

Landing within systemic stories

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Abstract

This paper shares stories of conversations in my personal and professional lives, the theories which informed the incubation of those conversations, and what developed as a result. The relationships cultivated through those conversations are recorded here in written form, which offers the illusion of stability, suggesting that what I write now will remain true when you read it, but the relationships will continue moving beyond this static written form. For instance, the coaching relationship mentioned in this paper is temporarily on hold, and the peaceful glow, with which the story of my marriage closes, has been ruptured on several occasions since. Understanding that creating space for stories yet to be told allows them to change and transform, has challenged my previous high regard for permanency. The movement of relations now fuels my work and seasons my life. My systemic and new materialist learning, simultaneously at foundation and doctorate levels, enables me to search for that movement in conversations within this writing. I acknowledge the changes that the writing process has created in me. I have begun to question how we reference our learning, who we ascribe our learning to, and how the land on which the learning occurred might be recognised and honoured for its part in the process.

Personal Introduction

As I'm exploring the importance of acknowledging our place within our learning and the land on which it occurred, I'd like to introduce myself briefly. I am a white, cis, heterosexual coach and systemic therapist in the making, who identifies as female, called Finn. I was born in the country of Scotland, living in a small town during my childhood, and in the city of Edinburgh as an adult. I speak English but not the Scottish Gaelic language.

I celebrate the birth of the Scottish national poet, Robert Burns, by eating (vegetarian) haggis, and sharing poetry around a table, but otherwise, I know very little of historic rituals and medicines previously practised on this land. Recently I learned through Nora Bateson's teaching that the more personal the content, the more powerful a story can be (2024). Marking our stories within a geographical location and asking permission to include people with whom our stories are enmeshed, can expose every "thing" involved in a story, making each one vulnerable within that exposure. In this writing I include stories belonging to my husband, Col, and my client, Linda, but I'm aware that William Smythe & Maureen Murray suggest that research gained through gathering stories can potentially be "intrusive and subtly damaging" (2000, 321). Although I asked both Col and Linda if I could share their parts in this story, and they kindly agreed, it's possible that they will only know the ramifications of such exposure once their stories are published in this paper. I have anonymised Linda's name but I'm aware that my husband cannot receive that level of protection. I'm concerned that his support of me makes him vulnerable to the inquisitive eyes of readers. I'm grateful to Col and Linda for allowing me the privilege of sharing their part in my story to demonstrate my learning process.

Introduction

We are working in the garden, removing weeds that have already sprung up by mid-April. Sorley, our dog, sniffs appreciatively at the overturned soil, and Col, my partner, absentmindedly reaches out for the hand fork. We work in companionable silence as the wind blows camellia petals around us and the sun warms our backs. This seems to be the pattern of our relationship: working on projects together, supportive yet intermittently irritating the hell out of each other. We are the same individuals and yet what happens between us changes, resulting in us no longer being the same individuals. Through recent systemic therapy studies, I'm beginning to notice the importance of what happens *between* people.

Before I began my current learning on a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice (PDSP), at the University of Bedfordshire, I'd recognised the importance of systemic thinking. The absence of any mention of the Climate Crisis in my MSc studies in coaching psychology had concerned me. I anticipated that my doctorate studies would allow me to discover how Earth could ethically be part of coaching conversations. As my PDSP learning began, I felt comfortable exploring Gregory Bateson's writing as he had been mentioned by coaching psychologists, Peter Hawkins and Eve Turner, in their book regarding ecosystemic practice (2020), but I was confused by references to the Milan team, second order thinking, and the dangers of pathologising individuals rather than wider systems. I found regular online discussions with cohort colleagues interesting, but also terrifying, as the gaping hole in my knowledge of systemic practice became more pronounced. Paradoxically, while studying for the highest level of recognition in British academia, I decided to bridge that gap by applying to study for a foundation course in family and systemic therapy. It was an excellent decision.

I travelled to Wales for my systemic therapy foundation studies at the Centre for Systemic Studies in Cardiff. From the first day of teaching, I was aware that the learning process was different from anything I'd experienced before. I watched teaching staff confer during breaks, adjusting timings or content according to what was required by students at that moment; it seemed to be the

embodiment of systemic practice. I prefer to use rail travel if possible, so my learning in Wales required two eight-hour trips, but my cohort were supportive, inclusive and practical, offering mad dash trips to the station after class to save me the cost of further accommodation. While I notice a token gesture towards Scottish Gaelic in my own country, the Welsh language is taught to all school children from their first primary year, and road signs prioritise Welsh in larger letters with the English translation placed in smaller font below, an afterthought for visitors. I found that the people who live in Wales have a strong sense of connection to that land, and many people who have moved there don't want to leave. Perhaps, when a land hears its language being spoken, a positive cycle of reciprocity begins between humans and all other beings, described by David Abram as more-than-humans (1997). Rather than locating relations within, my systemic learning has enabled me to notice the relations *between* beings; human, more-than-human, or those treated as less-than-human, and the complexity of those spaces. Through their consideration of Karen Barad's work regarding New Materialism, Karin Murris and Weili Zhao comment on the agency of all matter that doesn't identify as human, whether in its original form, or modified through human action, commenting, "Nonhuman things and forces (e.g. atmosphere, food, affect) actively shape and constrain the bodies they encounter, including the humans who never fully possess or control them" (2022, 28). I'm beginning to understand that there is no separation of myself from 'resources,' taken from their natural habitat, to create the fabric of the chairs, the steel of the tracks and the glass of the "Break in Case of Emergency" alarm in the trains that transport me to Wales. Spaces between me and such matter are full of relations, naked to the human eye yet bursting with intra-active meaning (Barad, 2007). I'm keen to discover theories of practice which give my noticing substance, to flesh it out and prompt my next action or utterance.

The Importance of Stories

I've learned recently that within North American First Nation culture, it's not possible to tell another person's story without acknowledging that the story doesn't belong to us, that we're sharing it on behalf of someone else (Wright, 2024). My previous assumption that stories are linear, with a beginning, middle and end, is challenged as I learn that stories are often told within stories, and they can be passed on to us from generations past, as well as recent times. It leads me to question my earlier experiences of listening to stories. When I've enjoyed the thrill of gossip or the bellyache laughter of stand-up comedians, the stories have usually been told at someone else's expense. For instance, I enjoyed reading fiction in my childhood, but in retrospect writers, such as Ceri Radford, have signposted the racism and gender stereotyping that were often embedded within many tales written for children in mid-twentieth century Britain (2018). Now in my adult life, I see the power of stories told in many forms of media, and I realise the value of questioning what I read and hear, wondering if there are alternative ways of telling or hearing these stories? Leah Salter's inspirational work in community storytelling led her to recognise that, "Stories are powerful ways for people to feel and be heard and they can be (mis)used as powerful tools to silence people(s)" (2020). I'm learning that stories can be a means of connection and collective meaning-making between individuals and across communities (Salter, 2020) but regardless of the thrall of a story well-told, an insidious aspect to stories can allow them to do great harm, despite an appearance of innocence. Through my reading of Carolyn Ellis' work on autoethnography (2004), Kim Etherington's writing on reflexive research methods (2004), and Shawn Wilson's exploration of indigenous research methods

(2008), I recognise my responsibility of care regarding the ethics of storytelling, both in sharing my own, and those who generously entrust theirs with me. When I asked Kelleigh Wright, the person who shared the teaching of First Nation people with me, if I could share my learning with you, here, in this writing, she responded:

“The teaching of stories and permissions came from a Swampy Cree (Omushkegowak) elder, the late Alice Sutherland, Bear Clan, from the community of Peawanuk, on the Hudson Bay coast in Canada. Alice was living in Timmins, Ontario, when she shared with me these teachings. She learned many of her cultural teachings from the Lands and her family” (2024a)

I sat with this reference for a moment, it is significant. Rather than a clean-cut name, date and publisher, this reference is respectful of its human and more-than-human sources. If scholars in Western academia had been taught to take such care over each academic reference, to pass it as far back as they can, and to immerse it in the land, how might our learning have been shaped?

I’m challenged further by the response of a researcher and writer, Joanne Peers (2023), during a recent online forum (2024). In the online book discussion, a white anthropologist, from the global north, asked authors, who were largely from the global south, about the inclusion of writing regarding a subject, which was similar to Joanne’s research topic, by authors residing in another location. Joanne responded that while she’s interested in reading from a wide variety of researchers, she prioritises hearing the voices of unheard peoples from her own land. When I contacted her to ask if I might write about the experience, Joanne gave me permission to use her name and described herself saying, “I am a brown, woman of colour with a lived experience of apartheid laws in South Africa which racially classified me as Coloured and legally excluded my body from land, access and separated our people from our basic human rights. My body carries the segregation laws and legalised violences of colonialism in this country” (Peers, 2024a). Again, I take a moment; in fact, I take several to absorb this statement. I notice the horror of its content, and the strength with which it’s written. It’s difficult for me to move away from it as I recognise the place of white Europeans, of whom I am a descendant, within the horror. I suddenly remember my grandfather’s brother; a white man who took his family out to South Africa after the Second World War, who returned to Scotland because he didn’t want his children to be part of an education system which promoted apartheid. The horror literally runs through my veins.

These experiences raise my awareness of the importance of including the land from which stories emerge, the land beneath our feet. What words are steeped within that specific landscape? A language that might whisper tales of previous relations between humans, more-than-humans and land, telling us what was important to them. I learn, from the work of William Smythe and Maureen Murray, that looking at stories from different perspectives can reveal which voices are listened to and who is muted, illustrating the power of those who tell the story (2000). Should the systemic therapist/coach be alert to their power to include, or exclude, the land within which the stories of clients are located? Gail Simon and Leah Salter ask these questions, offering us the practice of Transmaterial Worlding where stories need to be understood from the perspective of where and how they emerged (2020).

I’m reminded that nothing happens in isolation when I attend a production at the Scottish Storytelling Centre (Rickle o’ Stanes, 2024). The production documents the story of Alba (Scotland)

from pre-historic geological movements to the current day. It tells of the movement of the Scottish Gaelic language of my ancestors, initially pushed north when King James the first (or sixth), who pioneered the English translation of the bible, enforced the first-born children of 'barbaric' Gael clan leaders to be educated in English. The Gaelic language then crossed oceans during the Highland Clearances. The research of Iain McKinnon and Andrew Mackillop indicates that the mindset that facilitated wealth derived from "highly exploitative and often brutally coercive forms of labour" within the slave trade, led to a similar extractive view of land, and power over unpropertied people within Scotland (2020, p. 20). Gregory Bateson urged us to look for "the pattern that connects all living creatures" (1979, p. 8), and I see a clear pattern of the displacement of people which began through the Atlantic slave trade. It was repeated when 'slavery wealth' was used to purchase land, and Scottish people were driven from their homes to allow for more lucrative sheep farming. It continued through people who owned land in Scotland, paying for the forced emigration of their tenants to countries such as Canada and Australia. First Nation peoples in those lands were subsequently displaced from the land with which they had developed strong relations over millennia. Patterns of displacement continue today through the movement of climate refugees described by Hossein Ayazi and Elsadig Elsheikh as individuals, (which can include humans and more-than-human matter) displaced by "short- and long-term natural disasters and environmental degradation precipitated or exacerbated by the climate crisis" (2019, p. 3).

Tyson Yunkaporta writes of his people who are indigenous to the land where they live, who did not choose to colonise people of other lands, and who remain loyal to their land now, continue to tell stories in relation to their terrain (2019), but stories in Western culture seem to often be disconnected. Discussions with a running friend, years ago, raised my awareness of Western media removing communities from local news, distracting them with tales of far-off lands, of which they have little or no control, and preventing them from understanding what is within their power to change (Daniela Romero-McCafferty, running round The Meadows, Edinburgh, 2015). Without diminishing the importance of international events, and my role within them, I wonder if I could have more power on a global scale when I recognise my response-ability, within my local and national location (Barad 2012). Leah Salter, Lisen Kebbe and Gail Simon write of acting within local landscapes, and the impact of systemic theory and practice in raising awareness of our connection with the local systems which we inhabit and can impact (2021). Sheila McNamee also advocates the power of the micro to affect the macro (2024), raising questions within me regarding what might happen if every human knew the power within them to effect change?

Within systemic practices, the externalisation of our own stories, allowing new narratives to emerge through their telling, makes narrative therapy a valuable means of working with clients. Michael White and David Epston emphasise the importance of not pathologising a person within a "storied therapy", but rather take time to recognise the effect of wider systems upon individual experiences (1990). I listen to Michael White's tales of families who are dealing with issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, encopresis, or self-harming, and I admire the ease with which these issues are clearly identified and understood to be separate from the person. Re-authoring our stories, preventing incidents within our lives from becoming interwoven into our personal narratives, can happen when we're given the space to step back and see our stories differently (White, 2020).

Pam Gilbert (1991) comments on the cultural impact of writers and readers being taught how to share and consume stories asking, “...what space exists within such positions for resistance, rewriting or remaking?” Questions of micro to macro return as I wonder who has the power to create such spaces, an individual teacher, educational institutions, or the student? As a child I didn’t question writers who described female characters, in children’s books, as often crying and demonstrating fear, while male characters chose not to express emotions and felt compelled to take charge. Ceri Radford writes about the removal of racist terminology from children’s fiction, but a continued poverty of cultural representation in children’s books today (2018). My own memory of reading books to my children, with an overwhelmingly heteronormative expression of sexuality, sadly didn’t urge me to question this absence of diversity, and didn’t lead me to begin conversations regarding this absence within libraries, school texts or with booksellers. Now I recognise the value of always asking, “Who isn’t here?” as Gail Simon and Leah Salter suggest that such questions can open up transformative worlding experiences (2019). Karen Barad observes that language, which tells stories, has become more important than the matter, described *within* the story (2003). I recognise this within my own practice, when I give more consideration to the formation of a question that will lead to the matter of my client’s story, rather than seeking to be immersed within the matter itself. When considering Karen Barad’s writing on material-discursive, Viv Bozalek and Candace Kuby comment, “Matter and mattering are agentic, dynamic, in/ determinate and temporary” (2022, 83) and I recognise the deceptive power of language that can describe matter, but deny its agency. I’m keen to understand how I might get under the skin of a story, to understand its meaning in a visceral sense.

Storytelling within Systemic Practice

The image that I use when considering the level of attentive listening required to effectively hear clients’ stories within my coaching, is that of surfing. I imagine that the skill in surfing lies in maintaining a balance of tension and flexibility on the cusp of each wave, requiring the surfer to be constantly present to what’s happening within them, and around them. I try to emulate this flexibility within my practice, watching and listening intently to clients, while being aware of my own thoughts and physical sensations. Learning of theories and practices within systemic therapy has recently informed my coaching practice further, encouraging me to listen for specific aspects of clients’ stories, and working with clients to consider different perspectives. The Social GRRRAACCCEESSS is a framework created by John Burnham, Alison Roper-Hall and their colleagues which uses a mnemonic to describe different aspects of a person’s life including gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, culture, class, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality (Burnham, 1992). Experiences of these different aspects of life can lead to encounters with prejudice or privilege, whether they are visible or unseen, and their effect explicitly recognised or unacknowledged. I’ve found this tool helpful to consider different facets of life that my clients will uniquely experience, and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s writing on Intersectionality deepens my awareness of how varying combinations of these aspects of identity can lead to different experiences (1991).

Telling stories may result in a person feeling exposed and vulnerable, and it will often take courage to tell a personal story. Barnett and Kimberly Pearce suggest that systemic practitioners have an opportunity to co-construct clients’ narratives, recognising that “the quality of life depends on the

richness of our stories” (1998, p. 172). They describe three ways of storytelling, literal, symbolic and social constructionist, all of which might be used at different points within systemic practice, and they add a transcendent apex of the conscious choice of a storytelling style, through the practitioner’s reflexivity. At my early stage of systemic practice, I find it helpful to consider this framework allowing me to reflect on what type of storytelling is happening at different stages within coaching conversations. Understanding the complexity of clients’ stories, raises my awareness of the challenges that could be involved in telling them, and my own unrecognised privilege becomes conspicuous. I realise that the Social GRRRAACCCEESSS and Intersectionality apply to my own life as much as to my clients and will affect how stories ‘land’ within me. I’m challenged by Angela Davis who questions ‘progress’ which allows one woman to move ahead but leaves the rest behind (2018). As I reflect on my own struggles with patriarchal systems, I recognise that I didn’t consider far beyond their impact on my own life. If we recognise the ripple effect of an individual’s experience, that what happened to you will impact me, might we begin to care at a deeper level, albeit motivated by self-interest, about the stories we hear? Joanne Hipplewith suggests that the inclusion of culture within the Social GRRRAACCCEESSS infers that culture is a difference between people, and she suggests its removal, to create the Cultural Graces, which recognise that culture is within each of us (2024). Furthermore, we’re encouraged to understand culture as a verb, rather than a static noun, continually moving “in a state of flux” (2024, p. 9). This state of movement within culture, and stories in general, prods me out of my state of comfort. There can be no assumptions, I choose to be constantly curious, and I imagine myself seeing the stories of clients through a range of lenses, moving between them to explore different angles, to see their stories in different ways. The lenses could be theories through which I work with the story content, rather than using theories to work on or around it (Mazzei, 2014).

Indigenous belief systems provide some of the lenses through which I’m learning to see clients’ stories. I am developing my understanding of these systems through an early morning ritual of reading the words of Ojibway author, Richard Wagamese. Recently I’ve been going out to the garden to drink my coffee and meditate on his writing. Last week I read,

Better to spend time creating – good words, good feelings, good relationships, good memories – the grandest, most triumphant stories of our individual and collective time here. Creating these stories is a sacred act, and all that we are really meant to do.

(2016, p. 145).

I take this learning into my day, considering my role in the creation of stories, not only with my family and clients, but with many forms of life within my garden, birds, insects, frog, plants and different forms of wood and stone, reconstituted and in original form. My dog trots beside me, digging for potatoes and taking interest in the micro-details of my garden activities, attentive as I lament the overnight foraging of slugs, or my delight in transformation of seeds to young plants. I wonder how this more-than-human presence within my life is shaping my morning learning alongside my reading. My eyes wonder back to the above quotation from Richard Wagamese, and I notice the stark difference of the academic reference I ascribe to his work, with that which Kelleigh Wright offered. Without reference to his land, his story of removal from his people and his experience of addiction before being reunited with them, Richard’s words can be quickly scanned, yet it took him a lifetime to find them (2011). How do we honour the lands from which stories originate? Could systemic therapy’s focus on the contexts of stories might allow it to be easier for

practitioners to adopt such practices? I will share the beginning of my first story, which is situated in my personal life, with you now, as it unfolded while I travelled over the lands of others.

Personal Story (interwoven with professional learning) Part I

I'm sitting on a train punching words into my phone screen, wondering if the person sitting opposite me notices the vehemence with which I use my mobile phone. My partner and I had previously agreed upon a certain course of action regarding an issue in one of our (adult) children's lives, and that decision has now been reversed without further discussion. I've been out of the country for a week and I'm travelling home. When I receive news of the deviation from our agreed action, I've been travelling for eight hours, and know that I still have another eight hours of travel ahead. I recognise that I am tired, and this is influencing my thinking as I read materials for my foundation course in systemic therapy, alongside dwelling on my family situation. I've been learning about systemic theory, and I wonder if this is already influencing, or could begin to affect how I am making sense of my own relationships.

Systemic Theory

During my initial studies in systemic theory, I learned of its cybernetic foundations through the writing of Rudi Dallos and Ros Draper (2010). I was struck by the notion that individuals evolve through their relationships, that a family is more than the sum of its individual members, it's the relations between them that give the individuals and the group its unique identity. Relating this to my personal story, I can begin to imagine me becoming a new iteration of myself through my response to my partner's actions. I am, and our relationship is, in a state of constant evolution.

Peter Rober refers to the theories of Russian linguist Valentin Volosinov and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin which suggest that dialogue develops because "every utterance invites a response," (2005, p. 481). The Finnish model of open dialogue stresses the significance of such responses to dialogue. A leading member of the team that developed open dialogue, Jaakko Seikkula emphasises that, "Nothing is more important than being heard and taken seriously" (2011, p. 191). The focus is upon dialogue which exists in spaces, both within a person and between people. The acknowledgement of the polyphonic voices within a person and the response of one or more people to the content of a person's dialogue lies at its core. The foundational tenet of social construction, developed by Kenneth Gergen, of the power within language, informs systemic therapy (2009) and a dialogical approach can take this further by focussing on live interactions within emergent dialogue. The nuances may be tricky to spot to my apprentice-eye, they also seem somatic in nature, needing to be felt within the crackle of live dialogue, and only temporarily intercepted through an agential cut within therapeutic conversations (Barad, 2007; Bertrando & Lini, 2021). Rather than taking a position of expert, through observation or hypothesis, Jaakko Seikkula suggests that the dialogical therapist's responsibility is to respond in the moment to what is said, carefully choosing questions in direct response to the utterances of clients (2011). Power is not recognised within a particular person in dialogical therapy, as every contribution is of equal importance, and issues are continually reformulated within the conversation, and in subsequent dialogue (Seikkula, 2011).

The systemic-dialogical model developed by Paolo Bertrando and Claudia Lini (2021) within their practice, emphasises the importance of the therapist finding their place within therapeutic conversations, and subsequently allowing clients to find theirs. It endorses my surfing metaphor and reminds me that I become a novice of every new conversation, finding my place alongside my conversation co-creators. The principles outlined within the systemic-dialogical model, add further clarification to my understanding of the open dialogue model, rather than offer a new means of practice, and enrich my exploration of dialogical therapy further (2021). There is evidence that dialogical therapy can be used with multiple participants when Jaakko Seikkula refers to the success of its work with “uncurable” psychotic patients, where the shared conversation enabled participants to recognise their agency and ability to create necessary resources (2011, p. 180).

Professional Story (interwoven with personal learning)

As I’m learning about this approach to systemic practice, I have a conversation with a private client which enables me to learn more about a dialogical approach within my work. Located in a European capital city, Linda attends online coaching with me every fortnight. Linda’s immediately engaging with a quick wit and infectious laugh. Prior to becoming a professional coach, she worked within the tech industry but, in alignment with her personal values, Linda’s now developing her coaching work with clients either working in the environmental sector, or with concerns about the Climate Crisis. Lately the weight of her work has hung more heavily on her, Linda was initially emotional as our conversation began at a recent session. Linda has heard of the language of ecoanxiety, and we talk about how this relates to her experience and the experience of some of her clients. I recognise that the language of ecoanxiety is contested. It suggests that the wide issues of ecological crises can be located within the individual and translated to a diagnosis. Any mental health diagnosis that locates social dis-ease within an individual frame requires careful unpacking (Bendell, 2021).

Linda wants to be honest in her own experience, to understand if there’s anything that she might do to overcome these feelings. I’m aware of my own environmental concerns and my commitment to increase Linda’s resilience so that she is able her to continue her important work. I realise that these feelings could compromise my ethical stance as her coach, so I name them within our session, remembering the importance of the practitioner within the conversation rather than as a hypothesiser or observer (Bertrando and Lini, 2021). Our conversation is not constrained by specific techniques, it’s allowed to be whatever it chooses, and at the end of our time together the conversation turns to the concept of power. Following this coaching session both Linda and I write to each other several times, after we’ve had time to reflect. I write to her in an email:

“It occurred to me that if importance lies within the dialogue, and the dialogue never ends, then that’s where the power lies, within the conversation. It doesn’t lie within a person or within a person’s muscles, power is between people, in their dialogue. The dialogue depends on previous interaction, so who we’re in dialogue with (and perhaps the physical location of those dialogues?) is important but ultimately, we are passing the dialogue on, it’s in constant motion.

What help is this understanding, that power is in the dialogue? Personally, it takes the ego out of the conversation. It’s not up to me how the dialogue develops, that’s the conversation’s responsibility. My only duty is to pay attention to its content. And for others? What about someone who’s been abused, or is being abused, how does the idea that the power lies in the conversation help them? It

might take the power out of the abuser so that it lands in the space between the abuser and the abused. It opens up a space for power to be elsewhere. If someone is imprisoned, physically or metaphorically, knowing that freedom lies within the dialogue allows the question to be asked, "What needs to happen within this conversation to loosen up the rigidity of power, to allow power to be shared or re-assigned?"

I finished my message to Linda by saying,

"If power is within dialogue, I feel that it must be accompanied by action. Perhaps, the action will ensure that the dialogue happens in the right place with the right people? Maybe I've just described activism...?"

My question, of action occurring through dialogue leading to activism, seems in alignment with Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian's challenge of the acceptance of the individual-self within humanistic and family therapy (1992). They recognised that a person evolves through the ongoing, ever-changing narrative experienced and told by a person throughout their life commenting, "Change in story and self-narrative is an inherent consequence of dialogue" (1992, p. 29). The terminology within a dialogical approach suggests that the therapy will focus largely on what is said within a therapeutic session, and my experience suggests that this also can be expanded to that of personal texts and professional emails, which were shared outwith face-to-face conversations. However, Jaakko Seikkula also comments on the value of physicality, as well as cognition, commending, "...shifting the focus from the *content* of narratives to the unfolding feelings in the present moment..." (2011, p. 186). Dialogical therapy recognises the many forms of non-verbal communication, yet its name might cause confusion, perhaps preventing its use, if practitioners or clients believe that the theory only considers a language-based means of communication. I use both cognition and interoception, the sensing of internal movements, in the continuation of my personal story.

Personal Story Part II

The combination of my argument-over-text and a long train journey seem like an opportunity for me to explore how I might develop a systemic approach within personal and professional conversations. As I look out at the passing urban and rural scenery, I try to add more context to the conversation shared with my partner, thinking of as many explanations to the cause of our argument as I possibly can. Narrative therapy begins to inform my questions and I wonder if I am pathologising my husband, making him the problem rather than *my* response to a change in agreed actions, or if there's any other possible story that I'm holding back? The landscape outside the train window is now dark, reflecting the lights inside the carriage, and I feel a sense of being exposed as I question my own narrative. Areas of vulnerability are made visible, and I realise that my defensive attitude isn't a response to my husband's actions, as much as to issues within wider systems. My body's tired, it has played an important part in this search through my inner dialogue as I thought of possible stories and used my senses to check which stories felt congruent and true to me. I notice the similarity with my practice, where in the moment of coaching, I'm aware of the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic sensations, while listening to and watching my client, but after the session take more time to reflect on what theories informed my choice of actions.

My husband picks me up from the railway station. He cooks, we eat, and I share many stories from my travels. The issue of the reversed decision is raised and discussed, but I'm surprised by the way in which we talk without the conversation becoming heated or escalating. I'm able to explain how I feel, my husband's able to explain his own point of view, and we discuss our responses to each other's perspectives. I feel that we're learning from each other, rather than talking at each other, and I notice the parallels with dialogical practice, how the power lies in the conversation happening between us rather than within us. My externalisation of the issue and my repeated search for the different narratives that surrounded it, allowed a sense of intrigue, as to which stories felt more relevant, and a desire to know the stories held by my partner. This story has been one of many recent experiences that have raised questions in me as to the nature of conversations.

An Ongoing Conversation

This year I have enjoyed group discussions regarding different aspects of hydrofeminist thinking, through a book of the same name edited by Tamara Shefer, Viv Bozalek and Nike Romano (2023). Within our conversations I've been reminded of the circularity of the water used within our planet; the continual cycle of evaporation, condensation and precipitation, that uses the same water that has existed since our planet came into being. I see a parallel with my earlier reflection with Linda, considering how conversations may have existed since time began and are only held for a short time by individuals before they move on, creating patterns in time and space. I wonder if humans are transient receptacles for ongoing conversations. The patterns of the conversation remain the same through Time, but they take different forms because of the varying experiences of the humans through whom they pass. The humans are shaped by the conversations and in turn they will shape subsequent conversations that pass through them, but the finite quality of human life means that the conversation will always be passed on to future generations.

The systemic practitioner's role, whether therapist or coach, might be within the shaping of the receptacle, through the quality of their listening and questioning. I remember the teaching of the late Alice Sutherland, Bear Clan, from the community of Peawanuk on the Hudson Bay coast in Canada, who taught me, through my conversation with Kelleigh Wright, that it isn't my place to share another person's story without their permission. I wonder if honouring this teaching could allow clients within systemic practice to focus on their own stories, alongside the land on which the stories transpired. Seeing their stories with and through the land might allow a new story to emerge. Within Transmaterial Worlding, Gail Simon and Leah Salter, stress the humility that's required, for northern hemisphere, Western-ideological humans to consider "co-inhabitation," an activity that requires us to "engage *in* and *with* our environment with an ethic of care and an assumption of having some responsibility. ... reconfiguring what it means to live, temporarily, alongside with others, human and other material life forms" (2019, p. 11). How much easier might this transition be when systemic practice is held within Nature? Chiara Santin describes her systemic therapy, held in outdoor spaces, as "inherently more relational than in clinical settings, promoting relationally responsive understanding and meaning making beyond language" (2021, p. 22). Or should every therapeutic session, regardless of indoor or outdoor location, begin with an acknowledgement of the land from which the practitioner and client(s) speak, as well as the culture which informs their daily practices? How would that practice affect coaches and therapists who use online software to hold conversations with international clients from their homes?

Conclusion

My recent learning experiences through reading, listening to the lives of systemic practitioners, watching my teachers embody relational learning during in-person classes, talking in online breakout rooms, attending online webinars, participation of online book group discussions and personal interactions with humans and more-than-humans, have been interwoven with relevant systemic and dialogical literature in this writing. I'm developing a deeper appreciation of the value of exploring stories, informed by Harlene Anderson & Harold Goolishian's "not-knowing" approach, which could prevent the allocation of expertise, or mental health pathology, to specific participants, and encourage an acceptance of uncertainty to ensure that dialogue doesn't follow a prescribed route (1992). As well as learning about systemic theory, I have discovered the value of a systemic approach to dialogue through my own stories and reflection upon my practice, and I am questioning how my referencing practices can be informed by Indigenous teaching. Learning that power mostly resides within language, I've become aware of the importance of focussing on the matter within my clients' stories that language is used to describe. Locating dialogue within intra-active spaces rather than in humans, I see that conversations are living matter, which shape, and are shaped by, humans, as well as through the worlding process of other matter described as Transmaterial Worlding by Gail Simon and Leah Salter (2019, 2020). I imagine the conversations described in this paper moving on over many lands, through time and space, recognising that you and I are only a few of its many receptacles, as it continues flowing forwards. John Shotter and Arlene Katz describe that motion beautifully, so I will end with their words:

And it is in such living moments between people, in practice, that utterly new possibilities can be created, and people 'live out' solutions to their problems they cannot hope to 'find' in theory...

(1999, 81).

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