

Chapter 1.

Introduction to my learning journey – searching for legitimacy without compromise...

When I made my transfer between MPhil and PhD registration (October 2002) I wrote about my learning journey stages. It was only this process of writing my transfer document which helped me to see a pattern in my own 'progress', to give a shape to the journey I had travelled while at Bath – my learning journey, and to see how this fitted with my wider life journey.

This sense of the connection between the two is important for me because at the heart of my thesis lies the issue of the personal/biographical being both connected to my practice and being situated in the wider political context.

Until that time (of the transfer) I had a *felt* sense of the changes involved in the journey but there was no narrative or story line, which I needed in order to tell the story to myself and others (and now to you my readers and my examiners).

I struggled to see learning journey phases for myself, having spent a great deal of time (August 2002) going through tapes of sessions with my tutorial group and supervisor and audits of my inquiry to date. I was puzzled as to what these phases might look like. It was unlikely they would be clear and simple ah-hahs, yet something obviously changed at times during the six years. The challenge was to find how to describe it.

One possible approach was to look back over the years and see if there were key developmental points that felt significant. I tried but it just looked like a mish-mash of personal and professional 'incidents' like leaving the Health Authority, working with significant people, significant pieces of work, and my diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. Somehow they didn't feel coherent, or even creatively incoherent!

I noticed in reading through my old writings the appearance of some creatures which were figural for me at certain times. Two appeared in quotes from other writers (Blake, Carroll) but the last came in a dream, and they captured a sense of how I was inquiring at that time and how this changed during the learning journey. I have chosen to take an allegorical approach to characterising my learning journey, and to view it as consisting of phases or *moments*.

I do wish the term 'moments⁸' didn't feel like it was unavailable as a description. It feels like it belongs to Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, the more so having heard Yvonna Lincoln speak so lucidly about them and hold it so lightly. But I'm remembering my mother's use of the term; 'Don't take any notice of her, she's just having one of her moments', which was her response to me doing my own thing, being incomprehensible to her. It makes the idea of learning journey moments very attractive!

I will outline my learning journey moments here, including the significant characteristics of each moment. Throughout this thesis I will refer to these moments when I want to highlight the particular stage of the learning journey that I was at. Through doing this I want to enable you to see a progression in my learning (reflected in my practice). Although I do not want to give the impression that I moved directly from one moment to the next – I find it a much less clear division than 'progression' might suggest, with each moment existing in or pushing through the next like the segments of a telescope, so that today I may be mainly in a later moment but some situations and triggers raise up in me the earlier moment behaviours. The way I see the dynamic of this is that they are not successive and discrete, all the moments exist at any one time, if only as potential. Each is subsumed within the next moment.

It's been a long and at times very painful process this learning journey, and has involved reflecting on uncomfortable aspects of self, as well as gaining the confidence to explore, write about and share aspects of my biography, values and skills.

I'd also want to state that it's been a very joyous process at times too.

Writing this (Laugharne, August 2002) I look out of my window and watch the tide as it returns to the estuary. There will come a certain point where it lifts the boats, which have spent so long grounded and not fully boat-like on the sand. As the water rises below their keels there is an ecstatic moment where the boats take-off across the water with the tide – and as an observer one wonders have they come untied, they move so far and so fast? But no, they reach the length of their attachment to the buoy to which they are moored, pull back and settle to float.

I want this story of a learning journey to tell how, in a similar way, I have used the inquiry to become ungrounded.

1. The tigers of wrath moment 1996

This comes from a quote, which I used early in my diploma period (1996 - 97). 'The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction' and

⁸ I use the term 'moment' to mean a point of change or transformation and the period succeeding it. Moments exist concurrently, 'they all circulate in the present, competing and defining one another' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:xiv).

comes from William Blake (*Proverbs of Hell, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). This phase extends through my diploma years.

When I first came to Bath I think I was breathless with anger, anger and passion about social justice, the abuse of power and the servant role of facilitation in the context of working with groups of unequal power rather than facilitation with an empty slick professionalism, or a facilitation which is allied with power-holders. The idea of service here standing for a more connected and 'live' facilitation practice. I was very excited about the potential of facilitation to hold a space in which those with different power and types of knowledge could meet and form a temporary community of interest – and I still am. I also held a deep suspicion of authority, and strong doubts about my own place in the academy (legitimacy).

I had to let go of the breath I was holding (yes, just think of those childhood tantrums), relax and take in some nourishment, some oxygen. Not to lose the driving forces but to make more of the surface of my lungs accessible.

Characteristics of this moment include lots of anger, clear and untempered; anxiety is hidden and unspoken (e.g. about my acceptance within the academy); distress is denied (e.g. about the redundancy process I was subject to at the Heath Authority).

I spend a lot of time feeling like I will burst, particularly my head will burst. Writing is more formal and slow to come.

Misunderstandings, and mishearings – particularly with Peter, my supervisor at the time.

Huge commitment to particular groups and settings, which has an unquestioning feel at times.

2. The unicorn moment – fabulous monsters 1998

This also comes from a quote, one which I used in my diploma transfer paper and relates to that period between transfer from the diploma and my returning to CARPP after taking a break after attempting a transfer from MPhil to PhD (October 2001).

In Women's Ways of Knowing terms the experience of attempting the transfer had me banging my 'subjective knowing' head on the brick wall of the academy (or the sense of the academy I had constructed in my own mind). The Unicorn moment, which describes where I was at at that time, determined a confrontational and painful experience. My withdrawal (by suspending for 18 months) into a period of reflection and exploration enabled the shift from one moment to another – although I would stress this is a gradual process and not a clean or clear transition. In this piece Carroll describes two worlds coming face to face with each other and their beliefs and prejudices about each other, and the very conditional relationship which they negotiate.

'The Unicorn stood for some time looking at her with an air of the deepest disgust.

"What – is – this?" he said at last.

"This is a child!" Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude. "We only found it today. It's as large as life and twice as natural!"

"I always thought they were fabulous monsters!" said the Unicorn. "Is it alive?"

"It can talk" said Haigha solemnly.

The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said, "Talk child."

Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began: "Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too? I never saw one alive before!"

"Well now that we have seen each other," said the Unicorn, "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, if you like," said Alice'.

Characteristics of this moment have their strongest resonance in the CARPP/academic world⁹, and include lots of anxiety, insecurity and ambivalence. Me being very confused about what's expected of me, feeling I should know and being unable to ask for help or advice. Anger is expressed in unhelpfully tempered forms. Lots of anguish mostly suppressed but also bursting forth through writing to start to become accessible.

I spend a lot of my time afraid I will burst into tears.

I am beginning to explore witchiness and transpersonal aspects in facilitation and taking a delight in 'legitimising' these¹⁰.

I had concerns about spanning different worlds, will I lose touch with my communities of origin and affinity if I take the space to explore my other aspects and become more reflective and less activist? An aspect of this concern was a strong desire to make this inquiry 'useful' in the world; it was insufficient to be doing it for myself. I was therefore looking only for some sort of meta messages about facilitation practice, what it was, how to develop it e.g. the challenges of facilitating partnerships.

At the same time my writing from this phase does dive into exploring my feelings about power and powerlessness, leadership and personal integrity e.g. how I hold and work with my power, how I integrate aspects of myself that did not feel legitimate in the politicised settings I was working in as a facilitator, i.e. the witchiness that manifests in imaginal writing and dreams e.g. *Crow appendix A*. (I suggest you go to the appendix and read this now).

⁹ Although the characteristics are strongly related to old, reactivated material from my early childhood,

¹⁰ A real delight in coming into this aspect of myself, claiming a space for it, for 'me'. But it doesn't stick, not enough of something there to get me through the door, feels like I'm still out there hovering at the window. I notice from notes of supervision sessions at the time that I connect while I'm face to face with my supervisor or my CARPP group but somehow the connection is not strong enough to survive a separation.

In my 1998 paper I used the metaphor of taking breath: 'Breathing in, and breathing out' for my moving-between these interests. This became a key image during the Unicorn moment, which mirrored well the moving between the personal, introspective, reflective (breathing in), and the political, campaigning, and at this time quite personally denying self (breathing out).

I wrote in 2002:

Looking back now the breathing image still holds some value, although I am more aware of the potential for the seemingly separate elements in 1998 to be more joined up – circular breathing one might say. And the image does feel to me to describe an aspect of action research as I practice it. I still like the sense that its only through joining up the interior and the exterior that one can be effectively nourished, and it speaks to me of the issues of integrity, values and 'joined up action' and congruency that will reappear as key concerns throughout this thesis and also lie at the heart of a description of the characteristics of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 2). The other reason I like the metaphor is its urgency – there is no future in the holding of breath. Dwelling only in one aspect of myself, or drawing on only one aspect of myself, is not sustainable, it activates sharp anxieties and distress.

3. The pig and the deer moment 2001

Influence without controlling. Be alert but not clever. Be both yielding and firm. While being attentive and understanding, be able to refrain from action. Inspire and nourish without possessing. Teach but do not take credit for learning. Lead as if following.

The Tao of Being.

This moment starts about the time I returned to CARPP to complete my PhD (2001). The pig and the deer images come from the dream (and the events which followed) which I wrote about in a writing exercise and shared with my CARPP group¹¹. They are clearly two aspects of myself – the forward, bold, grounded pig and the fleet, timid and elegant¹² deer.

Characteristics of this moment include a space for both aspects of self, a more open exploration of anger, anguish and anxiety. I'm also much more choiceful about exploring, taking risks and staying silent/giving voice.

More use of multiple aspects of self in my facilitation practice.

Greater confidence and self-possession – possessing and accessing more parts of myself.

Writing about a piece of client work in 2002 (the LGA, see *Practice accounts*) and the consultant team relationships/interactions, I wrote about this stage of my learning journey and its effect on my practice:

¹¹ This piece is included as *Appendix B*. It shows me using writing as inquiry.

¹² Did you know that scientists call the simple solution the elegant solution?

Making a claim for how I know, how I feel it and keep asking the questions.

It's a body sense, it's a class thing, a tribe thing, and a story thing.

It's an 'are you in?' thing, or 'are you the other?' thing. An inclusion, exclusion thing.

I understand social exclusion, somewhere inside (if I listen respectfully), as a personal story.

Not just as part of my personal biography – which it is, but through my practice, through long years of listening respectfully to others who have themselves a lived experience of the issues, from being submerged in the day to day experience ...and carrying it with me. Present as anger, concern, love, a passion.

So when I talk of passion for this work there is commitment, **but there are also teeth, and claws and dancing**. And there is thought and reflection – and more dancing.

The pig and deer phase includes teeth *and* claws *and* dancing. By which I mean working from passion and outrage, *and* working with a joy, and all of it better grounded in a sense of self and a reflective practice.



My very grounded pig, Maud

Moments and values

One of the features of my Tigers moment was my struggle to stay in touch with my own values while working for an organisation (Gloucestershire Health Authority) which was unable to reconcile its espoused values – wanting to involve the public in health service commissioning decision making, and its values in-use – not wanting to be slowed down or fundamentally challenged in its purchasing decision making.

At times it felt as if I was flip-flopping between a desire to be influential in the organisation and therefore a need not to be too challenging to the status quo, and an urge to 'flame out'; what Scully and Meyerson (1995) describe as stridently challenging the status quo in an antagonistic manner (so confirming my own beliefs that I did not belong there). I was unable to sustain the behaviour which Meyerson describes as that of a *cautious and committed catalyst*.

At the same time (and another example of my Tiger moment) I was struggling with similar issues, but on a smaller scale, in the Community Planning Conference project (see Practice account). I noticed a tendency in myself to identify a way of going forward which I believed was the right one and to 'dig-in' around it. Only by defending what I felt to be the 'right' way of doing things, the way which felt congruent with my values, could I feel I was not copping out or being co-opted (what Meyerson (2001) describes as *conforming*). *I found it hard to be choiceful and flexible about when to be a catalyst and when to be an activist.*

Now, in my Pig and Deer moment I notice myself being more choiceful; I can normally manoeuvre between activist and catalyst as I judge to be most effective. I do not have to be 'the conscience of the organisation' (as my CEO at GHA dubbed me), but nor do I have to feel co-opted by my client organisations (see *LGA Practice Account*).

I notice that I am able to consider a range of strategies from being pragmatic to flaming-out. Being pragmatic usually means valuing small changes in agencies and government, being responsive and encouraging, but if this is perceived as 'approval' and things get no better then withdrawing or challenging are also options. For as bel hooks (2000:84-95) identified when writing about choosing the margins as a place of radical effectiveness; just because I've been placed in a muted position doesn't mean I have to join the dominant group in order to be able to speak. I can be on the margin and have that as *my place*.

Underneath this more strategic approach I have come to recognise that, for me, it is easier to lay siege to an organisation than to learn to walk-out with them, and I practice noticing how I carry being choiceful or not

about my strategies and behaviours as I work with organisations. This too is part of what I am practicing to *notice* about the way I'm working.

In Appendix C I quote from some of my sense-making writing-as-reflection which demonstrates me surfacing issues around feelings of frustration and co-option, and coming to understand some of what lies at their root in an effort to understand my own reactions better, and to be able to be more choiceful about my actions and responses, for as Martin Buber said, *the anecdote is the recital of an incident that illuminates an entire destiny.*

Here I have identified my learning journey moments and some of the ways in which I have worked with my values in those moments. I will now go on to talk more broadly and deeply about my approaches to inquiry; my methodology and the thinking that has influenced it.

