writing both describe and illuminate my life? This takes me into a description of rituals and practices of writing, how writing has disturbed my life, and writing authentically (or not) about feeling. This chapter includes extracts from a 2001 account of a consulting assignment with a large oil and gas company, which enables me to introduce questions concerning bewilderment and wonder.

3. Chapter Three, *Disconnection*, is built around a break down in my relationship with my supervision group which is initiated by a deliberate experiment in withdrawal that has far more profound effects than I bargained for. This prompts a deepening of my personal inquiry as I express in writing some very intimate aspects of my life. As I reflect on this in the second half of the chapter I explore different conceptions of myself that are more relationally based, and also explore entering another's intimate space through writing.
4. Chapter Four, *Re-thinking my situation in the world*, inquires into the way in which I am engaging with the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and phenomenology more generally. This includes the way in which insights from phenomenology are feeding back to re-shape my understanding of my Gestalt heritage. In the second half of the chapter I attempt a synthesis of my understanding by relating it to the notion of experiential knowing in action research. I try to recreate in the chapter the sense of struggle that I experienced in 2004 as I sought to take in the ideas from phenomenology and make sense of them as a person and as a researcher. The Chapter includes the description of a consulting case in which I sought to apply ideas of closeness from a distance drawn from phenomenology. My failure to do this in a satisfactory way (for me) energises my entry in Chapter Five.
5. Chapter Five, *Conclusions and new questions*, is concerned with resolution and synthesis. What do I have to say about the original questions about energy and excitement in my life, and about the process of action research and the epistemological questions raised by the journeying? I continue to introduce accounts of my life but these are now directed towards closure rather than opening (there is a new consulting account and a description of my engagement with "Constellations" training). I draw out some dimensions of my move towards resolution but I do so in a freehand form drawn from my notebook to emphasise the provisional nature of my conclusions. I pose new, but now differently structured questions.

If I was to ambitiously visualise the whole of this thesis then I would take a balloon, and half fill it with water in that way that my children used to do when they had "water fights". This shape of distending towards the end is something of the overall effect I seek. I would like the reader to feel that the thesis gathers weight and bulk towards the end. I seek this quality.