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Each Leaving Something for the Other. Reflections on a Person-of-the-Helping- Professional Retreat in New Zealand

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Abstract

Eight helping professionals – social workers, psychologists, counsellors, group and family therapists – meet as a facilitated group for a five-day mid-winter retreat in New Zealand to explore and reflect on themselves, their family and intimate relationships, their relationships with clients, and their role in society. They utilise collaborative methods, such as interventive interviewing, reflecting teams, storytelling, poetry and action methods, to practice self-reflection and reflection of the other.

The purpose of this paper is to share snippets from the retreat in the form of autoethnographic poems and statements written by participants in the hope these may stimulate the reader's self-reflection.



Prologue

In Winter

*Under the oak
in winter,
far from the house.
To the right,
Iridescent acrobats,
five tui in the kowhai
have taken over.
Are they,
in full throaty voice,
enraged
at each other
for hunting infringements
of some assumed deal?
Each fiercely sucking nectar,
running out of time
before the long bells drop?
But the sudden powerful papery rustle
of feathers on the wing
streaking past,
arrows of speed
and purpose,
raises the possibility
of all that ruckus
signifying
something else.
Perhaps
each leaving something for the other.
That kind of deal.
Together.
Then gone.
And after a while,
under the leafless oak,
the house is not so far from the tree.*

Sandie's statement

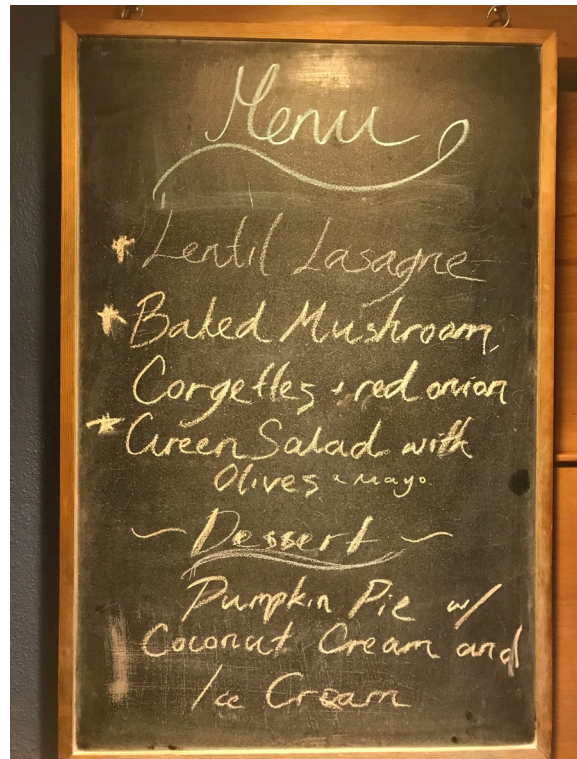
This poem has its beginnings when I sit in my garden before starting the journey to the retreat. On the plane, writing it down meant entering self in the way I hoped to. After finishing the poem, I feel I have already entered the self-of-the-therapist space and arrive holding these words, which are a reminder to me that I am alive and present and want to make something of this in the company of others.

A Reflective Retreat

We, the eight co-authors of this collaborative writing, are social workers, psychologists, counsellors, group and family therapists, meeting for five days in the middle of winter at the Tauhara Retreat Centre in Taupo, New Zealand to reflect with one another on the unique person of the helping professional we each are. The retreat is led by Craig Whisker, who draws inspiration from Johnella Bird's invitation to helping professionals to engage in training in self-reflection:

The ability to reflect on oneself in relationship to dominant societal ideas and practices, family and intimate relationships, past and present and the client/therapist relationship is critical if therapists are to avoid abusing their authority.

(Bird 1994, p.52).



Bird urges us to surrender the right to private or secret thoughts or feelings that may impact on the professional-client relationship. She insists these be made explicit to supervisors or peers and reflected upon with the aim of enhancing our work with those who consult us. Both Rober (2011, 2017) and Aponte and Kissil (2014) regard a professional's capacity for self-reflection to be predictive of them utilising their own strong emotions – or what Aponte and Kissil refer to as “signature themes” – as resources when working with others. In a similar vein, Evans and Payne (2008) perceive self-reflection as crucial for self-care and ultimately career longevity.

Our retreat offers the gifts of such ethical reflection among peers. There is relief to be away from the coalface. We are also willing to be away from our homes, our loved ones, and to step outside the familiar. We bring our inspirations and despairs, things we want to talk about, and others we do not expect to explore. We meet each day in a carpeted lounge in front of a blazing river-stone fireplace with an outlook onto hardy brown-leaved trees and beyond to a solid macrocarpa hedge recently given a rough haircut. A homemade gong hangs in the garden and sounds the readiness of meals we are consistently late for. We encounter one another respectfully utilising experiential methods inspired by systemic, social constructionist, and relationally reflexive perspectives, such as interventive interviewing (Tomm 1988), reflecting teams (Andersen 1995), reflective writing / poetry / storytelling (Epston 2014), and concretisation (Densley 2004). At other times we eat and talk together over meals. We take walks in ones, twos and threes. Sometimes we choose to be alone; resting, sleeping, reading. One evening we watch *La Famille Bélier* movie en masse and there is not a dry eye in the house. There is also the lure of thermal pools a short car-ride away.

Autoethnographic Poetry

As the days of the retreat go by, we share stories from our lives and each helping professional experiences what it is like to reflect collaboratively on aspects of their own life with the group. We discuss difficult workplace situations, the stress of client suicide, collegial predation, stress at home, beliefs and habits inherited from childhood, the possibilities of a new phase of life, appreciating our mentors, surprisingly new stories about ourselves, redemption and much more. Artefacts from these co-created group processes are presented in the autoethnographic poetry that makes up most of the remainder of this paper. Ethno-poetry, as it is also known, is a style we are inspired to draw upon from humanistic anthropology - for example, the journal, *Anthropology and Humanism* - as it lends itself to conveying poetic interpretations of the thing being written about while maintaining respect for details confidential to the group.



A Straggle of Chairs

*Forget the new and the view...
 What is this orb - this strange and wonderful sun
 Shining at me
 Out of a squared frame on a far wall?
 Before I speak my name
 I speak of (you) the orange orb
 There are no meanings I say to the question
 But inside I recall Heart Space
 The art that rose from death
 Suggesting egg or stone or both
 Rimmed by a perimeter
 (As startling as a horizon at dusk)
 Later a formation of chairs
 And in the semi-circle, soft rim to a hearth
 I begin re-creation of my own orb*

Scarves, clothing, fabric covers...
Encircling edge
Become a membrane for the inside story
Where hefty logs
Are the remembered,
the dislocated,
the moving parts of memory
upended and refloated
And here, lapping at the feet of the surrounding others
(But going no further)
Muscle walled moat. Delineating hold-all
Taking it,
Making space for newcomers
A rumpled cardboard box
Plastered with Joy
And, like a small arrow, agency in stone
My circle is half circled by
What could be
Strengthening arms.
I am floating above the amniotic sea.
Satisfied. Unaware.
Ready for gestation
And, who knows,
Perhaps the birth of a tousle-haired baby, or two

Pam's statement

My writing comes from my experience during day one of the retreat. I arrive knowing nothing of what would or could emerge, aware only that the invitation to spend time with others under the theme of "person of the therapist" is an irresistible call. My shaping up of a representation of self on that first evening and exploration of the existential questions and shifts using available objects as metaphors, creates a literal and psychological space that becomes a container for the personal work to come.

A Leap of Faith

"What? There is no programme!?" I struggle to let myself get into a process that is gently laid out for us ... then late on day two, the woman beside me reveals, "I'm battling to get out of the therapist and be in the self". Eureka! That's it. Stop this therapising stuff and be in the self.

A number of times I struggle with a default cognition that "my intellect is inadequate", but as time goes on I become more comfortable and accept that I do have a contribution and value in the group. Such is the power of a retreat into centeredness and an invitation to turn the mirror to the self.

An interview with Craig brings reflections from the group that reference an adherence to redundant narratives in my life. In this one transaction, I gain a better understanding of myself and new insights into the power and relevance of the narrative metaphor.

If I had gone to supervision or therapy every day for a week I could not have found, seen, understood, or encountered a fraction of what has come to me in these four days with a group of marvellous people.



Graham's statement

As a family therapist I savour language, yet poetry in its classic form does little for me. My lazy intellect at work again! While my colleagues swim in rhyming couplets, I feel like a fish out of water, yet perhaps my lifeline is a phrase remembered from an adolescence of avid motor-racing reading – a quote that memory attributes to Keats though it may be Aristotle's – that goes something like: "Sensation is the soul of essence". I can only guess that the sensation of crafting words is more similar than different to my predilection for surfing the dirt on a mountain bike, balancing swerve and flow with single track and speed; sensations I also embrace on skis or in a white-water kayak. To be in a place that centres on the abstract to explore meaning and other machinations of mind is well outside my comfort zone, where my natural habitat is to be outside doing something physical. This is truly a leap of faith! However, I can see it is congruent with aging, and as my body slows – damn that dilated cardiomyopathy – my mind matures and delivers to me riches and sensations not previously experienced or anticipated.

Updating

*The reflecting team sit in contemplation,
inspecting their notes,
wondering where to start.
They have heard their colleague's story
of an adolescent caught in the web of*

parental unfulfillment.
Decades later, this still affects his will
to knuckle down to tasks at work.
The team cradle the incongruous;
"He has a better relationship with his father
after his mother dies, however, he still has
the same relationship with achievement."
"Yeah, logic doesn't count"
The team question the unquestioned;
"Perhaps 'better with Dad' means closer.
Does he still have the sense his father
sees him as an underachiever?"
The team invite new possibilities;
"Can he say 'no' to his mother? If he has
internalised her as the parent that counts,
does continuing to underachieve mean
he remains her loyal companion?"
Later he says, "It may be time to update my story".
His face is light as he speaks.
He looks at each of us.
Smiles among friends.

Craig's statement

I first experience second-order reflecting-team processes on the job in a hospital-based Child and Family Service in Wellington, NZ, during 1991. On the job is still the predominant way family therapy is learned in New Zealand. When I come to organise this professionals' retreat, I am drawn to the comradery and generativity of the reflecting teams I have been in over the years. The Tuesday afternoon family therapy group in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service at Hutt Hospital during the early 2000s comes to mind.

18 hours, 4500km

I expect nothing to be known or familiar
in such a place and time as this;
yet as I connect with others
I connect with and within myself,
making the 18 hours and 4500km
much shorter and nearer than it really is.
This surprises me!
How can all these things I am being
with halfway around the world make
it seem like I am so much closer to home?

*I am challenged to bring out different sides of me;
the 'passive' me; the 'responsible' me.
Which one is wise? Which one has power?
Are both protecting me? Acting in love?
Somehow, not knowing the answers,
there is still a feeling of peace
and congruence within.
Perhaps, as someone in the group reflects,
the presence of God in it?*

Christopher's statement

I attend the retreat as part of a sabbatical break. Making the trip from hot and sunny Singapore to the edge of Lake Taupo, New Zealand in mid-winter, the weather is not the only difference I anticipate having to adjust to. I am therefore surprised with the similarities I experience within the group and connections I make.

The second stanza of my poem attempts to capture my experience being interviewed as an 'internalised other'. Having one part of myself talk to another part seems awkward at first, but slowly the discomfort gives way to a greater sense of peace and connectedness within. I am thankful for the experience of being a person and being with persons; the many gifts I give and receive; the wonderful cooks who feed us; and the fire we gather around.

The Vulnerable Self

*Really glad to see you could come to the retreat.
Of course, I am going to come. This is special for you
and I wouldn't miss the opportunity for the world.
I'm not sure why I'm here, but everything lined up and here I am
Ah, so the universe won out this time?
Yes, I guess it did.
What do you make of that?
I listened?
Yes, I guess you did listen, but how did that happen?
I have been in therapy for a while now and I am learning to listen again.
Ah, yes, listening again!! Remember when you were a child and you not only
listened, but you soaked it up like a dry sponge.
Yes, I do.
Well, what happened?
But I thought I was listening, in my job and with family.
Really? You are listening to others and bending with them,
but who's listening to you? Who hears you?*

No one.
Why do you think that is?
You taught me to be strong and never give up.
Oh dear. I did, but not like this. Not to the detriment of yourself.
Did I lose myself? I thought that would sustain me forever.
Guess not, hah?
Guess not.
Tell me what you feel about being here?
I feel like things are going to change
and that I'm not emotionally prepared for it.
Why is not being emotionally prepared an issue?
I don't know. I guess I feel a need to be in control.
But if you are in control you can't change with authenticity.
What do you mean?
Control is based on the things we know from our past so change
with control is not changing at all. It's an illusion to trick yourself
into believing you have changed when you really haven't.
So again, what is the purpose of being here?
To leave aside control
and just be in the moment and see where it takes me?
Good start. Hahaha

Shez's statement

Anxiety about going to the retreat starts as soon as I make the payment. Who else is going? Will there be anyone I know? Does it matter? Yes, it does! How can I be honest if I am familiar with the participants? What relief when the list of participants comes out and I know nobody! My next anxiety is the lack of a pre-set program for the five days. How can that be? Then I allow myself to be chosen for the first group exercise. Where did that willingness come from? And how uncomfortable it is to identify a person I respect and to 'become' that person and talk about me. By the end of the second day, I am struggling to be me and not a therapist. I retreat into my safe place. Then a revelation! My conversation with my mentor appears in front of me, and all of a sudden, I see what I need to do. With the help of the group, I am vulnerable, sensitive, and most of all, in the moment.



Dis-Illusion

*To open the door and walk out
Takes the same amount of time
Every time*

*How long I have been in the room
How I got there
My opinion about the room
My 'truth' about the room
How often I've rearranged the furniture in the room
What it has taken to get me to the door
How long it has taken me to get to the door
The
Trips, traps, snares
Sound, fury, gross mendacity
Irrelevancies, noise, enchantments and entrapments
All part of the design, embedded in the blueprints*

*To open the door and walk out
Takes the same amount of time
Every time
The door is to out
Not*

*Another room
A hallway
A closet
A courtyard
An addition built under commission,
or cover of darkness
No maze, spiral, loop, net*

*The door is to out
Shall I burn down the building, ensure I never enter the room again; shall I walk into this snare?
Engage with the room is in the room....
And now
Known cannot be unknown
There never was a blueprint, a building
There is no room to enter, no room I was in
This is the final revelation
This is the termination*

I am whole and complete

I am self-expressing-self

I am warm to me

Ava's statement

I sought and found a space to explore self as an interpersonal and intrapersonal being simultaneously (and inextricably) reflecting, reflective, and reflexive. I experienced fine-tuning, playing, and hearing the echoes of sound returned; taking in the response of others to what they hear - experience - feel - are moved by. I, too, of them. Witnessing, holding space, embodying compassion and respectful attention for others are all privileges. In my professional work, it is a joy to share in the experience of seeing others simply, powerfully, completely disappear rooms that once held them tight, constricted, oppressed - no matter how hard they had pushed or punched or screamed at the walls.

Epilogue

Like the echoes in Ava's statement, the co-construction of this paper creates reflections upon reflections, as felt by one co-author writing to her retreat companions:

I have been meaning to write to you all to say how much I have appreciated your post retreat reflections. I know some of us have entered a new process with this writing, but what I am very grateful for is that we all generously shared our very personal writing with each other, for each other. What a delight actually! I am moved and enriched by each of you. Thank you.

This is "life led" writing, where the life of the group – before, during and after the retreat – influences retreat participants' understandings of themselves and of others. The readership of this journal is a larger "group" whom we are also addressing and inviting into systemic and relationally reflexive thinking about the person of the professional. We have sought to minimise theoretical interpretations of our text to leave space for readers' inner and outer dialogues, should they choose to have them. As one participant wrote:

I am deeply aware that my professional capacity to journey with others is in direct correlation to my willingness to make my own inward journey. As a participant in a group with fellow professionals, all of them willing to unmask from professional roles, I saw again how potent and rewarding it is to risk real encounter with myself and with others.

Twelve months after the retreat, the insights and responses that arose in the intimacy of group experience, while generally less accessible in detail, have found ways to linger in our beings. The retreat was of benefit to participants, who may have been able to make similar personal and professional gains by engaging in individual mentoring, therapy or supervision, but on reflection, there is a sense that the gains may have taken longer to achieve and would have lacked the richness of multiple relationships and diverse perceptions available in our group.

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