

Volume 4

Issue 1

Winter 2021

Citation Link

This special issue focuses on the EcoSystemic Return in systemic practice. This is a moment when systemic understanding and practice are needed for nothing less than the survival of this planet. As systemic professionals, we have both the training and the moral obligation to engage with EcoSystemic matters across all levels of context. As a community with a strong social justice conscience, we cannot afford to use systems thinking selectively or only when in role as salaried selves working with small, isolated systems. If we do, we mirror the superficial commitment to systemic change of the recent United Nations Conference on Climate Change, COP26.

In the opening paper, Hugh Palmer asks, what happened to the “eco” in systemic practice, why it was dropped. He then shows us how the systemic therapy community has been highly selective about which theories of Gregory Bateson it just dropped at an early stage and how that has influenced the medicalisation of family therapy. I was taken aback to read Gregory’s words from the mid-sixties onwards and recognise the separation of therapy from ecological thinking. It raises a very awkward question for the systemic profession to address: why have we decided to punctuate our work with those theories and not these theories?

Chiara Santin takes us into the woods where she shows us how she has been rewilding therapy with families, couples and individuals. Her paper grounds us in her practice of ecotherapy, inviting us to take a look at how she creates therapeutic space and reflecting teams in nature. This is more than a paper on design but on the emergent ethics of making new therapeutic practices with people – describing clients as co-explorers - to re-balance some aspects of power in the therapeutic relationship and foreground the agency of participants and the natural environment.

Roger Duncan explores the relationship between systemic thinking and indigenous understanding of what creates wellbeing of land and its people. He draws on Australian Indigenous and African writers to extend western thinking about connection and to develop the deep listening practices of Dadirri and what Roger calls, Deep Donkey. Like others in this issue, Roger Duncan revisits the warning by Gregory Bateson on the dangers of separating people from contextual ways of knowing and doing.

A trilogy of short papers by systemic practitioners explores the relationships between land, extraction industrial legacies and wellbeing for individuals and communities. The opening paper by Leah Salter takes us on walks over post-mining countryside in South Wales and reflects on talks with people exploring the binary of what being alive can mean in terms of landscape and for people. In the second paper, Lisen Kebbe shows the importance of indigenous knowing about local ecology when she describes the battle for truth between international companies, politicians and local people. She explains how the local ecology of the island of Gotland in Sweden is dangerously disrupted by limestone quarrying for the making of cement. The piecemeal approach to problem solving and betrayal by politicians shows profit led systems exercising their strength. The final paper in the trilogy by Gail Simon, speaking from within a North Yorkshire landscape, connects cuts in the landscape with cuts on bodies and minds. She reflects on the contemporary requirement for people to mentally cut out knowledge about the removal of whole hills for limestone with the endless need for cement. She proposes some systemic questions for addressing the different ethico-onto-epistemological positions to participate in the shifting discursive practices described in Lisen Kebbe's paper.

Imelda McCarthy offers us an autobiographical reflection on her relationship with nature and ecological practices during her life. Imelda's stories reveal how she was part of an intertwined ecology of different kinds of emergent knowing played out in a long journey of developing systemic theory and practice in Irish and international family therapy, Irish political and cultural histories. She reflects on her family's values, key people and places, the Dublin cityscape with pockets of nature that she grew up in, and how her consciousness of environment and nature developed.

One of the failures of our time is the difficulty in connecting up the challenges facing the planet. Everything we do and think is connected to climate change in the same way that everything we do is connected to other forms of social injustice. Valuing of pale skins in the hierarchy of life-that-matters is part of the same anthropocentric set of values that makes cuts in our connection of stone and people and water. The theft and destruction of land, life and languages are connected so we need to work out how they are connected to what we do and how we can undo practices which reinforce the prejudices and the separations.

In writing about *panmorphic crisis*, Gail Simon brings into view some of the crises collectively in need of cultural rupture which depend on systematic decolonising and depathologising activity. She explores the use of Coordinated Management of Meaning to consider reactions to change in training programmes when they need respond flexibly to crises at hand. She advocates for an overhaul of systemic training courses to centre Black, Indigenous, ecological, queer and new materialist theory to urgently address systemic injustices at local-global levels.

Philip Kearney, in this issue's *revival paper* from 2013, and in his 2021 reflection on the same matters now, speaks with passion and directness about Bateson's concern that chopping up the world into parts would led to the current situation of fragmentation of issues and inertia. His 2013 paper may as well have been written this year for its systemic focus on global crises. Referring to his history in systemic therapy, he expresses frustration and anger that there appears to be little systemic thinking applied to the health of the planet. He asks if the earth needs therapy as a result of treatment which has lacked systemic wisdom. But perhaps we can go further and say that the systemic professions may be in need of systemic therapy too. We need two-way binocular vision to step out of the neoliberal focus on the human system in the consulting room or single organisation and rather resituate what is happening for individuals and families and communities and organisations within a larger ecology

which simply can no longer be expected to sooner or later self-correct. Living in the Anthropocene era means humans have interfered to a dangerous degree in all areas of human and non-human life. Everyone has an obligation to be informed, be able to theorise change and act. Systemic practitioners are not simply employees but critical thinkers and agents of systemic change. We cannot just speak about climate change as if it is a first order problem “out there”, disconnected from what we do in everyday systemic practice.

We are fortunate in this EcoSystemic Return issue to be able to invite you to experience two short films by Norwegian systemic therapist, Andreas Breden. "What can we co-learn from lighting a campfire?" and "Following a stream towards the sea". The films show Andreas's indigenous curiosity and knowledge of context. The invitation to viewers is left open but with clear agendas of seeing connections and learning. The stillness and sounds alongside Andreas's relationship with his environment is humbling and completely engaging. Indirectly, one is left with the question about how we make connections between our own local and global places, and how everything is connected.

Nearly all the writers in this issue show themselves in their writings. These are not “aboutness” writings but personally situated while also involving critical approaches to new and old thinking and practice. As systemic practitioners, we have learned the importance of showing ourselves and how where we come from affects what we bring to our practice.

There is another connecting theme across this issue which need honouring. There is a strong connection in this issue with Ireland in that we have two Irish contributors: Philip Kearney and Imelda McCarthy; two Irish reviewers and two papers re-printed from *Feedback: Journal of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland*.

Many thanks to all the contributors and reviewers for this issue who lent their rigour and imagination to make this issue what it is and not least to Jim Sheehan, Editor of *Feedback* for the generosity in giving permission for sharing Philip Kearney's 2013 and Gail Simon's 2021 papers.

Citation

Simon, Gail (2021). Editorial. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 4(1), i-iii.
<https://doi.org/10.28963/4.1.1>