

‘The Ocean in the Waves: Unity in Diversity and the implications of a Fifth Province Approach in complex systems’

Imelda McCarthy PhD
Fifth Province Centre

Introduction

The context for this paper is a keynote presentation at the 2016 Conference of the Association for Family Therapy (AFT) in Brighton, UK. It was written in the light of the many challenges faced by family therapists in today’s social, economic and political climate and as a ‘call to arms’ as it were for us to renew ourselves as systemic therapists in spite of the contracting and constrictive conditions which many of us find ourselves in.

Flow of the Paper

These days I gather, I am being seen as a kind of grandmother in our field – perhaps even one of those who holds part of the telling of its history and its herstory. I want first of all to discuss what I will be talking about and to begin with ‘OurStory’, which I want to be a celebration of the marvellous field of possibilities and creativity that many of us here co-created during the 70’s and 80’s. I will then return to my title for today and unpack it a little before going on to look at the unjust capture by Neo-Liberal contexts and discourses and ask, ‘how we can see and position ourselves systemically in those blinding, silencing headlights of that colossal Juggernaut which has tried to mow down our systemic, contextualising, relational, connecting, equalising, just and humanising practices. Finally, I will ponder with you how we can go on from here, talk a little about some Fifth Province questions about how can we get back on track and offer some ideas from my own recent meditation practices in the Fifth Province.

So, what did we do before – OurStory!

I want to go back in time when things were not too dissimilar to what they are now in terms of constricting discourses around what was possible in the area of therapy. At our beginnings we may not have had a rhetoric of an evidence base and bottom line, however, there were (1) the scarcities of the 70’s and 80’s alongside (2) the dominant discourses of psychoanalysis and behaviourism. It was also a time like now, of ‘there isn’t enough money and this is the way things must be done’.

When many of us began this systemic and family therapy movement in our different countries, there may have been some focus on the conditions that we wanted to move beyond, but my main experience was that we were more focused on what WE were interested in - systemic practices. This is where our passionate interests lay, rather than in complaint or critique. In fact many of you here who were around at that time can attest to the sometimes quite hostile environments within which family therapy grew up.

So, how DID we grow a systemic family therapy field in such an environment? Again, in my experience, we formed small groups – many outside of our agencies that were not either ready or eager for change at that point. We met after work, we met on weekends, we met in study groups and for peer group supervision. Some, even in the early days, courageously set up Institutes. Others, where it was possible formed groups, within their agencies, to study and practice systemically in small teams.

a) As for my own Fifth Province team, we 'locked' ourselves in a small dark observation room and developed our approach alongside clients who attended the child guidance clinic. In our own case the environment was open to different ideas under the directorship of two far seeing senior clinical staff. Two of us were not paid for this work but did it because we were captivated by it. We were also generously allowed to do it because as we had previously been staff members and also were part of the newly formed family therapy training programme at the clinic.

b) In the case of the development of the Milan approach. They developed their approach by setting up a private practice and training institute in a context that was promoting new public service, community psychiatry approaches. Their approach was developed through daily conversations in a nearby coffee shop. As many little groups developed, national organisations grew up on the one hand while some teams began to come together internationally.

c) One such venture were the Teams Conferences. These grew up around the Milan Team of Boscolo and Cecchin and were principally organised in Europe by Lynn Hoffman. We gathered through the late 70's and 80's in medium sized groups of about 40 - 45 people. Included in these meetings were Cecchin and Boscolo alongside some of the younger Milan team members; Tom Andersen and his team from Norway; Mia Andersson and her team from Sweden, Peter Lang, Martin Little and the team from KCC, Alan Cooklin, Gill Gorell Barnes and others from IFT; Phillippa Seligman, Brian Cade, Jim Wilson from Cardiff; John Burnham from Birmingham; Peggy Penn, Lynn Hoffman, Monica McGoldrick, Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson from the United States and our Fifth Province Team from Ireland. Michael White from Australia attended some of the early meetings in the USA.

As you will see from the array of names the whole collaborative, social constructionist and dialogical movements in our field had their origins associated with these meetings and many from within this supportive milieu. On this island (UK) we can think of all the creative adventures that began around the foremothers and forefathers of family therapy at the Tavistock, at IFT, in Cardiff, in Birmingham, KCC and many other places where the different approaches of family therapy grew and thrived.

Women's Colloquia and IBI

Another series of important small group international meetings occurred, firstly in the USA which I had the privilege of being a part of from the beginning. These were the Women's Colloquia brought together by Monica McGoldrick, Froma Walsh and Carol Anderson. In the mid 80's when these groups began to meet the field was entirely led by men. At these meetings the senior women in our field took it on themselves to run for presidencies of their national organisations and editorships of the big family therapy journals. Also there were caucuses of support set up for those of us who were invited to do keynotes and gender workshops at international conferences. These meetings spread into the early gender conferences in the UK, which were initially spearheaded by Gill Gorrell Barnes, Elsa Jones, Alan Cooklin among others. The gender movement, springing from these small groups, was highly influential in changing the faces and voices in the groups that previously ran our profession. In Ireland, Nollaig Byrne and myself began to author papers on gender and I called together a group which we called, WITCHES (Women in Therapy Chapter) and comprised, Kay Gilliland, Bernadette O'Sullivan, Mia Van Doorslaer and Jane Williams.

Another such current small and dynamic group that I am involved with is the recently formed International Bateson Institute. This is deliberately non-affiliated to the existing university system in the generation of what Nora Bateson calls 'warm data' on major challenges in our world. Interconnectivity and multiple descriptions are fore-grounded in trans-contextual conversations. Three of us took part, two years ago at CERN in Switzerland (the home of the underground Large Hadron Collider), in a meeting of 'thought leaders' from the systemic worlds of physics, biology, ecology, technology, robotics, art, music, psychiatry and therapy. This again was a meeting of about 45 people for three days of conversations on where the world was going and on the patterns that connect us across our differing work and life contexts.

Margaret Mead has said that nothing other than small groups of dedicated people are what change our world. In the family therapy world this has certainly been the case, as I have been highlighting. Also, from the very beginning these small groups got together to arrange workshops and conferences with those who were pioneering practices and models resonant with their own. We built our evidence on practice in order to move away from the current orthodoxies of reductionism and linear rationality.

Now, while we are again facing cut-backs and regulation, we have to ask ourselves if we can do this again in our field. In my view there is nothing to stop us except a lack of imagination and our entrapment in the larger social discourses of Neoliberalism which subtly and not so subtly constitute those demoralising conditions of 'othering', inequality and injustice that we experience in our daily lives.

Can we do this again?

So, can we do this again. I say a big, Yes. I believe strongly that we can, IF we continue to band with like minds and not allow ourselves to become scattered individually. I see it has already begun to happen. Recently, I came across a description I like, 'positive deviances'. So, let's look for those positive deviances on our landscape at this time. I like to think that the new book that Gail Simon and I have co-edited, *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*, is one such positive deviance! In this book we wanted to stand with other systemic deviants and to reclaim and celebrate the wonderful historical practices which rigorously embodied the concepts of Context, Recursivity, Pattern & Circularity which we witnessed were being abandoned in our field. We also knew that many of our colleagues were being migrated out of their existing services, put into straight jackets of what they could do and not do – all in the so called interests of expediency and bottom line accounting whereby money, is siphoned out of public services. This money is then re-directed and re-distributed upwardly towards the moneyed elites. This is done by way of lower taxes and massive social welfare bailouts to cover the financial sector losses, which occurred because of their disastrous unethical misbehaviours towards the communities they were ostensibly serving.

Jane Dutton (2016) described another lovely positive deviancy in the first chapter of our book which she called, "Systemic Therapy on the move: following Ariadne's Thread". In this chapter she shares how she and her colleagues began to link together and seek support after their systemic service was 'migrated' into a more individually based service context. Rather than feel defeated they rallied around to continue their systemic ways in spite of being 'strangers in a strange land'. Their gathering was one of nurturance and sense making rather than any 'over against' stance in relation to their host agency.

Another exciting movement in Europe is the Dialogical Network, built on a foundation of rigorous systemic practices, of which Jim Wilson, Peter Rober, Justine Van Lawick, John Shotter, Jaakko Seikula, among others, are spearheading. Yet another, described in Chapter 2 of our book, is the systemic collaborative therapy approach developed as part of the Solidarity Medical and Therapy Project in Thessaloniki, Greece. Decimated by Greek austerity measures and the collapse of public services, Fany Triantafilou and a small group of systemic therapists (Triantafilou et al 2016) came together with others to develop a novel way of providing walk in medical, social and mental health services to those who were no longer covered for public health care and who had little money. Indeed, they carry out this radical new systemic work without any security of tenure or salaries.

So, if we are not to hand over our field to practices which do not value systemic commitments to ecology and context then I believe we need to reclaim our systemic field with the kind of vigour and imagination seen in these examples of banding together in small nurturing and rigorous groupings.

Gail and I have had many conversations about this ‘decline’ in systemic thinking and practice over the years and it is one of the main reasons that we wanted to do our book. We wanted to convene systemic colleagues to revisit the gems of systemic thinking and practice, to explore newer thinking and practices and to situate them in our current world. Part of our reasoning was spurred on by our experiences that many of the new and aesthetic practices around relationality, dialogue and collaboration were not engaging rigorously enough with a focus on context and ecology and on recursive positioning and circularity at both micro and macro levels. Without such analyses and practices, we saw that our field was running the risk of becoming a sitting duck for individualising, pathologising, bottom line, constrictive and non-systemic practices. However, while we valued and celebrated many of the newer Constructionist practices we particularly wanted to carry our older ‘tribal’ systemic wisdoms with us.

I think most of us here are aware that we are also being increasingly captured by a media, in the services of a Neo Liberalism, which keeps us mesmerised by fear on the one hand and desire for satisfying our pleasures on the other. We are, on a daily basis, invited, I would say conned or hypnotised, by discourses of fear, want and scarcity, which leads to lives of suspicion, ‘othering’ and separation. The so called ‘stranger’ is no longer welcomed but seen as a threat in a perceived context of entitlement on the one hand and scarcity on the other.

Celebrating plenty and not scarcity – ‘we’ before ‘I’.

Over three hundred years ago with Descarte’s (16th/17th Century) philosophy of separation of mind and body, we inherited this way of seeing the world in terms of separation, competition and conflict. Body was separated from mind while humankind was separated from Nature. As we know, this has led to a catastrophic cascade of individualising, hierarchical thinking and ‘war metaphors’ in our everyday lives. – we fight disease, we fight ISIL, we fight inequality and abuse through their brother concepts of defence and protection. We see the latter in the constant collecting of information on every aspect of our lives and in child protection, protecting against bacteria, etc. etc. Every shop has anti-bacterial soaps and liquids that we have to use to protect ourselves from the hidden dangers in the world around us on the micro level. The environment, the habitat which contains us, is targeted as our enemy. The irony and paradox of this is that our universe is a living, breathing sea of bacteria without which life would not be possible. However, systemically, at the macro level it also begins a

circular and positive feedback or runaway process which paradoxically opens us to more and more infection, leading to calls for **more and more** protection – more social workers, more Pharma products, more pesticides and chemicals, more armaments, ad infinitum. The concept of **‘enough’**, becomes long forgotten in a context where the only the bottom line is the driver of Financial Growth. Our systemic r-evolution instead offers us an alternative and gentler view – that of sensitivity to context, recursivity, circular causality, interconnection, relationship, co-operation, co-creativity and co-evolution in our working together to resolve issues that can be yours, mine or ours at both Micro and Macro levels.

We propose a **‘we’** view of the world and not an ‘I’ view. Have you noticed that it seems to becoming more and more ‘correct’ to say things like, ‘me and my friend’, ‘me and my partner’, etc. There was a time when we, grammatically at least, placed the other first. Also within the so called ‘me first’ generation many have developed strong habits of discontent that make it difficult to feel satisfied with anything for very long. The rampant commercialism of our age leaves us with a tendency to assume that happiness exists in things that we don't already have. We constantly look to things and circumstances outside of ourselves to make us happy. In all of this perhaps I have to entertain the idea that maybe I am just a nuisance☺. However, as this nuisance, I am suggesting that **WE** in the systemic world, need to come back passionately into a ‘we consciousness’ that is based on enough for everyone, and a knowledge that we are all together in this as one people.

To back up my nuisance invitation I am bringing in as an outside witness, Buckminster Fuller the great American twentieth century social visionary who stated that even back in the 50’s and 60’s that we had the technology and know-how to solve many of the world’s problems. How much more true is that today?

Now let me unpack the Title a little

The Fifth Province

I will start with the story of the Fifth Province. Some of you will know something of this ancient Irish myth, that my colleagues Nollaig Byrne, Phil Kearney and I have used in our work since the 1980s. Here we are in the mid 80’s at the mythical site of the Fifth Province. It is not known in Ireland whether this province actually existed or not Its only trace is in the Irish language and in some myths and stories. The Irish or Gaelic word for ‘province’ means ‘fifth’. However, in the modern day Island of Ireland we only have four geographical provinces!

So, where is this ‘fifth’ province? Myth has it that it was to be found in the centre of Ireland on the Hill of Uisneach or the Hill of the Kings which is right in the middle of the country. At the capstone on the hill it is said that the four ancient provinces of Ireland met. It was a Druidic site and the story is that Kings and chieftains came to there to receive counsel from the Druids. Arms were left aside and conversation became the medium of peaceful conflict resolution.

In our own work the metaphor of the Fifth Province re-presented for us a space that was connected to all those provinces of conversation that we might engage in but was also simultaneously a space apart. It was therefore a space of both immanence and transcendence, immersion and observation. In my own work it has come to stand for a space of stillness, listening, attention and a compassionate detachment. I see it as a welcoming space that

invites a different point of viewing, circling around and about the rough passages on life's ocean. From the beginning it was a space that held together the apparent oppositions and dualities of family life, it tried not to give way to either/or modes of linear thinking but invoked and embraced the both/and orientation of Batesonian and other complex systemic thinking and action. In the last seventeen years or so it has also become a space of meditation, reflection and contemplation, which I will address towards the end of my presentation. You may wonder about this direction but over the past few years based on my experience of meditating with groups, I have been seeing the resonance between what was happening there that might be a resource for our systemic practices.

The Ocean in the Waves

Now I will go back to my use of the metaphor of the Ocean in the Waves. I am using the Ocean as a metaphor for Unity and the waves as those multiple diversities, which emerge on its surface given the different climatic contexts in our world. The ocean is water. Likewise the waves, which arise and fall are also water. The underlying unity of the ocean is never destroyed by its waves. This metaphor highlights, for me, the concept and experience of what my own spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva calls, Unity in Diversity and the One in the All. In the Tao Te Ching, the 6th century BC, Chinese Daoist philosopher, Lao Tzu, refers to the 'Dao' as that underlying principle of Life out of which the 10,000 things that create the multiple probable contexts for diversities in our world can emerge. In the late nineteenth century the Indian sage, Swami Vivekenanda pointed to a similar reality in his words, (p 120): 'Unity' is self-evolving - out of which everything comes". Across many of our spiritual traditions it is pointed out that everything in our Universe is always struggling to complete a circle as it were, to return to its experience of unity. In Zen this circle is left open for possibilities to come in and in the words of T.S. Elliot, to know the place for the first time. Allied to our own field both biologist, Humberto Maturana and physicist, Ilya Prigogine talk about autopoiesis, that self creating capacity of living and social organisms.

Neo-Liberalism: Discourses of Inequality and Injustice

Going back to Buckminster Fuller's notions of enough for all of us, I would suggest that what has dammed up this capacity, is a large scale collective 'dumbed down' Will, mired in a greed, fed by corporations and financiers with no moral compass. I fear that if we do not co-create our worlds all over again it looks like nature is on the cusp of doing it for us, through Global warming, rising water levels, food and water scarcities, etc.

Our Canadian colleague, Cathy Richardson, (2016) drawing on her Métis heritage and indigenous knowledges, offers us a vital Cree Indian warning in the form of a blessing in her new book, *'Belonging Métis'*, published this year. It says:

When all the trees have been cut down,
When all the animals have been hunted,
When all the waters are polluted,
When all the air is unsafe to breathe,
Only then will they discover you cannot eat money.

Gus Speth (2016), an American environmentalist and lawyer, says he believes that to right the problems in the world we need spiritual and cultural transformation.

I thought 30 years of good science could address the problems of biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

But I was wrong – the top environmental problems are

Selfishness, greed and apathy and to deal with those we need Spiritual and cultural transformation

... and we scientists don't know how to do that!!!!

Over and over again we hear from social commentators that we need a new way of thinking and seeing which moves towards interconnection and co-evolution. While this maybe a new way of thinking for many, this is not so new to us systemic practitioners. It has been the grist to our mills since our beginnings.

However, it seems that no matter how hard we try Society still gets caught in the old Cartesian world view (Descartes 16th / 17th Century) of the separation and conflict of body and mind together with the Darwinian notions (Darwin 19th Century) of competition in a survival of the fittest

Today we see the hallmarks of all of this kind of thinking in our quasi rationalist quantitative research methods, individualistic and simplistic linear causalities together with proclamations of truth where nothing else but money and numbers count. As Heinz von Foerster once said, *'Truth is the invention of a liar'*. As a counterpoint I always liked the quote from Einstein – *'Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.'* Would it count in our lives if we could quantify love, and compassion? The question seem as crazy as the answer is obvious!

A common and dominant contextual discourse?

Even though we have the ongoing reminder of all the social GRACES, looking around me in my working life, it seems to me that many of us are caught in the headlights of our strongest contextual force, Neo liberalism, and have become paralysed and disheartened by its apparent hegemony.

Many of my friends challenge me and ask me what I mean by Neoliberalism and here is a simplified definition I now use in answering these challenges.

Neoliberalism is based on the Laissez Faire economic policies and philosophy espoused by Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK. Markets are preferred to Governments as allocators of resources; an individualism and privatisation is valued above collective and public solutions to social problems. The Market will self regulate. It is also based on the myth of 'trickle down wealth', which it was deemed, would lift all boats. In stead it promotes the lifting of large yachts and the transfer of wealth in an upwards redistribution resulting in growing inequalities and poverty, scarcities of social and health care provisions, etc – all of which we experience daily in our lives and work.

Hope and Change

However we have reason to be hopeful that a change is coming. This year the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has begun to distance itself from Europe's Austerity Measures and stated along with many of the world's Nobel economists (Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz,

among others) that *Neoliberalism is increasing inequality, inequity and stunting economic growth*, and therefore, are now speaking out strongly against austerity. In data produced by the Equality Trust (UK) for international comparative data on inequality we see that the levels of inequality across most of the wealthiest nations indicate that the most unequal societies are the USA, Portugal and the UK. In their book, the Spirit Level they have shown that such inequality links positively with health and social problems across all societal levels – both rich and poor do worse on all social indices than they do in more equal countries.

But back to Hope. Other indications that the economic and social doctrine of Neoliberalism is in its final days are these international demonstrations of people power against the privatisation of water, the secretive Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership AND with the Brexit vote being a powerful one. More and more people are speaking out about a status quo of massive social inequality, increasing upward redistribution of wealth, poor migrational planning, rising injustices and lack of transparency. Resulting from these disastrous policies we now see the faces and voices of racism and fascism on the rise.

A New Paradigm

There is no doubt that the world needs a paradigm grounded in unity and connection, based on principles of interdependence and coexistence. It is my belief and hope that based on the phenomena, which I have outlined that the new paradigm will give birth to itself through us. Therefore, I see THAT as being our work now to allow this to happen, both in our own field and in our world.

If I look at our field and our world I constantly come back to two Batesonian Questions. The first one comes from Gregory – Why do we think the thoughts that we think? The second comes from his daughter, Nora - How do I see the way that I see the way that I see?

When we ask these questions of ourselves, context becomes so important. Because, we can forget at the practice level (if not at the theory level) that we are constituted in and through our context and culture. As the Indian sage, Jiddi Krishnamurti has stated,

We think we are thinking our own thoughts but we are really thinking our cultures thoughts

Or as we might say as systemic practitioners – we co-construct our worlds and are constituted in and through our conversations and contexts.

As I have said previously, over the past ten years or so I began to notice that many of our rich systemic ideas in practice were falling by the wayside in the face of what looked like a growing humanistic slide into micro relational processing. What I found missing from many so called systemic conversations was a feeling for how micro and macro relational processes are recursive in the way that we are discursively and socially positioned, informed or even deformed.

I began to see less and less of an emphasis on patterns, which connect across the different levels of our practices. For example, it appeared that many colleagues were paying less attention to how social discourses were shaping their practices, how these were directly effecting our agencies' policies and in turn, impacting on our professional commissions – what we could do, how we could do it and with whom we could do it.

For some time I, and I know others too, have been feeling strongly that we need to reclaim our rich systemic heritage from this slide into individualising, a-contextual practices and thinking.

Here are some questions that I have found it useful to ask myself and supervisees in this regard:

- * Where and how do we choose to position ourselves?
- * Where are we trapped or caught in social discourses?
- * Where might we be engaging in hegemonies or colonial practices?
- * How are we open and inclusive?
- * How do we know where we are?

The first two questions are questions for us as therapists. The last three questions are for answering by our clients.

How and why did this slide occur in our field? Again, I would suggest that two big movements have picked us off – Neoliberalism at the larger social level and a non-clinically led social constructionism at the therapeutic level. I have to say I get a little sad when I hear more and more students and colleagues talking about systemic thinking and practice being a form or facet of social constructionism. This for me is a little like putting the cart before the proverbial horse! Systemic Family Therapy began in the 1940's whilst Berger and Lukman's classic text, *The Social Construction of Reality* did not appear until 1966. Social Constructionism needs Systemic Practices and this, can be more appropriately developed by systemic practitioners and not primarily by academics and philosophers. This is not to say that I do not value their contributions but in my view, we need to return to re-explore or rich systemic practice traditions so that we can develop new ones for this time. Here I am thinking of some of our fields geniuses – Gianfranco Cecchin, Sal Minuchin, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, Monica McGoldrick and the work of the MRI and so on.

As systemic therapists, I feel strongly, that it is time we need to become much more active once again in looking together as a community or in small groups as to how we might begin to converse about creative ways of subverting those contextual double binds and linear thinking that I have been referring to. I do not think any one of us have clear proposals at this time of **how** to begin to unravel these but we still need to constantly ask questions in relation to context and therapist recursivity AND to draw on our rich past for some clues.

From my own practice experience I would see a Fifth Province invitation as trying to:

- * Find unity in the fields of diversity we are faced with
(*Through Convening Problem/Resource System*)
- * Find connection (patterns that connect) in separations and divisions
(*through use of Diamond Maps*)
- * Find the still point (stillness) in the rapidly changing conditions.
(*Through a Fifth Province Dis-Position*)

The aim was:

- * To hold together or juxtapose the presented dualities – the dilemmas of clients AND to look for patterns of connection (relationalities) between them;

* To look at the contexts and social discourses which might be constituting them and to look at our own recursive positionings within those patterns and discourses.

* The principle question is: ‘*in our dis-positioning are we part of the problem or are we part of the resolution*’?

In all of this we were inspired, particularly by the works of Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana, Ilya Prigogine and the Milan team of Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo together with our Irish poets, writers and artists.

We very much took on board, Bateson’s, Prigogine’s and Maturana’s ideas, that since we are self-evolving beings that we can therefore be a self-evolving ‘cause’ of our own co-evolutionary changes. We have the ability to create and co-create with others towards new possibilities. In fact, recently, Nora Bateson (2016) has coined a new word for this process, Symmathesy which “highlights the expression and communication of interdependency and, particularly, mutual learning”.

This kind of co-creation and mutual learning is not what Maturana referred to as, *instructive interaction*, rather it is a learning that emerges spontaneously and uniquely from within the context and process of our relational dancing and moving together. I have been calling this process, of an emergent and evolving consciousness, **Systemic Communion**, which is very much akin to Symmathesy. What I mean by Communion is that collective field of relationship, consciousness and wisdom that is co-created and set in motion when two or more meet in an open hearted resonant dialogue. So it refers to an emergent sense of Presence and wisdom that is greater than the sum of our individual presences and yet enfolds them – Maturana has called it, a ‘Unity’. In my own experience this Presence with its emergent wisdoms arises spontaneously and always magically from a deep resonant connection among diverse participants.

WE as therapists or facilitators are never the primary doers per se – futures might be imagined but not predicted with any certainty. We are not part of a linear sequence where we are in any way a ‘cause of change’. Rather it is a circular engagement and process, which is organic, mysterious and enlivening. Which now brings me to my current imaginings for my Fifth Province work.

Imagining the Fifth Province Anew

I have always been involved in teams. Until I was 51, I played in a hockey team competitively and of course there was the long time membership of our Fifth Province Associates Team. So when I came seriously to meditation in 1999 it was not long before I set up a group around me, which has now been going for 17 years.

At that time, I met my spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva, an East Indian Trinidadian. Early in my relationship with him I was presenting on my work on Sexualised Abuse and he said to me, ‘the frame is too small’. I was thrown initially and then I saw that he was correct, the frame WAS too small. It was a problem led frame even though it included possibilities. I knew then that I had to move instead from a space in therapy that while it held all the dualities and dilemmas of clients, and myself, it also needed to jump beyond them to a space of all possibilities, a space where all is perfect. In this latter statement I am re-memembering what

Boscolo and Cecchin often said, “The system is perfect”! We just need to understand it and co-create an observing system which when enacted re-calibrates itself. You will remember that in their early work they always added a post session message with some kind of paradoxical injunction. Then they found that if they did not add this, the family or family – professional systems seemed to auto-correct between the sessions. My hypothesis about this has always been that they activated that Batsonian collective wisdom, or Maturana’s autopoietic processes and the family wiggled to find their own problem free harmony in those long spaced out breaks between sessions. When we practice the subtle art of not making a problem out of any part of our experience we can move into a profound recognition that perfection is always already there – even though we may not see it at first glance.

After this episode with Sri Vasudeva, I refocused many of my workshops, presentations and writings on what I called, the ‘Space of the Fifth Province’. As I invited clients, supervisees and groups into this space, a kind of magic revealed itself. I experienced that we were moving more in the realm of Being rather than doing and I began to talk about the mutuality of the processes of Inter-Viewing, Inter-Acting and Inter-Being. And as I have said, out of that We space, unexpected possibilities emerged.

In my presentation today I am also offering these ideas and practices as possibilities for coming together anew and reclaiming the wisdoms of our wonderful systemic field. To do this I am going to present the voices from the other chair as it were. I started to invite these voices after wondering about the process of co-construction and my hypothesis about the spontaneous emergence of collective wisdom. I was so interested to find out, that if we were co-constructing and generating a space of systemic communion then how might my co-conversationists describe the process. I became fascinated as clients who had no education (apparently) in what ‘methodologies’ were being used were using mirror descriptions about the process we were jointly engaged in. So, I want to give you a little taste of what I have been talking about from some of the feedback that I have collected. First, I will present two examples of how this Space of the Fifth Province was experienced by a client and a supervisee. Later on I will present an example from my meditation community. In the first excerpts I have chosen words that refer to the ‘space’ of the therapy, emergences and Presence.

Client: The client was a woman who was coming to me as she was worried about what she saw as her excessive drinking and her marriage. She said:

Emergences’ “Therapy changed my life – my whole life, completely and permanently and I still haven’t figured out how! It is not in any way tangible so it’s hard to understand... A picture of my life opened up for me, which I never thought was even possible to see. Over a number of days each piece of my entire life slotted together like a jigsaw. It became a complete picture, which I could view clearly – it has never changed since! The sense of it at the time was that this had come from another domain.... A space was held for me where it was possible for this to happen by itself. I started to look at the beautiful flowers again in place of the darkness at the end of a wine bottle.... I couldn’t comprehend what she was doing! I perceived she was doing “nothing” – and that is exactly how the magic happened! Because I now know a window was being held open for me to set myself free.

Supervisee: The second piece comes from the context of supervision. This is what was said in relation to Stillness, emergence and presence:

“My overwhelming experience was of a space that was invitational, supportive, gentle, and with a sense of deep quietness. Stillness is perhaps how I would characterise the most striking aspect of Presence and it evokes for me the remarkable reliability of the process. It reminds me that when I attend to safety, when I am fully present in good faith, when I listen to and respond to the other, then the space that we can create together can have elements of the ‘spiritual’ - a feeling of bringing forth more than who each can be of our own human potential.”

I think you will see from these two process reviews that something akin to what one might call, ‘*meditative conversations*’ were taking place. There was a strong focus on context and presence, which recursively triggered a more expansive experience and observing. This observing included something that I feel we do not talk much about in our field and that is the emergence of an auto-poietic collective wisdom. The field itself becomes a learning context and is so much greater than the sum of the individual contributions. When this happens, it is reported as magic or as happening by itself. There is no sense of any prejudged or prescribed outcome, no one can claim exclusive ‘doership’ and yet useful things happen. The doing as it were comes from our Being together beyond our diversities. There is a sense of oneness, a sense of Communion. These are not just spiritual ideas they are also systemic ideas and practices.

So, when I talk of spontaneous emergences, systemic communion and presence I am also very much bringing to mind the notion of Gregory Bateson’s, ‘collective wisdom’. I see this in his constant evocation of an *ecology of mind* where many participate within a co-created, co-evolving fields of mutual learning, ‘*Symmathy*’. Therefore, when I talk of a ‘system’, I am in no way talking about any kind of mechanical entity but about living, vibrant, breathing and juicy unpredictable co-evolutionary patterns of interaction where all participants within the complex ecology live and learn – including ourselves as therapists.

As I love these principles, I have been asking and exploring for some years now, ‘how we can ‘use’ this kind of thinking, practice and consciousness more in our lives and work today’? If we think of our world, our Universe, as trying to struggle and wiggle its way back to more evolved and harmonious conditions in the face of social and environmental calamities (climate change, rising oceans, etc) then we need to look for and co-create movements which are allied to those struggling attempts towards evolutionary harmony even in our own field.

As I have said, large systems thinkers are saying that we also need an evolution of our consciousness for this to happen. Following Gregory Bateson, we would look for ‘patterns that connect’ - to those relational possibilities that connect us all rather than divide and separate us in linear and individualised words and worlds.

Towards a Fifth Province Sangha

Now I want to share with you how I have been including this kind of Fifth Province approach within the meditation group I have been facilitating over the past 17 years. I am including this today, as HOW I am in these contexts is also influencing my clinical and supervision work. I am wondering if these kinds conversational processes might be useful to us as we come once again together in small groups. As with the client and supervisee above, I am now

going to share with you a composite of what those in our meditation group have to say about the process of our Being together. You will notice how systemic this is (without training in that area) and how similar it is to the reports from therapy and supervision. Recently a visiting therapist (Nafeesa Suraya-Naz Nizami) reported her experience of participating with us, as one where it was like “the group was tapping into a larger wisdom, something bigger”

One of the group actually prepared an outline of what she has experienced over her time in the group which you will see could just as easily be a scaffold for a therapy or supervision session. These are her words: (J)

When we come together, there are a number of factors, which facilitate the emergence of our group field as an expansive and creative entity:

- *The careful preparation of the content and environment, which guides us towards creating a space of deep connection with each other.*

- *Taking time to come together at the start in (silent) meditation takes us deep within to the stillness and silence of a larger Field, where we can then experience that inter-being, or group spirit, in the most profound way, and endeavor to hold it beyond the meditation.*

- *Aspects from the meditative process can then be brought into the group conversation which follows to further enhance the coherence within the group: such as using present moment awareness, challenging conditioning, managing the mind, acceptance of the other and listening with love and from the heart.*

- *The facilitator is also continually referencing whatever we say, back to the rest of the group or the wider world - inviting us into a larger whole, which facilitates both the group coming together as a unit, and our expanding beyond the boundaries of a limited self.*

The process can then appear to unfold effortlessly of itself:

- *The conversation coming from a place of unconditional loving acceptance, allows each person the freedom to open up completely. Everyone feels empowered and moved to act from who they truly are, thus contributing in a valuable way, towards opening up to a group consciousness.*

- *So there is an appreciation created of the others in our group... encouragement in the process of really listening, and from this we can discover how powerful we all are when we come together....*

- *All viewpoints are valuable and included, yet all are held lightly as they change and transform throughout our conversation. One person saying something, another picking it up and adding to it, shaped by all with curiosity and enthusiasm, and then suddenly something completely new and unforeseen may emerge!*

- *To the delight of those who observe this process, any member of the group can become the ‘vehicle’ for these new insights and awarenesses.*

It can seem that the wisdom has just appeared in the space and snowballed... and from this fresh awareness, many further creative solutions can arise...

So as we have been told, and also have come to experience: "The process is about who we are individually and collectively. It is not so much about what we do...." Something 'bigger' comes into the space... So that we then become more than the sum of the parts."

One of the constant criticisms one sees of meditation is that it is an individual practice. However, my experience would not support this. Deep in meditation we connect, with both the transcendent and the immanent, the individual and the collective. In the latter we are intimately connected in the world around us. Also, all traditions suggest that personal meditations are strengthened when practiced with a group, particularly over a long period. When we come together in groups there is a different quality as we develop a field that is greater than the sum of its elements. It is this latter co-creative possibility that has excited me over the past years. And, I think all of our meditation group would say that they have experienced transformations in their lives, in their families, in their work, in their communities through being part of the weekly group field and our longer retreats.

This has convinced me that meditation is a highly important or maybe even a necessary practice for therapists in developing 'Presence', coherence, complex awareness, equanimity, compassion and 'detachment' in their work and in their lives. The detachment I speak about is not a cold non-involvement but one where we can maintain equipoise in the face of extreme presentations and refrain from having any kind of purposive commitment to particular outcomes.

Where would I like to go with this?

I have been thinking over the past while of building what I am calling a Fifth Province Sangha where colleagues can come together in:

- * **Meditation** – self care, relaxation towards experiencing that still unity point within ourselves.
- * **Building Sanghas** (groups, communities of practice and reflection) extending our individual practice(s) within a group and co-creating an atmosphere (sphere around the soul) where possibilities for collective wisdom can emerge.
- * **Retreats.** Practicing the above on a larger scale over a longer period of a few days with a group of like-minded colleagues and friends.

Perhaps in these gatherings we will experience first hand what it is like to be part of the subtle interconnective network that is depicted through the words above and the image of Indra's net where each node in the net is connected to every other one and where the whole is reflected in the parts.

To start this process I have devised a Fifth Province Sangha Facebook page. Let's see where it will bring us and please join me there if you are interested.

References

- Bateson, Nora, 2016 *Small Arcs of Larger Circles*
- Dutton, Jane, 2016 “Systemic Therapy on the Move: Following Ariadne’s thread in changing clinical contexts” in McCarthy, I & Simon G. (Eds.) *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Everything is Connected Press. Farnham, UK.
- McCarthy, Imelda and Simon, Gail, 2016 *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Everything is Connected Press. Farnham, UK.
- McNabb, Susan and Partridge, Karin. 2014 *Creative Positions in Adult Mental Health: Outside In-Inside Out*, Karnac: London
- Richardson, Catherine 2016 *Becoming Metis*.
- Speth, Gus. 2016 (<http://winewaterwatch.org/2016/05/we-scientists-dont-know-how-to-do-that-what-a-commentary/>)
- Triantafillou, Fany; Pouliopoulou, Dimitra; Bethymouti, Elektra and Moureli, Efrossini 2016 “ The inner and Outer Sides of the Wind: Collaborative Practice in the Solidarity Social Medical Centre of Thessaloniki, Greece” in McCarthy, I & Simon G. (Eds.) *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Everything is Connected Press. Farnham, UK.