

Creativity in Times of Constraint : A practitioner's companion in mental health and social care.

Foreword

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In the opening lines of Jim Wilson's introduction I am drawn to the lines, 'we reduce our analysis to individual failings rather than a consideration of the social-relational and political dimensions which largely shape the experience of human distress'. These lines are followed by the question, 'what can we do?' These lines and question evoked in me memories of the early days of systemic practice when that question came from an enthusiastic embracing of different ways to think about clients, problems and contexts. In those days an individual orientation held sway whether it was psychoanalytically, psycho-dynamically, biologically or behaviourally oriented. Here, individual failings and pathologies were also the order of the day. However, after what is referred to as World War 11, it was clear in the mental health professions that many of those presenting with problems were victims of the traumas of war, violence and fighting. Context became more important in understanding the aetiology of the 'complaint'. So the question 'what can we do' and 'how can we do it' were filled with excitement, compassion and hope. The way that practitioners avoided being sanctioned at the time was to learn to be 'multi-lingual' as it were and respectful of other approaches by using the appropriate clinical language in different situations. However, this was done alongside a more subversive developing of alliances with other like minds in beginning to experiment with systemic relational contextually based practices. For many years this subversion (?sub-version) was under the radar as it were in the face of the individually oriented hegemony. Then, as with all cycles they eventually play themselves out and more options emerged with the flowering of the field of systemic practice.

I love the invitation to such companionship offered by Jim Wilson all through this book. It has been my experience too that it is only through companionship and connection that we can once again begin to make a difference that makes a difference in our work. Each of us is called to action but we cannot do it alone. We need community, we need support and we need reflective spaces to nurture our selves and our practices. We need this, most of all, to be in service to the wellbeing of others – clients and bureaucrats, managers and policy makers. What is inspiring here is there is no call to collapse our field into either/or, them or us camps. Rather the call is towards the fostering of a kind of quantum field where all co-exist in a cradle where creativity can emerge. The clarion call, 'why is this so', is voiced as a co-creative critical attempt to challenge the recent increasing constrictions and contractions of neo-liberalism and to invite different and diverse perspectives.

Radical Systemic Humanism

Holding the book together is a coherent ethical, contextual and compassionate model of thinking and practice wisdom, Radical Systemic Humanism. This orientation comes from the author's early inspiration by the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationalist who worked to educate the marginalised in relation to the social and political contexts surrounding them. Fellowship and solidarity were embraced over isolation and individualism in the creative educational processes he engaged in. (Freire 1996 pg 66) The kind of critique that systemic humanism allows for can be hidden through the opacity that arises when we are under too much pressure to think and see. Throughout the text there is a clarion call to see through this opacity and contraction and open space for a practice based on the wellbeing of all. This call is accompanied by contextual critique and suggested practices, which can help throw open the windows and allow the fresh air of creative responses to flow through again. As Wilson states it allows breathing space for reflection and a new enthusiasm based on our core value base to become visible once more. Then we see something new or even more relevantly try something new. "We allow for creative risk taking" especially when "we feel that our abilities and experiences are recognised and validated by others. We are invited into creativity, and the challenge is in how we might respond". This is the constant invitation made to the readers of this book.

Policies hiding oppressive practices?

Under the guise of efficiency and savings, slick discourses emerged turning clients into customers and agencies into macro and mini businesses where services were purchased and provided. It all seemed so smooth until we realised that it hid a cost cutting that inflated profits for the private bodies now in the place of providing the purchased services. More and more the interests of services users took a back seat and the morale and possibilities of those employed and commissioned to serve them descended into contraction, box ticking, manualisation and 'must do' directions. This book inserts itself into this context and stands for an archaeology of hope and resilience, curiosity, aliveness, creativity and a relational ethics. There is no moral hubris intended here just the illumination of a critical and systemic curiosity with regard to relational realities rather than number crunching and pathology ratings.

It seems to me that the author is pointing the way beyond restrictive and deterministic practices of individual or biomedical focii towards the open vistas and the full spectrum of the richness and potential of human experience. It is a possibility frame rather than a prejudicial frame. Like Freire, Wilson offers us, the readers, a framework that is conscientised in relation to social, political and economic orders that distort the landscape of human possibilities. Curiosity, companionship or what he refers to as, mutual humanisation and learning then becomes a kind of gentle yet powerful dissent, protest and subversion. This has echoes of Nora Bateson's beckonings towards what she calls 'symmathesy' (mutual learning) in trans-contextual milieus. (Bateson 2016) Workers and clients are no longer shrunken into singular prescriptions or descriptions of reduced functioning and possibilities, through restrictive evidence based

practices on the one hand and pathologising, individualising labels on the other hand.

Nowhere in this textual work are we far from a practice that combines a rigorous analysis of context and one's own personal predilections as a therapist. There is a constant engagement in a reflexive curiosity between self and context in the avoidance of a top down regulated treatment regime bound by evidences often not relevant to clients' lives. Digging our heels in is not an option in Wilson's world. Rather, an openness to diversity and possibility is everywhere imagined and explored. In this we can hear the voice of that genius of clinical thinking and practice, Gianfranco Cecchin as he invites us to curiosity and irreverence and away from those romantic involvements, that 'falling in love' with prejudices and fixed ideas. (Cecchin et al 1992) Such relational orientations evoke an embrace of uncertainty. There can never be certainty in the swampy terrain of constant recalibrations and responsivities in the 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' of experiential sharings of contextually hued lived experiences. Humility and awe are the recommended antidotes to professional hubris and imagined certainty. Certainty has no sure foothold in situations where identities need space to move in response to different contextual necessities they encounter.

We have many identity expressions or indeed identities that are called forth by the different relationships in our lives – mother, father; daughter, son; child, adult; teacher, student; professional, client, expert and so on. Similar identities arise in relation to gender, race, religion, ability, class, ethnicity, education..... When we have a mingling of these identities among professionals and clients or client systems there is a complexity that can never be reduced to a tick-box mentality or any kind of certainty. Instead there is an ongoing dance of difference, diversity and possibilities. Versatility and spontaneity not singularity and prescription are what is needed in the development of "repertoires of creativity" (Wilson 2007).

This is the proposed art of therapy, which is not in opposition to a science of therapy. However, each is situationally or contextually coherent and resonant. Hence the need and call for an ongoing critical self reflexivity in relation to contexts of social and economic contraction, deprivation, injustice and impoverishment. Otherwise there is the spectre of probability that without companionship and self reflexivity we will fall prey to invitations to pathologise, demonise and blame those clients who are unable to fit with the proscribed ways of living and doing things! Contextual awareness thus broadens our lens and discourse beyond "just self/other awareness". Compassion and love shines through in this text as we are reminded again and again of the inter-facing of our personal experiences and those of our clients in situations of hope and desperation.

Order out of Chaos?

So, how does one balance the realities of today's practitioner worlds with hope? How do we combine dissidence with pragmatics. After all the intention is not to get fired unless as a last resort, I would imagine. However, for those who have

the daily frustrations of living with the constraints on and of the current service institutions, this is no easy matter. What do we do with our frustrations and anger when we see children offered drugs when their main issues are more relevantly associated with the particular relational and social contexts in which their lives are embedded. Wilson thus asks the very pertinent questions, 'how can we effectively speak out and up, not lose heart while not succumbing to false hopes? A tall order one might say in today's world and yet that is precisely both our challenge and invitation. How do we, through companionship, systemic analysis and a humanising orientation nurture our (co-)creativity? Such questions are not only questions of how we serve our clients in the best way but also how we safeguard our own wellbeing as professionals in today's world. Isolation is hardly the way. We need our like-minded companions. Along with companions, Wilson also pairs hope and hopelessness as possible twin harbingers of a call to new creative situations provided we not overfeed both. Over identifying with hopelessness leads to tiredness, a lack of energy and a kind of pessimism that can deter us from finding possibilities. I am reminded here of the physicist Ilya Prigogine and his Nobel awarded theory of 'Order out of Chaos'. (Prigogine & Stengers) Sometimes, we need the impetus of chaos to shake us out of our 'business as usual', out of our habituated boxes and generate new creativities for our selves and others.

If we think in a first order systemic way (which is often helpful) then there is always a bottom to the downwards spiral when systems tend once again to recalibrate towards a rebalancing, frequently at a higher level of operation. In these situations imagination is another wonderful companion. Imagining futures, which are different to difficult presents, has long been a soothsayer for those in challenging situations. This is a kind of letting the light in through the cracks as Leonard Cohen might have said. So, challenging times bring with them many cracks when we have the eyes to see them. Our choice then is the old one. Can we see the light through the cracks? Are we part of the problem or part of the solution. This book for me reminds us that we can be both. Practicing with a non-contextual awareness we become part of the problem But when we open up our awareness to the contextual plays surrounding us all then we can avoid the pitfalls associated with our part in problem generating and embrace possibilities of generating new dialogical realities! Crises can become "turning points". We all become interacting subjects in the contextual play and not objects of scrutiny and labelling.

Fun, Respect and Creativity in the face of the colonisation of contextual practices.

Reading through this book, I am again and again delighted by the creativity, analysis, humour, compassion and practical turn of the author. We are taken with broad and slender brush strokes into the heart of the labyrinth of each client-family dilemma whilst simultaneously being offered Ariadne's thread as a metaphoric way forward. Knowing Jim Wilson one is also aware of his talent for improvisation and creativity as he gently and often humorously walks his talk. His summations at the end of each chapter are those steps we can consider to take us out of our own specific boxes, dilemmas or maybe even fear at this time. The gentleness and clarity of these summations however, also invite us to share

a glimpse of a more expanded vista of possibility, open social mindedness and even good playful fun!

Contextual knowledge, wisdom and 'grace' enters this text as a fully embodied responsiveness combined with a open space theoretical appreciation. Techniques offered in an open minded and hearted way are no longer discredited as manipulative or outdated. Here all the jewels of systemic work are placed at the feet of clients and services as it were. Nothing is discarded except disregard for the music of those seeking 'help'. Wilson returns again and again through this text to the concept of Irreverence. We can become irreverent to our prejudices and also see it as a political act and a way of picking up possibilities for "challenging old ways of thinking and doing". Importantly, Wilson reminds us that 'whistleblowing' may also be a form of necessary irreverence when what we observe is experienced as counter to the wellbeing of clients and good practices.

We are provoked in reading this text to examine many of the pernicious feedback loops that can impinge upon or constitute our practice in times of form-filling and ticking boxes. In complying, being reverent, we co-create a potential illusion of keeping our jobs and our salaries but at what cost? What of wellbeing and ethical living and working? In times of shrinking services, we may not keep our jobs and we may also have sold ourselves out in the process. This is a welcome jolt to our reverence to the status quo and competing professional excellences. Open, collaborative teamwork has a hard time to survive in such a context. But it is nothing short of life saving to make sure it does. For me there is a particularly glowing moment of creative team dissidence when a staff team posted a cartoon lampooning current orthodoxies on the side of a filing cabinet for the staff but not the bosses to see. In this act of resistance, I am reminded of that colonial subversion when a poor man bent low and farted as the king passed by. We should not forget that although it might look otherwise, colonised communities find ways to use humour, poetry, music and the arts to both resist and to survive.

The author is never afraid to distinguish between what he refers to as anaesthetic and aesthetic practices and in many places throughout the text we see him as a playmate practitioner as it were. He gets down on the floor with children, improvises and role-plays with clients of all ages. This kind of performance is taken into both consultation and supervision when therapists are asked to role-play a family's dilemma whilst the family become a reflecting team. Old one-way linearities and singular descriptions have thus a chance to fall away or fall into each other in the creation of a more diverse landscape of thinking and acting. Supervision is viewed in its complexity and context. The author is here bringing his decades of experience to bear in different kinds of institutions with different kinds of mandates. Contextual sensitivity is never lost when therapists are caught between the rock and hard place that is an individual and evidence based linearity and constantly contracting budgets and resources. It can be a little like that scene in Alice in Wonderland lost in the forest and exposed to a multiplicity of conflicting signposts – diverse identities and medical opinions, complexity and linearity, uncertainty and certainty, individualism and systemics.

Placed alongside each other in a both/and frame, relationality is no longer in danger of being lost in Wilson's performative practices in supervision and therapy. A stance of self-reflective 'humility' and humour is ever present to lighten potential ways forward. Nowhere is a magician therapist imagined but rather the magic of a relational and contextual aesthetic.

Throughout the breath of Jim Wilson's practice history is in evidence. He has worked in statutory, voluntary and private sectors as a social worker and systemic humanist practitioner. He is a therapist, supervisor, consultant and I would say coach. This has all provided him with a diverse experience and viewpoints from which to survey the current landscape of cut-backs, regulation, evidence based practices, manuals, and tick sheets of 'must dos'. Interestingly he also sees himself contributing from the sidelines in opening up exploratory dialogues and reflection spaces for observing current everyday practices. Across these islands in the North Atlantic we have a tradition of manuscripts from the 8th – 10th centuries where many of the important illuminations are in the margins. Here in this text we have countless 'marginal illuminations' (McCarthy & Byrne 2007)

In this text Wilson always cognisant of his systemic and contextual positioning offers a way through the maze of increasingly difficult and staff demoralising and non-client centred services orientations. This book is his attempt to help therapists to keep going on through co-creating dialogues so that we can avoid being monologically positioned and losing faith in what we know to be 'better' practices for our clients, ourselves and our agencies. However, the focus for such co-creation also extends to political movements aimed at addressing the direction of Neo-Liberal policies and practices.

Systemic Humanist Dissidence and the Neo-Liberal agenda

I think all of us in practice have experienced what Wilson refers to as forces behind our backs pushing us in certain directions. Sometimes, there is so much pressure that we just get on with the tasks in hand and pay as little attention as we can to the background 'noise' as it were. This background noise can be greater bureaucratisation, privatisation, models, manuals and measurements, surveillance and regulation, social disconnection and dehumanisation. In today's world of social and mental health care these headlines have become the dominant discourses in many of our major service providers. However, as Jim Wilson reminds us, when we remain aware of our contexts this can be the first step to altering them by asking pertinent systemic questions. I love Wilson's likening of manuals to musical scores when they help cue us towards some helpful markers and ideas. However, the magic happens when relationality or HUMANISATION is included to bring it to life.

So, are we part of the problem or part of the solution? When we become passive we can become 'domesticated' and so constitute the very conditions that are damaging our clients and ourselves. We need those dreams, songs, poems and art to support aliveness and wellbeing. How can we "build a city to live in" as Irish author, James Stephens asked in, *A Crock of Gold*, his fairy tale for adults

and children alike. It is not just about us as therapists it is about building a whole human society that is relationally based, where we help our neighbours and 'strangers' alike. Where we do not cast blame upon people for their vulnerabilities. What happens to one happens to all is very well illustrated in the work of the Equality Trust in the UK (2016). More equal societies shower wellbeing across all social classes. More unequal societies do the opposite even in the lives of the so-called well off. So we need to be constantly on guard so that the four 'M's (monetarism, manualisation, marketisation and marginalisation) can be transformed into the four 'C's (care, consistency, conscientiousness and commitment).

Lastly, and most importantly this book is offered as a textual companion to support the reader in their journey as a co-creative, compassionate, conscientious social actor and indeed activist in the interests of serving well, relationally, resourcefully, honestly and in solidarity with our clients, our colleagues (micro politics). In this way perhaps the current process of dehumanisation in our social and health care services can change (macro politics). 'Must Do's need to be placed in the service of those we are commissioned to serve and not the market led commissioners in their bottom line practices and policies.

In closing the author honours all those colleagues who have co-created a 'home' with him in fostering atmospheres of professional belongingness. I too in my career must say that it was the single most important thing in fostering my ongoing passion for our field. I refuse to give up. Do you?

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