

**DIFFERENTIATION: A JOURNEY TO A REPERTOIRE OF SELVES**

**by**

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I declare that “Differentiation: A journey to a repertoire of selves” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signed: .....

An-Maréé Nel

September 2006

*Dedicated to my grandfather,  
NJ Louw Joubert,  
Lovingly remembered as “Meester”.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation the author embarks on a journey of storying and re-storying her life. Autoethnographic evocative personal narratives are used as the method of presentation. Congruent with a postmodern stance, the text repositions the reader as a co-participant in dialogue.

In this journey there is a move from a reductionistic understanding of “self” to an understanding of “self” as socially constructed, multiple and changing processes. The author’s process of differentiation is embodied and informed by this changing view of “self” as part of, being informed by, shaping and being shaped by the conversations she co-creates in dialogical contexts. This means taking a double-sided, reflexive view of relationships and systems, opens a space for a flexible way of being and imparts sensitivity to the discourses she co-creates. This journey entails taking action that keeps a self-reflexive dialogue going, allowing for different voices to emerge and various encounters to become possible.

## **KEY TERMS**

Autoethnography; Evocative personal narratives; Differentiation; Multiple selves; Self as process; Reader as author; Reflexivity; Postmodernism

# THE JOURNEY

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## INTRODUCTION

### (CHAPTER 1)

*Hallo..... I am An-Maréé...*

*I like the gentle touch of the wind on my face. I like the sound of the ocean at night. I like walking in the rain and chatting until the early hours of the morning. I like thinking about the meanings of dreams. I read the horoscopes once in a while. Actually I find them fascinating. I love candlelight and bubble baths. I love reading, especially, at the moment, spiritual books. I always have a song in my head.*

*I am not a morning person. I need time to wake up . I don't like paying attention to details and I have my head up in the clouds most of the time. I don't like being interrupted while I work, I lose my train of thought. I like drawing figures, playing with light and shadows. I like poetry and I have always yearned to express myself clearly yet gently.*

*Sometimes I take life too seriously. Yet I love being with spontaneously playful people and I love laughing.*

*I sometimes dream of riding a horse. There is an intuitive understanding between "us". I lift my face to the wind. In that moment life feels uncomplicated and I am happy and free.*

*Can you also hear the music? What does your song sound like?*

*Would you like to dance?*

I wrote this story at the "end" of my journey of writing the stories in this dissertation. It was meant to be the ending, yet it seems to fold back on itself and inform a new beginning. I would not have been able to write this story if I had not gone through the process of writing all the other stories in this dissertation.

Writing this text was a process of self-discovery and self-creation. As Rich observes, "[t]he story of our lives becomes our lives" (1978, p. 34). If I had not gone through the journey of exploring myself through the writing of this dissertation, I would

not have had the voice to write this particular story. Voice therefore preceded rather than followed the stories in this dissertation. This “voice” also became enmeshed in the act of telling these past stories. In this sense I agree with Ellis and Bochner that “personal narrative is part of the human existential struggle to move life forward” (2000, p. 744).

This research was my personal voyage towards finding a way of using my voice in a flexible way, and in doing so finding a space beyond the sense of being marginalised.

I grew up in a country in which the socio-political institutions and dominant discourses marginalised and silenced people. It is a country where women were often seen as the lesser gender. The impact of this discourse was that women were often marginalised, silenced. In the Afrikaans, Christian culture in which I grew up, women were often seen as subordinate to men. In relationships they were expected not to challenge the authority of their husbands, who were seen as the heads of the household. In the work environment they were often prevented from progressing and climbing the corporate ladder, as men seemed to have the socially sanctioned power to protect their territory.

Similarly, people of colour were marginalised by a government and a political ideology informed by the discourse that white people were the superior race. Even after the social upheaval, political change and transformation of core values in this country, I still feel the impact of old discourses as silencing and invalidating some people. My sister married a coloured man and to this day I sense the invalidation they experience in the daily rituals of life, and in their fear of bringing into the world a child who might be discriminated against and marginalised in our society.

In my community, children were supposed to be seen and not heard. As the youngest child I often felt that I was not listened to and not given the space to be heard; that my experiences and interpretations of events, my ideas and my sense of the impact of events in my family, were not important enough to be expressed or heard.

I have often found myself in relationship with people who feel marginalised and silenced. The year after I wrote matric, I went to Hillbrow where I chose to relate with

elderly people who were ostracised in our country, many of them forgotten by their families and spoken down to by the younger generations. In relating to gay people I sensed and felt the impact of how they were marginalised by a community that judged rather than celebrated difference.

I have thus often felt an urge to find my own voice and a space where I would be heard as well as to create a space for others' voices to be heard. This would be a space where we would have the freedom to be ourselves and not feel disqualified by external yardsticks of who and what we should be, what we should think and how we should act.

Thus I chose to be a therapist; I chose to be with people who feel marginalised and silenced by entrapping dominant discourses that inform their lives, their sense of self and their relationships with people.

I believe that one of the most important features of life is conversation. It is in language and through conversation with others and ourselves that we find voice. It is through conversation that "we form and reform our life experiences and events; we create and recreate our meanings and understandings; and we construct and re-construct our realities and our selves" (Anderson, 1997, p. xvii). It is through conversation that the possibility for change exists.

My need was to enter a conversation with my self in relationship to the various events in my life, and to recreate my meanings, my realities, myself. The need was not only to create such a dialogical process or space for myself, but also to create a space where you, the reader, could encounter yourself in relationship and conversation with my texts (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994).

These notions are not removed from my thinking about therapy. Often in my work I have asked myself: "How do I create a conversation that helps people to access the courage to encounter themselves, to have the flexibility to 'move about and around things' and to achieve self-agency and realise the possibilities of the events in their daily lives?" (Anderson, 1997, p. xvii). How do I create a dialogical space that facilitates such a conversation?

I wanted to do research in a manner that is congruent with my thinking about therapy. The postmodern tradition informs my ideas about therapy and this dissertation. The choice of this stance is significant, for it creates a space for all that the modern tradition has neglected, rejected and silenced (Rosenau, 1992). Therefore my research question was: “How do I create a text that encourages a conversation that carries possibilities for voice and change? How do I create a text that also gives voice to you, the reader, in the context of research?”

The “answer” seemed to lie in a postmodern approach to writing. I sought to write an open text that is composed ambiguously, with an equivocal, enigmatic style, so as to encourage an infinity of interpretations. As such my intent is not to convey a specific message to you, and not to write so tightly and rigorously and to reason so logically that you feel compelled to agree with my arguments. My need was to create an expanding the space for you, the reader, to encourage a plurality of meanings and to embrace many interpretations. Thus one of the aims of my research is to create a text that is plural; a participant text that empowers you. I endeavour to create a space for you not only to be a distant reader, but also to be the “writer” of the text (Rosenau, 1992).

Postmodernism postulates that such a text is written and rewritten with every encounter; no two readings of the same text are ever identical. You, the reader, rewrite the text in the manner in which you enter into conversation with the text. As a reader you are likely to look everywhere and find only texts and within the text find only yourself.

As this is a dissertation, certain restrictions are placed on the way I structure my text. Postmodernists usually reject conventional, academic styles and prefer audacious forms of delivery and intriguing elements in style and presentation (Rosenau, 1992). I have tried to be true to this stance, as much as was possible, although I have adhered to the APA guidelines on style and have structured my texts in “chapters”. However, I do this under duress. I have taken the liberty to present my text in a fragmented fashion, each story beginning on a new page. I did not want to create the idea that the texts or chapters necessarily flow logically from the one to the other. In accordance with postmodern ideas I have tried to suspend a strict linearity of plot, and I invite you to

invent the design as you choose to read it (Rosenau, 1992). Start reading at any point, skip texts, take a pen and write across the texts if you like.

I intertwine stories, discussions of therapies and letters from my supervisors, letting them speak for themselves, in an effort to portray my collaborative approach and my effort to create a participant text.

"Chapter 1" serves as an introduction and highlights my postmodern stance. It also comments on my method of presentation: autoethnography. "Chapter 2" revolves around my perception of my experiences as a child in my family and the community I lived in after I left home. "Chapter 3" turns upon verbal and non-verbal stories about my experiences in my personal therapy and "Chapter 4" upon stories about my experiences in training and stories about my rituals as a therapist in training. The stories in "Chapter 5" were written during the time that I did my internship at Sterkfontein Hospital. The stories in "Chapter 6" flow from a time when I met myself in crisis. "Chapter 7" consists mostly of reflections on the themes I thought were most prevalent throughout the text.

The texts are loosely arranged in a time frame, yet this was done only for the sake of convenience. You are invited not to take these distinctions as truths, but to conceptualise these texts in any manner you wish.

This form of presentation might be unsettling and might startle or shock the complacent reader who expects a modern discourse that aims to be exact, pragmatic and rigorous in style. My need was, however, to stay true to a postmodern style, presenting "readings" and not "observations", "interpretations" and not "findings". In accordance with postmodern thinking I would like to invite you to redefine and be innovative with the text, reading for the pleasure of the experience rather than in the pursuit of "truth" (Rosenau, 1992). The goal is to encourage compassion and to promote dialogue. After all, why must academics be conditioned to believe that a text is important only to the extent that it moves beyond the merely personal (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)?

I make no truth claims for my text, but invite you to interpret it from any position you choose. Maybe you would like to read it as a scholar, as a therapist, or as a person who has been in a context where the medical model was prevalent. Feel free to adopt

any stance you wish to take. You can interpret my writing as that of a student, a therapist in training, a client, a person who needs to find voice, a woman who has been through therapy and has found voice, or as merely a set of stories. The possibilities are multiple and I by no means want to limit you. The “goal” is then to ask: “What are the consequences that my stories produce?” On a more personal level I could ask: “What kind of person do they shape me into?” and “What new possibilities do they introduce for living my life?” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

My text is presented as a self-reflective, autoethnographic personal narrative written in a personal voice. As such I wish to take personal accountability, and to transgress the notion of objectivity. I am stressing the journey over the destination, and my desire is to “eclipse any illusion of mastery or control” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744).

Such stories invite you, the reader, to become more fully immersed— aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually. They activate subjectivity and compel an emotional response. Thus such texts “long to be used rather than analysed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled, to offer lessons for further conversation rather than unrivalled truths” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744).

In conversation with myself while writing these stories I have frequently exposed vulnerabilities, both mine and those of my family. I have revealed embarrassing conflicts in the dynamics of my relationships. I have demonstrated difficult choices that I had to make and I have exposed my value system. “*Our accounts seek to express the complexities and difficulties of coping and feeling resolved, showing how we change over time as we struggle to make sense of our experience*” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b, p. 27). I agree with these authors that the account of myself is “unflattering and imperfect, but human and believable”. I have demonstrated multiple layers of my experience: as a member of a family, daughter to my parents, friend to others, scholar, client, therapist and woman, relative to my experiences as a human being.

Rosenau’s (1992, p. 54) description of the postmodern individual resonates with the stance that I have taken in this dissertation. She writes:

The postmodern individual is relaxed, orientated to feelings and emotions, interiorization, and holding a “be-yourself” attitude. She is an active human being constituting her own social reality, pursuing a personal quest for meaning but making no truth claims for what results.

The postmodern individual is seen as one in touch with “impulse and process” rather than an “institutional end-product” (Wood & Zurcher, as cited in Rosenau, 1992, p. 59).

I did not want my dissertation to be just another text that “proves” my competence as researcher, student, psychologist and human being. Postmodern authors are storytellers rather than story analysts. As such the “goal” of texts like this one is therapeutic rather than analytical—a personal voyage towards meaning and the flexible use of the storyteller’s voice (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

### Ethnography

The therapeutic value of autobiographical and personal narratives is constituted in and informs the autoethnographic method of presentation and writing that I have used in this dissertation. Autoethnography is one of the various genres of ethnography.

Ethnographic writers, say Ellis and Bochner (1996a, p. 4),

liberated from the chains of methodological practices that idealise the detached observer, using neutral language to explain raw data ... show us that the alternatives to the discredited practices of “objective” social science are not relativism, solipsism, or cynicism but rather modes of expression that invite audiences to enter actively into the horizons of the human condition ... where endless opportunities exist to create reality and live it.

These authors view ethnography as an activity in which ethnographers describe patterns of cultural experience that give perspectives on life. It is an alternative to

writing that breeches the “genre of realist writing that construes the author as a neutral, authoritative, and scientific voice” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b, p. 18).

Ethnography has evolved from a search for laws to a search of meanings (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b). Tedlock (2000) indicates that one of the most important forms of creating meaning is a narrative that shapes events into a unity through the temporal dimensions of human existence. It is through narrative that we develop an understanding of our lives. It is by writing my own stories that I have reclaimed my experiences, beyond abstractions, to give meaning to my life.

Ethnographers emphasise that experience is meaningful, that the meanings we generate in language inform human behaviour. Experience is seen as “intersubjective and embodied, not individual and fixed, but social and processual” Tedlock (2000, p. 471). Identities are construed as partial and multiple; in other words the experience of being a woman, or white or Christian, can never be singular but is dependent on a multiplicity of socially constructed positions, locations and dialogical contexts.

According to Tedlock (2000, p. 455), ethnography

involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It has moved away from objective methodology to intersubjective methodology, which entails representational transformation. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such data are transformed into a written and visual form ... and produce historically, politically and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations and representations of human lives.

*(While writing I become more and more aware of the style of writing I use, which could contradict my positioning of this dissertation as a text that is not intended to be a received text, where I pose as the expert on how to read this work. However, the concepts highlighted in this part are important to elucidate my method of presentation and allow me to take personal accountability of my approach and perspectives.)*



## Autoethnography, Reflexivity and Evocative Personal Narratives as Method of Presentation

“Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

In this orientation the personal story is told within and moves through layers of the social—the relational, familial, cultural. Culture is equated with the “webs of significance“ we spin for ourselves (Weber, as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 1996b, p. 16), and the boundaries between personal and cultural are often blurred as authors “zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, between focusing on the social aspects of their personal experience and then looking inward, exposing a vulnerable self” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In this process the distinction between personal and cultural becomes blurred.

In the following chapters you will encounter how my personal story weaves through this process, in and through the layers of relationships and the cultures of my family, therapy, selection for training towards my Master’s Degree, supervision at Unisa, a playgroup in Eersterust, training at a psychiatric hospital.

In line with postmodern ideas, autoethnographers see subjectivity as a given in that we cannot extricate ourselves from language. In this sense even though I make an effort to write honestly I invent the cultures that I write about, since I cannot help but read something into what is there because I am there with it (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b).

Autoethnographical stories are usually written in the first person. As mentioned, my use of the first person voice allows me to take personal responsibility for my work rather than attempting to erase subjectivity. It also allows me to immerse myself in my personal narratives. The third person voice adds weight to abstract categorical knowledge, whereas autoethnographers emphasise concrete expressions over abstractions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms: short stories, poetry, journals, photographic and personal essays, fragmented and layered writing (Ellis &

Bochner, 2000). In this dissertation you will encounter short stories, drawings, a transcription of a conversation with my therapist, transcriptions of therapy sessions with a client, letters from my supervisors at Unisa and at Sterkfontein Hospital and a diary entry. All of these contribute to creating a multivocal text.

In these texts concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought and language. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

Ellis and Bochner (2000) credit the term “autoethnography” to David Hayano, who limited the term to signify cultural studies by anthropologists of their “own people”, where the researcher is an insider/full member of the group being studied. However, Ellis and Bochner highlight that the meanings and applications of the term have evolved in a manner that makes it difficult to define it precisely.

The term now serves as a rubric for studies that have been referred to by terms such as personal narratives, narratives of self, first-person accounts, evocative narratives, writing-stories, auto-observation, personal ethnography, collaborative autobiography, among others. Ethnography has also been useful in a number of areas such as education, organisational studies, nursing and clinical psychology, to name a few (Tedlock, 2000).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) indicate that different examples of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of self–culture–process. The boundaries of each category are blurred as authors move back and forth among meanings and terms. A range of approaches is associated with autoethnography. “What falls under the rubric of ethnographic alternatives is diverse, multiple and non-canonical. There are no hard and fast rules to follow and no set categories to embrace” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b, p. 48).

I have used **evocative personal narratives**, focused on my academic training and personal life. This approach is an expression of the move in social sciences towards more personal and less anonymous writing. This term and approach are credited to

Arthur Bochner (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), who was provoked by the writings of postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist writers to construct a different relationship between researchers and subjects, authors and readers, moving towards a more collaborative relationship that explores how experience is endowed with meaning. He wanted to create narratives that

show the characteristics of the human struggle in an uncertain world, that resist marginalization, chaos and disconnection and try to preserve or restore coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744)

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 742) suggest the purpose of this approach is to “understand a self or some aspect of lived experience.” They indicate that participants (myself in this case) are encouraged to “*author their own lives in their own voice*”.

This approach is **reflexive** by nature. I used my own experiences in various relationships and cultures that I have encountered throughout my training to bend back on myself and look recursively, deeply and widely at my interactions, relational modes.

The word “evocative” “contrasts the expressive and dialogic goals of this work with the more traditional orientations in mainstream, representational social science” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). The authors of evocative personal narratives make themselves the object of research, thus breaching the conventional separation between researcher and subject. The mode of storytelling is similar to a novel or biography and blurs the boundaries between social science and literature. The focus is not on traditional concerns of generalising across cases but rather within a case. Thus in Chapter 7 I have written stories about the stories in the previous chapters and reflected on themes (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

The goal of this approach is to write evocatively, about topics that are personally meaningful, to include sensory and emotional experience and to understand the “self” and others in deeper ways. In this process, autoethnographers “cope with the untidy

ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions of relationship life and try to make sense of their local situations” (Ellis, 1998, p. 50).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) indicate that autoethnographers who use personal evocative narratives invite readers to take a more active role as they are “evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand and cope with their own lives” (p. 742).

Autoethnographers who use this approach disclose hidden details of life, which highlight emotional experience and thereby challenge the “rational actor model of social performance” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). They evoke an emotional response and offer lessons for further conversation rather than working towards conclusions. These texts “refuse the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination, and thus eclipse the scientific illusion of control and mastery.” They weave through the ebb and flow of relationships across time, resist being theorised, settled or analysed, and long instead to open up a conversation. The portrayal of intimate details of concrete day-to-day life longs to replace the loneliness of abstracted facts with companionship (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

The accessibility and readability of my texts reposition you as co-participants in dialogue and reject the traditional view of readers as receivers of knowledge.

I assume that some experiences can only be understood when feelings are a significant part of the process. I wanted you to feel and read *with* my narratives rather than about them. Reading with a story means “allowing yourself to resonate with the story, reflect on it, become part of it” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 753).

As I have already mentioned, I have therefore made an effort to keep my text sufficiently open to permit you to move between being in my story and in yours, where you can fill in or compare your experiences and provide your own sensitivities about what was going on. I hoped that you would feel the specificity of my situation, yet sense the unity of human experience as well (Ellis, 1998). I hoped that you would become increasingly immersed emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually, that my texts would

activate subjectivity and that you would be drawn into reflecting about your stories about my stories and the meanings of the responses they elicit for you.

In this regard Coles (as cited in Ellis, 1998, p. 55) says “the beauty of a good story is its openness—how the reader uses it for him/herself.” I also agree with Mairs (as cited in Ellis, 1998, p. 55), who states: “As far as I am concerned my text is not flawed when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no stories of your own. I keep my tale as wide open as I can.”

My texts are largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory. They present a layered story that highlights the social and dialogical practices through which my “identity” evolves as multiple (as daughter, student, woman and therapist in training) and in which these partial identities are performed. This is typical of an autoethnographic, reflexive, evocative, personal narrative approach and method of presentation, and is consistent with the therapeutic (rather than analytic) goals of such texts.

Some of you may wonder why I did not use narrative analysis, given that I have used narratives. In my view such analysis works towards “truth”; it is reductionistic, and synthesises rather than opens plurality and multiplicity. It positions the author as a person who can stand back and objectively reflect on the data. Although it might be useful for some, I thought this method was contradictory to my goal to open conversations and processes, to work towards the flexible use of my voice and towards complexity and multiplicity rather than truth.

#### Why Personal Narrative Matters

I have always been fascinated by stories. When I was a child, my father’s story-telling became a ritual during which we related to each other in a more intimate manner. His stories broadened my world, brought a sense of adventure and excitement, the safety to be curious and explore, and the knowledge that I had the freedom to create any stories I could imagine. This ritual held the hope and agency of creating other possibilities in my world and my relationships. Our story ritual was in stark contrast with the “real

stories” of the interactions in my family, and provided me with an emotionally safe context to dream of other worlds and possibilities.

Life is a performance of stories. It is through stories that lived experience is interpreted and through this process of interpretation that our lives are shaped (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992). Stories act to create, sustain and alter our worlds (Gergen & Kaye, 1992).

I agree with Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 726) when they indicate that [p]ersonal narrative, the project of telling a life, is a response to the human problem of authorship, the desire to make sense and preserve coherence of our lives. Our personal identities seem largely contingent on how well we bridge the remembered past with the anticipated future ... At stake in our narrative attempt to achieve a coherent sense of ourselves are the very integrity and intelligibility of our selfhood, which rest so tenderly and fallibly on the story we use to link birth to life to death.

Personal narratives constitute a process of reflexion, inspire conversations with ourselves and our readers and introduce new possibilities for life. They inform and constitute a process of exploration and self-creation. When critics question the therapeutic rather than the analytical consequences of such narratives, the questioning speaks of the critic’s life too. The meanings of texts are not transparent; the reader constructs meanings about what is read through her or his own narrative frameworks (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

When readers diminish the therapeutic consequences of stories they tend to draw linear distinctions between therapy and research, implying that narratives are useful only in so far as they produce theory and advance science. In conventional approaches to research authors are expected to pitch theory and be clever and analytical because that is what it means to be academic in the traditional sense of the word. I am not an academic. I am a therapist.

Even if this was not so why should academics only value that which is not personal? Given that the observer is part of the observed, our personal stories have always been embedded in our research. I have always believed that research projects contain attempts at resolving personal issues even if the issue is merely to choose a topic that provides a quick route towards a certificate of completion. Why should we hide our subjectivity and vulnerability behind “analysis”? “Why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observations back on ourselves?” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 747). Such projects constitute moral and ethical work.

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 746) suggest that, “We need to question our assumptions, the metarules that govern the institutional workings of social science—arguments over feelings, theories over stories, abstractions over concrete events, sophisticated jargon over accessible prose.”

Selvini (1988) suggests that the best research is the best therapy. I agree with Valkin (1994), who suggests that maybe the best research could constitute the best therapy for the researcher.

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 748) indicate that the usefulness of personal narratives also lies in their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of readers who enter from the perspective of their own lives, to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, to “reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into the worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of different perspectives and standpoints encountered.”

By inviting you to take my story and use it for yourself, to think about your life in relation to mine, you become a co-performer, examining yourself through the evocative power of narrative text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Critics have questioned whether personal narratives are not reflective of a culture of confession and victimisation and whether these narratives do not end up as spectacles that sentimentalise pain and take pleasure in revealing it. Once again I think that these questions speak about the critic and the particular reading by that person. Personal narratives are a source of empowerment and a form of resistance against dominant and

marginalising discourses (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This has also been my experience, and my journey of resisting the powerful conventions of traditional research.

I am aware that these statements may be unsettling and may complicate matters for those readers who ask: “How do we judge this work?” Ellis and Bochner (2000) emphasise that the evocative personal story is “an existential struggle for honesty and expansion in an uncertain world” (p. 749). The question is not whether this work is accurate, reliable or valid. Rather, say these authors,

Is the work honest or dishonest? Does the author take measure of herself, her limitations, her confusion, and ambivalence, mixed feelings? Do you sense a passage through emotional epiphany to some communicated truth, not resolution per se, but some transformation from an old self to a new one? Does the story enable you to understand and feel the experience it seeks to convey? (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749)

Personal narratives foster renewed appreciation for personal experience, embodiment, spirituality, diversity and difference and although unsettling and even painful, we gain humility and tolerance. Ellis and Bochner (2000) highlight the importance of being exposed to local stories that bring us into a world of experience different to ours and show us how partial and situated our understanding of the world is. This work fosters compassion and dialogue, which, for me, constitutes hope for the future in an ever-changing world.

#### Doing Autoethnography: The Journey

I started writing this dissertation while I was completing my internship at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital on the “aggressive male ward,” which was very unsettling for me. My experiences there, together with the recent suicide attempt of a male friend, provoked me into self-reflexion. Up until then I had been doing well. I had been through excellent training at Unisa and enjoyed the challenges of doing therapy. Then my world seemed to start falling apart. I questioned my values, my competence as a therapist and my worth. I questioned the value of therapy and struggled again with



meanings I thought I had worked through in my personal therapy. In an attempt to make sense of my life I started to re-tell and re-story my life, which now constitutes the process and the product of this dissertation.

I started writing about my encounters with men, starting with my father, and continued writing about significant relationships and events in my life. I paid attention to my physical feelings, my thoughts and emotions to try and understand the experiences I was living and had lived through. I wrote honestly. I placed myself back into situations, conjuring up details until I was immersed in the events emotionally. Then I wrote in whichever style and tone felt congruent and came naturally.

Although I continued to write a truthful account, tried to stay faithful to the “facts” of what had happened, writing from the head and the heart meant that my narratives differed considerably from the “truth” of traditional social science. My stories were not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of my life. I did not seek to recover already constituted meanings. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 745) write:

Narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present. Stories show us that the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and reversible according to the contingencies of our present life circumstances, the present of which we narrate.

I continued writing about the provocative events that had happened in my life (see, for instance, *Letting the Tomatoes Rip*). I asked my therapist to enter into conversation with me, and had her permission to record and use this in my dissertation. I took out the drawings I had made throughout my journey in my personal therapy, reflected on these and continued drawing. I transcribed diary entries from my private journal. I used the video recordings we made at Unisa during my training and transcribed challenging therapy sessions with a particular client. I asked Dian, my therapy supervisor, to write her accounts and meanings of how I developed in therapy. And I wrote ... and then I wrote stories about the stories I wrote.

I also made sure that I had permission from everybody whose letters I intended to use. I used different names for people who I thought could feel uncomfortable if I revealed their identities.

Sometimes the writing and reflecting process was too painful and I left it for a while, but always returning to it as the writing was also therapeutic. I was driven by a sense of how important this project was for my way of being in life in future.

### Credibility

Validity and reliability are positivist assumptions that underlie quantitative and experimental research. In qualitative studies researchers use several different terms to address issues of credibility with respect to how a study is conducted, such as transferability, dependability, conformability and authenticity (Maione, 1997).

I took several steps to establish the credibility of this work. I examined some of my personal and therapeutic preconceptions regarding therapy and research. I included this discussion and described my use of autoethnography as a method of presentation in my introduction to this dissertation so that you, knowing a bit more about me, could make better sense of my work. Another way I addressed credibility was to look at the visibility of my “data”. Visibility refers to the extent to which others have access to the actual material of the study. I addressed visibility by providing transcripts from therapy sessions and a conversation I had with my therapist, as well as letters provided by my supervisors. Access to these transcriptions allows you to judge the honesty of my work and to see how I drew distinctions in writing. I accomplished this by providing you with enough surrounding text for you to come to meanings of your own as you consider what I was saying.

### Time and Demands

Autoethnographers minimise specific dates in an attempt to “demonstrate the lived experience” and maximise the “humanity of authors and their peoples to outside audiences.” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). You may notice that I have used dates now and then and that a few years have lapsed since I started writing this dissertation. Such a

reflexive and personal process cannot be rushed; the time span to completion cannot be predicted. Ellis (1998) notes that she took nine years to complete one of her autoethnographic projects.

This is also due to the difficult and demanding nature of such work. Ellis and Bochner (2000) warn that it often requires one to confront things about oneself that are not necessarily flattering and may even be humiliating. Honest autoethnography generates a lot of fears, doubt and emotional pain; and then there is the vulnerability of revealing oneself, “not being able to take back what you have written or having any control over how readers interpret it” (p. 728). This approach is so different from the powerful conventions of scholarly discourse that I have struggled a lot with self-doubt. But there were rewards too—specifically learning to live with the ambiguity and uncertainty that are an integral part of our daily lives and, more particularly, moving from a rigid definition of self towards a more flexible way of being.

#### Invitation to Conversation

For in conversation, as in research, we meet ourselves. Both are forms of social interaction in which our choice of words and actions return to confront us into a kind of discourse or knowledge that we help to generate. This feature of conversation can be activating and used to explore our favoured approach to research in a way that is constructively critical. In that we systematically attend to confront and understand the nature and significance of what we do and how we might begin to do it differently. (Morgan, 1983, p. 406)

I invite you to now find a quiet space within which you can enter your story and meet yourself in relation to my journey ... I am not the same person I was when I started. Maybe this will be your experience as well ...

## MEETING THE FAMILY

### (CHAPTER 2)

#### The Beginning of a Dissertation: Meeting Ricky

*Dad stuff: Being insignificant to the point of abandonment, abuse, neglect to being significant enough to risk exposing, challenging, engaging this even further...*

Jo described Sam as a rock in the ocean in group yesterday. Standing in immense, vast and deep waters. This is how I feel at the moment. The immense depth and vastness of the sea of experiences I am facing is overwhelming. The pain and significance of this moment in time, space has every particle, every story of my being in it ...

I was tremendously relieved after having spoken to Ricky. I went there fully expecting to be turned away. After all, what I had in mind was out of the ordinary and could easily be framed as too personal, even too “wishy washy, feely, feely” for an academic disseration. More than that, I was going to take an immense risk to ask a man to listen, hear and see me, beyond a competent exterior. I felt like a little girl on her way to asking a stranger to be her dad.

I’ve been feeling like this a lot around men lately. A month ago a friend I love dearly tried to commit suicide. He survived but our relationship did not. Somehow, returning to his life meant excluding me for the moment. Again I felt insignificant, easily replaced and abandoned. Again I had to face the ever-present history with my Dad, and figure out how it is that I am still caught up in that. I went home, to Betty’s Bay, for a few days. I have always sought out beautiful places when I needed to deal with pain. This time, though, my Dad was too present to create such a space. My Mom is suing him about the payment of some pension money that’s about to become available. He phoned my cell phone repeatedly to talk to her. His presence and effect on both of us were devastating and brought memories I thought I had dealt with already.

My Mom started telling me, again, about our lives when I was a baby. She was very ill after my birth. She had an undiagnosed, under-active thyroid, which tapped her energy for seven years before it was treated. She was a music teacher. When she got home in the afternoons my five-year-old brother put her to bed, promising to take care of my two-year-old sister and me. She would wake up in the middle of the night and find me in the kitchen without a nappy, my sister sleeping on the carpet in the lounge and my brother exhausted on his bed. My father would be “working” until two in the morning, as usual. She was naïve enough to believe this until she was admitted to hospital a few years later and found out that he did not sleep at home that night. She realised then that he had been sleeping around since soon after they were married.

Hearing this again hurt. It reminded me more than ever that sex and any kind of intimacy with a man inevitably became dirty and unforgivable. Not having boyfriends meant being labeled ugly and worthless, and I internalised these labels to the extreme of abusing and abandoning myself. I saw that, although I have walked a long path with these themes, I was again at the point of abuse and abandonment. Again I am stuck in old interpretations of events. Again I feel like there is something terribly wrong with me. That I was not meant to be close to any man; that my friend’s desperate position was entirely my fault. Again I am badly in need of a Dad who will listen to me, comfort me and make everything okay again. Again I don’t want any man close to me. And again I am trying to avoid doing therapy with men even though I am supposed to be available to a whole ward of aggressive men on this rotation at Sterkfontein Hospital. This makes me question the journey I have been on with these themes. What changed? What happened in my training as a therapist and in my personal development that was so significant? And, at my therapist’s suggestion, how am I going to find “dads?”

Therefore going to Ricky was nerve wracking. I was afraid that he was going to think that my ideas were foolish. That he would ridicule me for not having done much work on my dissertation. That he would find my ideas boring and narcissistic. Yet I knew he had what I needed from a supervisor: the guts to allow creativity, the knowledge to be useful, the ability to stand at the edge of the woods and provoke and

steer me into the right direction. He would be capable of facilitating a useful working relationship that would not get entrenched in empathic uncertainties.

Knowing this and experiencing it were two very different things. He heard me out, cut straight through my already “academecised” ideas and my “stuckness” to the core: I had a story to tell. It would be painful. We needed to identify the central theme, and then I could write and “academicise” it in any form if I like. He spoke about how complex conceptualizations only serve to mask the painful, simple stuff. What would be interesting for him as a supervisor would be to find out what contexts enabled me to learn. I already had a tremendous amount of data available from a variety of contexts.

The world opened up. For the last week I have been remembering quotes, significant moments with different people in different contexts, pictures I drew and forgot about. A sea full of experiences. And now: “The unmeasured ocean of my mind is forever beating” (Acroyd, as cited in Conroy, 1986, p. 27). The possibilities are endless, and again I am provoked into a context of risk.

Growing Up—Three Steps Beyond the End of the Earth

*“Eendag,*

*Lank, lank gelede...*

*Ver, ver van hier...*

*Drie treë*

*anderkant die einde van die wêreld ...”*

(Dad, personal communication, 1982)

He was a great storyteller, my Dad. Still is. He lives his characters. His face becomes flexible, like a piece of clay, easily moulded and matching the different voices of each character. Whether it was a giant, a mouse, a little girl, a bear or a dwarf, he did it perfectly.

I used to be amazed at the way his ears moved up and down when he got to the frightening, intriguing part of a story. I would ask him to show me how he did that when the story ended. And I practised with all my might, but to no avail, of course.

His stories were like a magic ritual in that house. For at least a half an hour we would all be gathered on my parents’ bed, in peace, and in the wonder of a different world—where the good triumphed over the bad, where there was life beyond our imaginations: a world where my Mom actually seemed to glimpse the man she had fallen in love with, to recognise and appreciate him. It was a world where we actually jumped with delight when he roared in anger, where, for a few moments, I felt safe and loved.

I don’t know when I started sitting on the chair in the corner, rather than lie in his arm. I do remember envying my sister for still being loved, held in that sacred space. I remember that my brother stopped joining us for stories. And I remember the cold and terrible tension cutting even that space like a stormy Cape southwester.

It was at about the same time that my mother started leaving the dinner table before evening scripture and prayer. My father would be markedly unhappy about that. She would say that she was tired or felt sick, and the air would be filled with resentment. I was always afraid that he would explode. He is a tall man (6 foot 4 inches), but at times like *those* he would become huge. His face would become bloated, his lungs filled with the breath of murderous rage and his eyes piercingly evil. I was scared. And no one knew.

Mostly, he would be able to contain himself and pretend that everything was all right, for the moment. He'd read from the Bible in an authoritative voice and then we would sing two hymns. We would end with:

*“O, Heer, my God, as ek in eerbied wonder,*

*en al u werke elke dag aanskou,*

*Die son en maan, die aarde sterre wolke,*

*hoe u dit elke dag so onderhou...*

*Dan moet ek juig, my Redder en my God,*

*Hoe groot is u, Hoe groot is u,*

*Dan klink die hele wêreld tot u saam,*

*Hoe heerlik Heer, u grote Naam!”* (Bronberg, 2001, p. 464)

This song still brings me to tears and it still comforts me. It used to be the sign that the evening's ordeal was over, and it took me to all the beautiful places outside—the vineyards at dusk, the stars on a dark night, the smell of waves, the wind in the trees outside my window. When we sang this song, I knew that I could soon escape to my bedroom, where my little dachshund would secretly keep me company under the comforting darkness of my duvet.

Soon my Mom started giving my Dad judgmental looks when he poured himself more red wine than usual. He would look at her in challenging contempt and offer us a glass. Eventually she stopped coming to dinner all together. She seemed to be always in



bed. I worried about her, but never had the courage to voice my concern. I was still only a little girl. It was either my brother or my sister, mostly my sister, who asked whether they could go and find out how she was and maybe invite her to dinner. She never came.

Eventually evening scriptures stopped. His explosions became more frequent. His anger would erupt after days of visibly trying to contain himself. It would usually be a small thing that triggered the assault. His voice would become like thunder. His eyes would spit fire and look as if they were about to pop out of his bald head. Sometimes my brother would get the brunt of it. He would “punish” my brother for—I don’t know what—by hitting him with his belt. I trembled at the sound. In shock, I would lie in bed and try to keep the tears in until he left my brother alone. Sometimes I locked myself in the loo to cry as silently as possible in the only room in the house that could give me some legitimate privacy without drawing too much attention to myself.

And then he did not come home often anymore. He was away on business trips, or at AA meetings. Sometimes an AA buddy or his wife would call with a crisis. He was a hero in that community. He would go and support and counsel those in need. Everybody thought he was a wonderful man. He was charming, well respected in church, at the *Voortrekkers*, at school meetings, at the tennis club, in the AA. They probably pitied him for having such a disinterested wife. Little did they know. Sometimes women called the house and he would go out. My mother was always upset when this happened. He blamed her for “turning the children against him.” I never understood this. It was only after their divorce, 15 years later, that she told me about the affairs. I think I always knew, anyway. Apparently she told my brother and sister when they were still children—somehow she asked for their support in ways unknown to me. I was just always aware that my siblings shared something that kept me the outsider.

I suppose this is why I need people to be real/ sincere/ truthful (which becomes a stumbling block in therapy sometimes), and why I have such a need to hear and validate other people’s stories. And why I need to write this one.

He got married again five years ago to a woman with whom he had once had an affair. I can't blame him, after 27 years in a miserable marriage. They have a beautiful three-year-old daughter. And he's still a wonderful storyteller.

## Having a Grandfather Called Meester

### Knowledge

He drank strong, sweet, black coffee. Every Saturday morning we could hear his approach from a mile away. He drove an old brownish-yellow bakkie that he called *Weeskind* (Orphan). His other car, *Witbroodjie* (Favourite), was kept in the garage for special occasions.

My job was to make the coffee, and cool it by pouring it from one cup to another over the sink, before giving it to him. (He had old, discoloured, veined hands.) I did not like this job, but I did it without complaint. I loved him.

He always brought us vegetables. He was an enthusiastic gardener. My Mom still tells the story of the day he brought pumpkin. Again. I took him aside and made a request: "*Oupa? Oupa moet asseblief nie weer pampoene bring nie, want as Oupa dit doen moet ons dit eet.*" ("Grandpa? Grandpa, please don't bring pumpkins here anymore, because if you do that we have to eat it.") He was a bit taken aback, yet amused. He told my Mom and she thought it was hilarious. She also loved him dearly; his funeral card is still placed prominently on her dresser, 15 years after his death.

He was also a man who created his own rituals. Every time a grandchild was born, he would find a place in the garden, and carve the name and birthday somewhere in stone or concrete. Whenever we visited him, I used to run straight to the back yard, to see if my name was still there. And I was always extremely relieved and glad to find it. In that symbol lay the security that he still loved me and that I still had a safe place where I belonged.

Sometimes my sister and I slept over. He had wonderful feather cushions in clean cotton covers that were cool on my skin. We used to wake up with the delicious smell of bacon and eggs, fried on a gas stove. He preferred to cook breakfast on a small, blue, one-plate gas stove, which he placed on the kitchen table. We ate while he cooked and were allowed to drink coffee there, in the mornings.

Afterwards, we would go and play in his “study”, which was part of the dining room. He had an assortment of old bits of stationery that smelled of wisdom, and his desk was cluttered with papers and books. He encouraged us to work hard at school. And he invariably had a riddle up his sleeve for us, a maths problem or some other puzzle. The one who got the right answer first was always rewarded. He and my brother used to sit for hours at the dining table at our house, discussing books or newspapers.

He was compelled to instil a love for education in children. He had been a school principal or *Meester* in a little town called Klawer before he moved to Bellville, when my mother was still a child. He then taught English and History at the local high school. (It fits, doesn't it? Language and stories ... .) I am told that the kids loved him and that he got even the most rebellious child to achieve something. They actually called him *Meester* and I like to think of it as a playfully respectful name for an inspiring teacher.

He was never a man for close contact. I never rarely sat on his lap or kissed him goodbye. He was a solitary man in that way. He had his cat, which from time to time joined him in front of his coal fire while he was watching a rugby match.

Whenever I visit my Mom in Cape Town, she still, at least once, says nostalgically: “If only Granddad knew how far you all studied, and how well you all did.” We all specialised in our fields: my brother in internal medicine, my sister in social work and I in psychology. I guess knowledge meant closeness, approval and acceptance—and I guess healing is really also for the healers in this family.

## The Silent Piano

### Voice

It was a grand piano. I have never seen anything like it elsewhere, not even in the Cape Town Hall where we used to go and listen to the Symphony Orchestra. It filled half the lounge. It was the colour of fire, made in a foreign country of a strangely beautiful wood. My Mom was a music teacher, yet she never played that beautiful instrument.

She bought it when she first started teaching. She risked a third of her salary each month to have that piano. She had talent and needed a good piano. She still sometimes shows me newspaper articles from the years before we were born, when she used to perform. I never heard her play the piano that way. She started teaching me when I was five, sitting beside me and counting the time out loud. Once I heard her play Liszt for a minute. It filled me with sorrow and regret. To this day I think of that piano as a grotesque symbol of a woman who lost her voice for most of her life.

No one ever completely loses voice. We all find ways to speak. Some find it in drinking, some in shouting, some in silence. She found hers in illness. She was always sick. I do not doubt that there was actually something physically wrong, but it was more than that. Her illness became a comment on what was going on in that system. It was a way of spelling out her needs. It was a way of getting back at my father. It was a way of staying in that family system. It had many functions. The question is, if you are not heard, do you *really* have a voice?

Therefore, also, who or what has the power to take away one's voice? I could easily say the voicelessness in our family was entirely my father's fault. And I would find many therapists, especially feminists, to agree. I believed this for some time as well. He was the one who drank, who had affairs, who was deceitful and stingy with his money, who was admired in the community for everything he was not behind the walls of the family home, who put the fear of God into all of us. Yet, was this not also his way of speaking? Of voicing something that was never heard?

Of course, the way we voice has implications and sometimes painful and severe consequences in relationships. Yet blaming does not seem to be a useful way of looking at problems anymore. Of course, the expression of anger and hurt is important. To be heard is very important. But blaming and drawing linear distinctions seems futile. It just makes things worse. I learnt this last year.

I wonder what my Mom would say if she read this. I think she would be angry, for this is not how she would tell the story and maybe she expects me to tell her story. But I can't anymore. This is my voice. Maybe, this is my piano. I will not be silent anymore.

## Beauty—My Sister

### Home

I always go to Agape when I'm longing for home. One day while everyone was gathered under the thatch roof shelter for the ritual of a shared lunch, Corinne asked a woman called Beauty to bless the food with a song.

Her name was Beauty—and I liked her the moment I knew her name. We found an immediate connection, which grew into a sisterly bond I have never experienced, except with my own sister. I looked forward to seeing her face again. Whenever I went there, she would show me some of the new techniques of expression she had learnt at drama school while I was away, and we would laugh at the sheer fun of it. Sometimes, we would just sit quietly in the shade and she would tell me about her life.

One day, I felt particularly tired, vulnerable. Unisa was far away from home and training was invariably a perturbing context. I went to Agape where familiar faces welcomed me with the greetings that always filled me with a profound sense of community.

Beauty looked burdened and came up to me. I must admit I, arrogantly and naïvely, thought: “Oh, no, not today ... I don't have the strength to be with anyone's sorrows today ...”. I should have known that Beauty's problems could never be a burden. As always, it was a blessing and a space of shared healing.

She sat with me in the half-shade of the late afternoon and started singing to me. Her deep, African-alto voice reverberated with sincerity. She sang her pain. The words she wrote told the story of an abused girl's pain and struggles while growing up. The simple melody was humble and heart rending. She sang of childhood horrors and her song fell on my ears like a lullaby.

Beauty—my sister.

My father used to call my sister *Kiekie* (meaning a beautiful photograph or picture). She *was* beautiful. Maybe this has been her biggest burden all along. The

tension between her and my mother started even in the story-time days. My Dad paid more attention to her than to anyone else in the family. I think my Mom could not bear the “affairs” being brought into her house, even in such an innocent, metaphorical way.

It became unbearable between my sister and my mother in my sister’s teenage years. The pretty girl turned into a beautiful woman and constantly drew the attention of men and boys alike. She was caught in an impossible situation. There was the deep love she had for my father, which he both validated and betrayed in a psychotically hurtful manner. And then there was the accusing, loyalty-seeking love of my mother. Trapped, my sister left home at the end of Standard 6.

She asked to be sent to a boarding school for girls in Paarl (40 kilometres from home). I was relieved for her sake, yet I have never felt more alone. My brother had left for university the year before and I was the only one to stay at home. I yearned for my sister, the only person who shared and validated the knowledge of how bad it really was at home.

Two years later I was also sent to boarding school for a term. I hated it. I was a solitary dreamer and the rigid school system did not allow any freedom or context for such luxuries as privacy. I cried non-stop. My sister would hear of this and come and sit on the bed next to me, while I rubbed at my swollen eyes. She would slap me on the arm, leaving a red mark, and warn me that I would get wrinkles. Only she could make me laugh in such strange ways and in such dire distress.

She had a cunningly funny, naughty way about her. All her roommates flunked at least one year. I guess they just had too much fun! She, however, did not fail once.

She never fails to surprise me still. She phoned me today for the first time in a month, saying she had been thinking of me all day. Her timing always was impeccable.

She married this year and has just bought a house (a life?) in Gordon’s Bay. And I am again aware of the beauty that lies in the connection that she still creates between us. Beauty that sings of a sense of home.



## My Brother, “The Little Prince”

### Disqualification and Expertise

Bennie *Boekwurm*—that’s what the children used to call him. He loved reading anything he could lay his hands on. During exams, the pile of library books would tower next to his bed, for he did not have to study a lot to do well. Exam time meant that there was more time to read. The genius of the family.

We don’t have much contact anymore. It’s difficult to speak to him. Somehow he got stuck in the expert role. He constantly brings up absurd medical terms in conversations, and I am tired of asking for explanations.

It was not always like this. I have known my brother to be a very sensitive person. A kindred spirit, even. I think his patients still get to see this side of him, to some extent. People incessantly tell us what a wonderful doctor my brother is: “*My son used to get hysterical every time I had to take him to a doctor...Now he constantly wants to drop in at the surgery to visit your brother ...*”. I believe these stories. I also believe that he is especially good with children.

He was always my Mom’s Little Prince, her clever child. She swoons when she hears these stories about her son. Yet I don’t think he likes it. Maybe he is tired of the role he always fulfilled in her life. He lives about three kilometres from her house, yet he only visits her when I am home for the holidays. Even then, he always gets himself “paged” so that he can leave as soon as possible. She must know this, and still she always goes out of her way to make a special meal for him. She sets the table as if we were going to receive a king in her humble little home, and gets embarrassed if she does not have complete sets of everything.

This angers and irritates me. Maybe because I feel disqualified. Hopefully also because I know how disqualifying this expert role probably is to my brother as well. There is so much more to him than this entrapping role. Maybe I even play into this role. One of my first questions to him is always: “ So, have you read any good books lately?”

Yet I know this question is also about a need to connect with him again. To connect with the dreamer in him, the one who finds the most extraordinary stories and recognises the magic in them. We have a special history with books. Sometimes, while I was in high school and he was at university, he would give me a book to read. I would feel very honoured, as if he was secretly sharing a side of himself with me that others did not see. I would look for him in every story. And I would be ready to engage him in a conversation every time I finished a book.

One day he gave me a book called *The Prince of Tides*, written by Pat Conroy (1986). As he gave it to me, he said: “This is my story.” This is the most precious book I have ever owned. I wish I could give it to everyone who has ever lived in an abusive family. In that comment, that act, he voiced a part of himself that I think is still, to this day, silenced. The voice of the unacknowledged, abused boy.

He gave me another book that same year, *The Little Prince* written by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry . I did not grasp the wonder of this book then. Maybe I was too “grown up” to really appreciate it then. Today, I like this quote best: “*Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves and it is rather tedious for children to have to explain things to them time and again*” (1995, p. 11).

I do get it now. Today that book still reminds me of the imaginative Little Prince my brother was and is. It reminds me that he understands and has lived much more of the meanings of life than the constricting role of the “Expert Doctor” allows him to voice. It makes me believe that he is especially good at working with children. It reminds me of the boy I knew as my brother.

## Opening the Curtains: Living With The Family

It's raining outside, at last. Relief ...open the curtains. No—it was just the kettle. Wind touches my face. If mist is the feminine face of God for Coelho (1998), then wind is the feminine touch of God for me.

Opening the curtains at home was a rare event in my childhood. I remember one night my father entertained people from work. I was about four and this is one of my earliest memories. The farce of a happy couple entertaining guests. It was the only social function of this nature in that house that I would ever recall.

The women were dressed coyly—perfume lingering in the air, long painted nails; well-nurtured hands in peanut bowls. The game excited me. Eventually getting lost between all the grown ups, I decided to go and lie down and pretend that I was sleeping. My windows faced the outside entertainment area. I left the curtains open. Those wonderfully foreign female auras lingered by my window and whispered comments like “What a beautiful little girl”. It hit me right in the heart.

I still think of that night as my first invitation/passage to a sense of a feminine self. The story still brings me to tears. It hurts. This was one of the few times that I was ever called beautiful. One of the few times that I felt like a little girl and not just a thing.

I was trained in the art of a-sexuality in my family. In the 27 years my parents were married I cannot remember them ever touching each other in a loving way. Not once. No hugs, no kisses, not even a brush of the hands. Never. They slept in separate bedrooms most of their married life and not one of us children ever commented.

I became a very strong, very shy learner of how to ignore your body, and how to ignore the fact that you are ignoring your body, very early in my life. Being a-sexual was safe. Anything that represented a sense of femininity made me feel vulnerable. It was accompanied by a tacit knowledge of the danger of touch in a volatile context. I think there was an instinctive knowing that the system would not be able to deal with such (feminine) perturbation without responding with extreme rejection.

I learnt to be an excellent observer and listener. I avoided boys and men. This was not difficult, for their presence made me aware of my body, and that was intensely uncomfortable. I ate a lot. It was a comforting habit. I was never entirely obese, but I was, without doubt, overweight. Maybe it protected me from that fearsome thing called sexuality and the powerlessness that seemed to go with it.

When I was 16 a 17-year-old boy sent me a Valentine's card. It scared the shit out of me. I did not even know who he was. We had never met. He must have fallen "in love/infatuation" with his idea of me, based only on what I looked like. I was scared, excited, dirty and very afraid, all in one. After a while we met and he asked me out on a date. I felt like a trapped mouse trying to find its way out of a maze. The double bind lay in the choice: enter a forbidden, scary definition of a feminine self in relation to this guy; or dish out what felt like a terrible sentence of rejection. Not knowing what to do, I eventually told my mother, with great embarrassment. This was the first personal conversation I had with her in what could have been a lifetime. She encouraged me to go and I felt even more embarrassed and ashamed for telling her.

I agreed to the date. His mother and father were in the car. All dressed up. My immediate sense was that he wanted to make an impression and that he wanted to sit next to me, while not making his father feel like a taxi driver. My stomach was in a knot and my body was as stiff as a corpse.

He got tickets for an action movie. We had a drink before the film started and he surprised me with stories about his love of the opera and classical music that I'd grown up with. Yet the way he looked at me made me nervous. I can't remember anything about the movie. I sat down next to him in complete fear and I did not move once. Not even slightly.

Afterwards his parents, obviously delighted with their son's infatuation, fetched us. He walked me to the door and manoeuvred his way inside. He kissed me on the cheek. I could not get him to leave soon enough. I scrubbed my cheek for weeks afterwards. I felt terribly dirty and shaken. Terribly embarrassed and ashamed. I did everything I could to avoid him at school. He kept bringing me flowers and eventually I

could not bring myself to accept them. It would be acknowledging and approving of some kind of filthy admiration by a man. I tried to tell him to stop, but he did not hear me. Eventually I mustered up enough courage to write him a letter, to explain the rejection.

I felt guilty about this for years afterwards and I have avoided dating ever since. The part of me that used to call this “pathetic” now has compassion for the girl from yesterday who was restricted to such a singularly rigid definition of self.

Intellectually I know that a-sexuality was part of a pattern of interaction in the family that kept the homeostasis in the system intact. My mother never showed or projected feminine sense of self, so hurt was she by my father and his lovers. She struggled with her weight like she struggled with the need for an intimacy in her marriage that she also found repugnant.

My brother met his first girlfriend while he was at university. He married her after dating her for seven years.

My sister chose to go to a boarding school when she was 14. She started dating a much older man when she was 16, which provoked my mother’s petulant interference and threats. When she was a first-year student at university, she dated a young man who did technical work for Telkom. This time my mother phoned his mother and threatened to take my sister out of the university residence and stop paying for her studies if she (the boyfriend’s mother) did not get her son to stay away from my sister. I could not understand this at the time. He was an intelligent, decent, nice man with a good income.

Later, I realised that my Mom did not favour the idea of a man without a university education for her daughter. It would be quite legitimate to see my Mom as a sophisticated snob, yet her behaviour makes sense in the context of her relationship with my father.

She was an educated, cultured music teacher and he was the uneducated son of a farmer, who got an unexpected opportunity to work for Sanlam as some kind of clerk. He enjoyed *boere musiek*, which she could not stand. She loved going to the Cape Town Hall to listen to the symphony orchestra; he loved playing tennis at the local club and

charming the women with his laughter at their crude sexual jokes. I guess my mother wanted to protect my sister from getting involved with a member of the “different class of man” into which she so resented having married.

The irony is that my father worked his way up to a position in senior management. He was involved, as a well-respected member, in all the prestigious committees of the community. My guess would be that he was only inferior in my mother’s and in his own. It seems that the more he failed to live up to my mother’s expectations, the more he left the home, the more she felt betrayed, worthless and blaming, the more inferior he felt ... . Yet, getting a divorce would be admitting to such unacknowledged, unarticulated failures.

Thinking in this way about my parents is new to me and to some extent it is freeing. In that house, meanings around behaviour were not addressed. They were, in fact, ignored in the most extreme ways. I remember a night when my sister was home for a weekend from school. The house was tense, as always. We had all just gone to bed when her door flew open and she started screaming hysterically in the hallway. Out of the blue. “I can’t take it anymore, I can’t take it anymore!” Her face was contorted with pain, her screams earth shattering. My mother coldly told my brother to get her into the car and take her to a clinical psychologist, who was also a family friend. After they had left she told me to go back to bed and closed her door. My sister came back the next morning, sedated, and packed her bags. This incident was never spoken of again.

Silence—such aching, painful silences. Silenced sexuality; silenced pain, silenced parts of selves. In that system you were just on automatic pilot. You just barely existed. You used your head and ignored everything else. If my brother was my Mom’s male hope and supporter, my sister was the stirrer and the tension absorber, and I was the observer: careful never to show or ask anything that could possibly perturb. The silent, responsible one.

## Leaving Home, Meeting MES Action and Jacques

The journey of leaving home began a long, long time ago. I was 18 years old. Home was in Cape Town, 45 Kenridge Avenue in the northern suburbs. Kenridge Avenue was lined with trees that became a mosaic of colours in autumn. The house was a brick faced building, L-shaped with a beautiful garden. It was empty most of the time. My brother and sister had already left visiting only at weekends and bringing turmoil. It seemed like my father had left a long time ago, although he still lived there. He slept in the study. My mother's resentful presence pervaded the house.

I had a small room with many books. I was supposed to be going to the University of Stellenbosch in a few months. The thought made me feel claustrophobic. I felt an urgency to escape. There was a sense of destiny waiting beyond the boundaries of Cape Town and beyond the lonely walls of an unhappy, enmeshed family life. I had to get out. Even the thought of leaving old friends behind seemed a relief.

One day a missionary came to visit our school. Someone had met him the previous night in church and invited him to come and speak at the school, during the thirty minutes set aside for Christian Student meetings. I usually found this crowd somewhat pretentious and pious and avoided these gatherings, but this time I decided to attend the meeting out of curiosity.

His name was "Uncle Manie". He worked for a missionary organisation in Hillbrow and recruited Christians to help with their work in the "dark" centre of Johannesburg. People were lost in Hillbrow. He described it as a place populated by drug addicts, prostitutes and homeless people desperate for food and hope. They needed to be "saved".

"Listen." While he was talking I had a clear sense that I had to listen to this man. It was an outrageous thought, and it surprised me. Yet I had an unwavering sense that this was the place I needed to go to. I thought of resisting, disregarding the notion of such a clear sense of destiny. Besides, I had to leave. My lift home was waiting. The pamphlets with all the information were at the other side of the hall, but a boy I had

barely spoken to appeared with a pamphlet in his hand and for some reason, unknown, gave it to me. I called the people at MES Action (Mid City Evangelisation Action) the next afternoon.

I just knew I had to go. I was scared, yet there was clarity and purpose in this decision, which I was not about to ignore. My mother freaked out. The son of one of her friends had been killed in Hillbrow a few months earlier. She arranged a visit to Hillbrow so that I could see what I was letting myself in for. I went the weekend before I was due to start writing my Matric exams—and I loved the place. I loved the sense of freedom and independence in doing something important on my own. The missionaries were kind and welcoming. A sense of purpose radiating from them. They knew pain.

I went home and organised a sponsorship at my church. I stood in front of the church, enthusiastically telling people about the need in Hillbrow. I told them about the good work the missionaries were doing, about the hungry and homeless people who were given food, in return for which they attended regular church meetings. MES were starting a free crèche so that single mothers could go out and earn an income. The crèche also created an opportunity to bring hope and faith to the children and their parents. I told them about a workshop which gave women the opportunity to learn needlework, which in turn enabled them to earn money. My passion for the mission was inspiring. The congregation sponsored me and made it possible for me to go home three times that year.

My mother threatened to get a court order to keep me from going. It must have been a very difficult time for her, but I was not going to change my mind. I left.

All the missionaries stayed in a block of flats in Esselen Street, next to the AIDS clinic in the centre of Hillbrow. We had our own rooms and ate in a community hall. My father went with me on the first day. We bought a bookshelf, an iron, a kettle and cups. My Dad was supportive yet distant. Maybe I just kept him at a distance.

Months before I left, I prayed that God would send me a friend at MES. I was scared of being alone in a strange place. When my father and I stopped in front of the building in Esselen Street, the thought came to me, clearly, that the first person I was



going to see would be that friend. The thought frightened me, because I knew that there were usually homeless men in and around the building who acted as security guards. It so happened that they were having lunch. As we entered I saw a tall, skinny young man who was obviously one of the new recruits. He looked somewhat out of place. Jacques, his name was.

I was amused and a bit anxious. I never did feel comfortable around men. I kept my distance from Jacques in the first month. Challenging fate to play out. There was an air of intelligent rebellion around Jacques, which fascinated me. He questioned the trainers' assumptions without seeming to need their approval. I liked him.

One afternoon Jacques suggested that we could have coffee together. He wanted to talk to me. He was going to start a new division at MES, to see to the needs of the elderly people in Hillbrow.

Hillbrow was full of elderly people. Hillbrow: a place where sirens screamed throughout the night. A place where violence and gunshots were common. A place where people urinated in the streets.

I was stunned by Jacques' proposition, and again I had the sense that fate was nudging me in the right direction. The idea of creating a new division beyond the watchful eyes of the Ministers who headed up the other divisions was exciting. Jacques, two other girls and I started our journey.

Jacques was the oldest of the new missionaries. He had already completed an Honours Degree in Psychology. For some reason he saw potential in me, and included me in meetings with the church council and with the matrons at the old age homes. We were a team. (He even called me "partner"! ) I had (still have) a lot of respect for him. He had very creative ideas, a wonderful sense of humour and an amazing ability to read, understand and change contexts. He seemed to be able to play with realities and not get stuck in rigid beliefs. His belief in me inspired me to work hard.

We organised visits with the people in old age homes and in the surrounding flats. It was quite an ordeal for me to just go and sit behind a stranger and introduce

myself. Of course, my definition of self was validated by and limited to the label of Christian.

The old people were the outcasts of society. They were lonely, and many had been forgotten or simply dumped by their families. Most of them had lived in Hillbrow when it was still a safe and beautiful neighbourhood. Time and change became their cages.

Surprisingly enough, it was easy to strike up conversations with them. We got to know the different characters. Aunt Minnie had been rich in her previous life. She was seen, in her old age home, as the one who was stuck-up and difficult. Aunt Minnie was very lonely, yet had a robust way of keeping her distance from people. Then there was Uncle Peter who had Alzheimer's. We met as if never before, every week. One day we took everybody to the Rand Easter Show. I left him at a bench while I went to get us some drinks. When I came back he thought I was just a girl having fun at the show, being kind to him, and flirted with me, as he never would have in the old age home. What a difference context makes!

Then there was dear Aunt Betty who lived alone in a flat. She was an independent soul. Her family was far away. We had wonderful conversations about life.

These and many other elderly people became my friends. It was easy to connect with them. I listened to their stories, always caringly. At the time I thought I was the missionary bringing some kindness and support and connection to their lives. Today I know better.

I was lonely at MES. I felt threatened by the other people in the group. Some of them seemed like "ruffians" going through turmoil. Some were just plain weird (having visions of angels and all that). I did have friends, but I still felt trapped in the role of someone who cares and supports and knows only how to do that. I felt lost, yet eager to please.

Jacques became my mentor, but by putting him on a pedestal I became trapped in a one-down position. I defined him as clever, funny and just about perfect in all the skills you can think of, but by doing so I felt stupid, dull and, again, add label you can

think of. My sense of self became dependent on his validation of me, and this made ordinary human connection impossible. Just the thought of inviting him for coffee made me terribly nervous.

I isolated myself from most people. Jacques sometimes took me along when he visited friends or family. It was wonderful to get out, yet my need to perform seemed to freeze me into a mould of distance inside.

Towards the end of the year I decided to stay in Johannesburg and to study for a BCom in Communication at RAU. Needless to say my mother was very upset. She disqualified RAU as being no more than “a glorified high school”. The urgency with which she tried to persuade me to come home made me want to run even faster and further.

This degree was only available at RAU at the time. It was a good choice. I was not ready to go home. My mother and I fought over the phone and my father tried to convince me to come home. I guess they thought I was just being stubborn. My mother must, however, have felt very insecure. With no children in the house there was no reason for her and my Dad to stay together anymore.

Jacques was selected for his Masters in Clinical Psychology during the year we were at MES Action. He has had a significant influence on my life since the day I met him. Still does. I think of him as my big brother. We have been through many ups and downs. He watched me grow up and I often relied on him for support in tough times.

The relationship has changed with time, and although I still struggle not to make him only an expert, which silences me and frustrates him, it feels like we have been through several lifetimes’ worth of change together.

When my parents divorced in my first year at RAU it was with Jacques that I found a safe place. I was very good at keeping my distance from people at the time. No one else knew I was unhappy. It was also Jacques who referred me to a therapist that became very important in my life.

## MEETING THERAPY

### (CHAPTER 3)

#### Meeting Corinne

RAU 1994. Benjamijn: the hostel known as the place where you find the woman you want to marry. BCom Communication. New people, a new place, old pain. Isolation. Leave me alone. The mandatory social dance evenings. Sitting in the corner with Annelie, making myself as small as possible. Maybe someone will ask me to dance. No. I'm too ugly. I don't want to dance anyway. I don't know how. I want to get out of here. Have to study. If I study I don't have to try and relate to these people. "Hallo, what's your major? Where do you come from?" And then the uncomfortable silence. Oh, please—just leave me alone.

The call: "Your father is leaving me for another woman." Dad (keeping his eyes on the road, that authoritative voice): "I do have a lady friend, but we're just friends." The deceit. Silence. One, two, three, four five. White stripes flashing by. Swallow the tears. I want to cry, but I can't, not with Dad sitting on his *throne*, next to me.

Climbing up the hill, to Jacques' flat. Turmoil. Hurt.

"Have you told your roommate?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

"How?"

"Just tell her that if you're acting strange it's because you're going through a rough time."

Later: "I know a therapist, a woman I think you might connect with. She's one of the RAU lecturers. I really think you might like her. If not, then you just don't go back. I'm worried about you."

A distant voice on an answering machine: “Hallo. Please leave a message.” I put the phone down, quickly. The next time I leave a message, using my competent voice, trying to control the tremor. No one comes back to me. I pray. “Lord, if it is meant to be, she will be in her office 10 am Monday morning.”

Monday morning, I’m nervous. She’s there. What now? “Hallo, I was wondering if it’s possible to make an appointment with you.”

She is wearing a white shirt, soft eyes.

I sit across from her, in her office at RAU. I freeze. I sit very still, speak in a monotonous voice and use as little facial expression as possible. I tell her about my family. Flatly, scared of losing control. She asks me to buy a box of tissues. The tears come and come and come. I have no words.

We’re stuck. It’s not safe enough to say anything. I don’t want to be disloyal to my family. It’s my fault that I am what I am. I don’t know how to talk to the people around me. They don’t understand me. I don’t know how to talk about anything other than the studies. I don’t understand the happy-go-lucky way in which they seem to be in life. I can’t connect with them.

Corinne asks me to go draw a picture of my Dad. I’m scared. “I can’t draw.” Corinne says: “It’s not about drawing a masterpiece.” I buy the crayons. I have “homework” for therapy.

It’s a Sunday afternoon. Silence. Everybody has gone home. I’m lonely. Staring at the crayons and the white paper. I pick up a blue crayon. Lines on the paper. It’s a face, stripped to the bare minimum. Scared eyes, no mouth. I am on my knees, silently screaming.

Meeting Corinne becomes a weekly ritual. We give words to the pictures. She tells me about the impact the pictures have on her, what they bring up for her. I’m surprised: uttering the unutterable becomes possible. Like a broken piano, the sound of my voice is strange, foreign, staccato. A canyon of emptiness opens up. Slowly but surely we walk through the territory. Corinne, the mother who knows about pain. She nurtures me for seven years.

Corinne with her attentiveness, her understanding and her perturbing questions. “What is that?” she asks, commenting on a small movement. Forcing me to find the words.

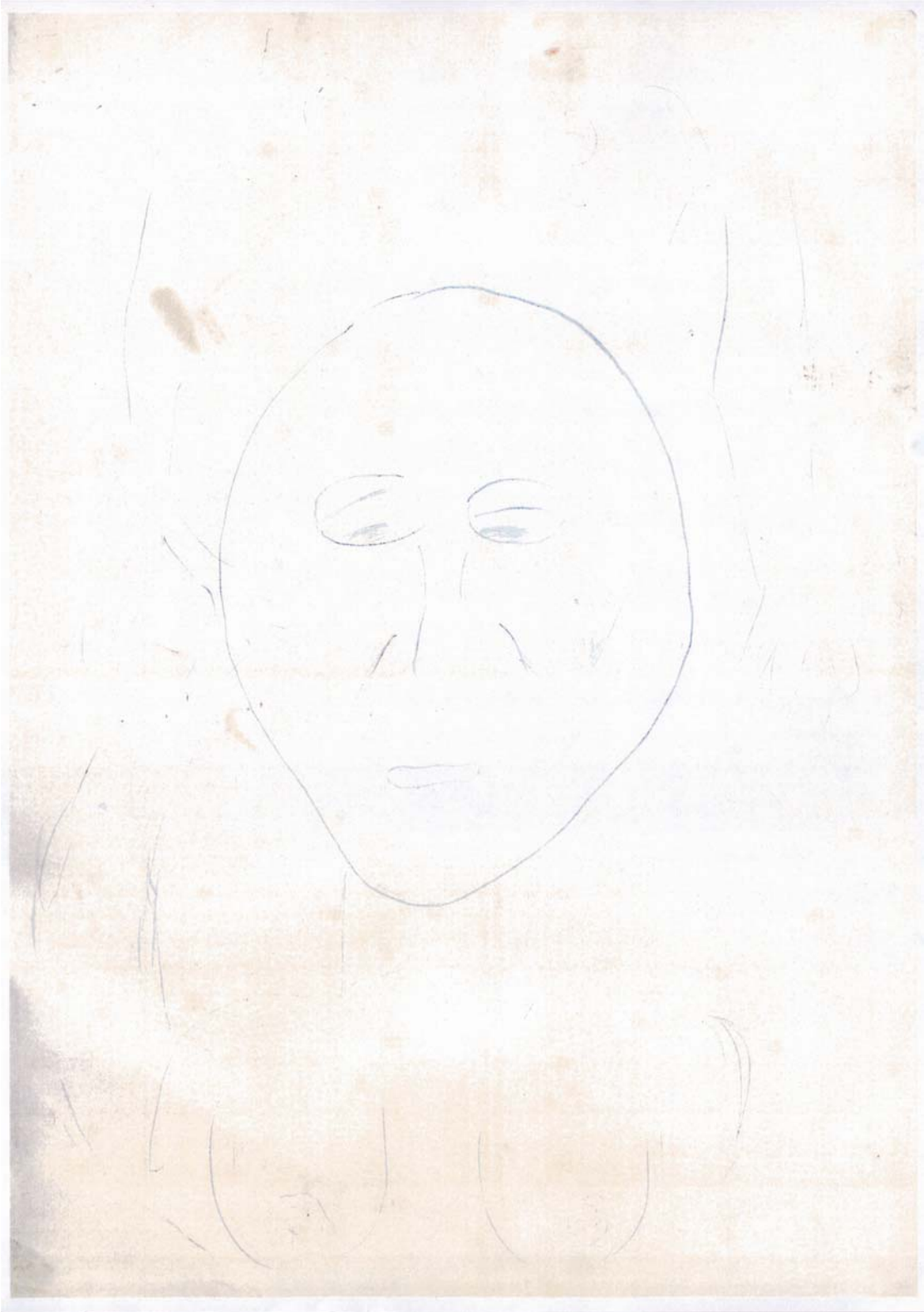
The little girl is invited into the space. Whenever I start censoring myself, she pushes me for the feelings, then the meanings. And it’s okay. Expressing my anger and hurt towards people in my life is permitted here. It does not make me a bad person. Eventually feeling vulnerable in her presence is okay; she can hold me in that space. Everybody needs to be nurtured. Small things, like buying a bottle of bubble bath, a bunch of flowers, become very significant. The “little girl” is given space in my life. There is a sense of relief.

She understands me. I am not so small after all. I don’t have to be invisible. I start writing letters to myself, to my family, to my friends. I read the letters to Corinne. It’s difficult; the words are too close to home. Proof of what an awful, mixed-up person I really am. But Corinne keeps pushing for the words. She starts to speak, always in a soft, gentle tone. Sometimes I can’t hear her.

Eventually the space becomes a tapestry of voices and meanings. She likes my sardonic sense of humour. The pictures change. I start playing with different textures, colours. The faces are given bodies. The bodies are given meanings. The meanings evolve. The bodies change. The faces change: Every face becomes one of many possible faces. Every body becomes one of many possible bodies. On paper they start interacting with one another, in words they get life, voice.

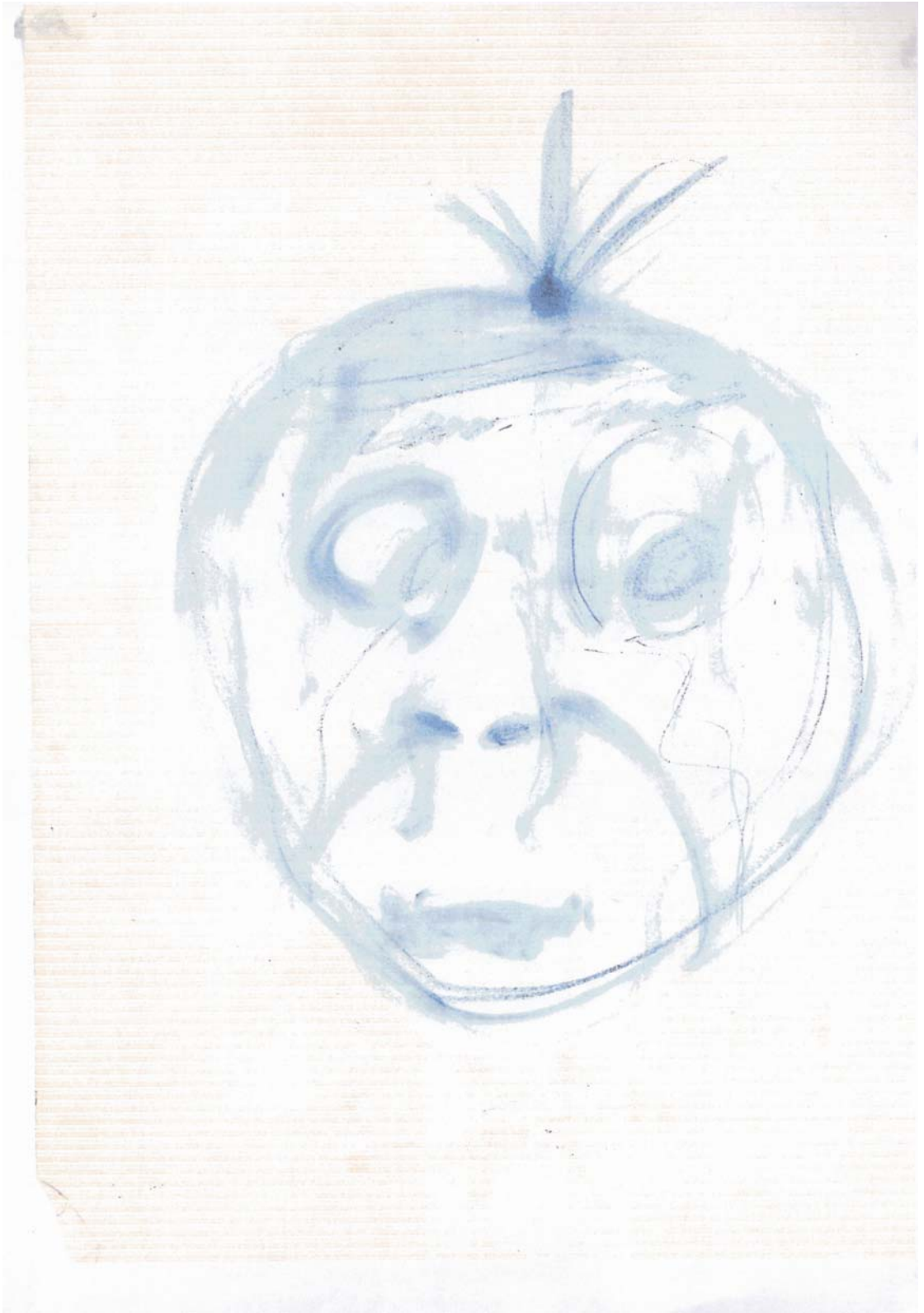
Then the metaphorical world becomes life, is taken to witnesses. Unisa, Reiki, Agape. The voices/selves are permitted in different contexts; they are permitted to be one and many selves with different people, in different places.

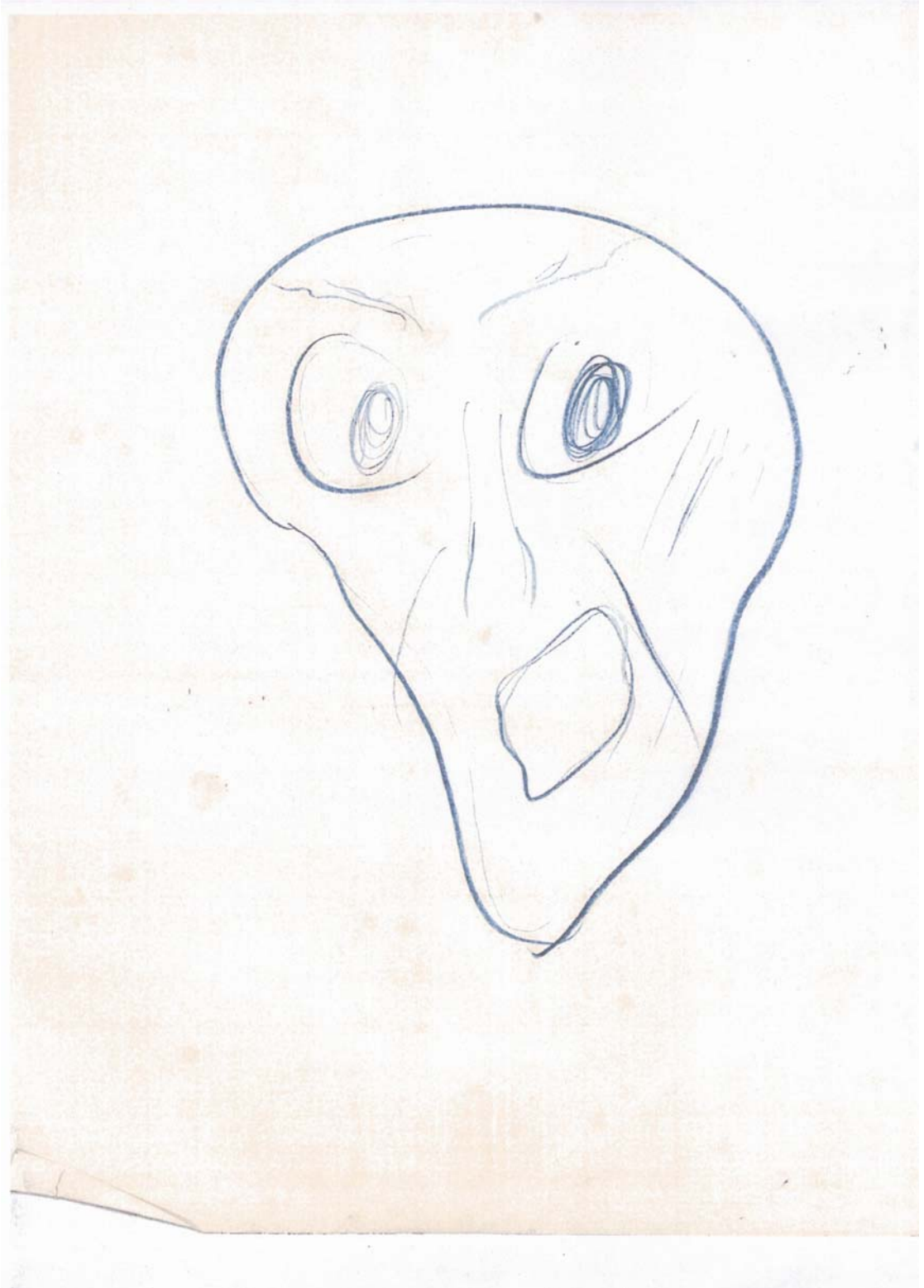
Corinne: “Come visit Agape. Come show the pictures to Stan.” I’m embarrassed. Okay, okay. Stan spreads the pictures out. Everyone can see them! It’s okay. He likes the drawings. I start talking with the people around me. I become my drawings and they become me. A gallery of selves emerges.





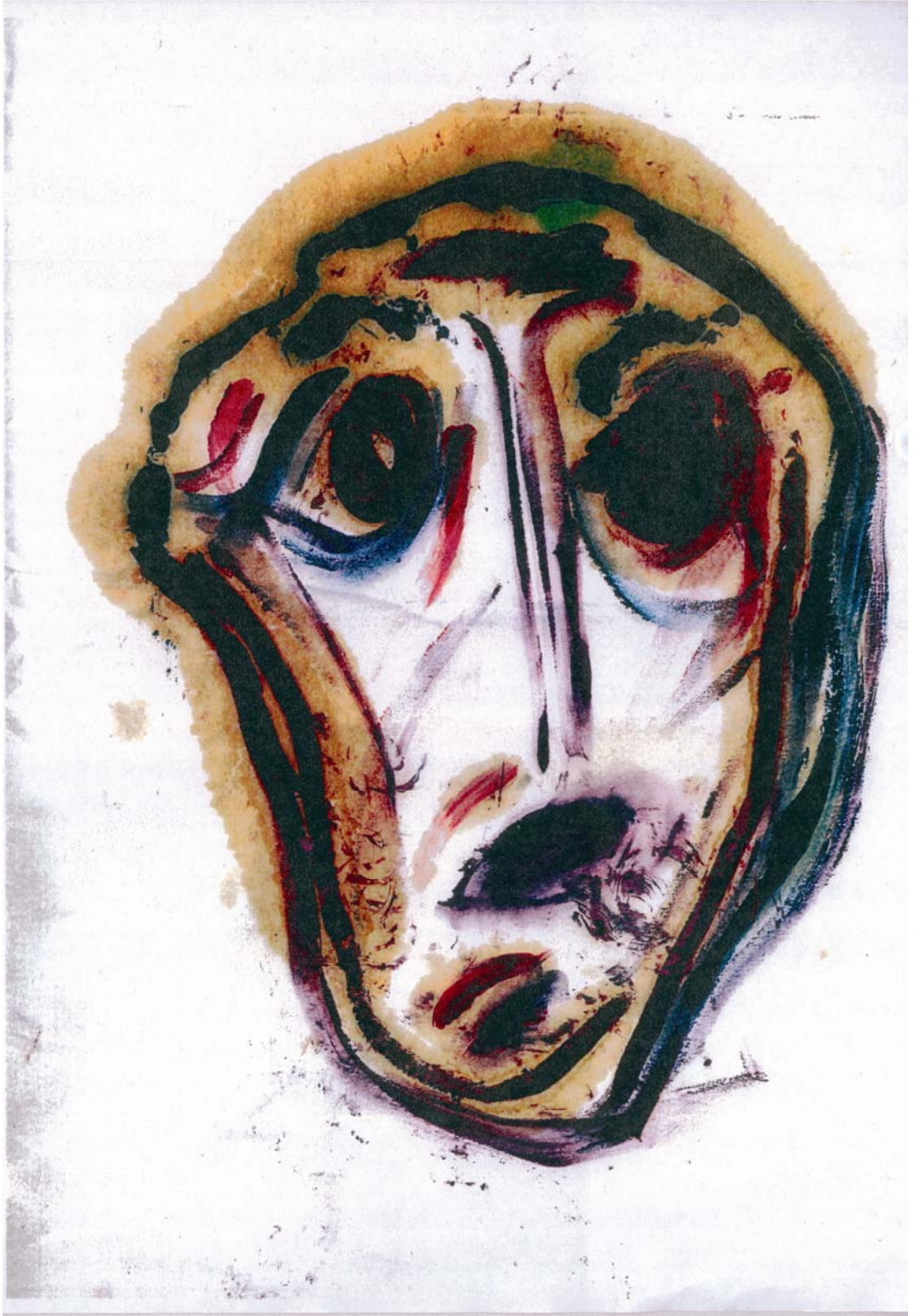






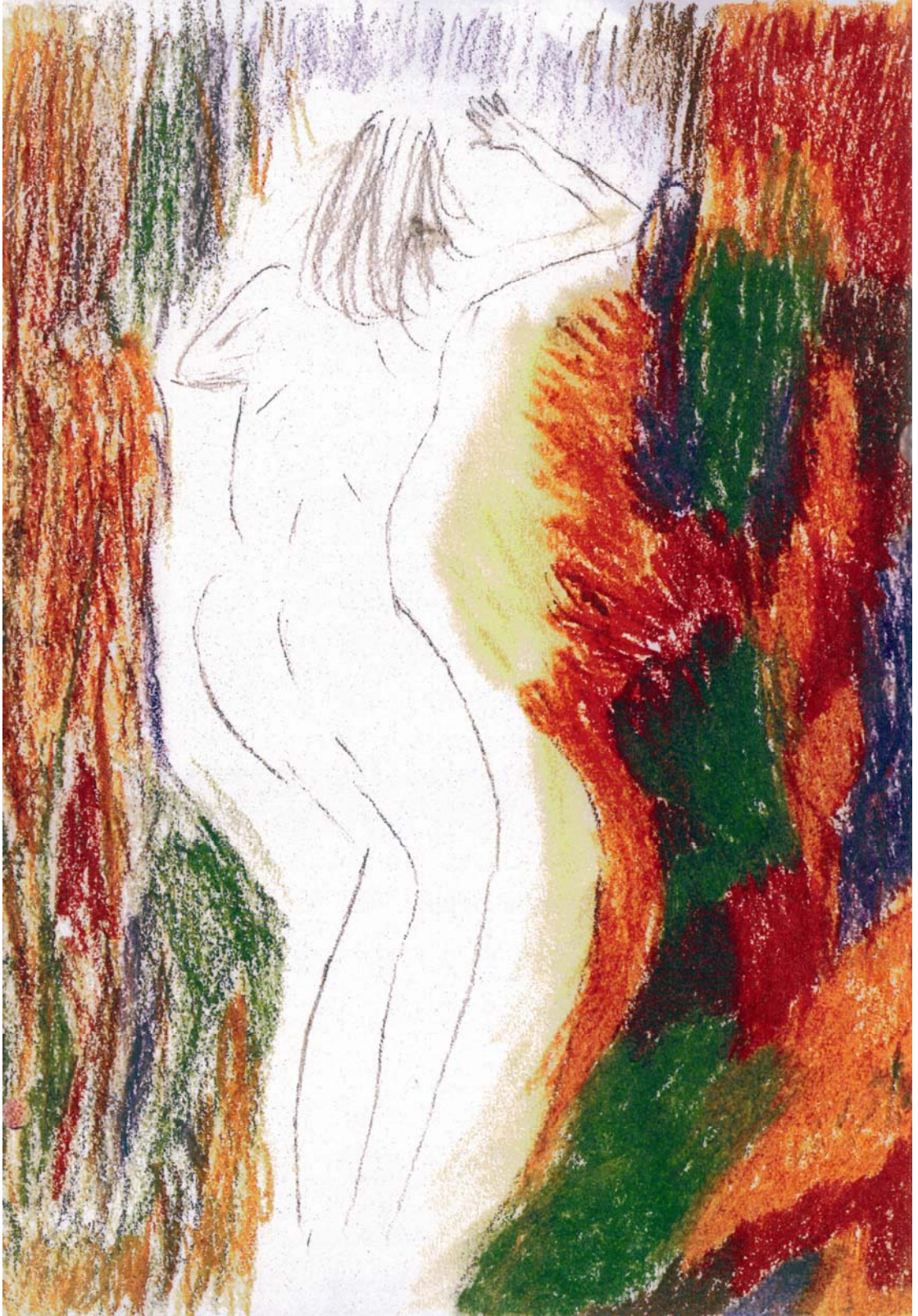




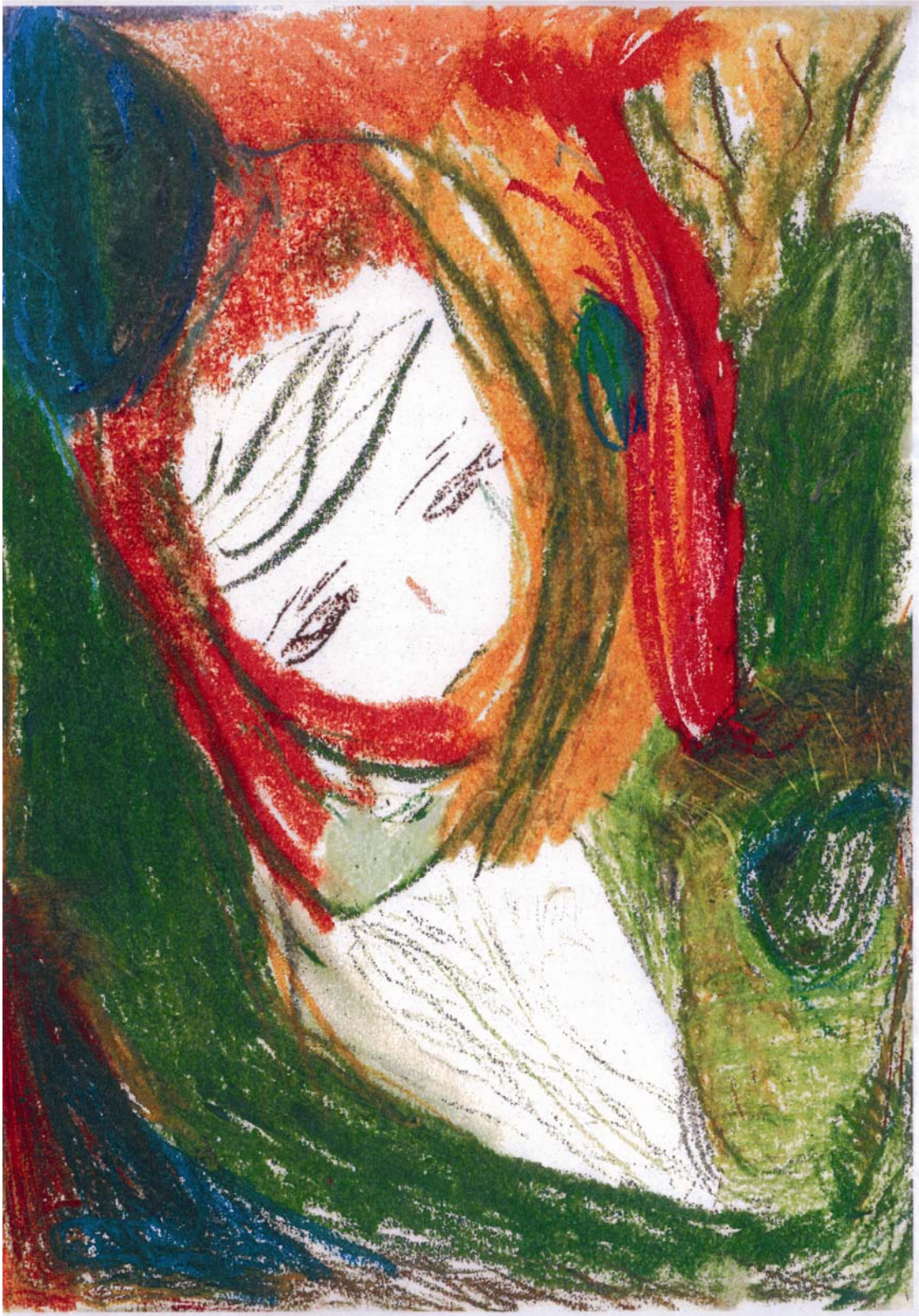


















## TRAINING CONTEXTS: MEETING UNISA

### (CHAPTER 4)

#### Selection

*Walking down Unisa's corridors for the first time was nerve-racking, yet exciting. The place had an aura of risk, of people treading on the edge of something new. Maybe I was just ready, even craving, to meet the challenges of a New World—a world of being the “expert”, learning the “skills of the trade”.*

Unisa felt right. The selection process was fascinating and felt more humane than that of the other universities I had been to, where selection felt like a culling process. I had been through the selection process at two universities. After each round of inquiry and observation, the names of those chosen for the next round were pinned on notice boards. I remember the tension among the hopeful students waiting for those dreaded lists, which seemed to have the power to make or break the lives of those hopeful of becoming “validated” therapists. And I remember the disappointment, fury and isolation of being rejected without feedback. I also remember feeling stuck in the group processes, not allowing myself to be spontaneous in contexts that felt artificial and judgmental.

Unisa was different. The students were divided into groups, which each had a turn with each of the supervisors (Ricky, Dawid, Stan and Dian). We were asked to call the supervisors by their first names, which was indicative of the interesting, interactive, even humane process of selection that was to follow. We were asked to engage in different conversations and activities, with each supervisor observing and participating.

Ricky asked us to think of something we would never say to a client. It felt like he was challenging us to step out of the box of pretence and “live a little”, to take a risk to spontaneously participate. After we had taken the risk of revealing something about ourselves, he flipped the question and asked us to think of a context where it would be appropriate to say what we thought we would never say to any client.

Ricky also used puppets, asking us to choose a character we identified with, and have a conversation with each other, using the puppets. I chose a little devil and drew comments that although I was always perceived as being very serious, I had revealed quite a sardonic sense of humour. Some of the students were uncomfortable with the puppets, whilst I felt a context had been created where I could reveal more of myself than just the nervous, serious and appropriately sensitive “good student”. A context of play was created, which seemed to bring a sense of freedom that allowed us to interact in different ways even though the competitive edge of “selling oneself” was still very apparent between the students.

Then there was Dawid’s session. He asked us to describe each other by means of a metaphor. It was new and fascinating to hear how we perceived each other. Giving feedback in an honest yet sensitive manner and receiving it in the same way made this a value process for me, whether or not I was selected. It was also fascinating to hear how each student wove a metaphor about the group, and how much that revealed about each of us. I shall never forget John, with whom I was to walk quite a path in training, calling me a “gentle giant”. Corinne, my therapist, had often told me that I was unaware of my strong presence and impact. I often ignored the comment. Yet hearing the feedback from a stranger validated the strength in me that I so easily disqualified.

During Dian’s session the group was asked to nominate two students for a role-play. Imagine the tension and dynamics such a request stimulated! Again we were asked to risk something, to take a stance. I was one of the students nominated and had a lot of fun impersonating a very “concrete” client talking to a very “clever” doctor/therapist. At the end of the session the group members were asked to decide individually who they would choose to be their therapist. Many of us, including me, remained non-committal, commenting on the aspects of each other that we did connect with. Shaïda, who was also to be part of my training group, was never one not to take a stance. I’ll never forget her for choosing me in that session. Again I was left with the sense that it was okay to just be myself and to value the process, whether or not I was selected.

Then there was Stan’s session. I liked Stan. I can’t remember what we spoke about in that session, but I do remember feeling that he took us into a very philosophical

space in a gentle, yet direct manner. It was as if he wanted to get to the core of each of us, and was not interested in any pretence or attempts to impress.

After experiencing a group session with each of the supervisors, I knew that this was the place where I wanted to do my Master's training. I did not plan to apply at any other university. There was something special about the people and the place that felt right. I remember waiting with a friend to be notified whether I was through to the final selection, praying silently that the phone would ring. We were talking about what the process had meant to us when my beeper went off.

In the final selection process we were divided into two groups and in one session asked to draw up a list of essential things we would take with us to the moon. It was fascinating to be part of this process and to observe the dynamics between us. In another session, we were again asked to use a metaphor to describe how we perceived each other. Later that afternoon we were gathered in a room and the names of those selected were read out loud. I heard my name and felt that I had been given a gift beyond the ideal of becoming a clinical psychologist. It felt as if I was embarking on an exciting journey with people who had the skills to make it the experience of a lifetime.

Ricky invited the students who had not been selected to lunch, and gave them an open invitation to speak to the supervisors and ask for feedback. I thought the invitation fitting and congruent with what I had experienced at Unisa that week.

After this process we were asked to meet our allocated supervisors. It was here, with Dian, that I met Lea again. We had met a few weeks before, during selection at a different university. We had connected immediately after enduring a group process that had seemed somewhat stifled and we had had coffee with some of the other students. We were surprised to meet each other again, this time after being selected, and by the same supervisor. It was a déjà vu experience for both of us and it remains part of a shared narrative that we were destined to be friends. I walked with Lea to her car, having the first of many conversations in the parking lot at Unisa.

*The selection took place while I was still busy completing my Honours degree and I was terrified that I was going to fail dismally, which would disqualify me*

*from training at Unisa. I went home for the holidays. In Cape Town I passed my driver's license test after spending just one week behind the wheel. My mother helped me to purchase a second-hand Toyota and worried about me risking my life and those of others on the Johannesburg highways. My father and I drove up from Cape Town to my new home in Pretoria. (Before leaving for Cape Town I had found an affordable, private room to rent in Brooklyn.) My Dad insisted, strategically, that I drive the last few kilometres through the scariest peak time traffic on the N3 highway. After that I was ready for my new, independent and exhilarating life as an MA student in Clinical Psychology. A new place, new people and a different life awaited me.*

## Meeting Stan: Dealing/Not Dealing With a Flirtatious Supervisor

Training truly began on the first day at Unisa. I think the supervisors could not wait to perturb us. Shaking up old certainties is, after all, the grist to the mill of any context of training, change or personal growth. My first day was an initiation into the years of training and self-reflective work to come.

After meeting the supervisors we (the nine prodigy therapists) were taken to a room behind a one-way mirror. The supervisors took turns to role-play clients, while each of us had a turn at being the therapist. The rest of the group remained behind the one-way mirror and commented on the process of interaction between the “clients” and “therapists”. The process was terrifying, yet exciting. I remember thinking that everything we said and did not say, did and did not do was significant, meaningful and revealed something of ourselves. I felt as if we were all being studied with magnifying glasses, while the supervisors got on with the business of training. What kept me from feeling like a bug in a box was the knowledge that the supervisors participated and subjected themselves to the same process (they were, after all, also revealing themselves to us and their colleagues) and that we (the students) were in the process of developing our own lenses.

Jo and I had to deal with Stan. He acted like a hippie. I can't now remember the content of the problem he presented. What I do remember is that he started to flirt with me in an outrageously obvious way. He winked and smiled and moved his chair closer and closer, while I blushed and moved my chair further and further away. I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, desperately trying to ignore my own discomfort. I must have moved my chair ten times. I parried every non-verbal attempt of the “client” to come closer with an attempt to create distance. Of course, to everyone behind the mirror, this was hugely amusing.

I felt embarrassed. It was as if Stan had pinpointed my Achilles heel in a few seconds and gone for the kill. He had chosen the one theme of interaction that would leave me extremely perturbed, even paralysed. I was so trapped in the moment that I could not even think of doing something different or useful.

After each “session” the group watched a video recording of the process. I hated seeing my incompetence so clearly, immediately after going through the experience. I remember Rick’s comment: “This is going to be a very difficult year for you.” This stayed with me for months, feeding into my insecurity. The thought, “He thinks it was a mistake to select you”, went through my head countless times in the weeks that followed.

But the difference between content and process was clear for ever after, as well as the importance of acquiring a repertoire of behaviour to give the therapist manoeuvrability! The importance of self-reflection and the idea that a therapist can only change him or herself will always be associated, for me, with this experience.

Fortunately the supervisors were skilled at maintaining a balance between perturbing and holding. They debriefed us by creating a space where we could voice and reflect on the impact of an exercise. Apart from the selection process, this was the first time that I was part of a context of feedback within such a group. It was new, difficult yet exhilarating. And it was the beginning of a journey with themes of intimacy and negotiating space in relationships, self-reflexivity and feedback as news of difference.

## Meeting the Group

The group (the nine “first-year” MA students) met weekly for supervision with Stan. We spoke about our experiences in training and with each other. Stan’s philosophy was that in sharing and staying in our struggle (i.e. not trying to “fix” it immediately) one became a healer and part of a humane community whose members do not so readily objectify one another.

It was a difficult context for me. I felt extremely nervous, not wanting to speak for fear that I would be labelled stupid. I hardly spoke at first. It seemed like a very intimate, very threatening space. I was supposed to make a valid contribution, yet every time I opened my mouth what I said sounded like emotional trivia in my ears. I felt trapped between two voices: “I need to perform and therefore have to speak” and “What I say does not have any value and just makes me feel more vulnerable.”

The group became a valuable space in the sense that we were not only given permission, but were asked, to bring the issues and themes we felt were emerging. I had difficulty trusting the group, especially in the beginning. In one of my journal entries in May 1998, I wrote: “I spoke in group today! Stan spoke about us putting him on a pedestal, wanting to make sense of the silence in the group. He asked me to change places/chairs with him. I wondered what he was up to. Did he want to see my reaction? I noticed that I was my ‘pleasing’ self and moved immediately. Determined not to remain stuck in this role (the ‘pleaser’), I told the group that I was not ready to speak about my struggles, because I did not trust them to care yet. Stan noted the agreement from others and asked what we could do to build that trust.”

It was a big deal for me to speak so freely. It felt like I was challenging the group and myself in that I was tired of labelling myself as a “pleaser”. Yet challenging others was way beyond my comfort zone.

The group remained somewhat stifled throughout our training. I think the purpose of the group was to facilitate a supportive community for each other, as well as provide a space where feedback could promote each other’s growth. Yet there was

always an element of “having to perform”, which created a paradox. Having to perform whilst opening yourself up for feedback on issues with which you struggled could create an almost abusive context of judgement. On top of that we were a very competitive group. Yet when we did risk speaking about difficult therapies and issues (including issues with one another), the context was a valuable resource for news of difference as well as support.

Lea and I often pitched up at Unisa wearing the same colours. This was pure chance, which we thought was just a sign of how connected we were. We were good friends, although we made a point of not forming a clique. Jack asked us once if we arranged to dress similarly each day. I thought it a ridiculous notion, not understanding what he was getting at. Once (in group), Jack accused me of having formed an exclusive “coalition” with Lea. He went off at a tangent, which frightened and infuriated me. He seemed to be acting like a jealous child throwing a tantrum to get attention. Lea and I were both strong students. It felt as if Jack was constantly in competition with us, and of course we were up for the challenge. Distance and distrust seemed to create an ever-widening gap between us. I still feel, even now, that I lost out on an opportunity to know Jack in a different way. Yet he would probably push the same buttons in me today. Maybe I would have more maturity and compassion to explore his meanings now than I had then.

I learnt in the group that fending for myself or differing from others did not necessarily mean that I was disqualifying others, even if they chose to frame it so. I also learnt that I did make an impact, which could be interpreted as threatening if you were constantly competing with everyone around you. I still feel myself getting angry that a competitive spirit and the disqualification that inevitably accompanied it pervaded my experiences in the group.



Yet the group supervision also provided a context of connection and the freedom to use different modalities, like song, dance and even costume, to reflect on and express our changing sense of selves as therapists.

Stan's mantra still rings in my ears: "Stay with the struggle, people." Yet these days I am less keen to take those words too seriously.

## Meeting Eersterust

My connection with this special place had already started during selection, when Dian asked me to role-play a very concrete, coloured woman who sought help because her husband drank too much. Coming from Cape Town I was familiar with the kind of character Dian wanted me to portray. Little did I know that I would soon be in the shoes of the therapist in such a setting, where this kind of behaviour is desperate and not funny!

Eersterust is a relatively small coloured community on the outskirts of Pretoria. Dian's supervision group has been working with the Department of Child Welfare in this community for years, on the assumption that this space would create a context of learning, especially in working with a diverse array of colleagues, people and issues.

I used to drive to "Masada" (the name of the building rented by the Department of Child Welfare) every Wednesday morning. The street that leads to this building was dirty. Early in the morning it was fairly quiet. The houses were fenced, silent and unkempt. Here and there weeds flourished in dusty gardens. Sometimes someone was yelling at a scrawny dog that looked as though it was never fed. Later in the day, people would hang around listlessly. Sometimes someone would turn on a radio, so loudly that the whole street could hear the music.

Once a month we (Dian and her students) met "officially" with the social workers to discuss particularly poignant "cases". The social workers were kind, warm women, somewhat hardened and burnt out by the suffering they had to deal with on a daily basis. Masada seemed, often, to be the only source of support in a very needy community. Children were often removed from abusive homes. Food parcels were handed out to families living well under the bread line until the government discontinued the project due to limited funds. During the meetings I frequently heard how the social workers gave money, from their own meagre salaries, to enable desperate mothers to feed their children.

I felt great frustration, hearing and seeing how repetitive patterns played out again and again: young girls getting pregnant again and again, mothers returning for help after having been drinking and beaten again and again; mothers requesting that their children be sent away again and again.. I was appalled at how the system seemed to do no more than keep the same redundant patterns in place.

Being so critical of what I saw playing out, I tended during the initial meetings to remain quiet. As “systemic therapists” we were expected to bring news of difference. I was expected to comment. Yet I was afraid of opening my mouth and disqualifying the strenuous efforts of people who really wanted to make a difference. I was also afraid of not “performing” to the satisfaction of my supervisor.

I read Anderson and Goolishian (1992) and reminded myself of the “not-knowing stance”. It is easy and very ineffective to sit on the sidelines and criticise a system, conveying preconceived ideas about the problems and about what should change. I reminded myself that as a therapist my expertise should be in participating and facilitating a conversation in which we could explore the meanings of the system—the system including the social workers and the community, as well as the “therapists”. I needed to enter the system in a different way.

Every Wednesday as I left Eersterust, I saw children (even two and three-year-olds) wandering the streets without supervision. Children who were supposed to be in school were playing with the mud in the graveyard next to Masada. I would often see young men hanging around suspiciously. I became tense every time I got into my car, wondering what I would do if someone attacked me. But I was becoming curious about this place that seemed so different from the gang-less, “safe” environment I grew up in.

During a discussion about our purpose in Eersterust during supervision, Lea and I decided to start a playgroup for three to six-year-old children. This would give us the chance to do primary prevention work, as well as explore the narratives of the community and what it meant to be a child in Eersterust. It was a way of joining the community in a different way.

The social workers were excited about the idea. One of them suggested that we start by walking down the road and gathering the children. She walked with us and introduced us to one or two of the mothers while they were busy doing their washing. The children greeted us with friendly smiles and spontaneously joined in the excitement as we took them to the hall in Masada. I was astounded that most of the mothers did not even know that their children were being taken to Masada, and I wondered what had happened to their sense of responsibility for their children.

Walking down the street and gathering the children became a weekly ritual. At first they were rowdy and boisterous, and seemingly uncontrollable. They swore at each other and even kicked and slapped one another for the fun of it. They were dirty and seemed to have no sense of appropriate boundaries, often grabbing the chance to go through our bags and even drinking from the bottled water we kept in our bags.

Lea and I were called “teachers” and I soon acted like one as well. Teaching the kids basic skills (i.e. teaching them to wash their hands after using the WC, to say please and thank you and to use tissue paper to wipe a runny nose) came with the territory and could be regarded as facilitating the acquisition of primary social skills congruent with primary prevention. However, in trying to create a useful context, when I told the kids to behave my voice was often punitive, which appalled me and served only to create an even more disruptive environment.

When Lea and I tried to structure the context by planning the morning (e.g. by taking books with the purpose of reading them a story), chaos erupted. Some children sat quietly and listened, but others ran around, usually fighting with one another. Forcing a programme of activities on the children was not our idea of a useful way of exploring what it meant to be a child in Eersterust. We were also worried about what we were bringing to the context that prompted such behaviour. Surely the children’s behaviour was recursively connected to what we were doing? The language of cybernetics began to inform our thinking. The theory covered at Unisa came to life in an especially visible way in the context of the playgroup. I remember reading Keeney (1983) and thinking, “Yes! This theory gives words to what has been my frustration and what I have sensed and felt in my gut all along!”

So Lea and I decided to use what the children brought. If someone began to sing, we asked him or her to teach us the song. If they began to run around while we were drawing with them, we created a game that involved running. The playgroup was an excellent exercise in “reading the context” and co-creating difference in a practical way. We began to comment and reflect on the process of what was happening in the playgroup, and adjusting our behaviour in line with that.

The concept of re-framing became a basic tool in this process. One morning one of the children kicked Lea. The other kids stared at him in shock. Instead of making the usual comment, implying the child was violent and therefore “bad”, Lea responded with: “Wow, you seem to have the potential to be a Karate expert! Come on kick me, I want to see this. Now, the trick is in showing me and not kicking me for real.” The whole group joined in kicking exercises, which turned into a ritual of morning exercises.

We started taking music to the playgroup to add to the morning exercises. The children loved this. They seemed to identify with some of the songs immediately. It soon became apparent that the children were gifted performers. They danced spontaneously to the rhythm of the music. It was strange for me to use this activity myself and join in. I was not used to dancing. Yet I think there was a freedom in experimenting with my body in such a different way. The dancing became a language in its own right. I remember being shocked at the sexually provocative movements some of the children made as they danced. This was qualitative information that gave us insight into the environment the kids grew up in.

In using the arts (dancing, singing, drawing and story-telling) we co-created a context in which the children could express their fears and joys. More than that, it created a context where I could let go of the “all-serious therapist” and allow the playful, irreverent therapist in me to emerge. Dian frequently commented that she would like to see my more playful side in therapy. I believe that spontaneously experimenting with this in the playgroup, when I was not feeling that I was being observed and evaluated, eventually made it possible for me to bring difference to my therapeutic stance in the clinic as well. Working with the kids and reflecting on the process with Lea also gave

me more confidence to make suggestions or comments at the monthly meetings with the social workers.

One day we were told that the mother of one of the playgroup members had been shot and killed the previous night. This was shocking, very disturbing news. When we asked the children about it they spontaneously started acting out the shooting. We began to use role-play to explore the children's reactions to such events and to give them a safe way of expressing their feelings. The kids began acting out drunken parents yelling at each other and smoking *dagga*.

Lea and I decided to plan a concert for the parents, using role-plays such as this as well as the kids' drawings as a way of connecting with the parents and providing feedback from the kids to them about their experiences in Eersterust. The children were very excited at the prospect of a concert. We began to practise a song and dance for the event and the kids made posters to advertise the concert, which was to be held in the hall that also served as a Church on Sundays. We tried to get hold of the children's parents and made appointments with them to talk about what we were doing. But the parents (the mothers or grandmothers, as the fathers were usually long gone) rarely kept their appointments with us.

By this time Lea and I were also very perturbed by the theme of responsibility. Why were the children left to their own devices in such a seemingly dangerous community? We often heard how the kids in Eersterust were being abused. A young girl was actually raped one night in the graveyard right next to Masada. Why did the parents not protect the children? We were also aware of how judgmental the questions we were asking each other seemed. We wanted to understand in what ways the parents *did* take responsibility for their children. We wondered, too, about how we, as strangers, perturbed the community. We thought that if we made home visits we would have the opportunity to explore these questions. But time and again the parents failed to keep their appointments.

One day Brian's mother invited us into her home. During our visit we asked her about her experience of Eersterust. We told her that most of the parents seemed to avoid

us and asked her why that was. She told us that we were associated with Child Welfare. If someone from Child Welfare visited your home in Eersterust, rumours would start as people would assume that there was a problem in that house.

Brian's mother told us about what she had had to endure as a child in Eersterust. She was well acquainted with the presence of drugs, abuse, gangs and violence in Eersterust. She feared for Brian but had nowhere else to go. In associating with us, she hoped that we could send Brian away some day, to a place that would be better for him. I was very saddened by this conversation, by the desperation of a mother who wanted to save her child from what she called "bad influences." I realised then that in requesting the authorities to remove their children, some mothers were trying to give them a better future. I realised that such requests were not always about wanting to get rid of an apparently uncontrollable child; that in fact they were a desperate way of taking responsibility.

After meeting Brian's mother, Lea and I saw that we needed to start changing the image of what Child Welfare and we, as therapists, had to offer. The concert was a small beginning in this regard. We took photos of the children, which we displayed during the concert. To our surprise most of the mothers and grandmothers came to the concert. They seemed to enjoy it thoroughly. The audience applauded the children, who glowed with the acknowledgment.

I like to think that we co-created a context where the children and the parents experienced a different sense of self and self-worth. The audience and the kids beamed with pride. Mothers and grandmothers came up to Lea and me, telling us how they had showed the members of their church the drawings and photographs we had put up in the hall.

The children also came and hugged Lea and me. One of the mothers remarked to Lea that she knew the children loved us very much, because they hugged us. Evidently many of the kids did not just hug their parents spontaneously. We used this feedback in the remaining the group sessions, asking the kids to take some of their pictures home to show their parents and encouraging them to acknowledge their parents, believing that

such a change in behaviour would also encourage the parents to acknowledge their children more. Of course we continued to explore the reactions of the parents with the kids.

Many of the children in Eersterust were treated like “no-good” burdens by their parents. We often heard parents yelling at their kids and saw how harshly they were treated. Knowing more about the hardships the parents had to endure made it easier to understand this behaviour. But I hope that, by co-creating a space where a different kind of interaction was apparent, other possibilities of behaviour became possible to the parents. More than that, I hope that Lea and I co-created a context with the kids in the playgroup where they felt less marginalised by what seemed to be the reality or narrative in the community, that they were worthless burdens.

What became apparent during the two years Lea and I spent with the group was the new respect with which they treated each other. After a few months in the playgroup sessions, the kids rarely swore at or hit each other. At the beginning, the group had formed a kind of gang that excluded new members. We did not want to perpetuate a theme of gangsterism and encouraged the kids to be more tolerant of each other. We often worked with the theme of sharing and what that meant in that context (e.g. sharing sweets, giving each other a chance to choose different songs or giving each other a chance to take the limelight). After a few months they were more inclusive and became open to inviting new children into the group.

The social workers usually planned activities for the kids on Friday afternoons. They commented that the kids who attended our playgroup were behaving in a strikingly different, more respectful way, towards them. I hope this was because Lea and I created a context where the kids could experience different realities in action.

In talking about our experiences in the playgroup, Lea and I realised that it had given us the opportunity to create a non-judgmental context for all the parties involved. Thinking back, it gave me the opportunity and freedom to be creative and put the theory into practice, without the fear that I was being evaluated every step of the way. It also helped me to be less judgmental and more curious about the community and the welfare



system. The acceptance and spontaneous playfulness of the kids became a treasured experience during my training. Working with Lea and discussing the playgroup in various supervision meetings also gave me a sense of the possibilities of a participant–observer, collaborative stance. Rather than closing doors, such a stance seems to open new possibilities and contexts for discussions in which new meanings can evolve.

## Meeting Supervision

Getting either close to or distant in my relationship with my supervisor (Dian) was never easy. Sometimes neither felt possible. She was great at keeping an equi-distant stance, skilful at perturbing the guts out of you but at the same time willing and able to create holding contexts. Dian was the best supervisor I could have asked for: the kindest and the harshest.

As I write this, I feel a strange loyalty to this woman, whom people perceived to be the “mother” of the department. This awareness is akin to the feeling of not wanting to betray my mother, which is always with me when I write about her.

I never perceived Dian as a mother in the protective sense of the word. In the sense of creating a context for birth and staying with the intensity that comes with that, though, for sure I saw her as a mother.

Dian was direct in her feedback and expected a lot from her students. As soon as we grew too “theoretical” in our thinking about therapies, she would ask questions that required self-referential pondering and answers that described the processes in our work, which always opened up new ways of thinking about how we related to clients. This gave way to systemic, both/and descriptions that were based on the assumption that the observer is always part of the observed. Personal reflections always had to be connected with theory and vice versa.

Supervision was not a reassuring context. It was informed by an ethic of participation and exploration. We continually identified individual growing edges of which we needed to be aware and on which we gave one another feedback. Unisa’s training was a two-year programme. The supervision group therefore included first and second-year students, who worked together as a team, behind a one-way mirror, in our clinic on Thursday afternoons. The team was expected to comment on and contribute to each other’s therapies. Being behind the mirror did not mean it was time to relax. We participated actively in observing and generating ideas about what we saw happening in the therapies. Our behaviour was informed by an ethic of respect for the clients as well

as for the differences between us. When we were perturbed or did not agree with one another, we did not disqualify each other or the clients but tried to give words to how our reactions fitted with our personal and theoretical assumptions. These themes would then be explored further in supervision.

There was a freedom in allowing different ideas and different ways of working that made for a very rich training context. Dian never prescribed one exclusive way of working to us. She allowed us to develop our own stances and ways of working while keeping us accountable by always asking us to explore our theoretical and personal assumptions. This created a context of variety in our clinic.

I remember Leon moving chairs around in therapy and working very structurally, in the way described by Minuchin (1974), then working very strategically in his next therapy, while quoting Haley (1976) behind the mirror. In the next room Corné would probably be asking the circular questions described by the Milan team (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978) or externalising a symptom in the way described by White (1995). I remember Lea changing the context in therapy by sitting on the floor with a child, or sculpting families with ropes, or writing letters to her clients, always finding new ways to bring news of difference. And I remember my initial two-hour therapies, creating contexts of voice and exploring the “not-yet-said” with clients, along the lines described by Weingarten (2000), Anderson and Goolishian (1992).

The use of the team was also rich in difference. Sometimes we would send messages into the therapy room, informed by the practice of the Milan team. Sometimes we would change places with the client and let them hear our reflections, congruent with Andersen’s ideas about reflecting teams (1987, 1991). And sometimes we would follow White (1995) and be witnesses in the therapy room, trying to punctuate *unique outcomes*.

Our work was always informed by the co-creation of systemic hypotheses, sometimes a range of them, that accounted for all the elements in the problem and how they were linked. These ideas about the patterns of relating between all the members of the significant system, that is, everybody in language about the problem, including the

therapist (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988), were formulated with the intention of being useful in bringing new information into the system in order to enable the system to punctuate problems in different ways and facilitate contexts of change.

*Allowing, exposing and exploring the differences between us sometimes elicited intense feelings, especially when we included the referring person (mostly social workers with a “helping stance” who needed reports for the courts) in our therapies and our reflexive conversations. Yet we were not prone to engaging in polarised debates. Dian had the ability to create a context of neutrality in which, rather than choosing sides, all the facets of the differences between us could be explored, and this meant that expressing my ideas could become less dependent on the support and acceptance of others. This freed me to bring and explore different sides of myself in supervision.*

One day, while we were discussing my stuckness with a client and my difficulty in giving words to my experience with him, Dian picked up on the critical, sometimes disqualifying voice I used in describing my work. She called this voice the Hatchet Woman. In the following months we explored how this voice kept me from trusting and using myself in different ways in therapy. Dian encouraged me to listen to this critical voice, for it obviously also served a purpose that allowed me to progress and succeed. Yet I needed to question this voice so that I could also make space for the other voices and ways of being that the Hatchet Woman silenced.

This both/and stance of permitting the Hatchet Woman and exploring other voices allowed me to experiment with different ways of being in therapy and supervision. It became easier to be more spontaneous in therapy, to allow a more playful side to emerge rather than being only the ever-serious and responsible An-Maree. I started to vary my approach, even at times becoming strategic. The constantly probing questions and feedback from the group made it possible to access and use myself much more creatively in therapy.

This was, of course, a reciprocal process. I also saw my colleagues come forth, relate and work in a variety of ways during the training. I was also part of creating different contexts in training, which enabled their different “selves” to emerge.

The voice of the Hatchet Woman still keeps me accountable in therapy, and I still live by Dian's voice challenging me to describe personal and theoretical assumptions that inform my work. Yet what stays with me most, of the two years of working in that supervision team, are the memories of being part of a context that encouraged the emergence of more and different ways of relating between people. I still feel privileged to have had these people and experiences in my life and I still rejoice in the sense of freedom it brings to my life and my work.

I was very nervous and quiet during the initial clinics or sessions behind the mirror. I paid attention to what was happening in the therapy room, yet felt unable to make useful comments. I think this must have frustrated Dian and the group. Dian was patient, yet made it clear that she expected each of us to contribute and share our ideas. The theory we covered in the workshops made it easier and as soon as I risked making suggestions and took part in the discussions I felt a sense of relief. I realised that the team was not going to disqualify me as the fool I so easily felt myself to be. There were no fixed answers in the world of therapy and every viewpoint made the context richer. This gave us a sense of our group as cohesive, working together. I remember that we were covering Minuchin's work (1974) in the workshops during this time. What struck me was the idea that the therapist's use of herself was the most powerful tool in the process of therapy. It soon became apparent in my first year of doing therapy in the clinic that my natural inclination is to join with clients by identifying with their areas of pain, difficulty and stress and acknowledging these. I often became a source of nurturance and support for my clients.

The context I co-created with my clients in therapy was intense, serious and always very respectful. At times it was difficult to disengage from the client and retain therapeutic manoeuvrability. It was very helpful to be able to leave the therapy room and reflect on the process playing out in therapy with the team behind the mirror.

Therapy became a context of self-discovery. The idea that we should not imitate the "experts" discussed in the theory workshops but should rather use our own resources was a comfort and a challenge. I saw that I could not always rely on my natural way of joining with a client. Different clients, and different moments in therapy, called for

different ways of interacting. Observing the styles of other members of the team was useful and so were the different techniques we covered in the theory workshops. It was, however, difficult to develop and trust my own style with different clients.

It was easier to risk experimenting with different ways of being in therapy in my work with the children and people in Eersterust. It was there that I learnt to trust my instincts and spontaneity. Having a place in which to explore my style without the presence of my supervisor was valuable. We did, of course, still work with the team as well as do co-therapy in Eersterust, which generated responsibility and accountability, but there was a freedom in not feeling that my supervisor was evaluating me. This is part of the paradox of training: You are encouraged to be creative and develop your own resources and style, yet in this process you are also continuously evaluated, not in terms of being given continuous exams, but in terms of your development. This includes confronting and exploring difficult and personal themes and assumptions that play a role in therapy. This was stimulating, but it was also at times challenging and difficult.

Working with different clients in different contexts was most valuable in developing a repertoire of joining and relating with different systems. It was freeing to be able to be boisterous and playful at times in therapy, playing the devil's advocate at times and being more proper or silent when required.

The camaraderie in the supervision group, especially during my second year, was wonderful. We often stood in the parking lot after the clinic and discussed the afternoon's therapies. I often think of how important these conversations were in my training. The group members became good friends. We were very supportive of each other in difficult times, often debriefing each other after particularly intense therapies.

These informal visits in the parking lot frequently sparked new ideas that were useful in therapy. We also often challenged each other and commenting on the process between us became a source of great fun. We were clever in commenting on the both/and of everything that was said, which often had us in knots of laughter.

The team often told a dirty joke just to make me blush. I had been shy and introverted for most of my life. The group created a social context in which I could "let

go” and also played a part in my growing willingness to risk different ways of relating. I went to a club for the first time, dancing my heart out to the rhythm of “Mambo Number 5”. We went to Umshlanga for a weekend to give ourselves some space in which to work on our self-evaluations for the exams. The group became an important source of feedback. We were eager to learn and we were having a lot of fun in the process.

I think these experiences with the group also enabled me to choose to persevere and face the challenges of seeing Steven in therapy.

## Meeting Steven

The stories we tell ourselves, particularly the silent or barely audible ones, are very powerful. They become invisible enclosures (Griffin, as cited in Weingarten, 1998, p. 9).

In facing your clients, you *often have to face a sculpt of your own worst fears* (Stan, personal communication, 1999).

I chose to be Steven's therapist.

During my first year at Unisa I worked with women and families presenting various problems. I became more confident in using myself in therapy, finding my own way to connect with clients and to perturb the system from within such connections. I enjoyed conceptualising problems or "symptoms" in terms of the interactional patterns within a system. Yet my natural inclination was towards a "not-knowing stance" in therapy. I did not like the idea of being the expert who has insight into the patterns within systems that the client does not have access to. The ideas of the Social Constructionist therapists resonated with me and so did the narrative metaphor, more so than the cybernetic metaphor, in my thinking about my work. As such my interactions with my clients were tentative, marked by a respectful stance, whilst gently exploring and creating new meanings with them. Yet, in time, I became freer in also using the playful, sometimes strategic self in therapy in a way that was not disrespectful or incongruent with who I am.

I noticed that I connected well with women and found it easier to use myself in more flexible ways with them.

Dian always encouraged us (the team) to be aware of our growing edges. At the beginning of my second year at Unisa I had a gnawing sense that I needed to work with men. The previous year, Leon had done therapy with a family in which the father had molested his daughter. I had had the chance to be a participant-observer of the process of therapy behind the one-way mirror. My initial dislike of and anger towards the father



in this system had been a red light for me: one that illuminated a growing edge. Furthermore, my encounter with Stan, playing the flirtatious client with me at the beginning of my training, still perturbed me. It felt as if I had to put myself in a place where I could explore my discomfort in relation to men who pushed my buttons, that I had to face this before I left Unisa.

One day Dian (my supervisor) told us about a client who had been referred by a social worker. The presenting problem was abuse. Steven had a history of abuse and had molested his 15-year-old daughter a few months earlier. I volunteered to be the therapist.

I met Steven in the waiting room the following week. His first words to me were: “I hope the injection needles in there are not too thick!” There was an obvious sexual undertone to this comment that scared and disgusted me. The way he delivered the line put me on my guard. Steven came across as an invasive, crude charmer.

I remember feeling extremely perturbed during and after the first session. Steven came across as glib, and ambiguous about committing to the therapeutic process. During the first session he maintained that he did not really have a problem and that he had “no urgent need for help”. He was now a converted Christian and his problem was something of the past.

*Steven:* I must say, when this happened, when I smoked dagga, rocks and cigarettes and drank alcohol. When little Karen (his daughter) was taken away from me and my family was ripped apart, I had choices. I could have carried on or I could have changed myself. But I gave my life to the Lord. I left everything—even the cigarettes. My sexual problem ... Jesus controls it. I can't do it on my own.

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*Steven:* You see the ... my sexual problem ... it is the other me. I am the normal person. I love my children. It is not my fault that I have a problem. It is not Steven's fault. It is the other guy's fault, the other Steven. I am two people. I think I am a very good person. I am a soft person. I like to help people. I am an

open person. I have many friends. Many people like me, those who do not know of this story. Then I have the other guy ... the other side.

*An-Mareé:* What is the other side?

*Steven:* The bad side. The manipulating side. The alcohol, women, prostitutes.

\*\*\*

In meeting Steven I felt like I was meeting my Dad, and everything that, according to my mother, he should not have been. The way Steven used alcohol as an excuse for his behaviour, the way he spoke about religion, reminded me so much of my father that I felt paralysed in his presence. I could not focus at all in therapy with him. I did not feel strong enough to deal with him. I kept thinking that he was using religion to pretend that he was something that he was not; using it as a mask for everything he was not supposed to be or do. I felt like a little girl with no voice, with no means to express what I thought and felt. I wanted to blame and punish him, yet as his therapist I was very aware of how dangerous my anger towards him could be.

Steven's ambivalence about therapy also made me extremely uncomfortable, especially given my own ambivalence in relating to men. I felt self-conscious and had an overpowering desire to flee. That was not possible, of course. I had a responsibility to see this therapy through. I was committed to my training and to the responsibilities it involved.

I also had a very strong assumption that Steven had to "get real" and commit to therapy. I thought, by disqualifying therapy, and blaming drugs, alcohol and the "other, bad Steven", he was trying to manoeuvre himself out of taking responsibility for the effects of his behaviour. The team agreed with my impressions of Steven. They also commented that they thought I was angry with him, which scared me because I tried hard not to come across as angry in the therapy.

Yet I believed that Steven had to realise, acknowledge and take responsibility for the consequences of his behaviour. In short I was not going to let him get away with shifting his responsibility on to "external factors" like alcohol and drugs, while his

daughter was suffering the consequences. However, this stance in itself became a problem in therapy. I felt obliged to challenge the realities he presented, finding myself arguing more and more vehemently for him to “get real” and take responsibility. In this process I disqualified him many times, even with small, non-verbal gestures and, predictably, I felt myself having to deal with an increasingly “resistant” client. (Now I realise that resistance in a client says more about the therapist’s inability to be flexible, to connect with the client and to create and sustain a meaningful dialogue with him or her, than it says about the client’s inherent nature.) I felt extremely stuck in therapy and became increasingly scared to open my mouth as I realised how vehemently I felt about his behaviour. My need to punish Steven and my stuckness in that are evident in the following excerpt.

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*An-Maréé:* What do you want to happen to you?

*Steven:* I don’t know whether you cure me.

*An-Maréé:* So. Do you see yourself as being sick?

*Steven:* Yes.

*An-Maréé:* Do you view this as something out of your control?

*Steven:* It was, yes.

Therapy with Steven became, for me, increasingly difficult and perturbing. In addition to these difficulties with him, during this time an acquaintance of mine committed suicide. I found her death devastating. She jumped from a cliff in Graskop: a beautiful place that had become my sanctuary and escape during training. I cried continuously for weeks after her death, knowing that I was mourning more than the death of a very special person. I mourned her loneliness and sense of entrapment, and her failure to see her way open to the possibility of a different and fulfilling life. Selfish as it may sound, I was also mourning my own sense of loneliness and entrapment, and my own failure to see my way open to a different, more fulfilling life. Therapy with Steven reminded me all too often that I was living with meanings about men that would

destroy the life I yearned for, if I could not summon the courage to face up to the meanings that entrapped me.

I grew up with the understanding that men were dangerous and that any kind of sexuality was disgusting. My parents never touched one another in a loving way in my presence during the years I lived with them. Whenever we watched television and a loving touch was enacted, my mother would walk out of the room or start talking to dissipate the intensity. She would also comment verbally and non-verbally on how disgusting these scenes were. I remember noticing how my father enjoyed the sexual scenes in TV programmes like Dallas, and feeling ashamed and embarrassed whenever any kind of intimacy was portrayed. At some level I needed to side with my mother and be loyal to her by never letting any man come close to me.

I have always feared letting men get close to me. Every part of my being felt programmed to avoid this. My worst fear was of being raped, but more than that I often felt like a child who did not understand her parents' behaviour and who could not stand up to her father and tell him how she felt. The family secrets were very powerful, even between the different members of my family. I also felt that I could never speak to anyone about this, as people would disqualify it as being nothing. Even now, when I put it into words, it seems inadequate, as if the words just touch the surface of what I could express.

My mother's anger towards my father about his sexual activities was ever present. I never had the courage to speak to my father about his behaviour and its impact. How could I have? Of course I can explain the theme of sexuality in my family more systemically now. That is not the point. Nor is blaming anyone. The point is that my experiences and fears about the theme of sexual intimacy made therapy with Steven very difficult.

Cognitively, I knew that my stuckness in therapy with Steven spoke of meanings I needed to address. The dictum that the observer is in the observed (Keeny, 1983) and that a therapist can only change herself and not the client (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) became a harsh reality for me, one that I needed to act upon. Therapy with Steven

perturbed me to the extent that my supervisor suggested that I should address it by means of personal therapy.

It was here that I found a context in which to voice the unsaid meanings about touch, men and abuse, which facilitated a process of changing my meanings and “blueprints of relating” in and out of therapy.

In the meantime, in my desperation to work “effectively” with Steven, I used Jenkins’s (1990) model for engaging men to take responsibility for abuse, in therapy with Steven. Jenkins proposes that the therapist should co-create a mission of responsibility with the perpetrator. This mission is derived from the perpetrator’s own expressed goals and desires. It is based on the assumption that he wants respectful relationships with others and does not want to continue his abusive behaviour. Jenkins suggests that the meanings that the perpetrator has attributed to the events of abuse as well as his goals should be explored in a way that invites him to consider the relationships he really desires.

Steven initially expressed the following goals regarding therapy:

*Steven:* First I want my child to have the respect and love for me she had before the time and I want her to forgive me.

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*Steven:* I love my children. I want my home, I want my life: a normal life. I love my children. I want them to love me. I want them to listen to me and have respect for me because I am normal.

\*\*\*

In the process of exploring Steven’s goals, he continued to disqualify therapy. Furthermore, it was evident that he felt he had earned the right to expect love and respect from his daughter. This often made me feel angry with him and even more ambiguous about this therapy.

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*Steven:* When I was involved in drugs I did not really have the “fatherly authority”. They could do as they liked. They could smoke in front of me. It was easier to do the wrong things when they also did things that were wrong. When she comes back, it will be different. My life turned around. She will not get away with these things.

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*An-Mareé:* Is this something that has happened before?

*Steven:* A lot.

*An-Mareé:* With whom?

*Steven:* With my stepdaughter. [Adding challengingly] I have a problem.

*An-Mareé:* Yes, I hear that. I wonder how you cope with that now.

*Steven:* At the moment it is manageable.

*An-Mareé:* How?

*Steven:* With God’s strength.

*An-Mareé:* Have you decided previously to manage this?

*Steven:* Yes.

*An-Mareé:* Did it work?

*Steven* [laughing]: I tried to manage it on my own.

*An-Mareé:* And what happened when it did not work out? What was the impact on you?

*Steven* [interrupting, irritated and in a defensive tone]: My whole life is a mess. I am 44 years old and I own just about nothing. My whole life revolved around this.

*An-Mareé:* Around what?

*Steven:* Feeling guilty, fighting against it ... Hmm. The whole idea ... the whole story.

*An-Mareé:* If you say you fight against this, what is the idea?

*Steven:* I am a paedophile.

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*Steven:* There is work for me to do. Sorry, that's why I say I don't like psychological help, because I know what it is about. I believe that psychological help alone cannot solve your problems. It is a very deep problem. It has been coming for years.

\*\*\*

*An-Maree:* But I want to know what else you want to change? Because you are giving me conflicting messages. On the one hand you are saying, "There is nothing that I want to do here because I don't need help." On the other hand you are saying, "I'm here because I have to be here, because things have to change."

\*\*\*

It became evident to me that Steven perceived himself as a victim and that he had access to relating to the world only from this position. He began to explain his behaviour in terms of external factors, indicating that he was abused as a child and never loved. Later during the therapy he indicated that he had stopped flashing at children for a while, but when he found out that his wife was having an affair he started flashing again. (Steven had a history of exposing himself to his stepchildren; it was only recently that his behaviour had escalated to molesting his child.)

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*Steven:* My wife found out that I flashed to the children. Then she left me. I could actually start from the beginning here. For years I was a flasher. I was a very scared flasher. There were times that I could not help myself ... Schoolgirls. Not older women, schoolgirls. Hmm. When I married my second wife ... We

were married for one month when she started having an affair. It was then when my things started. I am not making excuses for myself, I am just trying to tell ...

*An-Mareé:* You are trying to identify what triggers you?

*Steven:* Yes ... My low self-esteem. I tried to build that up through physical things, like flashing, because that was all I had to show of myself. That's me.

*An-Mareé:* Shew, it must be so difficult to think so little of yourself and believe that that is all you have to show for yourself.

*Steven:* Obviously, as the time progressed ... the more affairs she had ... I never had affairs. But the more affairs she had, the more I began with these things.

\*\*\*

Jenkins (1990) suggests that the perpetrator often tries to discover causal explanations for his behaviour. In this process he convinces himself and others that he is “trying hard” while he becomes increasingly bogged down in introspective “navel-gazing” (p. 13). Further instances of abuse may be responded to by stepping up efforts to locate the true cause—by trying more of the same.

In my mind it seemed that this was the process that was playing out for Steven. He continued to explain his behaviour more vehemently in terms of external factors. He came across as trying to convince himself that he would never abuse anyone again; that there were external factors influencing his behaviour, and now that he was a Christian, he would have the strength to resist abusing again.

Another point Jenkins (1990) makes is that in the creation or discovery of causal explanations for abuse, the *victims* of abuse are often left carrying the burdens of shame, guilt and responsibility for their own victimisation and feeling powerless to intervene. Concomitantly, causal explanations leave the perpetrator with a sense of “relief, reduced culpability, absolution from guilt, entitlement to forgiveness and permission to make a new start where ‘all can be forgotten’” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 14). Consequently, causal explanations often lead to the avoidance of responsibility by the perpetrator and prevent the discovery of alternative solutions.



It became clear to me that there was a cycle of abuse at play. Steven had been abused as a child, which informed his meanings of being worth nothing and having no power, which informed his way of relating to the world. In an effort to take control he abused those with less power (little girls). Yet this only perpetuated the abuse, since once he had, for example, exposed himself to a child and experienced the surge of power it brought, he only felt worse about himself. The acts of abuse only perpetuated his feelings of worthlessness.

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*An-Maréé:* What is a paedophile in your eyes?

*Steven:* I like young girls.

*An-Maréé:* What does that include? A feeling of?

*Steven:* Power.

\*\*\*

*An-Maréé:* What else is part of the paedophile?

*Steven:* Self-esteem.

*An-Maréé:* Self-esteem? In what way?

*Steven:* I lift my self-esteem, in that I am capable of doing something, at least.

*An-Maréé:* Okay. What else do these acts do to your self-esteem? The one that says I feel like I am nothing ... Is that part of being a paedophile? Does that strengthen the feeling and idea that you are nothing? Or does the feeling that you are at least able to do something only make you feel better?

*Steven:* Yes, in that stage. And then I think nothing of myself again.

*An-Maréé:* In other words, while you are doing it you feel powerful.

*Steven:* Not while I am doing it. Before that.

*An-Maréé:* And while you are doing it?

*Steven:* I don't know.

*An-Mareé:* And afterwards?

*Steven:* Yes, you are nothing...you rotten, you are a worm!

*An-Mareé:* You feel that you have no self-respect left?

*Steven:* Nothing. Nothing. Then you tell yourself you will never do this again. Then you find yourself doing it again. It is not something you ask for.

*An-Mareé:* It is like a whole devastating cycle.

*Steven:* And it is a vicious circle and it goes on and on and you will never be cured.

*An-Maree:* So, do think you will ever be able to stop? Because it sounds like you are saying that there is no hope for you.

*Steven:* No, there is hope.

*An-Maree:* What is the hope?

*Steven:* God, that is all. Like I told you last week. You can't help me.

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Constructivism and social constructionism take issue with the modernist idea that a “real world” exists that can be known with objective certainty (Gergen & Kay, 1992; Von Foester, 1981; Von Glasserfield, 1991.) The beliefs represented but constructivism tends to, “promote an image of the nervous system as a closed machine ...and constructs take shape as the organism bumps against its environment” (Hoffman, 1991, p. 4). By contrast, the social construction theorists see our construction of our selves and our worlds as a product of social interchange mediated through language (Hoffman, 1991; Gergen & Kay, 1992).

Our behaviour tends to be consistent the meanings we construe about ourselves and our worlds (Anderson, 1997; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990; Hoffman, 1990). I realised that if Steven carried on thinking about himself as a victim only, the cycle of abuse would just continue.

I also realised that I could not continue to see Steven as a perpetrator and no more than that. This would only facilitate the use of my “punitive” voice in therapy, which would perpetuate his view of himself as a victim.

Hearing his stories about being abused created a sense of connection with him and empathy for him. This empathy helped me to establish a better connection with him. In addition, in my personal therapy I was exploring my meanings around men and abuse on various levels (see *Meeting the Touch of Reiki*). This freed me up in therapy with Steven. Instead of either losing voice in therapy in the fear that I was being too punitive, I could loosen up in his presence. In bringing a more playful, sardonic stance to therapy, a context was created in which we could ascribe more and richer descriptions and meanings to his behaviour.

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*An-Mareé*: So excuses are part of the paedophile?

*Steven*: No, no, no ... That I did not get love as a child ... I use that as an excuse for what I did.

*An-Mareé*: Shall we say excuses are informed by the abused voice ... The voice that says, “I was never loved as a child, I was abused as a child, things were not okay then”?

*Steven*: Yes.

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*Steven*: Bad. I am bad. Why am I doing such things? Then I hit myself with a ten pound hammer.

*An-Mareé*: Ooh, let me draw a hammer.

[Steven laughs.]

*An-Maree*: Do you think I will also hit you with a hammer here?

*Steven*: Yes, you do it all of the time.

*An-Mareé*: How do I do that, Steven?

*Steven:* By pushing me into a corner.

*An-Maréé:* What is the corner?

*Steven:* I don't know what to say. I don't know how to think.

*An-Maréé:* So you think there is a right and a wrong way of being here as well?

*Steven:* Let me put it this way. I don't want to be here, because you are going deep.

*An-Maréé:* And you want to run away and I am preventing you from doing that?

*Steven:* Yes.

*An-Maréé:* So, on the one hand you want to flee, and on the other hand?

*Steven:* On the other hand I want to be here so ... I want to be a better person. So I will accept anything that is positive for me, to help me to be a better person. And I will be there for that: I want to get this behind me and I want to finish it. I am tired.

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*Steven:* I am tired of thinking what this and why that. I have forgiven my mother. I have forgiven my father. I am not saying any more that they made me this way.

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*Steven:* You must remember that I am speaking about what I have done and what I was. Not about who I am now. I am still a very mixed-up person. It does not just come right, just like that. But, because I am trying to live a clean life, those things will never happen again. So I don't have to say it is my parents' fault. I don't have to say this and that made me like that.

*An-Maréé:* So you are saying that the Steven you were all your life is now gone? How did you get that right?

*Steven:* It is my past. As I said just now, I am trying to live my life right. I don't have ... Oh, no, I do have that voice on my shoulder saying do this, do that ... But I have the armour on to attack him and to chase him away.

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*An-Maréé:* Yes, but I want to know if you can tell me when you are the paedophile and when you are Steven. And if I am talking with the paedophile or with the other Steven.

*Steven:* The paedophile will never come here.

*An-Maréé* [loudly, in a surprised tone of voice]: Really! How do you manage that?

*Steven:* I don't know ... No, he will never come here.

*An-Maréé:* No, Steven. I don't believe it.

*Steven:* You think so? Do you think that I will allow him to come here?

\*\*\*

*Steven:* You told me last time to go and think about which guy was here. I don't know. I was here. I don't believe there are many me's. I am just me.

*An-Maréé:* Really? I don't think so. What will happen if I push for something different? If I say I think the cunning Steven is with me? The Steven that does not really want to work with this? Or do you find it challenging if I say this?

*Steven:* Which Steven? There is only me.

*An-Maréé:* The clever Steven that we said is sly enough to get Karen back, without anything changing. Tell me more about that guy.

*Steven:* That is me.

*An-Maréé:* Yes, but tell me more about that guy, because I don't know you that well. Give me some more words, because you are good with giving words.

*Steven:* It is just me, who is clever. Who thinks I am clever. I think I don't really need help.

*An-Mareé:* Shew, but that sounds so incongruent with what you said a few weeks ago. Maybe it is the clever Steven who is speaking.

*Steven:* You are making me very confused.

*An-Mareé:* Really? What will the clever Steven do if he gets confused?

*Steven:* He will walk away.

*An-Mareé:* Are you walking away by saying that you do not have words?

*Steven:* I don't know.

*An-Mareé:* Is "I don't know" another way of walking away?

*Steven:* I have never really thought so deeply about myself. I think when I started to think deeply about myself I fled to alcohol and drugs.

*An-Mareé:* So it is dangerous for you to think about yourself.

\*\*\*

*Steven:* You say you don't know me. I also don't know myself either.

*An-Mareé:* Would you like to get to know yourself.

*Steven:* No.

*An-Mareé:* You know, Steven, I can see how you are running very fast. You are breaking the speed limit.

*Steven:* I am running away from wrong thoughts.

*An-Mareé:* No, you are running from thinking deeply about the wrong thoughts and what relates to the past.

*Steven:* Yes.

*An-Mareé:* Why do you not want to talk about the past?

*Steven:* Because it is in the past.

*An-Mareé:* Are you not just running from the past as well?

*Steven:* I think it is in the past.

*An-Mareé:* How will you know that it is in the past?

*Steven:* It has to be in the past. It is things that I did, that I don't want to do again.

*An-Mareé:* Hmm. But how are you going to get that right? Because it seems to me that running away did not work in the past.

*Steven:* I am not doing what I did in the past.

*An-Mareé:* In the past you also stopped abusing children for a while...

*Steven:* Yes, but in the past I tried to stop through my own strength. Now I have a higher power that helps me.

*An-Mareé:* Now, you are going to say that the Lord helps you.

*Steven:* Yes.

*An-Mareé:* Okay.

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*Steven:* Yes, I confess every morning and every afternoon. It is very difficult. At times I have to force myself to do this.

*An-Mareé:* So, is confessing a way of thinking deep?

*Steven:* No, I don't believe so...

*An-Mareé:* Not?

*Steven:* Well, it is to some extent, yes.

*An-Maree:* So what would thinking deep be?

*Steven:* I don't know ... If you think about why you are doings such things. Hmm ... What the reason is ...

*An-Mareé:* That is heavy stuff, hey...

*Steven:* It is. Hmmm. I know why.

*An-Maréé:* Why?

*Steven:* Well, I did not get love as a child.

*An-Maréé:* Who is speaking now, Steven?

*Steven:* I don't know. Me.

*An-Maréé:* If I told you that I am hearing the abused child speaking ...Would you want to run away? Is that too close to thinking deep?

*Steven:* No, I am not allowed to run away from that.

*An-Maréé:* You are not allowed to? Now, how are you going to stop yourself from running?

*Steven:* I don't know. That is why you are here.

*An-Maréé:* Is that why you are here also?

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In this process Steven's behaviour became more appropriate. He could confront me if I was stepping on his toes. However he could no longer bring only the voice of the victim into the therapy. Whereas in the beginning he did not commit to therapy at all, he now came to therapy with a commitment to explore the relationships he really desired.

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*An-Mareé:* What do you need help with?

*Steven:* I need help in changing my way of thinking about certain aspects ... My relationships with women, sex, things like that. I need help in thinking the right way about things like that.

*An-Mareé:* Why?

*Steven:* Because my thoughts are wrong ... I think love is sex. That is number one.

*An-Mareé:* So, what do you think love should be?

*Steven:* Love is many things, but it should not be sex.

*An-Mareé:* Okay, so you want to work on your definition of love.

\*\*\*

I feel myself getting trapped in wanting to say too many things on too many levels. Maybe this is isomorphic to the process I experienced in therapy with Steven. On the one hand I want to illustrate something of the change that occurred in the process. On the other hand I really need to convey how Steven was the sculpture of my own worst fears, and of how that played into my therapy with him. I also want to show that this was also a process of personal and professional growth for me. Maybe this is the most important thing that Steven brought to my life: *the tacit experience and knowledge that the personal always informs the professional.*

I saw Steven in therapy for a year. I also saw his daughter, at first separately and then with him. During this time Karen (Steven's daughter) moved back and Steven behaved appropriately towards her. He no longer invaded her personal boundaries. In therapy he asked to see me alone when he needed to address any problems of a sexual nature. And together the three of us worked many hours in creating a healing space, exploring a new way of relating between them.

During the year that I saw Steven in therapy the "silent and barely audible" stories I lived with regarding men, abuse and sex became "louder" and had to be opened up with my own therapist. It was in realising the power and possible effects of the stories

I lived with that a healing space was opened for me in my life. The “invisible enclosures” of my stories were made visible in a healing way for the first time. And this informed a healing and freeing way of using myself in therapy with Steven.

When Steven first spoke about his “sexual problem” in therapy I blushed, froze and instinctively changed the subject. Yet later when he introduced the topic of having problems with impotency, I was comfortable enough with my own sense of my bodily self and what sexuality meant to me, not to get so stuck in therapy. Impotence was reframed and explored in terms of his “importance/non-importance” in his relationships. I even used explicit language in this process and my ease with that became useful in therapy.

Even now, in looking at my video recording of my therapy with Steven, I am still astounded at how Steven’s story fused with my own stories in life, how he highlighted the stories I lived with, that became silent and invisible enclosures.

Take, for instance, this excerpt:

*Steven:* Very much so. I struggle. Sometimes I am **embarrassed**. Even when I am alone at home I feel **stupid**. Even though I grew up in a Christian home. My mother was a **Sunday School** teacher for years and my Dad was a **drunk**.

*An-Mareé:* Do you think that this is one of the positive outcomes of what happened, the abuse, Karen being removed from you, the way your ex-wife left you? Do you think that in your getting close to the Lord, that this is one of the positive or hopeful outcomes?

*Steven:* **My main purpose in life on this earth is to help people who are like me.** I have been through this. I know what it is about.

*An-Mareé:* Have you been through this Steven?

*Steven:* What?

*An-Mareé:* Have you moved beyond it?

*Steven:* No, but what I mean is that I went through it. I did it. I know how they think, I know how they do it because I did it and I am like that. But God has a

purpose for me. That is way I am doing this course. I am going to study for seven years.

*An-Mareé:* What is this course called?

*Steven:* It is a course in Christian Psychology. In seven years' time I will have a Master's degree in Christian Psychology. I am determined to do this. I am 44 years old. When I am 51 I will have completed it.

The bold lettering highlights the themes that resonate with me. How I, too, often felt embarrassed about myself, especially in the presence of men. How I, too, often felt so very stupid in life, that nothing I had to offer to anyone was good enough. Like Steven's mother, my mother was a Sunday School Teacher, always informing me of the "socially correct" rules about being in life. And like Steven's father, my father was a drunk. And my main purpose in life, I guess, is also to help and be with people that are like me. I, too, have studied 7 years to get to this point.

No wonder therapy with Steven was such a painful process. It reverberated on so many levels with the stories of my own life. Although my encounters with Steven were the most difficult struggle in my life, I will forever be grateful that I had the privilege to be his therapist. In having had to face the "sculpt of my own worst fears", I will never underestimate how difficult the process of therapy can be for my clients. Yet I will also never forget the sense of hope and the possibility for change such a context can create. To this day I believe that I am a better therapist for having had Steven as my client. More than that, I am a freer person. In having had to voice my "inaudible" stories about men in my own therapy, close relationships with some men became possible for the first time.

I include a picture (on the following page) that I drew when I was feeling so helpless and threatened in therapy with Steven.

By the way, I coincidentally heard from the social worker who referred Steven to therapy that he is doing well. There are no further reports of abuse. Karen, his daughter, is doing well too. Hopefully, they are living a life with fewer entrapping and silent stories about themselves too.



## Meeting the Touch of Reiki

Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain (Jung, as cited in Knaster, 1996, p. 19).

There is a power to touch, and a magic. Some call it a mystery (Peloquin, 1989, p. 299).

It was only during my therapy with Steven that I eventually acknowledged the perturbing absence of femininity and touch in my life.

Stan (one of the trainers) once told us about his trip to traditional healers in Lapland. During a healing ritual he was asked to lie down while a healer moved his hands over his body. I yearned for such a healing space. I needed to get in touch with my body. I had more and more clients with sexual problems, which had me blushing, stuck and painfully perturbed.

After speaking to Corinne, my therapist, about my therapy with Karen and Steven, she suggested that she and I use Reiki in our therapy. Reiki is an ancient Tibetan healing ritual where the healer's hands are placed on the different chakras of the body to allow healing energy to flow at a physical, spiritual and emotional level.

Corinne had a man in mind for Reiki. I was afraid, but I agreed, knowing I needed that space.

It was a Tuesday afternoon. Corinne and I made tea while Dean prepared the outside therapy room. When his tall figure entered the kitchen and he called us, I was so afraid I could not breathe. I could only stand a split second of eye contact. The round hut we used for therapy felt entirely different as we entered. The air touched my skin differently. Incense softly textured the room with a new smell. The couch was covered in a beautiful, colourful African cloth, soft to the touch.

After Dean and Corinne answered tentative questions about Reiki, Dean asked me to lie down. He covered me with a clean cotton duvet cover. I nearly cried. The simple gesture of being tucked in brought me in touch with the absence and longing for

a lifetime of nurturance in a very real way. He covered my eyes with a tissue, fragrant with the perfumes of essential oils. Foreign, soothing music filled the room like mist. He placed his hands on my eyes and forehead. I tried to relax, thinking, “Breathe, just breathe.”

I saw myself in whiteness. A white coffin. A sense of floating and fear and light and pain and resisting what was happening, all in one.

His hand moved to different places on my head. “Please God, let this be okay, let this be okay,” I prayed in and between spaces. He encapsulated my face with his hands and something in me just gave way. I spontaneously leaned into his left hand and wished the moment would never end, not knowing how I could allow myself such indulgence. There was a gentle warmth flowing through his hands. It felt like my soul soaked and breathed in love. I read this year that this is called the loving position and that the left side of the body is imbued with meanings around femininity and the future (Quest, 1999).

The rest of the ritual was a continuous struggle between allowing and not allowing the flow of energy. His hands heated up on certain places, while on other chakras there was a strong sense of resistance. I could not allow myself just to float where I needed to be, and I continuously returned to focus on what he was doing and finding rational explanations for what was happening.

At the end of the session it felt as if he had placed something heavy on my forehead. In “reality” he had simply made healing symbols in the air above me.

I was dazed afterwards. The window next to me was filled with light shining through the leaves of a rustling poplar. A poem by WEG Louw (1942, p. 14) lingered in my mind for days afterward: “*Ek voel my hart heradem in die reën, en by die stil aanskoue van die fyn en innige lewe van populierbome in die wind...*” (“I feel my heart breathes again in the rain, and at the quiet site of the delicate and sincere life of poplar trees in the wind.”)

## Diary entries

The following diary entries illustrate my inner dialogue during the process of Reiki and the impact it had on me.

*“No matter what they tell me, no matter what they say” (song).*

\*\*\*

*Fire on my back. It is warm, soft, holding like his hands on my face.*

\*\*\*

*Blocking, pain.*

\*\*\*

*No, no, no. Don't touch me.*

\*\*\*

*Enter white light—“sky”—white. Lying in a white coffin, dead, but it is a healing death. Praying. He lifts my head. Butterflies...beautiful: green, yellow, purple, orange. Crying.*

\*\*\*

*Pressure on my chest, trapped.*

\*\*\*

*Pressure... No!*

\*\*\*

*Blocking.*

\*\*\*

*Turning my face into his hands.*

\*\*\*

*My stomach is quiet, no more pain.*

\*\*\*

*My legs are running, running.*

\*\*\*

*Don't touch me, you will turn away in disgust. ... Burnt child, a dark figure in the corner, raw with big white eyes. I am contagious. I will turn to ashes if someone touches me ... coal ashes in their hands.*

\*\*\*

*Symbols on my head, warm pressure, I want to be far away...I don't want to talk now ... embarrassed.*

\*\*\*

*Corinne's hand on my head ... "a mother's touch" ... crying, crying, crying.*

\*\*\*

*Allowing poison, allowing light, allowing ...*

\*\*\*

*God I feel different: light, free and touchable.*

\*\*\*

*Corinne so caring: "Phone me when you want to."*

\*\*\*



*The tears—it was so different, not full of raw emotion out of my stomach—yet painful. I cannot believe that a man touched me in such a healing way. He did not turn away disgustedly ...*

\*\*\*

*Prayer*

*O, God how do I give words to this? You are holy. I wonder if you also touched the dead girl in the Bible in this way ... God I feel like the girl in the movie Nell, who went to the psychologist and said: “Look! Guardian angel has a penis!” She replies, “Yes, and he is not going to hurt you.”*

\*\*\*

*Corinne: “Your femininity was sacrificed in that system, intimacy was sacrificed.”*

\*\*\*

After several Reiki sessions:

*Strange awakenings ... what an extraordinary rhythm in this new space. My body is surrounded by light and movement, it announces my every movement. Like birth ... and entrance to a new space. It sings in me. My back is glowing. Movement and silence, I breathe ...*

## Talking Therapy

Corinne and Dean's ability to be with the intensity of the therapy process made all the difference. Sometimes we invited Dean into the "talking therapies". His way of being with my fears around intimacy, his perturbing comments, created a context where some of my assumptions about men could shift.

One day I was extremely angry with him for the aloof way he had acted towards me in a different context the previous week. Corinne facilitated a conversation between the two of us in order to deal with what was going on. This was the first time that I could address anger with a man in such a confrontational way. It was quite a difficult process, for it was difficult for both of us not to soften what we needed to say to such an extent that it would become incomprehensible. Corinne had to translate our words to each other.

The content of the conversation does not seem to have had nearly as much impact as the process that played out. In my mind, at the time, he was not in any way obliged to be at the receiving end of my anger. He could easily have left the context. Yet he stayed and struggled to understand and confront the way we seemed to have impacted on one another. That day I realised that I had avoided addressing anger in all my relationships. I realised that I had an assumption that people, especially men, would leave if anger or differences were verbalised. I realised that I avoided making perturbing comments to male clients on the assumption that they would never come back to therapy. And I knew that these assumptions had just changed.

The intimate context that was created in therapy with Corinne and Dean opened a lot of intense feelings. In this space I was allowed to explore issues around intimacy, sexuality, femininity and nurturance that facilitated a process of becoming much more of myself. Even now, it is difficult for me to admit that at some level I "fell in love" with Dean. Giving words to these feelings in therapy enabled us to more deeply explore these issues and my patterns of relating.

This experience also enabled me to examine the meanings around such feelings when a client declared his love for me. Opening this space in terms of his patterns of relating and in the context of his life facilitated a process of change. These experiences brought me to the assumption that the presence of romantic feelings and erotic energy is often a metaphor for non-sexual issues that can be very useful in therapy (Dujovne, 1983). The ability to be in emotional contact with such a difficult, emotionally charged problem and not feel compelled to rush towards rigid recipes to “fix” the “problem”, allows a process of differentiation of a greater repertoire of selves for both the client and the therapist (Bowen, 1978).

Dean and I became friends after the journey with Reiki was completed. We also became colleagues at Agape Healing Community years after the therapy ended. Just as in previous stories in this dissertation, the ever-shifting and ever-stable nature of this relationship is still a valuable and perturbing part of my journeys in life.

### Comments From My Supervisor: Dian Flowers

An-Maree asked me to write about what I, as her Unisa supervisor, observed about her as therapist before and after her therapy with Steven and Karen.

I want to take it back to her selection. There I chose her because she showed presence and courage and humour and asociality. She came across as strong, yet not too strong and especially not strong to the detriment of others. I saw the brilliance of her intellect during her first year (MA). She can describe situations in terms of relational patterns. As therapist she was soft, caring, and she persevered.

I saw her make a big shift in her second year and especially in therapy with Steven and Karen, a shift in our relationship and in her as therapist. With this therapy, I saw the development of the characteristics that I observed in selecting her. I think the challenge/problem was, process-wise (not content-wise), very close to her own life history, because this one she could not surpass with soft understanding only. She wanted to change the situation!

And she became versatile: She acted more asocially than ever, and she changed her own position creatively: from empathy to confrontation, to strategies. This especially applies to her relationship with Steven.

For this client system (a difficult system for any therapist) this was valuable, but for An-Maree there was freedom—permission to be the therapist that she can be. In my opinion this permission lies in many facets: her superior experience, her superior self-respect due to her own therapy, but for me more so in the “problem” that she no longer wanted to, or would have let continue. That loving, strong resistance against the language of the problem, that creative translation of the language of the problem set her free and was beneficial to her clients.

## Letter to Corinne

*Dear Corinne*

*I have been writing different versions of this letter in my head for such a long time... I think it is about time to put pen to paper.*

*Whilst reflecting on my sense that healing lies in giving voice to the entrapping realities we as human being sometimes live with, and that being a healer requires one to be able to create a context of connection and dialogue where such realities can be explored, I realised how much our journey in therapy informs my way of being and working.*

*I told you the other day that you remind me of the wild woman described in “Woman who run with wolves” written by Estes (1992). I especially identified with the following passages, which resonated with my experiences of and with you:*

*“The wild woman carries the bundles for healing, she carries everything a woman needs to be and know. She carries the medicine for all things. She carries stories and dreams and words and songs and signs and symbols. She is both the vehicle and destination. From the viewpoint of archetypal psychology as well from storytelling tradition, she is the female soul. Yet she is more, she is the source of the feminine.*

*“She is the Life/Death/Life force, she is the incubator. She is intuition, she is far-seer, she is deep listener, she is loyal heart. She encourages humans to remain multilingual; fluent in the languages of dreams, passion and poetry. She whispers from night dreams, she leaves behind on the terrain of a woman’s soul a coarse hair and muddy footprints. These fill women with longing to find her, free her and love her.*

*“She is the voice that says ‘This way, this way.’ She is the one who thunders after injustice. She is the maker of cycles. She is the one we leave home to look for. She is the one we come home to.” (pp. 12–13)*

*When I first came to you, two years after I left home, I was an undifferentiated mess. I felt like there was something terribly wrong with me. I felt guilty about voicing my experiences in my family—like that was the ultimate betrayal. You listened with depth and saw far...*

*You encouraged me to learn the language of art and the unspoken inner voices, by asking me to draw myself and my experiences with others. The process of personal knowing began while we created meanings for those blue faces without a body. You heard me beyond my limited ways of understanding, being and expressing. Your reflections and perturbing rituals were a voice whispering: “This way, this way...” And I went there every time, or we created different paths together when necessary, for I found a voice that heard me for the first time. Your voice(s) helped me towards the exploration of the “wild woman” I sensed within...*

*You were the first one who used the word “abuse” regarding my experiences in my family. You are the one who pre-empted a both/and view to understand and relate with the symptoms, behaviour and ways of being in my family and life.*

*You were the one who helped me to deal with and make sense of my perturbed reactions in therapy with a sexually abusive father and his daughter.*

*And you were the one with the courage to go even further beyond the limits of traditional therapy, to create a context within which I could connect with my femininity and fears around intimacy. A journey still not complete...the growing edge being the calling and initiation of the “wild woman” within to come forth and be lived more fully.*

*Estes (1992) writes: “The wild nature has a vast integrity to it. It means to establish territory, to find one’s pack, to be in one’s body with certainty and pride regardless of the body’s gifts and limitations, to speak and act in one’s behalf, to be aware, alert, to draw on the innate feminine powers of intuition and sensing, to come*

*into one's cycles, to find what one belongs to, to rise with dignity, to retain as much consciousness as we can" (p. 12).*

*With you and Dean I found a place of belonging and connection. A place where I could explore the "realities" that felt so entrapping in my life. Now I am in my body with more certainty, regardless of its limitations. Now I have come to a place where I can speak on my own behalf. There is a sense of freedom in my way of being these days. And it is as if I am freer to connect with my clients and as if I am freer in exploring their stories with them. As if my own inner dialogue does not entrap me all the time.*

*I want to make sense of what happened in therapy with you and how it links with my process of differentiating/claiming different selves, especially the feminine self, which was abandoned in the asexual rules of my family.*

*I hope that we can get together and share ideas about the experiences and process we lived in that context.*

*I am particularly interested in your views around the way I relate and related in the context of intimacy and the feminine self/voice.*

*Hope to speak to you soon.*

*Love and blessings*

*An-Maréé*

## In Conversation With Corinne<sup>1</sup>

*Corinne:* Your struggle with whether you are okay with your place with people and those things will always be there. But what stands out for me about you at the moment, is the way that you are in this. You engage and interact and it is as if you *intrigue* your presence. And I can see that you are careful with that, but, for me, this is not a contradiction with what you are.

You are so sure and less self-conscious than before in how you move with your body. Just like you are with your sexuality. You can let go, and make yourself beautiful and feminine and it comes across. And this is part of what makes me feel very okay about you as a therapist. There are many sides to you and you can bring out and access many sides of you. This is the transformation process of “I allow myself more now”. The sexy woman, the seductive girl, the soft and gentle, sensual ways, the lustrous, humorous soul that buys condoms for her mother.

And the aggression, you know, that you can live it ... the stuff with Jo, with your father, with Dean ... I think it is more difficult for you to get angry with your mother, and it is worse for you, but I don't feel that there is a big stuckness there.

It's been seven years An-Maréé, seven years hey...

*An-Maréé:* It feels so unreal and yet so close ... . What other shifts did you see?

*Corinne:* I think there is a big shift in the fact that you feel less ashamed and embarrassed. You punctuate things with more confidence and you have a different way of understanding that makes it easier for you to use your body more. And the idea of magic and spirituality, or whatever it is, you know, something beyond the tangible, is very present with you.

I also think that you can be more blaming.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a transcribed conversation about Corinne's perceptions of how I changed in the process of therapy.



*An-Mareé*: Tell me more about the blaming?

*Corinne*: Like with Jo or Lea. You know how to say: That's their stuff. It's not my stuff. I think you own better instead of becoming a bloody receptor for everybody around you. And that is maybe central to how you punctuate things differently, in how you allow yourself to be one and many people. Where before you could not be part of the interactions when you were with people. You felt like you stood out like a sore pain. Now it is a human process.

This makes me think of when I was part of a group in another country. We made a ritual. We put things in a grave and spoke about it the following day. It was very powerful for me. One of the things that was powerful for me in that, was something of, that your story and other people's stories can become part of the same disposition. It is something of being part of common humanity in the struggles. And however different it is, it is also part of the same disposition.

And the way in which you punctuate things allows you to show more of yourself. You can be blaming, you can be uncertain and then you can also be confident ... And it is okay for you to take space even if it means that the person who can't take space is very quiet. And this is important. It is being part of common humanity and your magic in that is to be able to say, "Okay, now I am An-Mareé", which is actually great. That An-Mareé that shows ... it is a shift.

You organise a space and I can come in if I want to and I can stay out if I want to. But you, you go, you move!

## TRAINING CONTEXTS: STERKFORTEIN HOSPITAL

### (CHAPTER 5)

#### Meeting Sterkfontein Hospital

By August in my second year at Unisa, all nine of the students in our group had to apply for internship positions. By this time the group was fed up. We were ready to leave Unisa. The competitiveness between us had become unbearable. I had just had it with the seemingly petty fights and disagreements that had plagued the group for some period of time. Spending two years in intense group sessions with Stan had been wonderful, up to the point where we had just had enough.

On the other hand I was sad to have to leave the first-year students of the supervision group behind. The clinic was always a safety net and a wonderful, challenging context. I was scared of “leaving home” and finding out that I was actually a useless therapist. This speaks of my insecurity during times of stress. I had *cum'd* both the theory and practical parts of my training. I received positive feedback from the supervisors and I knew I had been through excellent training. But, yes, I was also excited at the prospect of working in a different environment. Even working in the clinic had become a bit frustrating.

After going through selection processes at several institutions, I was one of five students of our group of nine who was selected as an Intern Psychologist at Sterkfontein Hospital.

Letter of Recommendation for an Internship Position From My Supervisor (Dian Flowers)

I have known An-Mareé Nel for 18 months in my capacity as supervisor and trainer on the MA (Clinical Psychology) course presented by Unisa. She has been in my supervision group as well as in the Unisa psychotherapy clinic as well as the Eersterust community setting for which I am responsible. This involves many contact hours per week and I feel that I have come to know her well.

An-Mareé is very intelligent and is quick to learn. She is a dedicated student who sets high standards for herself regarding the acquisition of knowledge and integrating this with psychotherapeutic activities, and regarding being accountable for her interactions with clients as well as in other relationships.

Thus she has acquired a sound theoretical grounding which is well integrated with therapeutic actions. An outstanding feature of An-Mareé is her ability to be productively proactive. She constantly seeks new challenges to further her growth as therapist and is prepared and able to deal with the discomfort associated with this. This courage should stand her in good stead as an intern and practising psychologist.

She shows good ability to work in a team and, as has been stated, is prepared to take risks while also being productively available to facilitate the growth of fellow students. She is open to receiving and acting upon feedback and to acquiring new knowledge and skills.

In both practical settings mentioned above, An-Mareé has participated in cross-disciplinary work. She has shown herself well able to contribute insightfully and productively to the professions concerned in such interactions. She has also worked with a wide variety of clients and was often involved in trans-cultural activities and therapies. In this she has revealed awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural differences regarding the meaning of symptoms and the appropriateness of interventions.

An-Mareé is an independent and creative thinker and this is reflected in her therapeutic skills. She is not threatened by structured contexts and thus is not conflict

generating in such contexts. She is flexible and can adapt to different contexts well and can contribute to these productively.

Over the past ±18 months, An-Mareé, together with a fellow student from our clinic, has initiated and developed a psychotherapeutic playgroup for preschool Eersterust children. The focus is on primary prevention. This project has broadened this year to include a focus on the children's mothers and grandmothers.

An-Mareé has a strong and positive personality. In therapy she can be appropriately gentle and confrontational. She is able to facilitate positive change and is well liked by her clients.

She is one of the best students I have been privileged to train in my 25 years of experience. I can recommend her for an internship position

## Moving to Krugersdorp

I decided to move to Krugersdorp to be close to the hospital. More than that, I wanted a space of my own. Since I had left Cape Town, I had been living in places all of which I had had to share with other people. Now, I felt, I needed a clearly defined space of my own. I wanted physical boundaries in which to define and express myself. I wanted to create a home of my own, where I could invite people in, but also keep them out if I wanted to. I wanted a space where everything (my choice of paintings against the wall, the way I arranged my books, the way I decorated my bathroom, my choice of coffee) said: “This is me.”

I also dearly wanted a space where I could keep a dog. I have always loved dogs, finding it easy to just love them, spontaneously be myself with them, without worrying about the implications of my every move and word (as with people). I found a spacious “granny” flat, with a separate entrance from the house next door. It had a separate bathroom, bedroom and kitchen/lounge, and felt more like a house than a flat. I was also the first person to rent it. The Granny of the family next door, who had died the month before, had previously preoccupied it. I took the freedom to make the space my own. I also adopted Vlekkie, the Granny’s six-month-old fox terrier.

I loved staying there. I often invited friends, people I connected with in the group of interns at Sterkfontein, to my home. The three people I had connected most strongly with in the group at Unisa (Lea, Jo and Charissa), also did their internships at Sterkfontein. Yet the intern group soon just became people I connected with, or not. The definition of Unisa interns, RAU interns or Natal interns quickly went out by the door. I did not feel guilty about choosing who I wanted to be friends with any more. It was a freeing space, with a sense of: “This is me, I am allowed to choose to connect with you or not, just as you are free to do the same, yet if we don’t connect now it does not mean we will never connect.” I allowed myself to create my own community of friends. Lea, Charissa, Jo, Pat and Samantha often invited me over to their homes and were often invited to mine.

I remember the pasta, wine and chocolate evenings at my home, when we cooked together, sat on the floor and just related so easily about what mattered to us, joking and crying, contemplating therapy and life. Just being human and loving it.

For the first time I did not feel that I had to censor myself continually in relation to people close to me.

## A Letter From Izan

### Evaluation of First Rotation at Sterkfontein Hospital

An-Mareé was placed on the psychotherapy ward (Ward 6) from January until the end of April. During this time she did individual, couple, family and group therapy. She was exposed to patients from various levels of functioning.

She also worked at the Krugersdorp Children's Outpatient Clinic on a weekly basis where she did psychological assessments, play therapy and family therapy. She also liaised with a multi-disciplinary team. An-Mareé managed a high case load very effectively and successfully.

### *Ward Involvement*

An-Mareé was a valued member of the multidisciplinary team. She was a responsible case manager and demonstrated an ability and a willingness to liaise and actively work together with members from various disciplines (e.g. social worker, occupational therapist, student nurses). She was also responsible for the main part of a presentation of a patient conference. Although initially shy, An-Mareé had a presence, which could be felt in ward rounds and staff meetings, and others responded to her with respect. She often brought a different voice, but also showed flexibility and a tolerance and patience for others' opinions. She has a powerful way of joining with the system and challenging it from within. An-Mareé is not always aware of her impact on others and could pay more attention to giving and receiving feedback from others.

### *Role as Therapist*

An-Mareé has expanded her repertoire as a therapist, including expressing anger and frustration, regulating intensity by varying closeness and distance in therapy. Her creativity, playfulness, emotional risk taking, and daring to go where many a therapist would refuse to go, has transformed her therapy into a process of mutual creation (co-creation) between her and her patients.

### *Response to Supervision*

As a supervisor it was delightful and a privilege to witness this process. An-Mareé's openness, willingness to explore and to experiment with different ideas and ways of relating made supervision very exciting.

### *Issues to Explore/Consolidate*

- An-Mareé needs to cultivate an awareness of her powerful impact on others
- She must be given the opportunity to further her knowledge of the psychiatric language
- To guard against the silencing of her voice
- To appreciate and trust her skills and abilities (confidence)
- To allow her creativity to be expressed in more contexts

Supervisor: Izan Hartman

### *Comments on the First Rotation*

Working at Sterkfontein Hospital was exciting. I enjoyed the opportunity to work more independently with various clients. I also enjoyed working with new colleagues and supervisors. I perceived them to entertain a reality that affirmed them as being experts and untouchable in relationships. An epistemology of certainty and expertise does not seem to allow them the luxury of humanness or the consideration of the messy (emotional) webs of complications that are always part of any behaviour or illness or interaction. It also serves as a mask for their flawed humanity. I was often scared to comment on this, as I did not want to risk confrontation in what seemed to be a very bureaucratic context. This was explored in supervision and in time I became more confident in airing my opinions.



### *Comments on the Intern Group Therapy Sessions*

Throughout the year at Sterkfontein, the intern group met for group therapy with two supervisors.

After a few months the group sessions felt stultified and stuck to me. It felt as if they had become a headspace. The supervisors continually remained in a mode of commenting on the process. It was as if we were all competing with them to “prove their skills as our therapists.”

I felt I was dealing with the painful, human stuff all the time, becoming more and more aware of my relational modes and taking the risk to explore these. I needed to be able to voice that in the group. I needed a sense of community in the group, a space where it would be possible to be not just the “clever student.”

During the year I still visited Agape whenever I had a chance. Somehow Agape felt much more like a healing space than the hospital. At Agape a space of community was created where everyone was allowed to bring the painful, human stuff. It was a space where I had the freedom to voice and be myself in different ways. I was not limited by having to be the “clever intern”.

More and more I had the sense that healing lies in being able to create a space where people can encounter each other beyond reified categories, fixed identities, meanings and patterns of relating. That a healing space is co-created in a context in which the stories people live, hide and tell, find voice. That healing lies in recognising people’s multiplicity and in fostering a process within which they can explore and reform their ideas of self and others and explore more ways of relating to one another. That healing is about co-creating an “in there together process” where both the therapist and the client’s way of relating and sense of self are acknowledged as multiple.

I wanted such a space with the intern group, which seemed to be trapped in the idea that a good psychologist was defined, in the context of the hospital, as being an objective yet empathic listener using clever strategies to facilitate change. I felt this restricted the process in the group and restricted my interactions in the group sessions to clever interpretations and comments on the process.

Some of us started to comment on this. We decided as a group that each of us would have a chance to bring a theme to the group sessions we had with our supervisors on a weekly basis. When it was my turn, I invited everyone to my home. I did so with a clear sense of wanting to create a space where I could show and be more of myself, where I could relate differently to the group, and where group members could relate differently to each other. I wanted to create a space where I could have a voice other than that of the frustrated student, criticising the supervisors

Everyone sat on the floor in my lounge. I had draped a beautiful multi-coloured cloth with intricate patterns on the floor. I had originally bought the cloth because it symbolised, for me, the multifaceted richness of people and relationships.

I started to talk about the cloth and its meanings, and about the space I wanted to create and how meaningful it was to show and share my home and, by implication, myself with the whole group. In bringing that voice a gentle, compassionate space was created where the group did not have to compete or prove our expertise as therapists by constantly making clever conceptual comments. We started talking with (and not to) each other in a more compassionate, gentle way. The space seemed more “real”, safe enough to enable us to risk bringing our vulnerabilities, and voicing our experiences in a way that fostered a sense of healing and connectedness to each other and ourselves as human beings and healers.

## A Letter From Jane

### Evaluation: Second Rotation

During her second four-month rotation An-Mareé was placed on the Forensic Unit, where she gained experience in the clerking and assessing of patients referred for observation; presenting at forensic case conferences, journal clubs and on ward rounds; the writing of reports for court purposes and psychometric assessments. In addition, she worked on Ward 13, with mostly chronic male patients, and at Kagiso Clinic, where her work involved therapy with adults from the community.

An-Mareé experienced Ward 13 (the male acute ward) to be a very provocative context in which to work. However, once she had negotiated clear boundaries for herself, she was able to connect with patients in a warm, empathetic and congruent manner. She did not shy away from doing individual therapy with very difficult patients, and the positive outcomes attested to her skills and commitment as a therapist. Having her therapeutic voice heard by the Ward 13 multi-disciplinary team proved to be a challenge that An-Mareé worked with and improved on. During this process she developed a greater trust in her skills and an appreciation that she has value to contribute.

With regard to Kagiso Clinic, An-Mareé dealt with cases enthusiastically and professionally. When necessary, she liaised with the interns working at the Kagiso Child Clinic in order to provide the best service possible for her adult clients and their children.

In terms of forensic assessments, An-Mareé was always reliable and thorough. She coped well with the demands of the Unit, and was able to balance independence and teamwork. She presented at ward rounds, journal clubs and forensic case conferences in a clear, confident and professional manner. Although An-Mareé was initially perturbed by the “neutral” role she was expected to take in terms of observation patients, she successfully adapted to the psychiatric language and was able to do the job competently

and respectfully without compromising herself. In this regard she showed determination and flexibility.

An-Maréé put a lot of effort into supervision and made space to address both personal and work-related issues. Her courage and willingness to share her vulnerability as well as her strengths, and to receive feedback, were greatly appreciated.

The main challenges for An-Maréé during her next rotation include:

- To continue to find alternative ways of being heard (particularly in relation to doctors)
- To maintain an awareness of the impact she has when expressing her voice (i.e. gauging whether her style creates distance or connection)
- To use her creativity in group-work on the female wards.

Supervisor: Jane Don-Wauchope

#### *Comments on the Second Rotation*

Working in the Forensic Unit, again with different colleagues and a different supervisor, was once more exciting. Here I was part of a team of psychiatrists, who had to assess whether the locked up patients or prisoners were responsible for their actions at the time they committed one of various crimes. Initially I felt very intimidated by such a context, and frustrated with the notion of having to assess patients as if my interaction with them had no impact on the behaviour they were displaying. I did not like working in such a judgmental context.

During this rotation I was also assigned to work in the male acute ward. This could be seen as a compliment, as Ward 13 was regarded as the most difficult ward to work in and I assume it was assigned to interns whose therapeutic skills were most trusted by the supervisors. It was a difficult time for me. However, I quickly learnt to take care of myself when working with very intrusive patients. The difficulty of the context created an opportunity to become very creative in therapy.

During my time on this rotation I began writing this thesis. Looking back I realise that being perturbed often precedes reflection and action on my part.

## The Third Rotation: Ward Round Jazz and Blues

### When the Multidisciplinary Team Becomes the Identified Patient

Sometimes, I think God created ward rounds just to keep psychologists humble. It certainly keeps me “in the struggle”. It is quite entertaining to read the process between the doctors, social worker, nursing staff, occupational therapist, patients and psychologists. If I did not take myself and my work so seriously, I would be laughing my way through ward rounds, given the absurdities of our multi-disciplinary team.

Dr Sansiman is the Consultant on the ward. He likes dressing up in grand, yet distinctly African attire, which makes him look like a king from a foreign planet. A king with a cell phone, that is. He keeps answering the phone while we are busy talking to patients and their families on the ward rounds, forcing us either to listen to his conversations or to carry on, shouting to be audible, while the *important doctor* stays completely oblivious of basic social etiquette. And even more absurd, nobody seems to have the courage to comment, for he has the power to make things unbearable for his “subordinates”. Pointing out something like this, with the potential of embarrassing an already distinctly insecure, yet powerful doctor, is *dangerous*.

Then there are the Registrars: Dr Ior (from Romania) and Dr Nomsa (who has to constantly display her vast knowledge of everybody and everything to remind herself that she *is worthy* of the pedestal upon which all doctors are placed). Dr Ior reminds me of my uncle: so socially inept and insecure that he has to be rude, constantly growling orders to the nursing staff and ignoring any sign of humanity displayed by patients. As soon as a patient reacts with anger to his extremely disqualifying way of interacting with her, he becomes immobilised. The psychologist has to intervene, while he prescribes yet another sedative and the poor nursing staff have to find a way of administering this “instant cure”.

The nursing staff and students seldom say a word, except when asked for a ward report.

Carin is the senior psychologist and my supervisor. When she attends a ward round, I mostly keep quiet, for she has a strong voice in there that makes it unnecessary for me to elaborate. She often asks circular questions about the patient's significant system, which give a context and a frame for the patient's behaviour. Unfortunately the doctors often drift off during this process. This is when I usually comment on the significance of the information.

It helps me to respond to their insecurities, rather than their rude and disqualifying ways, of which they remain oblivious. In this way I can still be curious about them and try to connect with them during tea breaks. It helps to build a workable relationship with them. Sometimes, though, I take pleasure in revealing the therapist in me in a more significant way, which shake them a little on those thrones ...

During the ward round on 14 September Carin was on leave. This meant I had to bring a therapeutic voice to that context. Just before tea, we discussed Lillian.

I had heard about Lillian from my colleagues on Ward 6 (the therapy/rehabilitation ward). She had been admitted to Sterkfontein several times before and spent a long time on the lock-up ward for acute woman before Carin had sent her to the therapy ward. She was suicidal. The team on Ward 6 felt extremely stuck in therapy with her. She frequently made para-suicidal attempts, which upset the staff and the other patients. She covered her face with a plastic bag at night, in the dormitory, in order to suffocate herself.

She was labelled as a "borderline personality". She seemed to leave everybody around her feeling utterly helpless. The team on Ward 6 was not prepared to have such a liability on the ward and sent her back to the lock-up ward, framing it as the team's failure in not being able to help her.

When Dr Nomsa saw her file in our ward round again, she sighed helplessly: "Oh, God." She was obviously at her wits' end with this patient. "It does not matter what we do, we just do not seem to get anywhere with this girl." No matter what I suggested, her response was repeatedly: "Yes, but...".

She did not even want to see the patient. We always see the patients on a ward round. It is an important way of finding out where they are at and it is also supposed to give them some say in their treatment. I insisted that we see her, for I did not like the helpless atmosphere of giving up that choked the air out of the room.

Lillian entered the room slowly, obviously showing us that she felt depressed. She slumped listlessly in her chair, her eyes downcast. Dr Nomsa asked her a few questions in a determined, yet hopeless tone. Lillian hardly answered. When she did mumble an answer, she just kept saying, in a barely audible tone, that she wanted to kill herself, while implying that it was our fault for not helping her. Dr Nomsa eventually gave up, signalling that it was my turn.

I had had enough. I decided to take action. I shifted in my chair and took a very sceptical stance and started speaking in a very challenging voice. “Well, Lillian, I don’t know you at all, but it seems to me that you’ve got everybody around you feeling utterly helpless. I hear from all the teams that have worked with you that they have failed you. And I wonder what you are going to do about that. I don’t think anything is going to change if you don’t help us to help you ... or maybe you are just too comfortable in the position you are in to even consider that ... ?”

The room was unified in an extreme tension I had never experienced there before. The student nurses looked at me as if I was a cold-hearted witch who could not care less about the patient, who was obviously in distress. Dr Ior’s face was white and Dr Nomsa seemed intrigued, yet ready to reclaim a position of knowing. I ignored them all, while my body language clearly said: “I’m busy working here, don’t you dare interrupt.”

Lillian got angry. She made eye contact and sat up while she said in an argumentative tone that no one heard her pain and that she had been shipped from one therapist to another. She asked us how we could have expected her to work with two very different therapists in Ward 6 alone. She had made a valid point, but I thought that going into the content would not be useful. What was important was that she had shifted from a listless helplessness to a less helpless anger.



Dr Nomsa responded with yet another “Yes, but”, explaining that all the patients had to put up with that, because that was the way the system worked. I turned my back to Lillian to face Dr Nomsa, for I wanted to interrupt the process before it got stuck again. I said, firmly: “You know, Patricia, I was very sceptical at first, but maybe there is some hope. She seems to be very committed to the idea of therapy. Maybe she is saying that she is ready to face the painful themes in her life, in therapy.” Dr Nomsa started to reply, “I ... don’t know ... maybe ...”, when Lillian tried to interrupt, getting halfway out of her chair and saying loudly: “No, but ...”.

I briefly turned around and said, firmly: “Excuse me, I’m talking to the doctor right now.” I turned my back on her again and basically repeated what I had just said, to the effect that if Lillian showed the same determination in therapy there might be a slight possibility of hope. Dr Nomsa agreed. I turned to Lillian and said: “Thank you Lillian, you may go back to the ward now.”

I explained to the team that I was being strategic, utilising a technique known as “gossiping in the presence” developed by the Milan team (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, & Penn, 1987). I thought that this would be useful, as Lillian’s patterns of interaction seemed to be redundant, inherently creating helplessness, resulting in more of the same behaviour.

The atmosphere changed from severe tension to relief. We were a unified team again—or maybe for the first time.

I was in shock afterwards. What had happened? What would Carin say? Was that really okay? I had continually monitored myself in there and I could explain what had happened in validated, theoretical terms. But this was not usually my style.

What had happened? I had taken a huge risk—as a mere intern, taking charge and choreographing the context. What had happened to my assumptions about disqualification and voice? Why did I feel that I had come close to being abusive to the client in there? Why had the context been so provocative to me?

When I told Corinne about what had happened, she asked me to consider the effect of helplessness on myself. She thought Lillian might well have been my mother,

as it were, sitting in that chair. We are working on my interactions/issues with women in therapy at the moment, and this really made me consider my assumptions about voice and abuse again.

I think I have always equated helplessness with voicelessness and voicelessness with abuse. Therefore I always took the responsibility to hear and acknowledge my mother's voice. This had severe implications for my life: having to stay loyal to my mother's pain. In reflecting on this, a space is created to come into contact and vent extreme anger about this—an anger that feels abusive because it is disloyal to my mother's voice even if it facilitates my own. I think I have come to the point where I undertake to only take responsibility for myself and my actions and not for the feelings and actions of every helpless/voiceless person that crosses my path. Helplessness seems to be a very disrespectful label to me these days: disrespectful to the resilience and potential for change that every client/person has.

This shift of assumptions has made a difference in my therapies over the last two weeks. A suicidal woman came to see me at the clinic last week. She has severe marital problems; her husband seems to attend more to the voice of his family than to hers. She reported that her whole significant system started treating her like a worthless creature, in even more extreme ways, following her first suicide attempt three months ago. She is not allowed to do anything in her own home: not even cook or clean. (Helplessness truly has an extreme pull on people, I thought.) Now, she is in a bind: Her husband wants to take his household away for the long weekend, with his family of origin. She would rather kill herself than accompany them.

After looking at all the possibilities with her, it was clear that in her mind she had no choice but to go with them. We started exploring ways that would make the weekend bearable for her. Her recurring, helpless stance made me angry. I realised that I was getting close to falling into the trap of the “rejected advisor” and took a less serious stance. I took the role of a cunning conspirator and asked her to think of five ways to completely surprise her husband and his family. She was not to tell them about this and she had to notice their reactions, write them down and bring her notes to the next session.

She actually seemed excited at the prospect. I also made a contract with her not to commit suicide before she had talked to me. This meant that I validated the seriousness of her pain and yet freed myself from taking responsibility for her helplessness. The playful stance also seemed to free her up to explore her creative voice.

I felt light after that session and pleased that responsibility was not such a heavy burden when handed back to the client.

And I have come to enjoy the freedom of legitimately having the luxury of possessing and using a whole repertoire of voices, even in such a rule-bound and rigid context. It complements the blues with a little bit of jazz now and then.

## Fire and Water

### Emancipation and Dependence

It felt good ... insisting that we could braai by ourselves. We are independent, emancipated woman, after all. Who needs a man to light a fire?

Lea was a bit uncertain but her children were obviously excited, given the evidence that their Mom's friend *was a little strange*, as they had thought all along. They swam in the communal pool while we watched. I used about half a packet of firelighters to get a decent fire going. "The wood is wet," I commented, irritated by Lea's sceptical glances. We got into the pool with the kids and had a lot of fun, while the fire died. I noticed as soon as the neighbouring "braai-er" stepped up to our fire. That was it. I got out of the pool immediately. He took the cue to back off, and pretended not to have noticed our fire at all, although it was only two feet away from his own. It took a while, but we eventually had a lovely lunch. Lea was very impressed.

She is going through a divorce at the moment (or rather for the last nine months, with still no end in sight). And she would still rather depend on a man for some things. We've been good friends for three years now, and I love her dearly, but this side of her pushes my "irritation button" to the extreme. It mirrors a side of myself I can't stand.

I don't like being needy. I hate feeling helpless. And I can't stand pretty little women who use these uncertainties to get what they want and make (their) men feel like the Masters of the Universe in the process. Man: God's gift to woman. Ha, ha, very funny. I have always thought men are like leeches when it comes to any vulnerabilities concerning women. It seems they think that being useful masks their own multiple insecurities.

Yet I know that place very well when it comes to needing emotional intimacy. I become dependent on people. And therefore, I always need to feel useful and am probably masking my own vulnerabilities in the process, the irony being that dependence negates closeness.

Why do I feel so strongly about this, though? Am I some kind of extreme feminist? Maybe it's because I have felt paralysed by my mother's helplessness all my life. Maybe it's because I saw how she used illness to ask for emotional closeness, and never succeeded. When requested in such a way, one can only become close to the illness, not to the person.

Maybe it's because I resent my father for being a "pillar of the community", flattered and flirted with by the ladies, while he never bothered to think, for one second, about our emotional needs.

Maybe it's because I always needed to be someone's significant support system. That was (maybe still is) my way of asking for what I needed in order to belong, be heard and acknowledged. But being sensitive to others' needs, and even being useful in that way, sent people back to their loved ones while I became redundant, or at least less important, in the process. There is nothing like a "repertoire of selves" to keep you company while everybody else is going on with their lives.

No wonder I'm in this profession. I've been in training for it all my life. And it suits me like a glove ... probably repeating the same patterns of interaction I have always had with people close to me. So will I stay in this, I wonder. And if it is such a comfort zone, why does it feel like I need courage all the time?

It's as if I was always extremely courageous to be able to be independent and emancipated and yet I have always managed to find ways and contexts to become enmeshed with other people's needs. For goodness' sake: I left my home in Cape Town immediately after I finished matric to do missionary work—in *Hillbrow* of all places. There was no place further from home, and no place that could have defined me as more independent than the violent streets of Hillbrow; and yet there was no other place with such potential for emotional enmeshment as a missionary organisation. Incredible.

Emancipation and dependence: There is something to be explored here. Something to do with lighting my own fire and then letting it die while I'm in the pool ...

Lea's response: "You just don't know what you are missing!"

## Singing in Church With Beauty

### Differentiation, Creating Community

I went to Agape again today, for the first time in about five months. Lea came with me. I was a bit frustrated, because the discourse, “*they need to differentiate*”, has been lingering around this friendship like a ghost for years now: meanings created initially by our trainers. So, yes, I’d wanted to go alone because I had my own needs and reasons and did not feel like holding anyone’s hand or, for that matter, being held. It sounds harsh and disloyal, yet maybe this is a sign of the “differentiation” everybody so desperately wanted to see.

I arrived first and Corinne sincerely welcomed me in a way that made me feel she was truly happy to see me there again. When Lea arrived the atmosphere seemed to change and I could feel it in the air: “Still together; no change.” Not true. Stan even welcomed me in a strange way: “Hallo, welcome, glad to see you here ... *I see Lea also came along.*” Then Beauty interrupted.

She tapped me on the back and made a big scene, or rather, we made a big scene. We were truly happy to see each other again. She hugged me and we were both excited, loudly and emphatically. Stan was forgotten. We sat down and spoke for about an hour. She looked well. She told me she was busy writing her life story in the form of a play for a radio station, and started relating an uncanny, magical Zulu story about how her father bewitched her mother into falling in love with him. She also told me about her current problems with her boyfriend, who had a one-year-old child with another woman who was still constantly making advances to him. He was confused. She was thinking of moving out.

She was not in favour of “polygamy”, like her father, and she was also ready to take him to court. She had invested a lot of herself and her money in this relationship and in his business and she was not about to let herself be used! I enjoyed this statement thoroughly and responded playfully: “You go girl! You also have rights!” And we had a good laugh. It was good to hear her speak in an emancipated way that revealed a sense of self-worth. It sounded as if she was grounded in a new way of being, even when in

sadness and turmoil. That was different from before. I liked it. She wore it like a beautiful new cloak, which I admired.

While this discussion was going on, Dean was in the background. I saw him for the first time again today. He looks different: lighter. He has even lost a lot of weight. I spoke to him last week. He sounded much lighter then as well. He still needs space (for he *is* on a healing journey as I sensed and hoped), but he was fine with the idea of me visiting Agape. He even sounded surprised that I could think that that would not be okay. It was very perturbing to be in the same context and not be able to speak to him. Of course I was “high-jacked” by my emotions again, especially when I heard Beauty speak. It was a bit chaotic. I went from being tearful to laughing joyously at her ideas and ways of moving on in her life (which I, of course, identified with).

Beauty had brought a friend with her this time. A young blind man. He volunteered to sing for us during the lunch ritual. He sang with soul and made me long to use my voice in that way again.

After lunch, I looked for a tap and had to cross the street to find one that was usable. There I found a beautiful little church I had never noticed before. A middle-aged black man was guarding the place. I asked if I could enter. I could see he thought it strange, but he obligingly nodded an “okay”.

As I entered the church swallows flew from their nests in the ceiling and I could not stop myself from singing. The sound filled the place, as if the emptiness had been deliberately created to make space for voice. God, it felt good to let my voice go, to let it fill a huge space without checking myself, worrying about the impact, or fighting for it to be heard. It was extremely comforting and it made me think of Corinne’s comment a few weeks ago: “Do you still sing or play the guitar or the piano? Because if not, it would be the same as your mother.”

I spent a long time there, knowing somehow that Lea would be looking for me and yet making a decision to stay there, where I needed to be. It felt good to be doing something for myself in that way. I went back to call Beauty and Lea had left already. I was relieved that she had been able to do that. I asked Beauty to come with me and her

friend also joined us. As we walked into the church I told them that I wanted to show and share this place with them, for the sound of it, and it was therefore significant that someone who was blind had joined us.

I asked them to sing with me. Spontaneously, I started with a well-known Hallelujah melody and they immediately fell in and split into different voices: tenor and alto, while I was singing soprano. It was *beautiful—majestic... sounds that left us all with goose bumps and tears.*

The moment seemed significant to all three of us in our own, strange ways. As we went back, Beauty started talking about how she has been afraid to pray because she thought God would be angry with her if she only came to him in a time of need. She interpreted this encounter as a sign, which gave her hope again. Her friend wanted us to sing together again so he could teach us about different techniques. It seemed as if he really felt validated and valued. He had been quiet earlier in the day, but turned out to be very talkative once there was a sense of connection. He even articulated his ideas about spirituality as just being in the mind, with the purpose of creating safe places. I disagreed, yet acknowledged that I'd felt safer than in a long time in that space.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in conversation with Sam, a *sangoma*, who told me about his life philosophy. The time I spent with him was soothing and interesting. Strangely, he talked to me (for the first time) about his faith in God.

Something very significant happened today. I really took care of myself in a different way. I stayed in touch with what I needed, and remained grounded in creating a context for myself in that. Even when it meant being what could be labelled as *inconsiderate* to my friend. It feels as if I found a way to spontaneously co-create the community I needed—a community just as useful for those who shared in it, in different ways. It feels like differentiation on a higher level than before: the freeing level of diversity within connection.



## Letting the Tomatoes Rip

*“Like a plump, ripe, red tomato ... It looks all contained on the outside but inside the pips are shaking about. It would feel good to be able to throw it against the wall ... making a big mess!”*

*“Sounds aggressive to me ...”*

Anger seems to pervade every context I find myself in these days. It lurks about in me and finds unexpected ways of showing itself. If I try to hide or deny it, it just flies straight back at me.

I used to avoid anger. When my father had one of his outbursts, I would become small: Invisibility meant survival. But I am not a little girl any more and becoming silently small is just one of many options to choose from.

Jo is a fellow intern at Sterkfontein Hospital, who also trained with me at Unisa. We have always had a strange relationship, fluctuating between intense connection and disconnection. We had a fight last week. He started shouting at me in front of my colleagues. This took me by surprise. I did not have a clue as to what had provoked such anger. He came to my house that afternoon, and I asked him to leave. This fuelled his anger and he only left after pulling my sliding door off its rails and throwing beads at me with an accompanying curse. He was obviously angry to the point of violence, and I was scared. At first, I thought he was either having a psychotic breakdown or had taken drugs, because he was making no sense. But these frames did not help much. It was, after all, not useful to be able to label someone as bad or mad. I was scared and the fear did not subside until after I came to understand his behaviour within a therapeutic frame of my having issues similar to his.

Corinne asked me last week how Jo’s anger was “twinning” me. She said that it seemed like I was looking in a lot of mirrors, in many different angles at the moment. How was John reflecting me?

I don't know. What I do see in that mirror is the potential to become angry to the point of abuse, and I fear that. I also see common issues between me and Jo. Maybe we are both angry at a history of experiences, of not having voice, not having a place, not being acknowledged. Writing stories about my family perturbs me in that way. I find myself being angry with my Dad all over again, but even more, I am really angry with my Mom. Maybe I am allowing myself to be angry with her in this way for the first time.

I am angry about how her meanings about life have restricted my own. I am angry that her fears have not only trapped her into a meagre life but have forced me to fight for a different definition of self all my life—always accompanied by threats of abandonment by her. I am angry that she still expects me to be loyal to her meanings, her pain. I am angry that I always had to feel guilty for being so inconsiderate as not to feel sorry for her. I am even angry at my need to also give the both/and here ... that exactly these influences enabled me to become strong and made a different life possible for me and that I love her for that. And that she has sacrificed a great deal to enable me to live a life in which I have the luxury of being able to reflect on these things.

Yet I also want to be able to say that she made me feel like a fat, worthless burden for many years. What she resented me for (moving 1 700 km away to start a separate life) has turned into her greatest source of pride: her daughter the psychologist! And even now I think she expects me to be *only* a good psychologist. Having a life outside of that would be the ultimate betrayal.

Well, from today onwards I am going to be okay with being called disloyal to the needs of others. As long as I am clear about who I am in that.

I saw Jo for the first time again for coffee today. I agreed to meet him only so that I could get rid of the turmoil he left me with.

We greeted and sat in stubborn silence for about ten minutes.

Eventually he asked: "Are you okay?"

And I let it rip: "No, I am not. I don't understand what happened and I am still very angry."

He replied: “Well, I have let it go already. But if you want to talk about it, we can.”

I sat there in the uncertainty of the choice: Would it be useful to talk about it or would it just become another way of engaging in some weird kind of intense connection with the same probable outcome? I commented on this and said in a hostile tone: “I think we press each other’s buttons in extreme ways that neither of us understand, but it has severe implications. We have been here before and the same pattern still continues. It’s not worth it.”

He replied: “Why are you telling me this?”

I went on: “Because I want you to know what impact you had on me. I think you have been brooding about a lot of your own stuff for a long time and you just left the bomb at my house.”

His (self-protective) distant response: “That’s an interesting way to see it.”

I did not take the bait. I was not going to be nice and ask him for his version. If he wanted voice he had to take it. I was not going to take the responsibility to create such a context for him any more. Another tomato went flying. “What I am busy saying is that I want you to understand that the only the thing that makes it okay with me, is the frame that we will never be close on any level again. I don’t want to be on the receiving end of something like that again. I haven’t let it go and now I am giving your bomb back to you.”

He answered, defensively: “Do you know why I came today?”

I replied, still hostile: “I have no idea, but you are welcome to say.” (Thinking that his silences have always been a manipulative tool that I am not taking responsibility for any more.)

Jo: “I wanted to say exactly the same; it was just important to me to know that you are okay.”

I replied firmly: “Fine.” (Thinking: “What a cop-out! How convenient to start the conversation in a despondent way and to first find out where I am at, before he dares to

reveal anything of his position, and now just adopting my frame as if it was his all along!”)

I gave him back the cursed beads he had thrown into my house the previous week, saying: “And this belongs to you.”

We parted in a civil way.

It felt great: being able to be with anger in a different way. Staying loyal to myself and being grounded in what I was doing. Not losing voice and not feeling guilty or taking responsibility for his responses, just for my own. Wow! What a day ...

It had started with a group therapy with the “acute women,” where my Occupational Therapist colleague had suggested we all choose a fruit or vegetable to describe how we felt today. I described a tomato, framing it as moody (trying to hide the anger) while one of the women aptly labelled it as aggression.

What can I say? Tomatoes are not forbidden fruit, after all.

## Leaving Sterkfontein

Towards the end of my internship I was eager to leave Sterkfontein. I wanted to finish my thesis and open a practice with a friend. There was also the possibility of doing assessment work in the corporate environment. I was eager to live the life of a professional person: earning an income and working more independently in a different context.

During this time, my supervisor at the time asked me to think about applying for a supervisor post at Sterkfontein Hospital. She had a lot of faith in my abilities and assured me that I stood a good chance of getting the position if I applied. It was a difficult decision to make; but I declined. I was tired of the context and the people, and I was afraid of allowing the place to become a comfort zone. I have heard of too many therapists who found it difficult to start their own practices after having worked in a hospital.

Working as a psychologist in a mental institute comes with the safety of working in a system where you are acknowledged as an “expert”. You do not have to cope with the competitiveness of the market place. You also do not have to cope with the loneliness and the slender acknowledgement you get when you work in a private practice. Being a psychologist in a mental hospital also has status attached to it, the social discourse being that you must be a very special person to work in such a context. So I knew how easily staying at Sterkfontein could trap me in a comfort zone.

Saying goodbye to Sterkfontein was easy. I had made a few good friends, with whom I would keep in contact. However, saying goodbye to the group sessions with my colleagues was a relief. During the entire year we (the interns) had had group therapy sessions with two supervisors. Towards the end of the year this had become a painfully frustrating space. The supervisors kept commenting on the process playing out between us and I felt like screaming. It no longer brought any news of difference. I could predict who was going to say what, whose buttons were going to be pressed and what the reactions of everyone in the group would be. It was a double bind. Having to attend group therapy was mandatory. Commenting on the stuckness and the redundant nature

of what was playing out was not heard. Towards the end I felt the group sessions were no more than an opportunity for the supervisors to gain experience in group therapy. We seemed to be doing the same dance over and over, and we all knew the steps.

Needless to say, I was eager to leave the context. Little did I know how chaotic the next few months of my life would turn out to be.

## MEETING AN-MAREÉ

### (CHAPTER 6)

#### Returning to a Sense of Self

*“Close the curtains, leave me be, let me be ...”*

*“Love, devotion, feeling emotion,  
don’t be afraid to be weak  
don’t be too proud to be strong,  
just look into your heart my friend,  
that would be the return to yourself...”*

*Don’t care what people say  
just do it your own way...*

*That would be the return to yourself...” [Song: “Enigma”]*

#### *Realness, Closeness and Distance*

Solitude, thank God ... My soul sighs with relief. I close the curtains. Now it’s only this space, the music and me. Go away world. Don’t look inside, don’t even give a passing glance! I need to breathe. How I have ached for this space. Maybe now I can enter the chaos ...

I haven’t touched the dissertation in months. Maybe I haven’t been with me in what feels like ages. Fear, fear, clutching fear has gripped my heart, my stomach, my lungs and chased me into a cycle of crises and allowed me to just run, run, run and get nowhere.

Dean asked me last night: “When are you real?” He asked me the same question two years ago. (Can it be two years? How time can be forever and nothing in a moment.)

*Dean:* “When are you real?”

*An-Maréé:* “Well, the flippant answer would be: ‘When I walk my dog.’ Oh, and then here’s a patronisingly clever thought: when you can access a repertoire of selves, you are real in whatever side of yourself you engage.”

He never feels real, he says. He feels lost and empty.

*An-Maréé:* “Do you feel there’s so much more to you, but whatever you show of yourself is defined in such rigid terms, that you just can’t break free and no one even notices?”

*Dean [softly and thoughtfully]:* “Yes, that’s exactly it.”

How ironic that I should feel such a need for connection with a person who shares a struggle that I thought, only a few weeks ago, I had worked through, solved and dissolved. After all, I experienced the same reality/struggle since my childhood. Now I am much more of me, I know much more of me and so do most of the significant people in my life.

Then why is it that I need to close the curtains, why do I stop breathing?

“Realness” has always been a very important concept for me. I hate it when people play emotional games, pretend and lie. I get very frustrated with myself, my friends and clients, when I can’t access the core stuff of “where are you with yourself and the world?” Maybe solitude allows me to be in the moment and live in the sense of being connected to what I think and feel. So Dean’s question took me aback. He makes me nervous. He asks perturbing questions and (un)fortunately we are both clever enough to play reciprocal games with questions and answers. Maybe that is part of the intrigue of this friendship that seems to persist despite all odds.

When am I real? “When I am known to some extent and when I feel that the people in my company are really interested enough not to annihilate whatever comes forth.” I know Dean thinks he is harsh because he does not hold back perturbing comments and questions. Yet, it is exactly for that quality that I so often seek him out.



I know that he would take the “annihilate” part of the answer personally, yet I make no attempt to open it up or explain that he is not one of those people. I just leave it. Maybe I have inadvertently just found an awkward way to say: “I struggle not to be ‘unreal’ with you, to some extent because I am not convinced that you really want to know me. This makes me on edge and nervous, especially when you talk to me in such caring ways and when you ask questions no man has ever wanted to ask me. I do not trust that you will not think less of me, given my answers, and I do not know what to expect from you. A few months ago you told me to expect nothing, and today you say: ‘Expect nothing and you will get nothing.’ The uncertainty of these ambivalent processes between us makes it difficult and unsafe for me to be real in the sense that you are inquiring about. Yet you bring a voice to my life that intrigues me and makes me feel part of life in a way that makes it possible for me to explore more of myself.”

This is maybe as “real” as it can get, yet even these words seem inadequate. This is a strange relationship: It’s not framed as therapy and it’s not a normal, easy-going friendship. Jacques would call it an “emotional fuck.” Maybe it just speaks of the connection between two people who seem to be on separate journeys that take each to the edges between being lost and found, understanding and being understood, thinking and sensing, courage and fear, knowing and believing, healing and being healed.

The ambivalent play between closeness and distance that seems to be the perpetuating process between us perturbs me time and again and now brings me to this point where I can write and meet this so-called “self” again.

## Running From and to Crisis

### *Managing Death*

I have been feeling quietly and completely lost for the last three months. After finishing my internship with a great sense of accomplishment, and in search of new contexts, everything fell and felt completely flat. I moved back to Pretoria, to live in a commune with a friend, her boyfriend, Gert, and her sister. I knew I was taking a risk, as I have lived alone ever since I left home. I was accustomed to having my own space. Yet I thought having my own room would be space enough. It wasn't.

In January I felt myself getting more and more unhappy, smoking excessively and getting nothing done on my dissertation. My friend and I became the "housewives" of the commune, keeping an eye on the builders, seeing to the domestic worker's needs, keeping the new dogs (two Alsatians and a Labrador) from biting each other or anyone else. Builders and other kinds of repairmen kept arriving unannounced, with the expectation that we would just be available since, after all, we did not work.

I felt like screaming. The people who shared the house with me all seemed to be very active, outdoor "cowboys" who drew extreme interpersonal boundaries. It was difficult to get a "hello" when they came back from work, never mind "how was your day?" Yet in other ways the patterns of relating were incestuous: It felt like they were intrusive in small but agitating ways.

I got frustrated and resentful, even petty. When one of the Alsatians bit my Fox Terrier I insisted that Gert should take the dog back where he came from (which did not happen). When he neglected to pick up the dog shit, when it was his turn, I let him know that it was just not okay. I got irritated when Janet forgot to buy milk when it was her turn and I complained when Maria, the domestic worker, used all my washing powder for other people's washing. This way of behaving seemed only to perpetuate the feeling of being defined as a person who got uptight about little things because she did not have a job.

The house did not feel like a home. Everything I did seemed to impinge on my relationship with the other people in the house and therefore I had no space. When I went to my room and shut them out, I felt defined as cold and angry. When I worked late I felt I was being defined as a “workaholic show-off.” When I watched television with them, I felt defined as a lazy, fat, inactive slob. (They probably never gave these actions a second thought, yet this is important information about my way of relating in a context of extreme boundaries.) Meanwhile the domestic worker kept interrupting me when I worked and kept walking past my window, staring in through the gap between my curtains. She made me feel like a lazy white woman who gave her too much work.

There was no privacy, no sense of connection and only a very rigid, labelled sense of self.

Then my aunt died suddenly, of diabetes. My mother’s voice was weary over the phone: She was in crisis. She asked me to come home. I was worried about her. I went home after organising a ten-day trip to take her away after the funeral. She sounded depleted from taking care of her brother and his family throughout my aunt’s three-week final illness.

The week of the funeral was quite an ordeal. My niece and her husband came back from London and stayed with us in my mother’s cramped house. There was a constant tension between extreme sadness and extreme efficiency. My niece and my mother seemed to fluctuate between managing the practical things efficiently and allowing themselves to mourn.

My mother was incredibly sad. She had lost a friend and her fear of a loss of a sense of family became very apparent. Her loneliness was expressed in raw emotion. She cried uncontrollably at times. This was the first time that I had seen my mother express emotion in this way.

I felt myself harden and “manage” the situation while I bit my tongue at her need to be available to the family at all times. I did not want to go into the painful meanings of life and death. So we fought when she criticised my looks and when I opened the curtains. I could not hide my irritation with the darkened house. All the blinds and

curtains were closed due to my mother's discomfort with heat (apparently the effect of an under-active thyroid). The house was morbid enough—no light made it stifling and constricting.

After the funeral we left for our trip, with great resistance from my Mom. She wanted to stay at home just in case someone needed her. I was irritated and angered. This is a pattern of the women in our family. My mother tends to fret and worry about any family member's crisis to the extent of sacrificing a great deal of physical, monetary and emotional resources to "be there." She indulges in the crisis as if it gives her some sense of purpose in life. Ironically this makes it safe for her never to enter her own crises.

And that was exactly what *I* was doing: "My mother needs me—crisis! Go home!" It took me away from that house and from the crisis of needing to finish my dissertation, into a space where I felt I was needed. This is a pattern in my life, too. If friends or family are in crisis I go ... I always go.

Maybe this was part of wanting to become a therapist. Not creating crises in therapy by avoiding perturbing questions was certainly a pattern in my early therapies! Yet I know that my training and the pre-verbal need to move beyond these limiting ways of being also enabled me to co-create spaces for crises to happen and to make way for change, in my own life and in the lives of my clients.

Yet now I was caught in the same pattern of avoiding the painfully difficult themes in my life as well as mother's life even though I had gone home to "help". And crises kept coming.

### *Illness and Independence*

A few days after I returned to Pretoria I got sick. Severe stomach cramps kept me awake in agony for days on end. The general practitioner thought it was my appendix and the thought of an operation in a state hospital made it even worse. It turned out to be double infection of the colon and uterus. Later I was astonished to read that these

symptoms could speak of irritation, anger and fear that block creative processes in (Hay, 1988).

The people who shared the house with me seemed not to care at all. This made me angry and resentful. Now I understand the process better. I am the mother of mothers when it comes to nurturing ill people. Yet I don't ask for nurturance easily, especially when it comes to physical pain. Feeling needy embarrasses me and informs a stubborn, independent way of relating. Later, it became apparent that all the people in the house took turns to get ill with chicken pox, ulcers, cysts, flu, in a way which is meaningful in itself. Every one of them responded in a similarly independent way to illness and nurturance. It was as if all of us protected ourselves from entering the crisis of our lives by avoiding interactions that made us feel vulnerable. It is difficult to give or expect or accept any form of closeness in the context of such relational patterns.

### *Fear*

Soon after I was physically well again, my dog was injured seriously for the second time that year. He fell on something sharp while trying to climb up a wall. I did not hear him cry, although I was in the vicinity. My housemates alerted me. (Now I wonder if I was so separated from the context that I even became deaf in terms of pain and fear?)

He would not allow us near him and even bit me as I was trying to get him into the car. I kept him company in the car outside the vet's practice. He crouched fearfully in the corner and snarled aggressively when I attempted to get close. I tried everything to make him better, feeling utterly helpless. I stretched out my hand towards him in an effort to Reiki the hurt and fear, while speaking to him in soft, calming tones. I even sang him a lullaby. Just as he lay down the vet came to see him. A terrible ordeal followed. He had to pin the dog down to give him a shot to calm him down. I had to leave him there for the evening.

That evening I had a very real sense of fear that Vlekkie was going to die. The habit of punctuating the interrelatedness of everything made me certain that this was another sign to move as soon as possible.

When he came home, he crouched underneath my bed for a week. He would not let me come near him, no matter what I tried. He was afraid. I tried to make him feel safe by putting on gentle music, leaving him food and giving him space. Sometimes I would lie down on the floor with my hand underneath the bed and talk to him. One day he made a very courageous attempt at connection despite his explicit fear. He slowly, warily approached my hand, gave it a quick lick and retreated immediately. This simple risk-taking brought me to tears, realising my own cowardice in life.

Now this relationship seems to be a metaphor for a process that was playing out between a friend and me. Jacques has been a brother, colleague or “partner” (this used to be his nickname for me) and friend to me in ways that always felt like a blessing that I did not deserve. He has always looked out for me in the way family members do and created opportunities and contexts of change for me as only a brilliant psychologist can do. I love him dearly and I have always respected and admired him deeply.

Conversations with him have also always created perturbing contexts of growth that have allowed me to “become more”, think differently about life, show more of myself and relate in different ways. He was one of my healers and trainers even before I went to therapy for the first time.

He prepared a space for me in his practice and it seemed that he had been waiting with great anticipation for me to finish my studies. Now he was at the end of his tether with my stuckness on the dissertation. (Patience is not so high on his list of virtues.) He kept asking: “Are you writing?” And I kept giving vague, non-committal responses that were worrying to both of us.

What I did manage to write at the time seemed so raw that I stopped halfway through each attempt. I wanted to stop writing the stories and start academecising them. Yet trying to give voice to the “academic” was irritating and felt redundant. I was confused about how to integrate and fragment the stories and theory into a congruent structure. This process scared and paralysed me.

Jacques tried everything possible to change this process. He offered ideas in terms of the structure, offered me money to get a better place to stay, and even became

business-like in motivating me to find corporate contexts to work in. His caring was touching and very needed and appreciated. Yet, like Vlekkie, I was consumed by fear and resisted the risk of moving one inch, not even allowing myself to admit to it.

### *Criticising Agape*

I found myself no longer wanting to go to Agape, the place I loved and now worked at on Wednesdays.

The morning ritual made a space for people just to get into the moment and connect with themselves and each other again. The last few weeks I had found myself going silent and repeatedly holding back tears in this space. The idea that healing and transformation happen when the crises of our lives find safe places to occur, informs the contexts that are created between people at Agape Healing Community (Lifschitz & Oosthuizen, 2001).

This space brought me so close to opening my fear and helplessness that I started to disqualify the context with a harshness that surprised me. Thoughts like: “What am I doing here? This feels like a cult! What bullshit is this?” went through my mind. That this could happen in a place that had always filled me with a sense of belonging with people who felt like family, was shocking.

One morning Corinne made a comment that spiralled right through me: “Only when you yield to the chaos can a dancing star be born.” She spoke about the trap of managing our lives to avoid the chaos and getting nowhere in the process. I hadn’t spoken to her in a connecting way for months, yet her words touched me in such a way that made it difficult to disqualify her. I kept quiet and did not show much, leaving people to their own assumptions about my non-verbal language.

### *Tessa: A Challenge to a Stuck Repertoire*

Meanwhile I got frustrated with therapy. I was sick of creating contexts of connection, yet I seemed to be good at it. My co-therapists kept looking at me and speaking to me in “awe”. This was more irritating than flattering, maybe because I knew

that my heart was not in it and the students were only observing my “farical repertoire of skills”. I became an expert and they became the “students”. It was so incongruent to the epistemology that I used to live by; yet it felt safe. Stuck, but safe.

Then I was asked to see Tessa, one of the regular members of Agape, who also had some skills in counselling, in therapy. Tessa was and still is a challenge to work with. One of my colleagues said the other day: “She sounds like the kind of client who, if she doesn’t kill herself, is going to be killed by her therapist!”

Tessa likes to speak in riddles. At lunch, before our first meeting, she was asked to read us (everyone who attended Agape, including the supervisors, students and people from the community) a poem she had written earlier that day. The content and the process told a story about a girl who found it difficult to express herself. She spoke in barely audible tones. The words carried a sense of feeling trapped, voiceless and lonely that made me feel a connection with her. She ran away after she had read the poem.

During therapy it became apparent that this was part of her pattern of interacting. She would leave crumbs of secrets, speak in half sentences and change the process as soon as I got close to working with focus in therapy. After I had struggled with her for about two hours, she told me that she was suicidal, had a plan and a date, but refused to tell me the date or make any kind of contract that could serve as a safety net in therapy.

Her way of interacting reminded me of the “borderline” patients at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital. I became very strategic in therapy, commented on the process and started to externalise the Tessa that she thought was dead already. I worked hard in that therapy, actively using different voices to address the stuckness in the therapy. (For example, the strategically sardonic: “Okay, don’t tell me the date, it seems to me that you’ve killed Tessa already anyway;” the playful: “You think you control that little Tessa who is asking you to hear her out? I think the more you ignore her the more impossible her tantrums are going to get, screaming at you: ‘Hear me, see me, listen to me!’ until you either give her voice or kill her.”) It loosened us both up to a greater variety of ways of being together. We even laughed and had fun during the therapy.



During the next week she called me and, yet again, spoke in ways that were difficult to understand at every level. At Agape she told me that she had a gun. I consciously made an effort not to get pulled into a process that could perpetuate her redundant ways of relating. Yet I was worried about the extremity that was playing out and asked Stan and Corinne for supervision. They urged me to see the both/and of the situation, as Tessa had a history of relating this way. I felt they were commenting without sufficiently exploring my ideas and the process of the therapy. Reminding me of a both/and and telling me not to be too empathic only felt patronising. Again I felt underestimated and defined in a rigid way by my “parents”.

This process started to shift only when Stan and Corinne asked all the “supervisors” to think of a personalised symbol of the themes that we picked up on at Agape. The next Wednesday night we sat in a circle in their “talking room”, sharing thoughts in a connected way for the first time that year. I took a tissue box called “lost and found” and even allowed myself to let go a little in trying to give words to this theme. Stan commented on how I had stopped. He did not explain what exactly I had stopped. But, I knew: I had stopped entering and reflecting on the struggles in and out of therapy and this was limiting my ways of being with myself and others.

Maybe this is why I need to close the curtains and open up this context of reflecting and writing today.

## Speaking the Chaos: The Crisis of Not-Knowing

I have learnt to listen with a “third ear” to the songs that come to me at the most unpredictable times. They usually speak to me of where my head and heart are heading. Sometimes they give voice to the pre-verbal senses of the soul. Last Wednesday, I kept finding myself singing: “And I think it’s gonna rain today ...”.

At Agape, the morning group gathered in an “endoro” (a spiral formation that carries the symbol of healing). There was a silence in the day that felt like the moment of going inward before things start to move. Corinne spoke in a gentle yet strong voice about entering the moment. “Listen to yourself. What do you need to hear today? What are you struggling with? What are you scared to hear and say? Look around you and sense each other encountering the same process. Maybe the content is not the same, but the struggle is part of a human way of being that we share.” Then she asked us to name the day (a ritual that we usually make space for at the end of the day’s meeting).

I spoke in that spiral for the first time since the beginning of the year. Something in me just gave way, opened, to give words to what I had feared sharing for months: My life was in chaos. The uncertainty of being between spaces at every level all the time gave me an urge to manage my life and not to “stay in the struggle”, as Stan always said. I spoke of how difficult it was to be at Agape, when people brought words like “enter the chaos”, while I felt that I could not afford such a luxury at this point in my life. I had a dissertation to finish, a career to plan and a huge study loan to pay off! Yet in managing my life, I got nothing done and I felt lost. I had lost my sense of self in clinging to a rigid and absolute definition of what I needed to do, with a grip that only fear could foster. So that day I gave myself permission simply to be in the moment in an honest way.

Speaking about the chaos brought a different way of relating to the people at Agape that day. People connected with me in verbal and non-verbal ways that were very touching. One healer even asked, with a loving sense of humour: “So are you a chaotic now?”

There was a release in speaking the chaos—a release of the boundaries of what I allowed myself to show and how I allowed myself to be; a release of a rigid way of relating fuelled by the assumption that being there in a supervisory position of sorts prohibited me from bringing my struggles to Agape. Now, I laugh at the arrogance of this way of thinking, knowing that nothing could be further removed from the ethic and epistemology that make Agape a place of meeting and transformation.

Speaking about my struggles freed me up to be there with more spontaneity and made it possible once more to connect to the context and the people. This also freed me up in my work there. I noticed how a stuck process of relating shifted between Tessa and I when I asked to see her home. On the way there she said she had written a song, as I had asked the previous week, but that she had decided not to sing it to me. This was part of her pattern of relating that was usually met with a strategic and sometimes sardonic comment delivered in an “expert” way from my side. This time I just started singing the song in my head, “I think it’s gonna rain today”, repeatedly, asking her to join. She laughed at my persistence and rather gay way of being with her and sang her beautiful song about the struggles in her life, after a while of the two of us just being human together.

She took me on a journey through Mamelodi. First she showed me the house she lived in before her father died. It was a beautiful house with a garden, in an up-market part of the town, called “Place where we build ourselves up”. Then she took me to her current home in Extension six, commenting on how most of the neighbourhoods in Mamelodi are called by number. This process made me understand that she felt objectified in the same way.

Her mother’s house was a shack, with dust as a garden. As we entered through the battered gate, this woman came towards me with a big smile and open arms, welcoming me quite unexpectedly. Soon after she had invited me into her home, her two younger daughters came running home, touching me with their open smiles and shy attempts to connect. Their elder brother (in matric) also arrived and started to fiddle with the radio.

While the kids played with my hair, I started asking Tessa's mother and brother perturbing questions about her. They answered with an honesty that amazed me. Her mother started telling me how Tessa wrote yet never showed anyone what she wrote. When I asked them what signs Tessa gave them when things were not okay, they agreed that she grew silent. That morning, at Agape, Tessa had told us that she had not spoken in two days. Her mother was very worried about her and her brother thought it was just Tessa's way of getting attention. Her mother also explained that she did not have enough money to always provide things, like shoes, which Tessa asked for. She knew that this made Tessa unhappy, but her brother went to school and therefore she needed to provide him with shoes, although she had little enough money to get by on already. Working with these meanings in a way that gave a *double description* of the information I had about Tessa, brought a shift in my thinking about her (Keeny, 1983).

I am ashamed to admit that previously I had thought of Tessa only as a manipulating client who played games in therapy that made it difficult to create the context of voice she seemed, so desperately, to need. Seeing her in relation to her significant system, and going there in a more self-reflective way, gave me a better sense of her urgent need for a sense of self that was not merely objectified as poor, workless, in need of attention and the single role of being a mother when her mother was not there. Her way of interacting was also her way of relating within these entrapping meanings of herself created in her relationship to the contexts she lived in, which served a function in that system that I still needed to explore.

Her family agreed to visit Agape next week, which I hoped would be helpful in creating a context to explore these meanings in a way that would allow for difference.

After our visit, Tessa took me to a mountain on the other side of Mamelodi, where she goes when she needs time to be alone. This place not only gave me a grand view of how big the area actually is, it also gave me a sense of how little we and our world can become when we take knowledge out of the context of relationship and claim it to be an absolute truth, as I had done with Tessa.

After she had taken me to meet her aunt and grandmother, who lived nearby, we returned to Agape. Our journey left me with an appreciation of her courage to show me more of herself, and how my way of being in the relationship, with more openness and curiosity, had changed the process of therapy.

Giving words to the struggles in my life that morning had made it possible to be in life and therapy in a richer, more receptive and open way. This had allowed me to show, be shown and relate with more of myself and more of the people around me.

At the end of the day, I named the day “open” and I understood the presence of a lyric like: “I think it’s gonna rain today.” Sometimes it needs to rain before the sky can open ...

## Leaving Agape

I “resigned” from Agape. I was frustrated with the context. Agape remained a context of training and I had had enough of training, even in the capacity of being a “supervisor in training”. I felt trapped in being the trainee or the child still working within the conditions and expectations of her “parents”. How can a different sense of self evolve if a child never leaves home?

My relationship with Corinne also felt too enmeshed at the time. Corinne, who had been my therapist for a long time, with whom I had a long history of “growing up” and who had been my “mother” in many ways, was also my supervisor at Agape. In addition, I had rented her house in Johannesburg after I had had enough of staying in the commune in Pretoria. She shared the house with me on Monday nights. This often led me to feel that the space was never really my own. I was literally still living in my “mother’s house”. Although it was a beautiful place, and although I was grateful for having affordable accommodation that did not force me to live with a lot of other people, it was a tricky situation. Living “under your mother’s roof” always comes with certain rules and expectations in terms of who you should be and how you should act. This frustrated me and I felt it was time to move on, first by leaving Agape.

I needed a new context where I was not only the “student psychologist”. I was also tired of the endless self-reflective therapies, which were becoming an emotional burden. I was tired of judging myself in terms of how my therapies progressed all the time and I was tired of judging myself in terms of my ability to encounter my own pain and difficulties all the time. The activities at Agape were informed by the discourse that healing is always also for the healer. I still believe this. I believe that being with other people in a humane way, acknowledging, reflecting on and utilising your own difficulties as a healer creates contexts that are healing. I was just tired of feeling that I always had to be in difficulty and that I always had to expose myself emotionally in the group sessions at Agape. Knowing that this was expected of me, knowing that I would be criticised if I did not bring my “struggles” into the conversation at Agape, and

knowing that this only served to feed my sense of insecurity about who I was and whether or not that was okay, I decided to leave.

During this time I was selected, trained and affiliated to a company that used a particular tool for career assessments. As an associate of this company I did assessments for various firms. It was exciting to enter the corporate world and learn more about the world of work, whilst using a tool that was qualitative made a lot of sense. I enjoyed working in a professional capacity and meeting new people, without having to reflect on my personal issues all the time.

## Going Home

*Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall*

*Humpty Dumpty had a great fall*

*All the king's horses and all the king's men*

*Couldn't put Humpty together again.* (Nursery rhyme)

*You've got to get yourself together*

*You got stuck in a moment and you*

*Can't get out of it.*

*Don't say that later will be better*

*You got stuck in a moment*

*And you can't get out of it.* (Song: U2)

*Human kindness is overflowing, and I think it's gonna rain today* (Song: Bette Middler)

Flight 367 to Cape Town has been delayed by half an hour. The plane moves. I'm stuck. The flight attendants are going through the safety rituals. Their voices are far away, like last night's dream. I'm crying. Can't stop crying. The tears flow and flow and flow. We are in the air. My eyes are closed. My body heaves. I'm drowning.

I try to read a dissertation: "The Self of the Therapist as Recursion: Connecting the Head and the Heart" (Valkin, 1994). I'm in the loop: back ten years. Can't do this thing (my own dissertation). Can't do it. Feel absolutely lost and overwhelmed. Isolated and scared. Useless and blaming. Small and confused. I was not smart enough for the Master's training after all. Everything, all the training, all the therapy, all the reflective thinking, everything is rendered redundant. Who am I? What is my purpose? Why am I here?



Someone offers me a handkerchief. I decline. A flight attendant takes my bag. It has to be stowed before landing. She bends down, makes gentle eye contact and rubs my shoulder. My voice is harsh: "It's okay." I close my eyes. We leave the aeroplane: "I hope you feel better." I'm surprised that she is still reaching out after being shunned. I say "Thank you", and the tears still come.

I'm in the WC again, like in my childhood, crying, silently screaming.

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I moved back home seven months ago. More than two years have passed since I began writing these stories. So many things have happened. When I was still living in Johannesburg Dean divorced his wife. Months afterwards we had a relationship. He was still in turmoil about all the changes in his life. I yearned to express and live the new me: believing I was ready to love and be loved. It was a wonderful and very crazy time. We practically lived together for a while, neither of us committing to each other. It was a time of fear and uncertainty for both of us. It seemed so important to express my newfound femininity and sexuality. But more than that, I was so afraid of life beyond the safe structures of the student role where I could write exams and find approval in the results.

It felt like I was entering the exams of life. I was scared and certain that I would fail horribly. It was time to take responsibility for creating my own life; to take responsibility for the relationships I created around me; to take responsibility for earning a living; to take responsibility for creating and expressing a life congruent with my ideals. I had to finish the dissertation. I wanted to open a practice with a friend. I had to get beyond the loneliness and turmoil I felt. Yet the dissertation just seemed to make this turmoil more present. I was failing this exam as well. I felt lost and confused. What was I going to do with the stories? How was I going to make sense of differentiation when all the stories seemed to express the feeling of a girl in turmoil? And anyway, I had an urge to get out there in live life! Writing stories just brought me closer to the fear I wanted to escape. I ran ...

Dean needed a place to stay for a while. He moved in with me. He was obviously going through difficult times. After all, I loved the man, although I hid it well. I found refuge in the role of nurturer. In taking care of someone else I did not have to face my fears.

We took turns cooking at night. Suddenly there was someone to share the daily ups and down of life with. I loved being in his company, listening to his views on life, religion, food, psychology—you name it. Funny how the daily rituals really became significant. We became comfortable with each other. Late at night I would sit with him (in my pyjamas) while he ironed his clothes. He joked with me about how long it took to blow-dry my hair and I made sure that there was food he liked in the house.

We paid attention to each other. He would know when I was upset just by the tone of my voice on the phone and he'd comment immediately. We would ask for and make space with each other when we needed to talk about the unsettling themes in our lives. This became like therapy. We were not good “therapists” to each other. He was in turmoil about his love for his ex-wife. I ignored my own turmoil about that and spoke only about not getting ahead with my dissertation. I needed to love him without entrapping him. He needed to be loved without obligation.

After a few weeks he moved in with his mother and her husband. He had grown up with his father. He took this courageous step because he felt this would give him an opportunity to address a lot of unresolved issues. We were both sad when he left, yet knew it was important that he did so.

In the following weeks we met each other for coffee every day. We spent our weekends together. Sometimes we went out dancing. Often we stayed home, drinking red wine in front of a fire. I felt like a teenager exploring, entering life for the first time. Hearing him speak of his love for his ex-wife made me feel safe even when I knew it was insane. Somehow, it was an affirmation that such a depth of love exists. Loving him despite this ambiguity in our relationship was proof that I could love as unconditionally and it fostered the hope that he could also love me without the usual entrapping obligations.

I lost contact with friends who were very important to me, knowing that they would bring a “reality check” that I was not ready or willing to face.

As time passed the unsaid invaded my space with Dean. I could not tell him that I felt insecure and not good enough when we spoke about his love for his ex-wife. This would mean the end of the relationship. I hid my feelings and thoughts from him, which frustrated him tremendously and made me feel even more worthless.

He also grew increasingly uncomfortable with the incongruence of loving me but more than anything wanting to reunite with his ex-wife. He did not want to hurt me.

Eventually the walls came down. The safe harbour the relationship had provided from life became an empty, unfulfilling, lonely space—a metaphor for the stuckness and fears we had wanted to escape in the first place. He had the courage to end it.

My life was in tatters. I called home: “Dad, I’m coming home to finish my dissertation.” He said he’d fly up and drive down to Cape Town with me. I was astounded by his support. He invited me to come and live with his family, but I opted to move in with my mother, who was living alone.

My mother supported me like never before. My family, like most people, knew very little about my relationship with Dean. But she knew we had “broken up”. She mothered me with food and support. She had been living alone for six years and welcomed having her child back with her.

At first I felt numb. Then the pain became like a knife, cutting me to pieces whenever I sat still. Even now the tears are severing the back of my throat. I did not want anything to do with psychology anymore. I started doing career assessment in Cape Town for the firm I had worked for in Johannesburg. I found another job, three days a week, doing assessments for a small consulting company.

I tried to get myself geared to finish the damn dissertation, to treat the stories like my client, as Ricky had suggested. All I needed to do, for now, was to identify and reflect on the themes apparent in the stories, using social discourse analysis.

Doing this became like sitting in front of a mirror, doing therapy with yourself and getting nowhere. I got stuck, seeing the same patterns playing out over and over. They became absolute, reified labelling realities. I felt I was defining everything that was wrong with me all the time. The same pattern and themes that were evident in the stories were still playing out in my life. In the process of reflecting on this, I was pathologising myself again with single truths. “You are dependent. You nurture others whilst expecting them to take care of your emotional needs. You avoid telling others what you think, feel and need and in doing so you create undifferentiated and empty relationships. You seek and create experts around you and avoid taking responsibility for creating what you want, whilst becoming the ultimate victim. Why does your sense of self-worth depend so much on what you can do for others?”

Seeing everything that was “wrong” with me, while not knowing how to change. Or was I resisting change? The more things change the more they stay the same ...

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Dean and I still speak often and I see him often. I have to travel to Johannesburg on business at least once a month. He has put a lot of effort into getting his life back together. Things still feel stuck between us. I have turned him into another expert in my life. He comments on my patterns of dependence and I close up, shut up, getting frustrated with myself and with his frustration with me.

Having a simple conversation with him is impossible. Talking about ordinary things makes me feel I am boring him. I don't like being boring. Even a simple conversation about meeting an old friend provokes comments like: “You don't even know what you are feeling, do you?” These are the spaces I still co-create.

This is the nature of the stuckness that had me in tears on the plane.

Something has emerged, though. The sense of wanting to enter life, and not just write about it, was also informed by the realisation that differentiation does not happen on paper. It happens in relationship, in action, with others. This was one of the reasons I returned to my family.

Slowly but surely difference emerges. My mother asked me to go with her to Betty's Bay for a few days. I agreed, forgetting that my father's and half-sister's birthdays were coming up. The morning we left I had to tell my mother that I would have to return early because of this. It was very difficult. My mother speaks of my father as if he is dead. She does not want to hear anything about him or his "new" family. I had to voice my needs in this situation. I wanted to attend their birthday party. They are part of my life even if she wants to believe that they don't exist. She was very angry and I think to some extent embarrassed.

She was afraid to drive alone to Betty's Bay. She was also afraid to sleep alone there. Usually I would disregard whatever I wanted to do and make sure I was there for her. This time I was not going to do that. I was tired of feeling lost in pleasing others. Besides, I had learnt that I do not do anyone a favour by "taking care" of his or her fears. Protecting others from facing their fears keeps me from facing my own, which only fosters enmeshed and dependent relationships in which one becomes undifferentiated and lost.

It was difficult to openly discuss the situation with her. Yet it was the most significant conversation we have ever had. We were both open and honest about what we felt and thought and needed. She wanted to convince me to change my mind. I told her why I was not going to do that. I felt guilty about asking her to recognise my father and little sister as part of my life. Yet the honesty between us was touching. More than that: It brought difference. It was not the end of the world, after all. She did not kick me out of the house. She took care of herself. She took the dog with her, so that she did not have to drive alone. She also invited someone else to spend that particular night with her.

This week she went to Betty's Bay again. She wanted me to go with her and again it was difficult to say "no". I knew I needed time on my own. I have been working day and night and needed to attend to my dissertation. Needed to be with myself again. She was disappointed, but accepted it.

I had space to breathe again, for the first time in months. I listened to classical music last night and my soul surrendered to the flow and themes of the music. Realising that I love Mozart is very significant for me. I own the thought. Today I bought incense and flowers and a candle and bubble bath. I cleared my room, created a space I needed and liked. I own this space.

The harsh voice in me asks why I still can't make space for myself with others? Small steps, I answer, small steps. First comes the realisation that this is what I have co-created in my life. Then it comes down to taking deep breaths, defining what I do want and changing my actions accordingly. Maybe it is about making our own choices and maybe certain ways of relating never do change. Maybe only our awareness, intent and way of thinking about our actions change.

Saying "no" to my Mom was like asking someone who is afraid of heights to jump from a cliff. Hovering on the edge in fear is worse than jumping. Now I will start acknowledging the small acts of bravery. It might seem like insignificant nonsense to you, the reader. Yet I don't think I care any more. I am tired of a sense of self that depends on the approval of everybody around me. I have no control over what you think or feel. Maybe just saying what I think and feel is the greatest gift I can give to myself right now. Maybe it is the greatest gift I can give to the people close to me to. I have been in my head for too long.

I spoke to Dean this afternoon. He's going to buy a goldfish tomorrow. I thought it was amazing. He got irritated: "Don't say it is amazing just because you don't know what else to say and don't take it to the metaphorical meanings. Yes, I am doing this because I have never taken care of anything in my life. Just be human for a while and talk to me about fish!" Funny, I thought small talk bored him. But he had a point. I have been in my head for too long. Self-referentially reflecting and commenting on process

far too often. Isolating myself from people who don't "know the language". Isolating myself from the humanness of those who do "speak the language". Isolating myself from just spontaneously being me.

I thought the journey would end here. Maybe this is not a journey that ever ends. Maybe it has only just begun.

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Hallo. I am An-Maréé.

I like the touch of the wind on my face. I like the sound of the ocean at night. I like walking in the rain and chatting until the early hours of the morning. I like thinking about the meanings of dreams. I read the horoscopes once in a while. Actually, I find them fascinating. I love candlelight and bubble baths. I love reading, especially, at the moment, spiritual books. I always have a song in my head.

I am not a morning person. I need time to wake up. I don't like paying attention to details and I have my head up in the clouds most of the time. I don't like being interrupted while I work, I lose my train of thought.

I like drawing figures, playing with light and shadows. I like poetry and I have always yearned to express myself clearly yet gently.

Sometimes I take life too seriously. Yet I love being with spontaneously playful people and I love laughing.

I sometimes dream of riding a horse. There is an intuitive understanding between us. I lift my face to the wind. In that moment life feels uncomplicated and I feel happy and free.

Can you also hear the music? What does your song sound like?

Would you like to dance?

## REFLECTING ON THEMES

### (CHAPTER 7)

In this chapter I have written stories about the stories in the previous chapters.

#### Reflecting on the Meaning of “Meeting”

*“In research, as in conversation we meet ourselves”* (Morgan, 1983, p. 406).

Throughout this dissertation I have introduced you, the reader, to the different contexts that have informed my life up to now. Each of these contexts and the way I have introduced you to them seem to be significantly different. It is as if I have used different voices, as if the intensity of the voices, or the way of speaking and the way the texts were structured, carry meanings of their own.

#### *Meeting the Family: The Fairy Tale Voice*

The texts in *Meeting the Family* are presented in a story format. Stories can be factually correct or fictional—like fairy tales. The language, structure and tone of the texts in *Meeting the Family*, are typical of fairy tales (e.g. *Growing up*: “Once upon a time, long, long ago”).

I grew up living in such stories. While we (my family) told each other and the world that we were a normal, happy family, we lived and struggled with the harsh realities that are always implicitly part of the underlying themes in fairy tales. As such the use of fairy tales to tell my stories about my family portrays something of the texture and the process of the stories that informed our way of being together.

Fairy tales are safe because they are metaphors. They convey that which is “close to home” in a symbolic, removed way that does not punctuate only one clear meaning. Yet they are rich in meanings.



Fairy tales also symbolically portray realities that are not necessarily factually correct. Stories express our perceptions and illusions of “our realities” of what happened in those contexts. We as people generate stories, family illusions, in our lives, which inform our behaviour. They are merely our perceptions or punctuations of that stage of our lives. These perceptions or narratives are the maps that we carry in our heads—they are not the territory.

The stories in *Meeting the Family*, therefore, convey my perception of myself when I was a child. These stories do not “reveal” what the people described in the stories are really like. Each story is a story of the person as she or he has relevance to my life.

The tone of the stories is respectful and gentle. It conveys that I have no malicious intent, but rather that I am meeting myself in relation to my punctuation of the people who are significant to me.

Fairy tales have an inherent moral undertone or message. If you think of a fable like Little Red Riding Hood, it is a violent story (the wolf tries to kill the grandmother, after which she is saved and the wolf is killed and gutted). Yet the story does not create a perception of violence, but rather relates a message of hope: The good triumphs over the bad. What was once perceived as impossible is conquered. Inherent in the fairy tale format of the texts in *Meeting the Family* is my perception of my vulnerabilities in the context of my family. However it also conveys that seemingly impossible circumstances were lived through and conquered.

#### *Meeting Therapy: The Client Voice*

In this chapter the text is written in a staccato style. The structure of this text is fragmented, which speaks of my struggles to find ways of expressing myself. It is isomorphous to the process that played out in therapy and my struggle to “break the silence” and express my experiences and the meanings with which I lived.

Here I give voice to my story of how I punctuate my experiences and my world, through pictures. Pictures are used as a modality of expression. Again, like fairy tales, these pictures are rich in meaning and can be interpreted in many different ways. The

pictures act as metaphors that illustrate my experiences and meanings of myself, and my experience of a process of change in how I perceived myself in relation to the world.

Pictures are, however, very evocative. They are not as safe as fairy tales. The impact of the pictures is much harsher than the gentle voice used in the fairy tale stories. Telling my story through a non-verbal modality does bring a modicum of safety—that of expressing the harsh experience of my realities in a way that is not judgmental or blaming but carries multiple meanings. But this modality is unsafe in the sense that it makes you and me vulnerable. Pictures draw one into the experiences of the artist. They are evocative. They compel an emotional response. They are a mode of expression that actively invites you (the reader) to engage and become more immersed, aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually, in my story and your story about my story (Ellis & Bochner, 1996b). And they compel you and me to not only “know” my “truth” but also to feel my “truth”. They invite you to also feel your “truth” about my “truths”.

#### *Meeting Unisa: The Student Voice*

The stories in this section are a chronological, factual telling of some of the events that played out during my training. These are “theoretical stories”: They have facts and role players, and give credit to the developing of the expert in the language of psychology. The voice of my supervisor is included as a witnessing voice, giving credit to this development, which helps to write my story about the training.

Initially the texts introduce you to the significant people in the context of my training, in that community; people who were part of the co-creation of my becoming as a therapist. The texts describe the rituals in and through which I claim my identity as a psychologist in the presence of this chosen community.

Furthermore, the texts juxtapose the family of origin with the family of the therapeutic community. The creation of a new community/family is informed by ways of relating that were created in the family of origin. Old realities are re-enacted and re-played in relation to a new group of people. Old ways of behaving create an old way of relating with different people in this context. In that lies the birth of the possibility of change, for the new role players are not the same people as my family of origin; the

same patterns of relating are challenged. For instance: In *Meeting Stan*, I move away from falling silent in the presence of a flirtatious man. It is clear that this behaviour is not feasible in that context. The need for and significance of a repertoire of relating to others are born.

Another example of this is the change in my behaviour in relation to the group (see *Meeting the Group*). In the family of origin, silence is described as a safe space. In group therapy, however, this behaviour is challenged. Although I remain in the role of the “pleaser”, I start to risk voicing my ideas.

As such the stories in this dissertation are also a modality through which I voice my ideas and experience, yet voicelessness is not taken away. Subtle meanings about myself are portrayed in a manner in which I don’t have to feel that it is I who am talking; yet I do speak. For instance, throughout these texts, my stories about men are told, yet in an indirect manner. The voicelessness I referred to thus indicates that the text carries subjugated discourses or stories that inform my way of relating, but which I still feel uncomfortable about voicing.

#### *Thinking About Recursive Influences at This Juncture in My Journey*

The “fairy tale” stories and the “theoretical” stories recursively influence each other at this point in my journey. I come from Cape Town, then during selection I am asked to act like an alcoholic “Capie”, but my Dad is an alcoholic. I start working in a “Capie” environment (Eersterust) with Afrikaans, coloured people. I, who have learnt to be voiceless in the Cape, start working in a voiceless community, where I am initially voiceless (see *Meeting Eersterust*).

At Eersterust I start a playgroup with children, in a way that is non-judgemental, nurturing. This is informed by my experiences as a child. My experiences in the context of the play group in turn influence my stories about myself and my behaviour in therapy with the clients at Unisa.

In *Meeting Stan* I use my voice in a specific way, which is informed by my stories about men, created in the context of my family (the discourse that men and

behaviour such as flirting should be avoided; the discourse that closeness in relation to men is dangerous and should therefore be avoided.). The experiences with Stan then facilitate an awareness of these discourses. This awareness then recursively influences a process of my becoming aware of and relating to these discourses. This in turn informs what happens in therapy with Steven. His stories about his stories, relative to my stories about my stories, facilitate a process of reflecting and voicing about my stories about men.

This process then evolves in my personal therapy with Dean, Corinne and Reiki. *Meeting Reiki, Letter to Corinne* and *Discussion With Corinne* tell the story of how I come into contact with my body and start working with my stories about men.

Yet, at the same time, I illustrate my theoretical voice in the text (*Meeting Steven*) by using the theoretical voice of Jenkins (1990).

The reader therefore bears witness to the juxtaposition of the fairy tales and theoretical stories. These in turn are juxtaposed with An-Mareé: who I am and who I am as a therapist. Therefore by telling you fairy tales and theoretical stories, I am drawing distinctions, which when viewed as recursively connected tell you about An-Mareé as a person and as a therapist (i.e. that I am ambivalent about the factual and need to see facts as only one punctuation of many possible multiple realities; that I am respectful and sensitive to other people's realities; that I have a need to be nurtured and that I have a fear of being judgemental—and so on.).

#### *Meeting Sterkfontein: The Expert Voice*

Here the tone of the texts is formal. The “expert” takes the reader to the medical model. The inclusion of the letter of reference from my supervisor at Unisa validates me as an expert within an expert system. It is punctuated as an “objective” opinion of an “expert on An-Mareé”.

In addition, the inclusion of the letters from my supervisors reflects a process: I am diagnosed as competent and given a “medical certificate of competence”. These texts

confirm the expert position of the supervisors as well as of An-Mareée, within the medical context.

The style of writing in *Ward Round Jazz and Blues*, a text in which I describe my success in that context, illustrates my voice of an expert in the presence of other experts.

Furthermore, using the voice of other experts to illustrate my expert stance is typical of academics or theorists, who use the voices of other experts to validate themselves as experts, whilst not necessarily having or expressing a voice of their own.

When I relinquish the expert position and start questioning the medical model, the tone of the texts changes. I start humouring the medical model (see *Ward Round Jazz and Blues*) and start searching for my own voice. In this process of searching for my own voice, both/and themes are explored in a story format. The medical model or voice of the expert punctuates realities in terms of fact or fiction, right or wrong. Relinquishing the voice of the expert makes possible a self-reflective process, as there is no burden of proof as with empirical texts. In these texts themes like emancipation and dependence, community and differentiation etc., are juxtaposed, which allows the flexibility for a voice of my own to emerge. Therefore encounters with the self and my own voice become possible.

#### *Meeting An-Mareé: The “Real” Voice*

In *Meeting the Family* I wrote stories that spoke indirectly about myself in relation to my family. In *Meeting An-Mareé* I wrote more stories about myself, yet here the stories speak more directly of my struggles in life. The illusion that I can control the meanings that the reader ascribes to me is given up. I claim my voice.

The stories are no longer presented as fairy tales.

Initially, in *Meeting the Family*, the stories are more ambivalent and the nuances of the meanings I live with are less apparent. I write about very harsh experiences in the gentlest way possible. In *Meeting An-Mareé*, the nuances of the meanings are more clearly illuminated and more “real”. Realness here is to be able to enter the ambivalence of being human. In expressing my entrapment in being lost and found, understanding

and being understood, thinking and sensing, having courage yet being fearful, knowing and believing and healing and being healed my “real voice” is expressed.

The function or effect of these stories is to illustrate my unique way of understanding and struggling with what it means to be human and how this informs my unique way of being in interaction with people. It illustrates a signpost in my journey: I realise that I am human; that the human condition informs a life that is comic, tragic and absurd, where there are endless opportunities to create a reality and live it (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Yet in that, I can claim my voice.

It has been a long and hard journey to get to this juncture.

### Reflecting on Performance

To be worthy or acceptable as a human being, you have to perform according to the standards or expectations of the contexts or relationships you are in.

This discourse is evident in *Having a Grandfather Called “Meester”*, illustrated by the line: “Knowledge meant closeness, approval and acceptance”. It is also evident in the anxiety with which I seem to enter new contexts or relationships (see *Meeting Ricky*, *Selection*, *Meeting Sterkfontein Hospital*). These texts illustrate that every time I enter a new context it is with fear and trepidation about not being good enough. This discourse is also evident in *Going Home*, where the text reads: “It felt like I was entering the exams of life. I was scared and certain that I would fail horribly.”

In including texts that affirm my “performance” in therapy (see *In Conversation With Corinne*), at Unisa (letter of recommendation from my supervisor) and at Sterkfontein Hospital (letters of evaluation), I implicitly also “validate” myself to you. These texts serve to remind you: “Remember, I am good enough, my results show this, the feedback from my supervisors illustrates this.” These texts speak of the insecurity that such a discourse creates, that could silence a questioning or critical stance on the part of the reader.

The implications of such a discourse are varied, totalising and severe. It creates a continuous cycle of fear, self-doubt, blame and disempowerment. Every encounter in

life becomes a battle, where the other person has the power to approve or disapprove of me. This restricts me to the role and voice of the responsible self, the pleaser, and obliges me to continuously censor myself in terms of what may be required by the person I am in relationship with. Always pleasing every need or expectation of those with whom you are in relationship impossible. This is a recipe for continuously feeling and defining myself as not good enough. On the other hand it also has the potential to facilitate a blaming and disqualifying voice. It marginalises me to a restricted choice of action: Either I disqualify negative feedback from those around me, or I accept it in full and disqualify my own sense of self-worth and work harder at accomplishing what is expected of me.

In an academic context this discourse means that failing any course reduces me to no more than a failure. In an interactive training context, this discourse breeds a spirit of competition, for if I do not want to be merely a “mediocre” person, I have to outshine the rest of the group. This has the potential to marginalise me in the role of the “good student” and can limit group interactions to a process of “one-upping” each other. Trusting my abilities and ideas becomes very difficult, as I need the security of my “examiners” (thus those I am in relationship with or those that I report to, such as my supervisors) around me to warrant my voice.

This discourse also requires that I continuously monitor and manage others’ perceptions of me. For instance, in *Going Home* I tell my father that I am coming home because I want to finish my dissertation: not because my heart is broken and not because I feel like a failure, that I feel lost and need support. My responsibility to perform better takes the place of asking for help.

Managing the perceptions of others’ silences restricts honesty about my own needs as well as hinders the possibility that other interactions and voices may in relationship with others. It prohibits closeness and intimacy in my relationships: speaking about what is important to me or what it is that I need in the relationship beyond wanting to please the person I am in relationship with becomes very risky, if not impossible.

However, the texts also convey that this discourse is starting to play a lesser role in my interactions. This is illustrated in my confidence and emerging trust in my own abilities, as depicted in *Comments on the First Rotation*, *Letter From Jane* and *Leaving Sterkfontein*. I begin to acknowledge myself. This is also evident in my willingness to leave Agape and escape the conditions and expectations that were immanent in that context (see *Leaving Agape*).

A process of differentiation emerges in my willingness to take action beyond what I think would be approved by my mother (see *Going Home*) or you (the reader). In *Going Home* the text reads: “I have no control over what you think and feel. Maybe just saying what I think and feel is the greatest gift I can give to myself right now. Maybe it is the greatest gift I can give to the people close to me.” This illustrates the emergence of a new discourse: being open in relationships and not always censoring my actions or conversations to please others allows me to become part of conversations, part of a process where new meanings and voices (i.e. different selves in relation to others) and new interactions become possible.

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I have, for a very long time, lived with the discourse that one needs to perform and see to the needs of others if you are to be okay.

In writing this dissertation I have stopped and disqualified my stories as nonsense time and again. It has been a tremendously painful process. I have always kept in mind that someone has to read and grade this dissertation. I am often still embarrassed by the simple, painful stories to which I have given voice. I keep judging myself. This restricts my inner dialogue to a process of labelling myself, totalising myself as a failure, as being stupid, etc. This process leaves me feeling isolated and entrapped time and again. It is then that I remind myself that such a dialogue is silencing. It takes me out of the process. It limits the encounters I can have with myself and the people I am in relationship with. Another dialogue begins, in which I remind myself that my self-worth does not have to depend on the affirmation of the examiner or reader, or anybody I am in relationship with. I take a deep breath and I start writing again, because I believe that in



“staying in the struggle”, therefore in speaking the simple, painful stuff, difference emerges.

You are doing harm to yourself by being what you think you should be so that someone approves of you. Compromising who you are to gain the approval of another is a very precise example of giving away a piece of your spirit. Eventually you give away more and more of yourself until you have no strength or sense of self left. (Myss, 2002, p. 55)

I believe this, because I have experienced it. I still do. What has become apparent to me is that I don't want to necessarily stop or silence the need to perform. It has helped me to succeed in a world where performance does matter. Yet I don't want this to become the overriding discourse in my life. I don't want it to totalise and marginalise my definition of self. Therefore taking small actions to open up other conversations and other voices and other ways of being have become part of my life story and my story of differentiation.

When I started this dissertation I did it with all the excitement of having a story to tell that speaks of change. I thought my story would illustrate how I have differentiated and changed, and voilà, here you have the end product: a new An-Mareé! Now, however, I realise that differentiation is never complete. It is an ongoing process of being in conversation with life. It entails taking actions that keep this dialogue going, always allowing for different voices to emerge and various encounters to become possible. It is a never-ending process that leads from “being to becoming”.

### Reflecting on Gender Discourses

I have often felt more at ease in the presence of women than men. I suppose this is due to the discourses that I grew up with. In the time in which I grew up, the world I lived in was informed by the discourse, literally taken from the Bible, that men should be the heads of households and women should be subordinate.

Living in a patriarchal society that took this discourse seriously, women were frequently at the mercy of men. They were supposed to be mothers and caretakers of their husbands and their families. If they really had to work, or insisted upon working, their options were limited. Thus my grandmother was a nurse and my mother a teacher. These were the most appropriate occupations for women when they were growing up. Women who decided to work in a corporate environment did so as secretaries. Progressing to managerial or senior management level was, I was told, nearly impossible. Most men protected their territory and their positions of power as a matter of course. It was mostly Afrikaans men who belonged to the National Party that governed this “dominantly Christian” country and perpetuated the power differential between men and women.

In the Dutch Reformed Church I grew up in, only men were allowed to be priests. Special duties, such as those of a deacon, were exclusively for men. In effect the church also kept men in positions of power. Women were restricted to roles such as baking for the church fêtes.

My father was a deacon in our church. He was the paragon of a good man and a good Christian in the community and society we lived in. Yet he was frequently not such a good Christian at home. I often had a sense of my mother’s entrapment on various levels within her marriage. On the one hand, she was informed by a need to be the “good Christian woman” who abided by the rules of what was appropriate in the world she lived in. On the other hand, she felt the effects of the rules society enforced upon women and the power it gave to men. She frequently came across as disgusted and hurt by the rewards of approval our society endowed my father with. She even stopped going to church with us. She never spoke to us about why she did not want to come with us. I think that perhaps this was the only relatively safe way she could find to voice her dismay with the position in which she was placed and entrapped.

Recently, she told me that each month my father would demand her pay cheque. As head of the household, he was in charge of finances and rationed her spending to the bare minimum. As our mother she was trapped in her marriage. She told me that divorcing my Dad would have been an absolute scandal at that time. She would have

been an outcast in our community and would not have been able to take care of us, her children, financially.

I grew up with the discourse that men had the socially sanctioned power and the authority to do as they the liked. The perceived difference in power between men and woman created the potential for men to be abusive towards women. I felt the effects of this in my home.

I perceived my mother as a victim of my father's behaviour and a victim of a society whose rules gave her no way out of her entrapment. Consequently, I have often perceived women as the "underdogs" in relation to men. I have sometimes been informed by the need to side with women and join them in the struggle for empowerment in subtle ways (see *Singing in Church With Beauty and Fire and Water*). I have often fought against being dependent on men. And I frequently encourage women to acquire the skills they need to avoid being in a dependent position in relation to men.

I suppose I have always wanted to protect women against the ways in which men were somehow allowed to misuse their power at times. I avoided men and distrusted their actions, and their words. I believed that most men had a selfish and conniving intent, whatever their ways of relating to women.

In general I often find myself thinking that men can be seen as potentially abusive and hurtful. As a result I struggle to relate with men. I find it much easier to trust and be in close relationships with women.

This made my work at Sterkfontein's acute male ward, known for the aggression of the inmates, very difficult. I found it difficult to create meaningful conversations with them. In my inability to connect with men I lose voice. I become defensive and silent. It is as if my assumptions around men inform my shutting the doors on the potential of an open dialogue of exploration and different ways of being together.

In contrast, I enjoyed working on the female acute ward. Joining with women just comes so much more naturally and this sense of connection makes it much easier to move and create a meaningful context of exploration. I mostly find it much easier to take a nurturing stance in the presence of women.

In relationship with women I am often more comfortable in letting my guard down, in being vulnerable and connecting with their painful experiences. However, as long as I see women as trapped, voiceless and lonely in a male dominated society, I run the risk of getting stuck in identifying with women to the point that I cannot bring different voices to therapy or to my relationships with them. There is a danger of only creating a context of “soft understanding”, as was the case with my earlier therapies (see *Comments From my Supervisor: Dian Flowers*)

During the course of my training, and while writing this dissertation, I began to question the implications of relating to women as if we, as a gender, are all victims (see *The Silent Piano*). This has made it easier to be flexible in the presence of women, to bring and express different voices (for example a playful, or a caring, or a perturbing voice) in the presence of women (see *Tessa: A Challenge to a Stuck Repertoire* and *Ward Round Jazz and Blues*.)

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Thus, I grew up in a culture that placed men in the dominant position. As a result, when I perceive men to be in an authoritative position due to the nature of their roles (e.g. the role of the supervisor, or the role of the father, or the role of a male doctor at Sterkfontein Hospital), I expect them to relate to me in a manner that allows them to keep a “one-up” stance. I expect that when I put “soft issues” (feelings) on the table, they will not listen. I expect them to start giving me advice from an “expert” position and leave me feeling inadequate.

I therefore always try to keep the conversation at an intellectual level with men. I perceive being vulnerable in the presence of men as a female weakness that perpetuates their positions of power in our society. This means my relationships with men are usually distant. I usually only use my “competent” voice in their presence.

As long as I see men as potential abusers and as being in dominant positions due to the society we live in, as taking a judgmental as apposed to a relational stance in life, as objectifying women as sex objects, as not being able to connect with women on an

emotional level and as being invalidating and potentially aggressive, I am rigid in the way that I relate to them.

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I grew up in a family where women were insignificant in the presence of men. Whenever my mother was emotional on any level, my father would ignore her or they would fight and he would leave the house for the night. My experiences in my family have informed my belief that whenever women bring an emotional stance, addressing problems in their relationships with men, they are mostly rejected, often not heard, and frequently judged and invalidated.

My experience in my family has taught me that men are usually more judgmental than women. My father saw the world in terms of right and wrong whilst my mother was more concerned with protecting the relationship. Two of my father's favourite lines were "*n Ding is of reg of verkeerd*" ("Something is either right or wrong") and "*My ja is my ja en my nee is my nee*". ("My yes means yes and my no means no").

I therefore expect that men will not be able to hear me if I speak about my concerns in my relationships with them. I expect them to disqualify me as being emotional or to take an expert stance and give advice from a position that makes me feel invalidated.

Take, for instance, the process that played out between my Dad and me when I went back to Cape Town. My heart was broken. My Dad kept inviting me to come and talk to him if I needed to. I perceived this as an invitation from the expert, authoritative Dad to "help me deal with my pain". I expected a rational, disconnected and disqualifying voice from him and I was not willing to make myself vulnerable to that. I swallowed my tears, said "thank you" and kept quiet, thus adopting a relational mode that restricted our relationship to the roles of the distant father and the disqualifying daughter.

I seem to find it easier to relate with certain men, like Jacques and Dean. They are usually intuitive, react on an emotionally responsive level and have the ability to engage in a gentle way that makes me feel safe. Yet even in relationship with these men

I find it difficult to trust that I can bring my human and more emotional side to the relationship (see *Leaving Home: Meeting MES Action* and *Jacques: Going Home*). Even in these relationships I felt I was going to bore them and be rejected by them if I spoke to them in a non-intellectual manner. As recounted in *Going Home*, this frustrated Dean and eventually contributed to the disintegration of our relationship.

My father was often less concerned with the “soft issues” in life. I seldom felt validated by my father. It was only when I did well at school or university that he praised me. I often felt I could not speak to him when I was unhappy, for he would only take a one-up stance and give me advice from an expert position. From my perspective I had to be intellectually competent and not emotionally vulnerable, to be significant to him.

The same process played out in relationship with my grandfather. Although he was a gentle man, he also kept me at a distance. He validated me when I performed well at school or whenever I could provide the correct answer to an academic question he posed.

Thus my experiences taught me that to be significant to men I have to relate with them in an intellectual manner.

My experiences in my family also informed my perception that women are validated when they fulfil certain functions. For example, my father validated my mother when she cooked the food and cleaned the dishes.

Thus I learnt that to be validated by men one has to relate with them in an intellectual manner and fulfil certain functions. These assumptions have severe implications for my relationships with men.

For instance, in my relationship with Dean I fulfilled the function of the nurturer. I went into a caring position in reaction to his suicide attempt. Within this stance I usually sense the opportunity for closeness, connectedness and the possibility of intimacy. In taking the role of the nurturing, caring mother, I secretly hoped that he would take care of me in return and not reject me.

However, I lost voice in believing that I had to fulfil this function in Dean's life to be "good enough" and to be validated by him. In "helping and being there", a pseudo closeness was created in our relationship. There was no room for me to be honest about my needs and concerns in my relationship with Dean. There was also very little room for him to be anything but in need of help.

In relationship with Dean I also became trapped in my belief that I had to be intellectually stimulating to him. I became the intellectual who analysed our and other people's behaviour. I was constantly afraid he would perceive me as dull and boring. I expected him to reject me if I was not sufficiently stimulating intellectually. In trying to become what I thought Dean expected me to be, I became silent and withdrawn, and the relationship became stultified and stuck..

My assumptions about men make me anxious in their presence. I have a repertoire of reactions in relationship to men. Mostly I try to avoid them. Sometimes, when they seem to be gentle and not as rigid and judgmental as the typical dominant Afrikaans male, I choose to be in relationship with them. (For example I chose Jacques and Dean as friends and Ricky as my supervisor.) Yet even with these men, my assumptions about the male gender influence and limit the way I relate to them.

My repertoire of reactions in relationship with men is as follows. *I become silent. I withdraw. I become what I think they expect me to be. I fulfil the roles I think they expect me to fulfil in order to be good enough. I take an intellectual position. If they do validate me for just spontaneously being me and not necessarily being intellectual or fulfilling a function in their lives, I do not trust their validation of me. I disqualify them and I become an expert.*

I take an expert role especially in relation to men whom I perceive as being in a dominant position, a position where they are likely to judge me.

As is evident in the text, *Meeting Ricky*, I entered the relationship with Ricky with the assumption that, in order for him to accept me and approve of me as his student, I had to impress him with clever, rational and intellectual ideas. The text illustrates how I assumed that just spontaneously being myself and saying what I thought and felt would

probably mean I would be judged as not being good enough. I believed that I would have to “perform” to gain Ricky’s approval. I constructed “performance” as being competent, being rational, intellectual and clever. Yet Ricky was receptive to my ideas about this dissertation, which I did not think were “clever” but, rather, exploratory.

In the course of writing this dissertation, I have felt trapped, many times, in my belief that Ricky does not think much of me. It took courage to show my work to him. Each time I sent him a batch of stories I was convinced he was going to disapprove. Every time I met him after giving him a chance to read the stories, he would surprise me. “Keep on writing,” he would say. “Your stories are beautiful.” This was an extremely painful process, as I felt incredibly vulnerable and never believed his validation of my work to be a reflection of what he really thought.

Initially, in relationship with Ricky, I therefore became silent in his presence. I also stopped writing my stories because I feared he would disqualify my work. I became the “expert of the expert”, continually assuming that what I brought to this context would not be good enough if it did not comprise intellectual, clever, rational, academic ideas.

In this process I continually evaluated my evaluation of the guru’s evaluation of what my behaviour should be. This inner dialogue became limited to continuously asking, “What would the appropriate/clever response be right now?” This process made me feel extremely self-conscious, anxious and fearful. I became the scared child who assumed that whatever I said would not be good enough.

In other words, in trying to control Ricky’s impressions of me, and in trying to eliminate any uncertainty and ambiguity in the relationship (by trying to estimate or define and act according to my assumptions of what would be perceived as good enough) I became silent.

I withdrew. Often I wrote my stories and did not show them to Ricky for months. Yet his affirmation of my work gave me the courage to stay true to this process and myself and I continued writing.

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My Dad often came across as charming in the presence of women. His affairs with other women informed my belief that men are usually just interested in having sex with women, and not in who they are. I often avoided any physical contact with my Dad and I avoided any intimate relationships with men. When Stan “flirted” with me, my rigid reaction of wanting to withdraw from him (see *Meeting Stan*) perturbed me into exploring this issue.

I chose Steven as my client knowing that he would challenge my way of thinking about and relating to men.

Steven’s meanings and behaviour in therapy perturbed me into construing him as the typical male: the aggressor, the abuser; the typical man who did not want to take responsibility for his actions, who justified his abusive behaviour; the typical male who knew only how to relate to women in a sexually objectifying manner; the deceitful male who used religion as a mask.

As his therapist, I was worried that my meanings around him were going to be hurtful to him. Initially I used my mother’s voice of subtle judgment. I was afraid that I would become silent in his presence. My history with and assumptions of men made me scared and ambivalent. I think I initially took a more aggressive stance in his presence.

I wanted to defend not only myself and his daughter, but all women, against this abusive man. Initially I was silent in his presence. Then I took the expert stance and set him up for failure. Yet ending the relationship was not an option. Only once I was able to explore Steven’s meanings from a less defensive position could the relationship become one of voice for both of us and different ways of relating to each other become possible.

By creating a space where we could explore different meanings for his behaviour I had the opportunity to explore my own assumptions about men in his presence.

My experiences with Dean and with Steven informed a process through which I could not continue to view all men as beings who abused and objectified women. Both these men appeared to be or to become more real in relationship with me. Steven and

Dean often asked perturbing questions and really wanted to know what I thought and felt.

When men are real and willing to be vulnerable in my presence (as I am in theirs), when men are more philosophical in life and seek connection with others through the struggles of their lives, I am more flexible and spontaneous in their presence.

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I fear men's anger. When my father was angry, he became aggressive. I became silent and withdrew, resenting him for his behaviour.

I often tiptoe around men, not wanting to provoke aggressive reactions from them. I often feel that I should not express any anger towards men, as they might become aggressive and hit me, or they might just leave and reject me. Concurrently I resent men for being in more powerful positions in society. I usually see any aggression from a man as abusive. I often disqualify men who are in dominant positions, who present reality as objective and claim their "rightness" in that. At Sterkfontein I often disqualified the male doctors in silence, and in fear that if I did voice my opinions they would just disqualify me in turn.

Yet in therapy with Corinne and Dean, (see *Talking Therapy*) Corinne facilitated a conversation between Dean and me in which I could express my anger towards him. He did not hit me and he did not reject me. I did not have to be either silent or defensive in his presence. He did not come across as the dominant male who believed only in his side of the story.

This made me feel strong enough to start voicing my anger in relation to men, when I felt it was appropriate. With Jo, I expressed, for the first time, my anger towards a man who took a dominant and aggressive position in relation to me. I openly rejected him rather than silently withdrawing from the relationship and silently rejecting him, as I did with the male doctors at Sterkfontein.

Yet as long as I see men as being in dominant positions, as disqualifying my voice as a woman, I am not able to be in relationship with them in a way that gives us

both voice. By reacting to men in the ways I have described, I rob myself of the potential of more fulfilling relationships with them.

### Reflecting on My Body

I am crying. What do tears mean? I feel trapped. I feel anxious about the dissertation. I feel I need to “quote” the academic experts to prove that what I am doing is “good enough” and valid. How do I then not lose my own voice in the process? It feels impossible.

When I felt trapped and anxious as a child and as a teenager, I ate.

I would retreat to a place where I was alone and eat and eat and eat. Food became a source of comfort. In those moments I abandoned my body and myself and I did not speak to anyone about what I was feeling. I did not care about putting on weight. Eating too much spoke of my need for intimacy, for nurturance. Yet, in those moments of abandonment, I did not connect with myself or any one around me. Food was a way of lulling myself, trying to escape the sense that I was never going to feel okay about myself.

These days, when I feel anxious, trapped and “not good enough” I light up a cigarette and I reflect on what informs these feelings. Sometimes I do Reiki, creating a nurturing space where I can connect with myself again. Sometimes I call a friend. The difference is that I try to engage rather than ignore and escape what I am feeling and thinking. In calling a friend a space of connection opens up, which becomes a nurturing space. I don’t try to comfort myself with food any more. Or when I do, I am aware of what I am doing and aware that there are other ways of nurturing myself. I am aware that I need to create a space where I can connect with myself again.

My mother and my father also disengaged from relationships by means of their bodies. When my mother was in turmoil she got ill, isolating herself in her room. It was impossible to try and comfort or speak to her when she was ill. It was as if she used her body to disengage from the difficulties in her marriage. It was always significant to me that as soon as there was overt conflict between her and my father, she got ill. As soon

as he stepped over some invisible border, she reacted with illness and kept the homeostasis of the system intact. Who knows what would have changed if they had actually addressed the meanings and difficulties they were living with in the relationship?

My father, on the other hand, drank too much or made sure that he was seldom home in reaction to what was happening between him and my mother. Again, this kept the homeostasis of the family intact. Both my parents seemed to ask for closeness in ways that had the opposite effect, that took them physically out of the relationship and out of a dialogue through which new meaning about the self and the relationship could have evolved.

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When I was a child my body was in constant pain. My mother still tells the story of how one of the first words I uttered was “*eina*.” Moving was painful, and we did not know what caused the pain in my back. It got worse as I grew older. This prevented me from free physical play and the kind of physical contact that is critical to basic socialisation at that age (Hughes, 1991). I always felt like an outsider in relationship with my peer group. How does one relate with other children if moving around hurts? I remember being teased by the children in my pre-school and finding ways to avoid contact with others during break times. Maybe it was there that I also learnt that relationships are hurtful; that being in the presence of others was painful, that I did not have anything of value offer to others in relationships.

As I grew older the pain got worse. I had to sit down after walking only a few meters. Sometimes I just hated my body. I did not want to be different from other children. I did not want to be different from my brother and sister. I did not want to cause more conflict between my parents. When I was in pain I tried to keep my mouth shut, I did not like feeling like a burden to everybody around me. I often asked for a pain pill and just retreated to my room. I wanted to disappear.

My mother and I went to various doctors who had different opinions; some thought that the problem was psychological and not physical. Fortunately I was unaware of this at that stage.

After years and years of spending time with various doctors and going through arduous tests at Groote Schuur Hospital, the doctors found a very rare tumour on the third vertebra of my lumbar spine. I was 12 years old. I was so happy that they had found it that I wanted to celebrate. If they had not found the tumour then, I would by now have been paralysed.

Now I think that the physical and the psychological cannot be neatly defined as separate. Why did the tumour grow in my back in the first place? Maybe the growth of a tumour was informed by the way my family dealt with pain. Maybe it was a physical way of claiming a space of attention for myself in the family in a very ambiguous way.

The tumour was hidden, ambiguous (nobody knew what was wrong with my back), yet life threatening and very painful. It is as if the tumour was a physical metaphor for how we dealt with the painful difficulties of relating to each other in our family. Perhaps, like my mother's illness and my father's drinking, my body was claiming a space to say what I needed in a way that was congruent with the family patterns. Maybe it was claiming a voice, claiming the sense that something was not okay in such a way that others could not connect with me or could not affirm that request for connection.

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I remember the words of the neurosurgeon: "Your scar is going to heal beautifully. One of these days you will be walking around in a bikini, charming the boys." I was terribly embarrassed by this remark—as if walking around in a bikini would be the ultimate betrayal of what I was expected to be in my mother's eyes. The idea of flirting with boys was taboo. I grew up with the Christian discourse that one has to be married before being sexually intimate with someone. More than that, I always had the sense that even kissing a boy would be the ultimate betrayal of my mother's pain flowing from her meanings around sex and my father's affairs. Yet these meanings were

always on a gut level. My body reacted physically in the presence of boys when I was teenager. I would instinctively become rigid, freeze, blush and move out of a personal space with boys (see *Opening the Curtains: Living With the Family* and *Meeting Stan*).

Eating too much was also a way of disengaging from any relationships with boys and men. In the presence of boys I felt anxious. I tried to lessen the anxiety by eating. But eating too much only made me fat and more self-conscious in the presence of boys. It was a vicious circle. On the one hand I did not want to betray my mother and go out with boys; on the other hand I did not want to feel like a fat outsider who could not connect with boys even if I wanted to. I did not even go to my matric farewell. This was never a point of discussion in my family: It was accepted as a given. My sister found a way to negotiate her meanings around this discourse. Being, I think, more loyal to my father, there was a freedom beyond my mother's expectations of her.

Yet there was also a double bind in being overweight. I hid in my body. The bigger my body, the more rigid the meanings I lived with, the less voice I had. Wearing clothes that were too big for me was also a way of negating a sense of a feminine self, informed by the meaning that a feminine self was taboo. Yet my family, especially my mother, also constantly judged my body.

I remember how my mother and sister met me at the airport when I went home for the holidays while I was studying at RAU. The first thing they would do was to comment on my weight, even lifting my jacket while they hugged me to assess whether or not I had lost weight. The three of us were constantly dieting, actually competing with one another to lose weight. Whenever I did lose weight my family congratulated me. Yet at the same time my sister, in particular, obviously did not feel good about herself if I lost more weight than she did. When I put on weight, I would feel like a terrible, ugly failure, whereas my mother and sister would feel better about themselves. Yet they would still judge me in the process.

Losing weight was a way of "performing", yet it was always a struggle and always had some negative meaning attached to it. Now, I don't have to be thin to feel okay about myself. The irony is that it is this meaning that, in part, does not make it

necessary for me to eat all the time. I also don't live in the reality that I would betray my mother if I had a boyfriend. And, now, I can comment on the process when my mother or sister make comments about my weight or about men. But it has taken a long time and many therapy sessions to get to this point.

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In my family, asking for what you needed and expressing what you felt in a direct way was not allowed. It caused conflict. I remember an occasion when I had to fetch a new pair of glasses from the optometrist. My mother was ill and refused to take me. My father was at work and insisted that my mother run the errand. They had a terrible fight on the phone. He came home and pulled the telephone out, and took away my mother's car keys, saying that if she could not even take me to the optometrist she did not deserve to have a car or a phone. My mother was in tears, screaming at me: "Now, do you see what you have done!" I felt terribly guilty, replying, nevertheless: "It's not my fault!"

Thus I became as self-sufficient as I could and tried to stay out of trouble. I learnt that I was not supposed to need anything from anybody. I tried to be as invisible as possible. My body spoke of my discomfort in relationship with others as well as of an eagerness to remove myself from the presence of others.

At MES Action I found affirmation in being kind and nurturing to the elderly people I was in relationship with. Yet I felt lost. I was uncomfortable in the presence of my peer group, not knowing how to relate with them. At MES Action, Jacques always commented on the way I walked: dressed in a big jacket, head turned downward, avoiding eye contact and walking very fast. I made myself unavailable for any connection.

In therapy with Corinne, the barely visible blue faces I drew spoke of feeling trapped and feeling invisible. Slowly, in exploring "having to be there for others, sensing what they needed and losing voice in that", the entrapping discourses were opened up. Together, Corinne and I created new meanings around who I was. She validated the voice of the child who needed nurturance; often prescribing homework that would

facilitate connection with myself. I remember her asking me to rub my body with cream: slowly and not functionally. Discourses like: “I am pathetic for feeling so alone” subtly changed to: “Feeling alone and having a need to be held in that is human, it is okay.”

The meanings around my body and my self changed. I was learning to take care of myself in a way that allowed for nurturance and connection rather than self-blame.

At Eersterust, I began experimenting with a playful self in the non-judgmental context of an adult working with children. In this group everybody found their own moves to the rhythm of the music and nobody was judged. I loosened up, and could laugh at myself wiggling my big bottom with the kids. Experiencing a different sense of self in this context made it possible to acknowledge and use the playful self in my therapies at Unisa as well.

In therapy with Steven my assumptions about men and sex were challenged in a big way. Jacques read the following excerpt to me the other day: It pretty much reflects the meanings I had around men at the time:

*Toe ek 'n kind was het hierdie dinge my nie gepla nie, want jy weet mos ek wou 'n weeshuisopsigter word. Maar ek sê jou nou, hoe ek lyk het niks met niemand te doen nie. Maar as jy in die straat loop en mans kyk na jou, dan kyk hulle na jou as iets waarmee hulle kan kopeleer. Dit wat my spesiaal maak, maak niks saak nie. It doesn't matter if you have a good brain. Of dat jy dalk kind mag wees nie. Dis hoe jou liggaam lyk wat saak maak. Hoekom het ons ouers ons nooit gewaarsku nie? Maar nee, ons is altyd gedryf om beter te presteer en aanhouer wen. En die een wat sê hy is lief vir jou, sê dit net want dan kan hy met jou kopeleer. Dis siek, Felos. Om 'n kopeleerobjek te wees sonder 'n keuse. Siek! En dis die cornerstone van ons civilization, mans wil met vrouens kopeleer.*

*Jy weet, Felos, ek voel lus om in die straat af te loop en elke man wat ek sien met 'n jakarandatak te moer. En ek moet al die vrouens met spatare en hangtieties vra om saam te slaan. (Jos, 1999, p. 63)*



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By using Reiki in therapy a context was created in which new meanings around men and touch and intimacy could be co-created. My body had been nothing more than a functional vehicle and a source of physical and emotional pain for most of my life. My body was informed by my meanings about myself as being fearful of engaging with others, as being worth nothing, of needing to hide, needing to prevent the forbidden flirtatious interactions with men. It became a useful tool with which to push people away. Meeting Dean in therapy and experiencing that not all heterosexual men just objectify women in terms of their bodies, changed my meanings about men.

Furthermore, the use of touch in therapy created a context of transformation for my “sense of body self” (Ross, as cited in Hunter & Struve, 1998, p. 35). It was as if I had a body for the first time. I realised that I had always believed, on a pre-verbal level, that I was never meant to be touched. This shocked me. I also realised that I had always thought that anyone who ever dared to touch me would always retreat in disgust. In acknowledging these meanings and experiencing Dean’s acceptance and respect for who I was and the meanings I was struggling with, a different sense of self became possible.

I began to lose weight without any effort. It was as if I was in my body for the first time. It was okay just to be and show myself for the first time. I began using my body in therapy with clients, using sculpting and movement to address very stuck interactions and contexts. My body became an expression of my different sense of self. It was as if I was free to engage more of myself in all my relationships. There was a novelty to all my sensory modalities that made me feel I was experiencing life in a new way all the time. There was a freedom in my movements and relating that brought a natural flexibility to my work.

I related differently to clients, sometimes even using explicit language to address sexual issues. It was much easier to bring these themes back to a description of the relational patterns between people and it was easier to explore their meanings (see *Meeting Steven*).

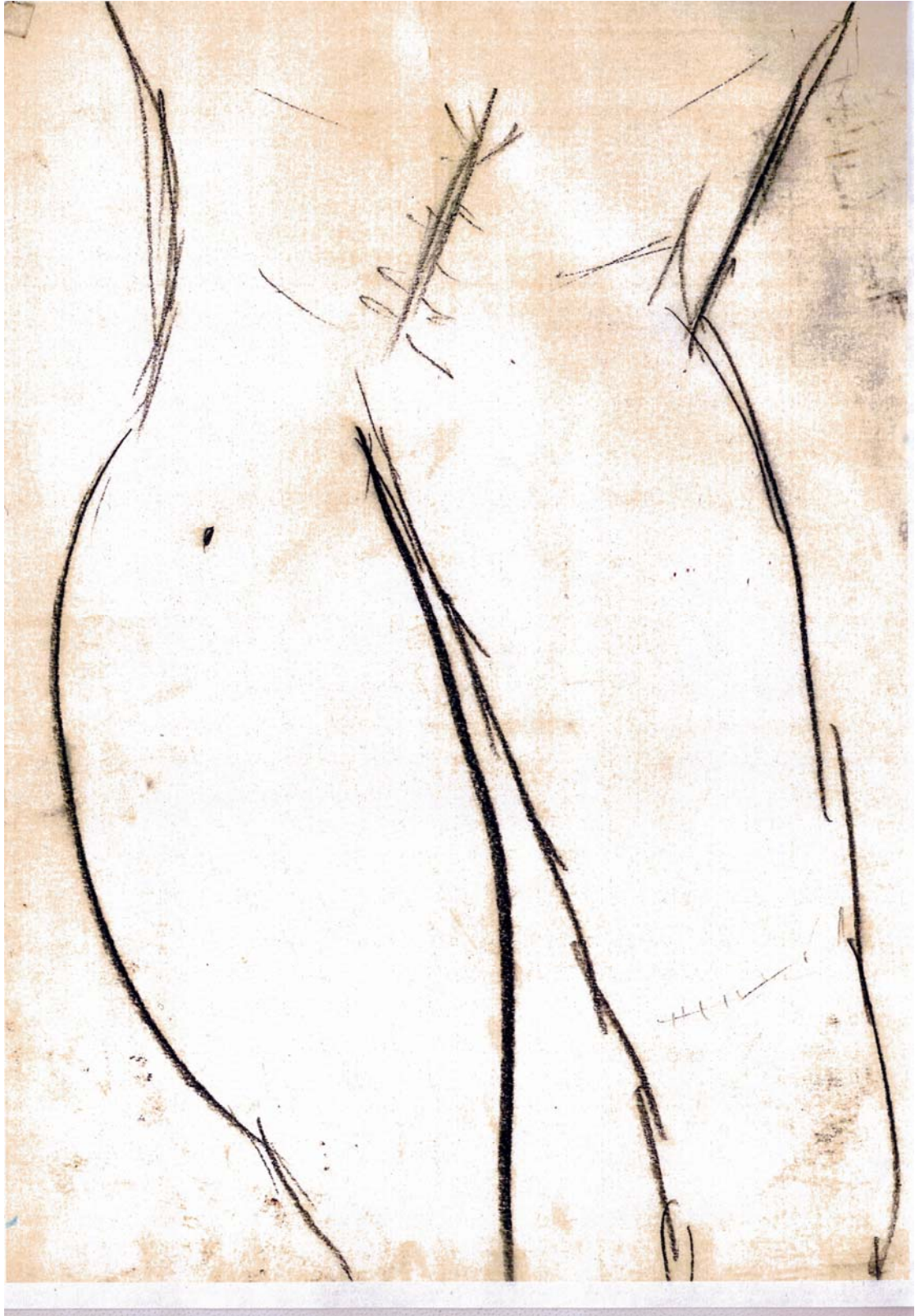
My body revealed and was part of my repertoire of selves. I was in touch with what I was feeling and thinking in therapy, and had the freedom to use my body and myself in different ways. I was no longer paralysed by anxiety when clients brought sexual issues to therapy.

At Sterkfontein I created rituals through which I affirmed and lived my new sense of self. I remember asking a friend to come and do my make-up before we went out one night. It was wonderful to acknowledge and even celebrate my feminine sense of self, which was affirmed in my relationships with my friends. One night I had a “girls” night at my house in Krugersdorp. My girlfriends and I chose the music we liked and took turns to show each other what a strip show should look like (without actually taking off our clothes). I had so much fun in just “letting go” and appreciating that side of myself as well.

I also stopped wearing clothes that were too big for me; it became okay just to bring who I was to any context. Today I have no problem in wearing a tight blouse if I feel like it. I also carry myself in different ways: I can be the professional woman with her confident stride, the “caring mother” who sits on the floor to connect with children, the flirtatious, playful person in the context of a blind date with a group of friends. All these interactions are now possible. Even when my body freezes in anxiety, I can engage the meanings that inform this. Depending on the context, I can comment on the process and explore the meanings with the person I am in relationship with. Or I can at least be aware of my internal dialogue and, in that, become flexible again.

I have come to believe that my body and the “stories or meanings” I live are always recursively connected. The one informs the other. And in being aware of my meanings in every context, being aware of how my body reacts and what its responses mean, and in exploring that, I don’t have to remain stuck in a rigid self. I can engage or disengage in relation to the people around me. Neither interaction is good or bad. But being connected with myself in relating gives me the freedom of movement. And it is this freedom of movement that is healing and informs the “healer”.

It is this freedom that allows me to be with another person and stay with what that person is asking for in a particular context, without being paralysed by my own reactions in the process and grappling for the words or techniques of experts, if these are not called for. Yet when I am not connected with myself, when I am not in the moment with my body and my soul, I know I am in trouble. I know I am going to define myself and the other person in rigid ways that will be entrapping to us both. I know I am in danger of imposing meanings and misunderstanding and disqualifying the meanings that the other person is bringing to the relationship. That is when I know that a healing space is called for: a space where people can co-create and share meanings that open up the entrapping or totalising meanings we live with; a space that allows for transformation and for new meanings to evolve (Weingarten, 1991, 1992). That is when I need to remind myself that I need to “dance with” rather than “dance for” the other person. And that is when the relationship becomes a co-created and freeing dance.





























## Reflecting on the Journey of Healing/The Healer

*...From psychologist .....to healer..... to being me.....*

My own struggles were what informed my need to become a psychologist.

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My family became a place of disconnectedness. It was in my family that I learned to be the silent observer, and the nurturing pleaser: It was functional in keeping the homeostasis of the family patterns intact.

I instinctively learnt how to be acutely aware of the intonations of my family's behaviour. When my Mom was ill, I knew not to ask for anything. When my Dad got that strange look in his eyes I reacted by leaving the context as soon as possible and avoiding the acceleration of his anger.

Being over-sensitive to the behaviour of everyone around me was taken to the extreme. Often, I would experience powerful guilt. "What did I do now? How do I make things okay?" These were my natural responses to any turmoil in the family. I became a receptor of and a reactor to the needs and behaviour of everyone around me. If anyone around me was unhappy or made a snide comment to me, I almost always believed that it was my fault and my responsibility to make things okay again.

Therefore I became the pleaser, always trying to make things okay again. The role of the pleasing nurturer was safe, yet it put me in constant turmoil, for what I needed (beyond as little as possible conflict) was not important. My interpretations of my interactions with other people often left me feeling bad about myself and confirmed my silence in claiming space in any relationship. I often escaped to the world of stories and books. It was there, away from people, that I found a non-threatening, non-hurtful space in which I could escape the turmoil of relationships.

Asking as little as possible and being responsible was the only role that was accessible to me in my family system. My brother's role was to listen to my mother's stories about my father and to comfort her. He thus became the "husband" and the



excelling scholar. My sister became the problem child—the rebellious, challenging teenager who commented on the process of what was happening between my mother and my father and on how that impacted on her. Although I admired her rebellious voice, I saw the dangerous consequences of her role. She became the ostracised child of the family. I could not relate to my brother or my sister in ways beyond their designated roles in the system. I had to remain the silent observer. This was my role and my place of safety.

Being the youngest child, I was also always protected from hearing stories of what was happening between my parents. But in being “kept out of the loop” I was also silenced. I often felt I did not understand what was going on and that nobody understood me either. This left me feeling isolated: an outsider, a spectator and a burden.

Then I chose to go to Hillbrow, a place where people who felt lost and disconnected from their worlds and one another found a place of belonging. It was not a coincidence that I chose to go to Hillbrow: I identified with the people in that context. I joined a missionary organisation and lived with people who also identified with and chose that place, people living with their own struggles, searching for ways to connect with each other and not getting it right. In witnessing this, and in my own struggles to find spaces of connection and not succeeding, the sense that there was something wrong with me got worse. I realised that it was not only in my family that I felt so lonely and stuck. I had an urgent sense that *I* was the problem: Something in me had to change.

At MES Action we (the missionaries) all found our subgroups in the choice of the people we reached out to. It was not a coincidence that I chose to work with elderly people and not with children or teenagers. I knew how to relate with people as the “adult” nurturer. I did not know how to relate to and connect with children or teenagers. In the presence of the stories of the ostracised elderly people I could begin to make a space for their struggles and, in silence, acknowledge my own sense of disconnectedness.

At RAU, my stuckness in not being able to relate with other students and the event of my parent’s divorce fuelled my sense of being in crisis. For the first time I saw

my Dad crying, saying that he did not want to lose me. My mother was in agonising turmoil, expecting me to be loyal to her and to forget about my father. I was painfully confused. “Who am I? What am I supposed to do with this? How am I supposed to react? I wish everyone would just leave me alone! It’s my fault. Thank goodness they’re getting a divorce at last. How can you think that?” This was the self-blaming inner dialogue that went through my head all the time. I buried myself in my books and failed an academic test for the first time in my life. I was constantly in tears and the sense that there was something terribly wrong with me became overwhelming. I felt alone and in complete chaos, not knowing how to connect with anyone around me. I did not dare tell anyone how I was feeling, as I believed that this would just show people what a pathetic person I really was.

In therapy with Corinne I found a safe place to begin giving words to my turmoil. It was here that my struggles were given a space; were opened up. It was in therapy that I began to find words for declaring the unspeakable within. I began giving words to my experiences in my family and expressing the meanings I had about myself. Time and again, Corinne would bring me back to expressing what I felt, rather than what I thought, as I tended to disqualify anything negative I said about anyone and in so doing blame myself. Sometimes what I felt could only be expressed in the blue drawings I created. Making the space to draw became a ritual of connecting with myself, of creating a space to take off the mask of the “competent student” and to express myself through the language of art.

Therapy became a space of connection where Corinne walked and stayed with me in my pilgrimage of creating meaning. We reflected on what the drawings were saying and opened up the negative meanings about myself that I was living. I felt understood. This enabled me to risk delving into what I felt instead of trying to escape and avoid myself; to risk exploring alternative meanings about myself in relationship with the significant people in my life.

Therapy became a ritual of connecting with another person and connecting with myself. It became a ritual of “storying” the self, with another person. For the first time I could consider different meanings about myself and my family and this recursively

influenced my way of being in life and in relationships. Meanings like “I am the problem” were explored in terms of my experiences in life, and placed within the webs of the relationships I was in. We explored how the patterns in the family could be framed as abusive and I became able to explore meanings about being the “victim” as well as the “survivor”, instead of just being the “problem”. A different, freeing sense of self, a sense that I did not always have to put myself down, emerged.

Therapy was an “in there together” process. It was a space of intimate interactions with Corinne. Not once did she come across as the expert who was trying to “fix” me, using clever strategies. We were always in a process of co-creating and sharing meanings, where I had the experience of knowing and being known by her. Many times we sat in her therapy room, going over the one-hour limit. Therapy was not a place of haste, but rather one of reflection, connection and the creation of a dialogue that held the possibility of change.

Finding hope in therapy, I began to study psychology in addition to my initial academic programme. The process that played out in therapy made me strong enough to want to engage with my struggles even further and strengthened the urge to remain in such a space of meaningful connection.

At Unisa I began to engage in the rituals of the student psychologist. The institution of psychology gives social sanction to the need to be with and engage one’s own sense of disconnectedness and struggles in relating to others. The ritual of training allowed and required such encounters with the self.

There was the ritual of learning to understand systems and patterns of behaviour; of encountering theory and encountering myself in the theory. There was the ritual of learning the language of psychology and using it in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the client. There was the ritual of being evaluated and validated as being a good psychologist-in-the-making.

The ritual of encountering the theory was useful in that it was practically applied and therefore became personal. Concepts like the use of asocial behaviour became very significant. Relating with clients in a nurturing way became impossible only in

understanding and experiencing how this was bound to perpetuate the problems and patterns of relating within a system. I had to learn to be able to access different ways of relating, which could not be taught.

The theory informed my therapies and my therapies informed my understanding of the theories. This created the knowledge of which ways of being and relating in therapy came naturally to me. There was the ritual of witnessing other therapists and coming to understand that therapy is more than being able to conceptualise problems in terms of ecosystemic theory, and that we all had our own natural styles and ways of relating and our own restricted repertoires of selves. That therapy is the use of one's self in relation to the client, and not the application of a theoretical technique that is unique to another therapist and in relation to a different client.

There was the ritual of supervision and group therapy: receiving feedback and exploring and encountering each others' growing edges and struggles. A sense of community emerged, where our struggles as therapists and, by implication, as human beings, were validated and called for. Being a good therapist in training meant being willing and able to sit with and engage your own struggles for the "benefit of your clients and training".

Being a psychologist meant being able to create and change contexts in a way that also allowed me the freedom to access, acknowledge and create the spaces I needed to be able to encounter others. Creating the context of the play group in Eersterust allowed me to access/create the playful child and made possible a new mode of relating with people: not only my clients, but also with friends and fellow students.

Through these rituals I began, more and more, to encounter myself and my struggles, and the sense of becoming free propelled me to take the risk of choosing to work with clients (like Steven) who would challenge me in terms of themes I knew would be difficult for me to work with.

This therapy illuminated some of the discourses that were prevalent in my family (about alcoholism, religion, men, sex). My meanings about Steven and about men in general kept the interactions between me and him stultified and stuck. I could not



continue to think of Steven only as an abuser. With him, I could not continue to blush and shy away from the topic of sexual intimacy. I could not continue to “lose voice” in therapy with him, becoming either the scared child or the punitive adult in his presence. The “theory” I encountered during my training informed my realisation that my meanings about Steven had to shift if I was to co-create a therapeutic context through which change would be possible.

Only in being aware of this and in working with my meanings in therapy with Corinne and Dean, only in the creation of new meanings about men, about my body and my way of relating to the world, could I become more flexible in therapy with Steven, which would permit a change in our interactions with one another and allow different ways of relating, different voices, to emerge.

Therapy with Corinne brought me to a place where I could engage myself in the rituals of psychology and the rituals of healing; opening up the stories and assumptions that had left me stuck in my work and disconnected in my life.

The rituals of healing (the ritual of opening up my therapy space with Corinne to include Dean, the ritual of Reiki, the ritual of connection through dialogue, incorporating the languages of touch, of understanding and reflecting) broadened my definition and sense of healing and what it means to be a healer.

Corinne’s flexibility in using herself in an integrated way, trusting her knowledge and thinking while sensing what it was that I needed and trusting that, brought difference. Her ability to be in therapy in different ways, to bring different sides of herself, to create an intimate context such as Reiki, to bring in the voices she did not have (Dean’s male voice), gave me the sense that being a healer necessitates a repertoire of selves, that being a healer meant knowing and being in contact with your “range” and being aware of how that could be used in a flexible way, which was nevertheless congruent with what the client needed. That in “being healed” I was becoming a healer in the sense that I was being immersed in the process of developing, creating, experiencing and expanding my repertoire of voices, my modes of relating and being with others (see *In Conversation With Corinne*).

Dean, who was not a registered psychologist, brought the stance of a healer. He could connect in a healing way by creating a space where I could open up and connect intimately with him, where I could take the risk of making myself vulnerable, by building a place of trust, of sensing, where I was allowed to come forth. This space was informed by a non-judgemental stance, where I could trust him just to be with me in a tentative yet connecting way.

It was there that I realised that healing is not a “mind” stance and that it happens on many different levels. In that space of connection, through the ritual of Reiki, I was in my body. My body effortlessly changed shape, lost weight. I was connected to myself and the possibility of easy connecting with others emerged. It became possible to start relating with a variety of people, knowing and sensing and trusting myself in doing so, which freed me to relate to people in a variety of ways.

For a very long time I lived in one room: cooking, sleeping, and studying in one space. This space became a metaphor of my restricted sense of self, my restricted way of being and relating with others and myself. When I initially went to see Corinne in therapy I had one voice. In this process my sense of self, my voices, multiplied. Now I actively sought out a house with many rooms that would allow a space for many voices, which I began to claim. The bathroom was a space to claim the feminine self, a space with candles, a space for the ritual of immersing myself in water, a space of cleansing and nurturing as opposed to a place of self-disgust and functionality. The bedroom became the space with a wardrobe beyond jeans and T-shirts. It became a space for dressing up and celebrating the feminine self. The kitchen became a space in which to nurture with food, to nurture the creative self and to perform the ritual of communion, of cooking with others. The lounge became the space for the rituals of listening to music that I enjoyed, claiming this and inviting others into that space, of “dancing” with others in that space.

The house was a metaphor for “freeing up” and allowing and claiming myself. I began to connect with a variety of people at Sterkfontein. I began to invite people into my space. For the first time, I organised a birthday party for myself. The people I invited were markedly different; some found a space of connection in the lounge, others in the

kitchen, some in the dining room. I floated between the different groups, which did not necessarily connect with each other. Yet my connection with such a variety of people speaks of how I had found different voices and places of belonging in various relationships.

My nurturing stance had always been a voice with which I wanted to take care of other people's problems, a process in which I lost myself. Now I began to nurture myself by creating physical spaces in which I felt I belonged, taking the time to do the things I enjoy doing, physically taking care of myself and allowing others to connect with me; showing myself, entering into relationships rather than keeping to myself, and finding connection in that.

At Sterkfontein I began to create my own therapeutic room. It was a non-judgmental space: There was no audience to perform for. It was a room where I had the freedom to move, to be and trust being myself in therapy and in connection with others (clients and colleagues). It was a space that was distinctly me, a space to invite others into and to co-create a "room with a view".

I came to realise that the pleasing nurturer stance could be either useful or destructive. Using the "pleaser" voice to avoid difficulties in relationships could be destructive. The voice of aggression was also given a space (see *Letting the Tomatoes Rip*).

In time, nurturing myself also came to mean choosing not to enter or stay in relationship with certain people or places. Leaving Agape was such a way of looking after myself (see *Leaving Agape*).

However, my experiences at Agape (and at Unisa) also informed my ideas of what it means to be a healer. Agape created a place for various ways of being and relating. There one was not seen only as a therapist or client. The multiplicity of people was acknowledged. At Agape and Unisa the idea that healing is always for the healer prevailed and was informed by an ethic of participation. As a therapist in training I was encouraged to be aware of how my experience in the domain of relationships and my

patterns of relating inform what happens in therapy. This ethic or practice is informed by the second-order cybernetic stance described by Hoffman (1985) and Keeney (1983).

It was this stance that fostered a process of exploring and re-forming my ideas of the self and exploring more ways of relating to others. It was this healing stance that allowed me to move: to sing with Beauty and connect, to be the teenager, to be the “mother” for Lea’s children (see *Fire and Water*), to be able to be more blaming than pleasing (see *Letting the Tomatoes Rip*) when I felt it was called for. It was this stance that allowed me to facilitate a process in which Steven and I could explore and re-form his ideas about himself and explore different ways of relating with others. It was this stance that allowed me to explore how I relate to men and that informed a process where I could relate in different ways with Steven. It was this stance that allowed me to move beyond the expert role in Sterkfontein (see *Ward Round Jazz and Blues*).

After my internship, I moved back to a small room in a commune. This was due to financial restraints. But I could no longer live in such small spaces. It was a space of frustration and disconnection, where I began to feel entrapped in a self-blaming dialogue and in having to relate with people with whom I did not and did not want to connect. I knew that I needed to be in a place where I had the freedom to create and be, beyond the restrictions of that context.

My intuitive sense of what would be healing for me urged me to move to Johannesburg and create the space that I needed. The ritual of healing became the ritual of life. I could allow myself to be the teenager and enjoy everything that came with that—the dancing, the flirting, being good enough to be in an intimate relationship, playing within that and not realising or ignoring the dangers of being so free. Once my identity, my voice as a teenager, were engaged and lived, and once I faced the consequences of that, the young adult emerged.

It became possible to renegotiate relationships: to go back to my family, without being scared that I would not be able to deal with the difficulties of those relationships. As a young adult I did not have to be scared that I was going to lose myself again. I did

not have to take on certain roles to have an identity. I was the identity and could trust myself in being centred, yet at the same time flexible. I was free to be me.

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If someone were to ask me what I do, I would probably not say that I am a clinical psychologist. I would say that I sit and speak with people who seek a context of healing. Given the process of healing that has been part of my being, there is a groundedness in my ability to create such contexts.

If you asked me to define healing, I would probably say that at this point I believe that healing is an attitude towards life. It is not an action or manoeuvre to “fix” problems; it is not the application of knowledge alone; and it not always a conscious stance. It is a ritual of giving words to our worlds, which has the potential to change our inner landscapes.

This is where I draw the distinction between what it means to be a healer and what it means to be a therapist. As I have already said, Dean, who was not a qualified therapist, brought the healing stance. I believe that therapists are healers when they have sensitivity and an ability to pick up the nuances of life and in relationships and when they have an ability to react to these in a gentle and kind way.

As a healer, I believe that one has to be able to bring to the context what is needed. One does not create a healing context by using the techniques of other therapists and theorists if that is not what is called for and if it is not congruent with what the client asks or needs. As such, “therapy” is often a process that is informed by strategic behaviour, which in turn is informed by so-called theory, which in itself is no more than a take on reality. A therapist, then, is someone who constructs and uses his or her constructions of constructed realities that he or she read in books and uses in impersonal ways.

In contrast, a healer constructs realities and explores meanings within the ritual of being in the presence of another person. This is not only a cognitive, intellectual process. It is also a spontaneous, emotive, creative and attentive process in that moment

in time. A healer uses what the client brings and uses and reflects on the impact of what the client brings.

A healer is someone who uses his or her own human existence as the starting point for a conversation with others about their way of being in life, their human existence. It implies a humble and respectful and tentative position that fosters intimate encounters. A healer engages spontaneously in the painful process of being, being aware, reflecting on the awareness or your knowledge of your understanding and being.

Sometimes this means casting the net and seeing what comes back. Then, being a healer means being able to relate, connect and use yourself in various ways—sometimes in humorous and funny ways, sometimes in being holding and sometimes in being perturbing, sometimes, even, in being disrespectful, yet always reacting in a congruent manner to what the person or system asks, no matter how difficult or easy that might be. It means being in tune with what the client asks and needs in that context and in that moment in time.

A context of healing is one of caring, where there is a “glow of respect for what matters in particular lives” (Mair, 1989, p. 229). It is not enough to give clients general encouragement only. A healing context is one of “nourishing concerns” that are felt rather than artificially manufactured. It is a way of speaking together, which raises possibilities of life that were previously hidden or absent.

Given that we live in and through stories, that stories constitute our worlds, a healing space is one where there is continuous and creative dialogue, where the self becomes a place of meeting in that dialogue (Mair, 1988). It is an imaginative and participative context where we help people to tell their stories, understand their experiences and risk new undertakings (Mair, 1987). It comprises processes of giving voice and reflecting on the discourses that are our gaolers.

A healer creates a space that is safe enough for people to risk bringing their crises and open enough for people to encounter each other beyond reified categories, fixed identities, meanings and patterns of relating. It is the stance of the healer that

creates contexts in which the stories people live, hide and tell, find voice and become part of the co-creation of a healing space (Lifschitz & Oosthuizen, 2001, p. 127).

Given my experiences as a client and a therapist, I believe that as a healer I have to be able to relate to people in various ways, and to use different voices in different contexts depending on the interaction between my needs and those of others. I believe that healing lies in finding connectedness in a community of voices (whether these are my own voices, the voices of my family or friends or the voices of theorists and academics) where there is space for my voice and for myself to also move, be and “become”. As a healer I do not push people away as I did in the past. I take the risk of encountering people, and facilitating connection in that encounter, as opposed to disengaging and losing voice or being no more than the expert.

I believe that you stop being a healer when you stop reflecting on and engaging the struggles in your life, when you stop exploring the meanings that constitute your life.

When your struggles are more prevalent or conscious, you also seek contexts where you can explore them, where you can connect with a multiplicity of voices: a space where you can connect with others who have a similar quest.

Healing remains a process of encountering others and yourself, of checking your understanding and attending to the meanings that inform our lives and our selves, rather than a process of using causal explanations as impersonal ploys. The healer and the client are engaged in changing and being changed, through our encounters with one another (Mair, 1988).

The participative stance of a healer thus challenges us to question the singular meanings we attach to ourselves and to appreciate the richness in the difference that comes forth in such encounters between people as “different manifestations of the humanity we all share” (Lifschitz & Oosthuizen, as cited in Seedat, Duncan, & Lazarus, 2001, p. 127).

The stance of the healer is therefore one that I seek to live. It is not separate from who I am. It is my way of being in life.

## Reflecting on Loneliness and Solitude

My stepmother invited me to a show at On Broadway last week. She and her female colleagues wanted to see a show featuring a transvestite, for the fun and queerness of it. Someone cancelled and there was a ticket for me. It felt as if they were on their way to the zoo to make fun of the abnormal tricks of life. I felt very uncomfortable in their presence, yet I was keen for an evening out.

I sat right in front of the low level black stage. A man, beautifully dressed as a woman, made his entrance with grace. Long hair, red nails, in a black chiffon and velvet layered dress. He had the air of a stylish woman whose eyes have visited many tiers of loneliness.

He mimed the words to the deep-throated voice of a French singer. The diva was sensual, playful, making jokes of the sad ironies in life. She flirted with the men in the audience, carefully sensing who would play along. At times there was a sad, connected quietness as the audience identified with the voice rolling across the speakers. I kept watching the accentuated movements of his mouth, wondering who he really was, what his voice would sound like.

During the intermission, some of the women around me kept joking: “Where does he hide his penis?” I could not get into the conversation, and the frivolous masks of their discomfort. I was preoccupied, contemplating the gentle sadness in my chest, wishing I could have a drink with the diva, sensing that we had a shared knowing of some kind.

At the end, the diva made another entrance, this time as a man, in a tux and high heels, singing, “I am what I am” with a passion that touched my soul.

One of the women asked me what I thought of the show. I said I had enjoyed it, but that it had left me with a sense of sadness. I was wondering why he was mouthing to other people’s songs. I wanted to hear *his* story and *his* voice, *his* song. I sat there with a sense of how important this was to me. The woman in red stared back at me with glazed eyes, as if I was speaking a foreign language.



I know about living in other people's frames, mouthing words to other people's songs, moulding my behaviour to the rhythm of other people's expectations. I know that lonely place of not trusting my own voice, not trusting that it is worth anything, not trusting that my songs will not be too foreign to be understood. I know the loneliness and fear that come with that. And I know the hunger for connection that lies in such silence.

As a child I lived in the frame of what my parents expected of me. I still seek the frames of what will make me good enough, in the presence of other people: frames that define the voices that would be acceptable. I know the anxiety that comes with that and the sense of entrapment in my struggle to claim my own voice and create my own life. Maybe this is why I am writing a dissertation that is "mine" and not just in the mould of what has been the norm, according to the recipe of what is usually acceptable in such a work. Yet there is a tremendous, sometimes paralysing fear that I will not be understood and my work will not be acceptable. And again I feel like a lonely traveller in a foreign country.

The stories I have written in this dissertation are also a telling of the places of loneliness I have known and visited.

As a teenage girl I knew that place of isolation, of feeling trapped in my sense of being grotesque, of being isolated in relation to my peer group. And I knew the pain in that.

During my time at MES Action, I was intensely touched by the loneliness of the elderly people, abandoned in such a harsh place. I made it my task to relate to them. I could, for I, too, had a lonely, old soul.

At MES Action I also joined the small choir. I found a voice in social contexts through singing in churches, identifying with the words of the song and feeling the flow of letting my voice go, feeling that I was soothing not only my own loneliness, but also that of the audience, through music.

Music, singing, is a way of speaking, a language of emotion that people share and understand. Song became my language of connection, a language with depth that

gave validation to how I felt and which resonated with people. In those moments of singing I felt less lonely and inherently part of the human race. Yet when the music stopped, I felt alone and stuck in my inability to relate with people.

At RAU, I again felt lost in my own loneliness. Again I felt like an outsider, a spectator. I longed for a place of belonging, a place where I was understood. Disconnected from myself and from the people around me, I disappeared in my own nothingness. I disappeared in my sense that I did not fit into that world. As when I was a child, I buried myself in books.

I joined the RAU choir and for a very long time this was the only social context in which I participated. The choir was a place of social awkwardness and isolation for me. I was uncomfortable in the presence of the other students, mostly keeping to myself. Yet I found a sense of belonging and community with this group, through the music we created together. The music expressed something deeper and more common to human nature; beyond the awkwardness of social chit chat. There was a beautiful sense of connection and harmony as our voices came together, which resonated in the space between and through us.

In my second year at RAU I travelled overseas with the choir. I will never forget how we sang “*Heilig*” in Notre Dame. Our voices gently soared as we silently connected in our tears, in the moment of creating something bigger than us. I will also never forget the playful, jazzy song: “*Java jive*” that we sang to the audiences that received and treated us with nourishment. It was as if the repertoire of our music became a space to express the repertoire of being human that I felt within.

Yet this trip was also a painful experience. As soon as we stopped singing I did not know what to do with myself. I stood aside, observing the cliques of people enjoying one another, and feeling like a complete outsider. I was often overwhelmed with the need to disappear. I hid myself and my body and my sense of discomfort in the big coat I always wore. My coat was my insulation and my comfort against the cold, the discomfort of not knowing how to relate to the people around me. It was my protective layer against the world as I saw and experienced it.

By the time I met Corinne I had vanished into the blue lines of my drawings. Slowly but surely, Corinne opened a space where I could reconnect with myself and connect with others. This was a space where I could voice my fears and ways of being in life, where I felt understood to the extent that one person can understand another. In therapy we spoke together in languages that were adequate for what I was feeling and languages that created a space of belonging and change. Once, I sang to Corinne in therapy, out of the frustration of not knowing how to express myself more adequately. And there was a space and an appreciation and a connection in that, the meta-language being one of connection and exploration and understanding.

I remember singing “There can be miracles” in one of the workshops I had to present in group therapy in my first year at Unisa. Lea danced and Lindiwe added her rich alto voice. I felt connected with myself and with the group in a significant way, away from the psychological lingo and competitiveness for the first time. Singing became a way of being and showing myself, connecting with myself and those around me. It was a way of being understood and conveying my understanding of myself, the world and the people who were part of my world.

At Agape, singing became a space of connecting within loneliness. Singing in church with Beauty opened a space of connecting with our own loneliness and each others’ loneliness. More than that, at Agape and Unisa, the stance that we had to engage and encounter our own struggles in the presence of our profession, created a journey where we, as a group, sometimes found ways of meeting one another. The language of reflection, struggle and intimate meaning-making was a language that created spaces of belonging and connection.

I began to encounter myself, exploring different ways of connecting with others and myself in various contexts.

Rituals such as writing a diary, inviting people to my house, finding special coffee shops and showing them to friends, became rituals of healing connection. The rituals of participating in group therapy at Unisa, the rituals of encountering my clients

and myself in therapy, broadened the range of my voice, and different ways of being with others and myself became possible.

In the context of my family, I had learnt that interacting with others is hurtful, and that there were places of emptiness and misunderstanding, where one tries to read the other person's scripted music and sing their notes. Remaining the outsider the observer is safe. My loneliness lay in my inability to establish closeness with others. It lay in my assumption that I had nothing worthwhile to give to others in relationship. In this sense, keeping myself in a position of loneliness, a position of reflection rather than participation, was the lullaby that I sang to myself.

The rituals of connecting with others and finding languages to express and explore one's understanding of one another allowed me to connect with others and myself, turning loneliness into a place of solitude. Solitude is not as entrapping as loneliness, for within solitude you choose to be with yourself yet the option to connect with others is there.

Dowrick (1991) describes loneliness as encounters in which what you are not and what is not happening dominate. In connecting with my songs in life I feel able to connect with others' songs. In these rituals lie the landscapes of the choirs within, and harmony between one another becomes possible.

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*"Where there is connection to soul, there is psychology..."* (Elkins, 1995, p. 9).

Human beings need connection and need to find ways of expressing themselves so that they feel they are understood. This discourse seems to be pervasive in every context of my life at the moment, perhaps because while writing the stories I became increasingly aware of the liberation and the loneliness of the process of writing. The liberation lies in claiming my history, thoughts and feelings and the ideas that evoke and evolve and feed the process exploring. The loneliness comes with being aware of my need to do this and to share my stories.

When I become lonely I become self-doubting. I don't show the stories to anyone and I start wondering if it would not be more professional and acceptable if the personal were to become less visible. Yet the personal is always also in the professional and I need to explore this if this journey is to be of personal and professional significance.

On reading the previous chapters again, I realised that the theme of loneliness shows itself in different forms in most of the stories. In *Meeting Ricky* it shows itself as fear of rejection. The story about my father (*Growing up*) speaks of the loneliness of being insignificant. Dowrick (1991, p. 160) writes:

At the core of loneliness often lies a fear of abandonment, usually experienced as a fear that the loneliness—the feeling of not being wanted by someone, of not being recognized, or understood, or sought after, or appreciated—will go on forever. And behind the fear of abandonment is something else: a lack of trust in your own self.

It is this lack of trust in myself that makes me withhold the stories, and makes me fear that I will be misunderstood and labelled by you, the reader. Not discussing the stories with anyone perpetuates a context of loneliness.

In *Letter to Dean*, loneliness shows itself in the missing of a specific way of connecting. Dowrick speaks of this:

Deep loneliness comes out of missing an actual person who has gone forever, or from the feeling of wanting a kind of contact, a level of communication, which is not and perhaps never has been available, or which has been available but now seems out of reach. (1991, p. 156)

I missed the level of contact that I had had with Dean, that level of communication that had never before been available in my relationships with men. I missed that relationship that had allowed me to think and relate differently to myself and with more openness to men.

*Fire and Water* speaks of the shade between loneliness and solitude in the midst of a repertoire of selves and in the barren field of being with others in a “helping fashion”. According to Bowen (1978), such a helping stance limits the process of differentiation. Loneliness lies at the core of such a limited way of relating.

The paradox of this dissertation is that anything I write can be interpreted in many ways. The risk is therefore that you may regard your meanings about what is conveyed here as absolute truths. Such a stance will create encounters between us that may limit your definition of me to what I possibly did not mean to convey. I also do not have the opportunity to be in a conversation with you that could allow these meanings to be explored. The only way to avoid such a restricting and lonely process is to request you to take a reflective stance yourself.

When were you lonely while reading this work? What meanings accompanied this sense of loneliness? Do these meanings limit you to rigid descriptions of yourself?

Are there times, as you read this work, that you feel superior to what is conveyed? Do you disqualify or label the author in any way? In what way are these meanings limiting to you and the author? What meanings perturbed you into taking such a stance? Is it possible for you to question and explore the significance of these answers in a way that allows you to encounter more of yourself?

### *Loneliness in the Family*

Over my twenty-year practice I’ve listened to thousands of “secret stories”, stories that, in the main, were kept hidden for many years, sometimes almost a lifetime. Whether a woman’s self-imposed secret is shrouded in self-imposed silence, or whether she has been threatened by someone more powerful than she, she deeply fears disenfranchisement, being considered an undesirable person, disruption of relationships that are important to her, and sometimes physical harm if she reveals her secrets. (Estés, 1992)

When I read the stories about my family again, I had a profound sense of how lonely I had been in that system. I became the responsible, invisible girl who complied with the rules of the system in order not to shake up the lurking monsters immanent in the face of difference. I have seen the implications and the severity of the extent to which my family would go to preserve the discourses and secrets that informed our way of relating. My sister even chose boarding school over the constant conflict and rejection that threatened when she dared to comment on the process between my parents and when she dared to become involved in relationships with men.

### *Loneliness and Psychology*

The Cartesian-Newtonian assumption that the researcher or therapist should and can take an objective stance without letting her or his assumptions influence the process of assessing people banished a sense of connectedness from the domain of psychology. By ignoring the inherent impact human beings have on each other, even when in “scientifically controlled” environments, in pursuit of absolute, measurable, logically deduced, absolute truths, creating knowledge became a depersonalised process that did not allow the observer or the observed to be in good connection with themselves or each other. The medical and mechanistic models of therapy are examples of such isolating processes.

When I worked at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital, the medical, mechanistic model was still dominant. That hospital was a *lonely* place. Often, the underlying assumptions of this approach perpetuated the lonely, disqualifying and objectifying contexts within which people’s symptoms had originally served a function. No wonder people keep “relapsing” after discharge.

I am not saying that these models have not made necessary and useful contributions to the field. But I agree with Elkins (1995), that when these models serve as the foundation of our profession, they produce a psychology that is barren of soul, with soulless results within which symptoms or the generation of new symptoms remain necessary.

I get lonely in therapy if what happens between me and the client does not perturb me and leaves me stuck in what feels like a rigid way of relating (i.e. being only empathic with the client and nothing else). Perturbations or differences (and sometimes even similarities) between us urge me to reflect on my personal and theoretical assumptions and to make different ways of relating and thinking possible. Not only does this process allow me to be in better connection with myself, it also allows me to be in better connection with my clients. Therapy then becomes a place of intimate connection with and attentiveness to the lives of clients and the meanings that inform their way of being in life, as well as the meanings that inform my life and my way of relating with the client. As such, therapy becomes a space of hope and understanding through attentive listening and exploration, which recognises the multiplicity of one another and through which flexible ways of being in the world become possible.

One could say that this process of being, which consists of your own assumptions and the meanings that inform your life and your work, is a narcissistic process. Yet the assumption that if we don't take this meta-position of reflection in our work we become "trapped in the webs of assumptions, which ground us as surely as chains or roots", makes this stance a necessity for a repertoire of selves to evolve as well as a necessity to create a context of change and transformation (Mair, 1989, p. 253).

Therefore loneliness has become a sign of danger for me in therapy: the danger in co-creating a context where people relate in limiting ways with each other that probably only perpetuate the problems we want to address.



## THE NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY

### (CHAPTER 8)

It is twenty past one on a Saturday morning. It is quiet outside and within. I cannot sleep. In my mind I page through the narratives/stories I have written and lived through writing ... I reflect on how useful this process of re-storying my life has been, how it has opened processes that have been and continue to be useful. How a variety of processes evolved and are shaping me as a person, introducing possibilities into my life ...

I page through my drawings ... In the beginning there were the thin blue lines of a fragmented and ambiguous self ... trapped in a rigid and stagnant definition of self as fixed and in need of fixing, closed off to myself and the world, trapped in an internal, self-defeating conversation revolving around how I should be and behave to be seen as good enough.

I remember the words of Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 746): “The work of self narration is to produce a sense of continuity; to make a life that sometimes seem to be falling apart come together again, by retelling and restorying the events of one’s life.” This has been my experience as well: a move from an ambiguous “self” to a deeper, wider and more coherent understanding of “self” in relationship, connecting the past, present and future.

Hoffman’s (1991, p. 6) beautiful metaphor of the “self” as “a stretch of moving history, like a river or a stream” comes to mind.

The consequences of re-telling my life through different contexts preceded rather than followed my story because they are enmeshed in the act of telling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The story of my life became my life. Through writing and living these stories the process of *one-sided self-monitoring*, focusing on myself as an individual who needs to censor my words to be acceptable to others, chastising myself and blaming myself for any discord in relationships, provoked and opened a process of *double-sided self-*

*reflectiveness, a process of viewing the “self” as a system, in a system, part of, informed by and informing systems in the contexts of larger systems.*

This process informs my understanding of “self” as a set of socially constructed, multiple and changing processes that co-create the web of meanings we live, rather than a reductionistic inner reality, fixed traits and a recipient of emotions and experience. There is a movement from “self” as target to “self” as instrument.

I get up and page through my drawings. The pictures become richer, more coherent and more colourful. I look at the body pictures and I think of how my understanding of my body changed from experiencing it as a humiliating static burden to using it as an instrument of perception, action and intervention that moves.

I think of how writing my personal narratives informed and informs a richer, narrative understanding of “self” more relevant to the therapeutic conversations I engage in. This process had and still has a perturbing and formative impact on my life. Stories about my training, simultaneously and recursively, became a continuous process of training. I think of how I have learnt and continue to learn to see myself from multiple perspectives in multiple contexts. Through writing and living the stories in this dissertation, a versatility of additional “selves” for various contexts emerged. In other words, an amplification of “selves” emerged that enables me to access more of myself and take more positions in more contexts. I do not only take the position of the caring, pleasing, empathetic, tentative and respectful therapist anymore, but also use my challenging, playful, assertive, humorous, irreverent voices in a congruent manner.

I look at the painful pictures that express my struggle to make sense of my experiences—the unflattering but human and believable accounts of myself. I think of how my stories have opened a continuing process of being in conversation with myself.

I have moved from a reductionistic sense of self and way of being, through the struggles of meeting myself in relationships, as part of relationships, informed by and informing the processes that play out, to a sense of “self” as open, fluid and multiple.

I think of how this played out in therapy with Steven (see *Meeting Steven*). How I became quiet and rigid in his presence, how discourses of performance recursively

influenced my becoming more aware of how this stance was not feasible in the context of therapy and how it provoked me into self-reflexion and in turn shaped what happened in therapy with Steven. How his stories about his stories, relative to my stories about my stories, facilitated a process of reflecting and voicing my stories about men.

I think of how this process made it possible to relinquish the expert stance and take different and less defensive positions, use voices such as the playful and challenging voices in a more flexible manner and how it opened different conversations and possibilities. I think of how I shifted from the “blushing bride”, uncomfortable with sexual themes in systems, to a more flexible stance allowing for even my flirtatious, irreverent voices to be used in a congruent manner. The self as instrument .... Taking a double-sided, reflexive stance in making sense of my experiences with Steven has provoked me to understand therapy as a participatory process, the co-creation of a context where a plurality of stories is encouraged, rather than enforcing a hierarchical power structure, where the therapist is responsible for “the one story” that explains the troubles of clients (Hoffman, 1990, 1991).

I am much more sensitive to myself in relation to other people and cultures and to the varied discourses that inform our lives. I think of how initially at Eersterust I became a teacher in relation to the playgroup and how the process shifted to a co-exploration of their meanings, rather than an enforcement of my values.

I think of how the themes that emerged in writing and reflecting on my stories provoked me and brought forth challenges with which I continue to engage.

I am more aware of the way that discourses around performance shape me and inform my relationships. The discourse that, to be worthy and acceptable as a human being, I have to perform according to the standards or expectations of the contexts in which I find myself, is less dominant, but continues to be a challenge that I engage with and will probably have to engage with as I enter new and different contexts.

When I start wondering if a person approves or disapproves of me and I start censoring myself, when my pleasing voice come to the fore, I am aware of how this position restricts my choice of action to disqualifying myself or buying in to the negative

feedback from those around me; how this can lead only to working harder to accomplish what is expected of me and how this can inform a loss of voice for myself and the people I am in relationship with. This awareness allows me to stand back, reflect and stay in conversation about the modes of relationship I co-create, and makes me more flexible, more able to see the both/and of my relationships. This process allows my competitive, expert and “pleaser” voices take a back seat and make room for exploration. In my “private” life this helps me to be more honest about my own needs in relationships. I think of how this process has, while writing my stories, informed an emerging trust in my own abilities and in using my “self” as an instrument in an “in there with the client” process, rather than only taking the expert stance and using the techniques of others.

When my expert voice comes to the fore, I am challenged to reflect on what happens in the relationship between myself and others that evokes my need to perform and create distance in those relationships. I think of how in therapy my expert voice or stance has been triggered by extremely helpless voices of clients. A binocular, self-reflective view of the relationship between the client and myself has helped me to relinquish the expert/advisory voice that has to change/ save the client and has allowed me to be more flexible and congruent in therapy.

This has also informed and still informs my understanding of loneliness, not necessarily as a sign of disconnection, but also as positive. Being “in there” with the client does not mean having to be only sympathetic and empathetic. It means caring enough to listen attentively with my body, soul and mind, sensing and thinking about recursive patterns in our relationship and taking the risk to be open to change myself. Thinking of how my stories about my stories recursively influence the client’s stories about his or her stories, and how this shapes the conversations we co-create, helps me to use the “self” as an instrument rather than as a target of self-deficit; it helps maintain therapeutic manoeuvrability, orthogonality, and enables me to be asocial and create a context where new possibilities can emerge in a congruent manner, rather than being drawn in by the dominant narratives clients bring and the reactions they evoke. There is a shift from being responsible to being “response-able”. I am curious to explore how

different clients may evoke my re-action of performance patterns and how this curiosity and reflection may contribute to my development in future.

Thinking and reflecting on the theme of loneliness has also brought forth a sense that I do not have to fit with and into every context that I enter. I am more comfortable now in disengaging from contexts, conversations and relationships where my way of being does not fit with the ways of others.

Reflecting on the theme of gender discourses has made and still makes me more aware of my assumptions about men and women and how these influence how I relate with them. A process has opened where I increasingly question my assumptions about men. My view of men as judgemental as opposed to relational, as objectifying women as sex objects, as potentially aggressive, as people for whom I have to fulfil certain functions to be accepted, are not so rigid anymore. In turn I am starting to be less anxious in the presence of men.

When I become silent in relation to men, when I withdraw, when I start thinking of how I can become what they expect me to be, fulfil roles I think they expect me to fulfil in order to be good enough, when I take an intellectual position, distrust their validation of me, become the expert and disqualify them, I am aware of how this behaviour restricts other potential ways of relating in our relationship. I am challenged to take a more exploratory stance, to question my assumptions and how these recursively connect and inform what plays out between us.

I look forward to exploring how this process may continue to be a struggle and how it could open possibilities in different relationships with men in and out of therapy and enable me to be in relationships with them that give us both voice.

These days I more easily confront men and express anger in my relationships with them. It is as if my voice has become amplified. This shift is probably partly informed by changing social discourses in the different layers of our society, where women's voices are increasingly amplified and legitimised in political, social and corporate spheres. I think of my relationship with my Dad. It as if his voice was always the voice of authority and power informed by our Afrikaans culture, religious discourses

and the context of being a senior manager in the corporate world. Changes in these contexts seem to have quietened his voice of authority, and this, together with the amplification of my voice, is allowing different possibilities to emerge in our relationship.

I am much more aware of the implications of relating to women as if we, as a gender, are all victims. I realise what a narrow view this is, that when I do this I run the risk of getting stuck to the point that only a soft understanding becomes possible.

Through writing and reflecting on my stories, I have moved closer to postmodernism concepts on an experiential level—I can see that there is no absolute “truth”, that there is no objective reality outside what we construct in language and in relationship with each other. I can see that what I experience as “truths” are flexible, incomplete frames that are fluid and could evolve, be re-written, edited and re-edited.

I can see that everything we observe, “all data” and “all knowledge”, are informed by our already existing and socially constructed theories and assumptions and that stories imply a multiverse of possible alternative interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

I can see how a postmodern way of being creates the opportunity to be flexible rather than rigid in how we understand and renegotiate our relationships with others and ourselves in a world of multiple contexts, and how it also brings about uncertainty, which escalates when we reinterpret our stories/“truths”.

In writing and in experiencing the telling and re-storying of my life, I never held the hope of discovering verifiable, dominating, fixed truths or knowledge that is objective, independent of mind and devoid of feelings. My stories were not written with the purpose of providing grounds for certainty, predictability and closure.

My sense of multiple “selves” and my process of differentiation are embodied and informed by viewing the “self” as a process, socially constructed in language, as part of, being informed by, shaping and being shaped by the conversations we create in various dialogical contexts (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). For me it means being sensitive to the realities our discourses and dialogical practices create. It means taking a

double-sided, reflexive view of the relationships and systems and opens a space for a flexible way of being, in therapy and in conversation with others and myself in various contexts. It entails taking action that keeps a self-reflexive dialogue going, allowing for different voices to emerge and various encounters to become possible. It is a never-ending process from being to becoming ... .

Differentiation is a circular process. When I started working at a consulting business I again felt that I had to prove myself, I again searched for the legitimacy of my voice, felt I had to justify my worth and got silent and lost voice in the presence of authority. The themes of this dissertation are the themes of my life. I expect that different contexts are going to draw me into the same processes. It is my continuing journey—the ending is the beginning is the ending is the beginning...

The personal narratives that constitute the process and product of this dissertation have evoked continuing conversations with myself and the contexts I am part of and co-create. Hopefully it has inspired conversations with your “self”, from the perspective of your life, and evoked you to critically reflect on your own experience and meet your “self” in relation to my journey.

I wonder which themes reverberated and did not reverberate for you? I wonder when you got lonely in relation to my narratives, I wonder when you smiled, when you laughed and when you pulled your face, what provoked you and when you thought “this is nonsense” ... and what your process of relating to my texts brought forth, and made clear about you for you ... .

Through writing and reflecting on my stories I have also come to realise how I tend to negotiate my relationships on an emotional rather than a rational, intellectual level—but I do not feel ready to explore this process yet.

Dawn is breaking ... I open my windows to a new day ...

***Hallo. I am An-Mareé ...***

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