

**The Spirit of The Fifth Province:  
An Ancient Metaphor for a New Millenium  
Imelda Colgan McCarthy**

Writing for this special issue which is dedicated to the work that Nollaig, Phil and I did over our fifteen years as a team and beyond, I feel very proud and very grateful. As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of our emergence on the international stage of family and systemic therapy I can only say that there is a sense of pride in what we have accomplished and an even greater sense of gratitude for the gift and privilege of these experiences in my life. In this issue each of us have an opportunity to say what it is that Fifth Province has meant to us.

For my part I would like to say some things about our fifth province dis-positioning in conversation with those who come to speak with us. In the early part of this century, George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have stated that the "Irish are an eminently fair race, they never speak well of each other". However, as we approached the end of the last century, Ireland's first woman president, Mary Robinson said that she wanted to be a president for a New Ireland, and invoked the metaphor of the Fifth Province. She explained that for her, the Fifth Province was that place in each of us that was open to the other. It was a metaphor for plurality, for openness, for tolerance, for the healing of conflicts and the acceptance of each other. Now, at last maybe we could begin to speak well of and to one another on the whole of this island.

**The Metaphor of the Fifth Province**

We have written and spoken in many places about the metaphor of the fifth province however, it never seems to lose anything through the repetition of our story of finding it. We have always said that we have 'captured' the metaphor from the work of Irish Philosophers, Richard Kearney and Mark Patrick Hederman. They in their time had refashioned it from Celtic myth. Currently, the fifth province refers to a place which probably never existed in historical time or in geographical space. The only existence it has today is in the Irish language where the word for Province is Coiced or Cuaige, which also means fifth. So if one says in Ireland there are four provinces one is also saying in Ireland there are four fifths. But, where is the remaining fifth? It is not a part of the four provinces and yet exists in language alongside them. Part of the story of the myth, as Kearney and Hederman have recounted it, is that the four provinces met at a hill at the centre of Ireland called Uisneach. This hill was a sacred Druidic site where leaders from the four provinces were said to have come to settle disputes and receive counsel. Here all conflictual, contradictory and opposing viewpoints met and were held together so that divisions could be transcended and new harmonious solutions might emerge. The metaphor is a remembrance of duality transcended and of pragmatic concerns transformed. It might even be said that this was a place where spiritual solutions emerged for pragmatic difficulties.

Writing in this vein about the fifth province in 1985 Hederman said that it was sometimes "described as a secret well known only to the druids and fili (poets)" (Hederman, 1985, p 110). He went on to say that the "constitution of such a place would require that each person discover it for himself within himself" (p 110). Previously when I or my colleagues have written or spoken about the fifth province we have referred to it as a sacred space within an interpersonal domain. However we might also refocus on the fifth province as an intrapersonal, an interpersonal and a

transpersonal space. Hederman reaffirms that the notion of a fifth province does not have a fixed physical or geographical location. Rather it is a "place beyond or behind the reach of our normal scientific consciousness". (p 111) As he sees it, it is also a centre or space beyond the psychology of the single individual (the Ego) - a space which gives access to the transcendent.

However, the fifth province not only points towards transcendence it is also re-presents a homecoming because the journey taken is one whereby the one journeying comes into his or her own ground and reaches the "first circle of themselves. (113) Here we have the juxtaposing or holding together of the apparently paradoxical notions of transcendence and immanence, a going within and a going beyond. Hederman frames it in the following way: " a conversion towards the innermost region of interiority, where the possibility of transcendence within immanence is unfolded" (p 116). It is the prospect of this process which opens possibilities for one to confront one's deepest recesses while at the same time opening to another. It is a process of being with one and other (one another!) through our differences and our sameness, a unity in diversity (Sri Vasudeva, 2002)

Last year during the European Psychotherapy Conference, which was held in Dublin, our team reconvened for its first public presentation in about five years. We entitled this presentation - The Fifth Province: An ancient metaphor for a New Millennium. This same title still calls me to talk a little more about some implications for a 'fifth province' style therapy as we enter the 21st century - the third Christian Millennium! My own orientation over the past few years has included an exploration of a spiritual ground for the practice of therapy. In that Dublin conference I spoke on the topic of Sacred Conversations: The Politics of Listening and the Ethics of Speaking. In our team we have always believed that the kinds of listening and speaking that we engage in emerge in the process of our interactions together. This premise brings with it huge ethical responsibilities for the types of interactions that are generated and the types of realities that are created through the listening and speaking of therapists. First let me talk about The Politics of Listening.

### **The Politics of Listening**

Because much of our work since 1981 has been concerned with those who have disclosed physical and sexual abuses in their families and/or have suffered situations of poverty and social exclusion, the context from which and into which clients speak has been important.

Why is this? Well, for the most part those we spoke with came from areas of poverty in our city and country. So, when they came to sessions, very often not only were they potentially disadvantaged by virtue of meeting with therapists who might speak a different language, as it were. But, also very often, many of the families who came were mandated to come because of abuse within the family. For these reasons and others we have always concerned ourselves with power imbalances, not only within the families, such as when an adult abuses a child or a man abuses a woman or child, but also between Statutorily appointed professionals and the family and between ourselves and family members. Our challenge was always to create a forum where all stories could be heard, even those that were risky, reprehensible and socially unacceptable. Therefore, for us, *listening was never neutral*, context always oriented

us to hearing someone's story in terms of our (and their) gender, class, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and so on.

Because all of us live in society and are part of the various social discourses on the abuse of women and children, we cannot not be influenced by them. We are constituted by them and we also constitute them every time we participate in them. Therefore, to become open listeners to distressing stories we have had to *constantly reflect on our own prejudices and preferences*. We have had to do this because we decided early on that our task was the task of consulting - of being present to professionals and family members in the co-creation of solutions which best fitted their individual and social situations. We also did not want to be experienced by them as judges or to have pre-judged the situation in advance. Of course, like all of us this sometimes unfortunately was not the case.

I remember on one occasion Nollaig saying that while social workers and court judges must assess and judge, this was not our role. In our case only God could be a judge. What I understood her to mean then was that professionals, who are social agents must make assessments and judgments according to the best practices of the time and the laws of the State. However, when we entered as consultants with family members and professionals the task was different - it was our task to bring forth a space wherein each person and their concerns might be included in an atmosphere of acceptance and love. I was reading recently that the etymology of the word, 'atmosphere' referred to the idea of a 'sphere around the soul'. I thought then of our responsibility to create a loving space wherein the spirit of all of us engaged in therapeutic conversations might be recognized, cherished and deferred to regardless of what has happened.

When we talked of love in the team, it was at a time when few in our profession were using that word. Being careful to appear serious and competent, we eagerly relied on a definition of love offered by the Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana. He defined love as "making space for another in co-ordination with oneself in a specific domain of interactions". As we were constantly concerned with avoiding a conversation where an imposition of a particular view or line might hold sway we also drew on the following words of Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire on love and dialogue, "love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. Love cannot exist in a relation of domination. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to another (Pedagogy of the Oppressed).

In this way one may catch a glimpse of the deepest implications of our work as therapists in today's and tomorrow's world - the creation of a sacred space of spiritual connection or 'communion'. Only our clients and those colleagues whom we have worked with can say whether we have achieved this or not. (see Deirdre Hill, 1998) For my part I can only say that working in this way kept me alive and energized throughout the period of our team work. Also when we decided to end our team work, we ended as close friends and this friendship has remained deep to this time. We may not see each other too often but for me Phil and Nollaig have continued to be major referent points in my professional and personal life.

Emphasising love in our work was not some romantic notion but a stance which embraced an ethic of relatedness. It was and is our view that if we look with love on those we converse with then we will see beyond the problems to the *resources and*

*strengths* they bring with them. That is not to say that we did not acknowledge either the problems that clients complain of or those which professionals and other social agents said were present. However, it was our firm belief that it is the resources of our clients, in connection with each other within their relational, communal and social contexts, which will ultimately empower them (and us) towards more life-enhancing solutions. As one young woman so wisely put it to me recently in the process of dealing with her friend's murder. "I guess you always have what you most need, no matter how bad things are"

In considering how we might listen with awareness to the stories which matter most to our clients I was again very influenced by a stance Mary Robinson took up as President of Ireland. When she was elected President she was no longer in a position to speak out on political issues as she had regularly done as one of Ireland's most prominent constitutional lawyers. A lesser person might have accepted such a situation but not Mary Robinson. She may have been silenced but those who would come to cover her activities were not. She knew that she had the benefit of being in the media spotlight and began to use it in a very creative way. Wherever she went they followed. Whoever or whatever she listened to they listened to. So while silenced herself she created a platform for the expression of marginalized voices through the journalists who traveled with her. Here the politics of listening was brought home very dramatically to me.

However, in opening ourselves to the other, to the concerns of the other, we also simultaneously, automatically and constantly put ourselves, our ideas and our positions at risk.. Everything we hear has the potential to challenge our own strongly held premises As another of our clients has so starkly put it in relation to poverty. "Educated political awareness of the intricacies of poverty and the overwhelming burdens endured are the tools needed by counsellors to reach those most in need of counselling and support and gentleness, as society and the system bashes them up pretty good." (Deirdre Hill, 1998 Feedback, 8: (2) 20 - 21) This gentleness that Deirdre speaks of has the possibility of emerging when we are not only careful about how we listen but also about how we speak as therapists. A politics of listening would also take into consideration that there may be implication for the speaker in telling of their lives on the margins. We were ever aware that their speaking out, their giving account could and did open possibilities for their further marginalisation in certain contexts. (McCarthy 2001)

### **The Ethics of Speaking**

The sister-challenge of a politics of listening is an ethics of speaking. For all of us in therapy we are challenged to speak in a way that opens up possibilities rather than closing them down. As one student said some years ago - in conversing with clients we must try not to put a full stop *before* the conversation! When one is in the role of asking questions and making comments one is constantly in a potential position of power in the conversation. In our role as therapists it is we who choose the direction and the topic of the question and what we respond to. Sometimes our clients have arenas of choice – oftentimes, for many reasons, they do not. So, how can we address the concerns of our clients or the statutory professionals who serve them and still create a *respectful* space for them to address THEIR concerns in their own words?

If we speak for another we take their voices, even when they ask us to do so. In this instance the speaking for another is a precious gift they bestow on us. When we speak for another without their permission but with the mandate of society, for another's protection, we take measures against that person albeit for a good reason. When we speak for another without their permission and without a social mandate, we engage in an oppressive act of control and colonisation as we have written about in many places. (McCarthy, 2001, Byrne & McCarthy, McCarthy, 1995)

In the light of these words, our ongoing challenge then, is to continuously strive to create a forum for clients to speak their own words and voice their own concerns. Let me again recall Deirdre's words on the process of question posing in dialogue. Her words capture better than we can what we mean by an ethical dis-position

"Yeh, I'd be leading but sometimes the questions were leading, because they hinted at or suggested, maybe a problem, maybe an unresolved situation, and I'd given a hint of that. And the questions were giving me the idea that the power was in me to answer. And I suppose in that way you were asking a question, and your question was leading as well, you know what I mean. But, I probably, obviously I'd have to give you some idea how to ask that question. .. I suppose it's a two- way thing, like between a counsellor and a client. Because .... unless the counsellor has an ear ... it is not often easy to decipher your own life"

Here Deirdre describes beautifully the process of experiencing empowerment through questions which are tuned to the "hints" she has given. It is this close tracking which we feel helps us to attune to those we encounter in our practice. In this close tracking we experience curiosity as love. (Salamon et al, 1990) If this process of curiosity is not in the interests of or at the service of our clients then in our view it is neither of pragmatic use nor ethical. Client's experiences are primary. In such practices professional expertise is in the service of the people who come to see us.

To imagine the life of an other is to embrace an ethical stance towards the other. It is about occupying a borderline territory between our own world and that of those we are in conversation with. Richard Kearney (1996) has outlined an ethics of imagination, which is underpinned by three main principles. The first is the acceptance of the other. The second principle is the right of all to be heard and to have the testimony to their experiences witnessed. The final principle is the imagining of future possibilities. As a province of possibilities in language and imagination, the fifth province also becomes a province or domain of ethics. However, we have always added a notion of caution to ourselves as therapists. We were aware that when we listened to stories which embodied values or experiences so different from our own then we also had the potential to silence the speaker and cut the communication cord. (Byrne and McCarthy 1995) We could become disconnected from the life and spirit of the other.

Connectedness is such an important concept in systemic thinking. How we are connected within ourselves holistically and spiritually and how we are connected with each other. In systemic thinking and social constructionism everything I do is connected to everything you do within our relationships. We are richly connected to our social and physical environments as we participate within them. As Bateson has said time and again what is important is "the pattern which connects" us all to each other and to nature. This deep sense of reciprocity, as our colleagues in the Just Therapy Team from New Zealand have called this kind of connection, is to be

spiritually whole and enriched. (Social Justice and Family Therapy, Dulwich Centre Newsletter, 1: (1) p 44)

### **We are Divine not deficient**

There is little place in this scheme of things for a pathologising language which describes people in terms of their deficits and deficiencies instead of their wonderful resourcefulness even in the face of desperate and tragic circumstances. A language of strengths opens us to the indomitable nature of the human spirit. A language of deficit close us to it. When we join at the level of Spirit within a therapeutic conversation then anything is possible and we feel 'led' from within the relationship. The 'miracle' of therapy occurs in these moments.

Therefore, let us, in this New Millennium take care of our spirits. Let us as therapists truly become 'a fair people' committed to the human rights of all those we encounter professionally and personally. Let us always speak well of each other. We are so intimately connected that it will be good for us also. I will close with another quote of James Stephens, whose stories have been close to our hearts:

"Is there actually a wolf in our neighbour. We see that which we are and our eyes project on every side an image of ourselves: If we look with fear, that which we behold is frightful; if we look with love, then the colours of heaven are repeated to us from the ditch and the dungeon. We invent eternally upon one another, we scatter our sins broadcast and call them our neighbours'. Let us scatter our virtues abroad and build us a city to live in" (Stephens 1982, p 50)

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**BIO NOTES**

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