

PRACTICE NOTES

Reclaiming the relationship with bodily knowing through movement in nature

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Context

Lorna

I spend a lot of time walking in the local landscape where I live in South Wales. I use many things and metaphors from nature in my work as a systemic therapist and supervisor and I'm a member of the EcoSystemic Group. We discuss the relationship between capitalism and ecology and how systemic thinking can be of use. In our discussions, we also give time to thinking about ourselves as practitioners – how are we affected by the world in which we live? How can we connect more with nature to bring it into our work selves and relationships?

I hosted a workshop on the subject of reclaiming the relationship with bodily knowing through movement in nature at Brathay Hall, Ambleside in May 2022. The idea was to create a space for therapists to explore and deconstruct binaries that connect and separate us and nature. While we are nature, I am referring to the human/nature binary created by us humans.

We spread out over the peninsular, each choosing a tree or finding a space.



I read aloud a poem, “The Moment” by Margaret Atwood (1998), as a challenge to our dominant human-centric view of life:

Below are the final few lines:

“You were a visitor, time after time
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round.”

I invited us to start the practice by

- Befriending a tree
- Noticing what draws us to a particular tree
- Touching the tree and being touched by the tree

The second stage involved participants connecting with the 5 elements both internally and externally as represented in, by and through the tree:

- Earth
- Fire
- Water
- Air
- Space

The third part of the exercise invited participants to connect with our five senses:

- Seeing
- Hearing
- Touching
- smelling
- (possibly/probably not) tasting

The follow up invitation was to feel free to move or dance – or imagine moving or dancing, or simply rest in stillness.

After about 20 minutes I rang a bell and we all re-gathered and shared our experiences and reflected on this question:

“In what ways can this embodied knowing support us in our aspiration to practice decoloniality: both in our systemic work life and life outside work, in alignment with situational ethics?”

Below are some of our responses from that moment and since.

Justine's reflections

I remember the tree at the waterside, calling me, welcoming me. And I sat there, musing over the water. Just observing and feeling. A swan swam up to me. We looked at each other and had contact. I felt something swan-like in me. She was just there, I was there. Tree, water, swan, earth, sky and me became one. I did not want to leave. As I walked back to the others, the swan swam with me...

Erik's reflections

A surprising and beautiful experience. So nice that Lenticular Futures has this workshop. Space for connection between hearts, bodies and trees. Wonderful.

Andreas's reflections

At first, hugging a tree felt very uncomfortable. I was reminded what society think about "tree huggers". That feeling got wiped away after a few second of contact - skin to bark. Being in nature and connecting with nature always bring peace to me. Leaning against the tree was an active choice. I am contemplating about how our nature connection is seen as a passive act, but right now I am sure there are many ways to actively speed up the process of slowing down and connecting with nature. This workshop was one such way. And I believe most people can profit from being led into an active act of reconnecting with nature.

Lorna's reflections

Since the session I've found both similar and different practices which I'd like to share.

Sunil Chauhan writes: "Imagine a world where we all have a friend in nature – tree, plant, flower, rock, river, mountain, clouds, blue skies, a constellation, the moon – just a friend in nature to keep us connected to our roots. A friend in nature also connects us to some of the core values of love, respect, community, and kinship that help us to live more harmoniously. Imagine, every now and then, we met friend of friends and create an ever-widening circle of nature friends. Imagine a festival of friends, a gathering of friends, a school of friendship, a celebration of kinship. Imagine!" (2021, p. 103)

Matt Hall (2021, p. 46) learned to listen in the way he was taught by the Aboriginal Elder and philosopher Bill Neidjie, taking the line, "that tree now e speak" as his guide (1998, p. 18). Sitting under a chosen tree, Matt listens.

"As I listen, I am trying to step back, to stop my own verbal commentary, to put aside my own human wants and desires and to allow the plants to take their turn at describing, shaping and living in the world. It is akin to botanical meditation, with space for other beings' flourishing as its object. Sometimes I feel like crying; other times I don't feel much. We have been dominating plants for thousands of years, so this is bound to take a while."
(Hall, 2021, p. 46)

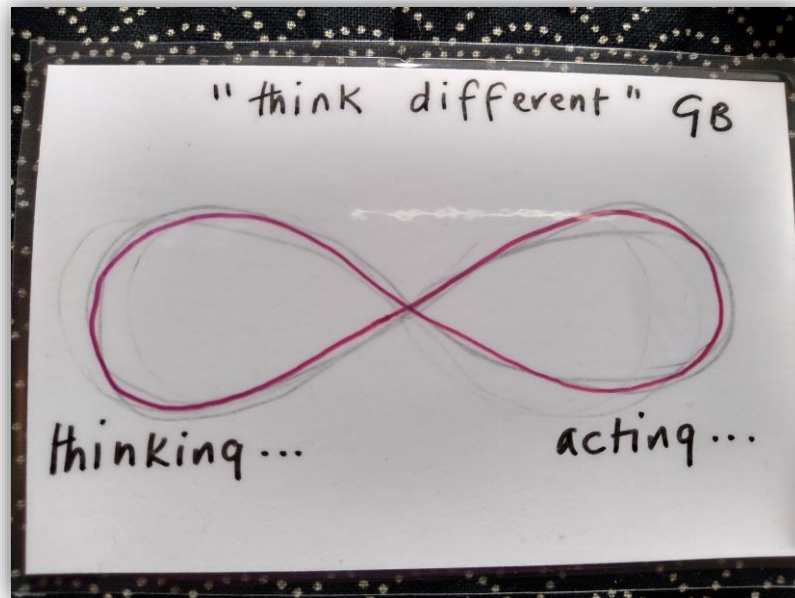
Hugh Palmer's recently published a paper titled "Think different' to stop extinction. Gregory Bateson's Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism". Hugh's final paragraph challenges us to take a "both... and..." way forward:

"However, the urgency of societal changes required to prevent catastrophe leaves me with more questions. To engender systemic change in a congruently systemic way (non-

coercive, neutral and so on) will require time, and little time is left. Is it enough to educate others, or could we think about implementing ecological, non-dualistic epistemology locally in our own lives and practices? Following in Bateson's footsteps and considering his view of immanence of mind, perhaps it is through both our thoughts and actions that we can make a difference. I hope so."

(Palmer, 2022, p. 25)

I was inspired by Hugh's paper to create an image which I keep on my desk to remind to keep my thoughts and actions in awareness and that I have choice in both ways of being.



I hope that the practices described above can help us all during this challenging time (the challenges that we created) of being human on planet Earth.

Connecting the workshop to our practice. Some reflections a few months later.

Erik's later reflections

Walking from the villa in the direction of the trees I could feel happiness and hope inside of me. Just walking there surrounded by nature and people I felt connected and that was already so good.

Should I feel the connection with the trees as well? Should I feel them and should they feel me? I remember entering the place of the trees like it happened yesterday. Feelings of happiness and hope.

And then it began. Walking, breathing and feeling. Should I choose a tree or should a tree choose me? I remember silence who somehow was filled with life and a strong kind of rest and peace. A prayer came up and "my tree" appeared. Making contact is not something you only do with your hands or with your eyes. It involves the whole body. The heart is such an important player in the field of connection. Not feeling the urge of being somebody else. To be just you is beautiful. Feelings of gratefulness came up even as images and dreams. And above all of this the feeling of connection. With a heart full of this all I started to walk back to the villa. Grateful...

Andreas's later reflections

Right now, I am lying in the grass in the mountains, leaning against a wooden piece that functions as a bench. The sun is warm, the wind is speaking its own language and my dog is sleeping beside me. I am at peace. This is a perfect setting for recalling the workshop with you in Lake District. There seems to be an understanding that our connection to nature is something that just happens. Sometimes it might be so and that might be one of the wonders of life. However, I am not sure it is a connection to nature but rather a connection *with*. A connection *to* feels almost parasitic and hostile while a connection *with* is more a dual agreement. Was it possible to connect with the tree without the tree wanting it? Was it a mutual curiosity filled with mutual kindness that framed the bark-skin-meeting? Some of the feedback I most appreciate from the people I talk with is when I hear that they find me calm and that this calmness infects them as well. I know how I appreciate being calm and how nature helps me becoming calm. And I know I easily gain wisdom and insights in topics in my life when I am calm. My practice story is from a few minutes when nature helped me bringing calmness and wisdom into my therapy room.

Female Reindeer Antlers

I don't remember which of them had petitioned the mediation, but I believe it was her. He had moved out after an argument and did not intend to move back in, not even if the circumstances changed. I had spent some time at the beginning of each of our three meetings checking out whether it was possible for them to continue as a married couple. It was not. I guess this urge of mine came from a hope for all the unassisted minor refugees I have been met during my career, for them to get their own family. They were under thirty years old. The interpreter sounded like he was my age, in his forties. The office had ordered interpretation via telephone with an interpreter from another city to ensure the parents privacy. Each of our two previous meetings had ended up with an agreement on when the father should meet their daughter. He was asking for as much as possible, and the mother kept him at arm's length, allowing him four hours on Saturday and four hours on Sunday. He was living with friends of his in a collective and she kept their apartment. Each time the mother came with an accusation about how bad a father he was, he tried to argue that he wasn't.

And after an accusation against the father midst of the third meeting, he started crying silently, and I just noticed this when he grabbed one of the tissues on my table. It was obvious that he was in pain. "I just want to see my daughter as much as possible", he said. "This is more of the same", I thought, listening to my critical inner voice, and let my eyes wander around in my office. And there I saw it! This day, I had brought a tote bag full of reindeer antlers that I had found during my last walking trip in the Norwegian mountain range, Jotunheimen. The antlers were meant for an installation that my team and I are going to make as a part of an ecosystemic project we are running. I asked the parents if I could do something that most probably would seem very strange to them, and they gave me permission. I went to the tote bag and grabbed the antler that seemed to have belonged to a female reindeer. This knowledge was passed on to me from my father, who told me that the female reindeer antlers have a sharper angle than the more rounded antlers of the male reindeer. The parents looked at me, excited about what was going to happen in a way that also were sceptical, and I started:

Andreas: *Do you see what this is?*

Mother: *They are antlers.*

Father: Yes.

Andreas: *Do you know what animal they are from?*

Both shook their heads. The interpreter had stopped interpreting and were just listening.

Andreas: *They are from a female reindeer. Did you know that they are the only deer in Norway where the female grows antlers?*

Both shook their heads. The same heads that now were raised a bit.

Andreas: *Do you know why they have antlers?*

Both shook their heads again. I reminded myself of a teacher. One of those who got a fire in their eyes when they speak about something that matters to them.

Andreas: *The reindeer in Norway live in the mountains where it is a very harsh environment. And during the winter, as you know, there are snow and very cold. This means that the reindeer must dig through the snow to get down to their food. And the calves who are born in May are not strong enough to keep digging for their food.*

The couple were both listening, and the interpreter was quiet. I continued.

Andreas: *During the mating period in August and September, the male reindeer have antlers to fight each other so they can mate with the female reindeer who doesn't have antlers. And after the mating period, the male reindeer loses their antlers. This is when the female reindeer starts growing her antlers. And she uses them to headbutt the male reindeer away when they have dug down to the nutritious white and curly lichen that the reindeer prefer.*

They were watching me like they were waiting for my point, and the interpreter was still quiet.

Andreas: *Are the ways of the reindeer your way?*

Both were laughing, and they had caught my point. I handled the mother the female reindeer antlers.

Andreas: *Could it be so that in your situation, the father must prove that he is worthy as a father, before you as a mother can trust him? And until then you will keep on headbutting him to keep your daughter safe?*

I was eying the father, and he were nodding in approval of my metaphor and the mother said yes.

Justine's later reflections

The next step

When I was trained as a family therapist from 1975 on, I was invited to position myself outside the family, observe the family and think about strategies to bring change by effective interventions. I for instance had to "win" the battle of initiative in a session, I had to be in the lead, otherwise I would get lost. My national and international trainers had certain images, norms, and values about a healthy functioning family. The feminist movement entered the field at the end of the seventies and brought

to the surface how much the white middle class family with a working father, a caring mother and two or more children were the starting point of theory and practice. They made us reflect on the influence of gender on the relational and personal problems in couples and families, and so on our practices. This marked a transition to the awareness that we are part of our therapeutic practices. We cannot position ourselves outside the people, relations, families, and communities we work with. What we as therapists regard as relational ethical influences our questions and interventions. In addition to gender, we became more aware of the influence of class, race, culture and other categorisations that are privileging some categories (male, heterosexual, middleclass, white, Christian, able bodied) above all others excluding them from resources.

This transition of working from an outside expert position to become part of our therapeutic practices was strengthened by the social constructionist influence in our field. According to social constructionism we live in worlds of meaning and create meanings in relationships and communities. Our personal history, class, cultural background, and gender identity influence how we understand the world, relationships and what we perceive as reality.

In the field of the academy and research a parallel development is taking place. We as researchers cannot do research from the outside, we are part of our research, the people we work with are our co-researchers.

The shadow side of the huge influence of social constructionism was that language and meaning became so central that the body and the reality of experiences got out of sight. We are also animals with bodies and sensations.

Post humanism was a next step to take. The posthuman theory made clear how we human beings got on the wrong road when we assumed that the human being, and in particular the white able-bodied man, was on top of creation. This anthropocentric image made it possible that humans acted as if they own planet earth and can use everything in their own interest. This also created the feeding ground for capitalism, consumerism and the destructive market system that nearly ruined the world.

This marks the need for a new necessary transition. Can we be even more inclusive and become aware that we not only are interdependent with the people in our practices but also with the non-human living and non-living creatures? If we are ready to make that transition, we can enrich our practices with endless possibilities.

In *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* we can find many texts that are an inspiration for, or part of, this necessary transition (For example, Simon and Salter, 2019; Duncan, 2021; Kearney, 2021; Palmer, 2021).

The workshop of Lorna for me was part of this transition. She invited us to be with trees, to hug a tree that attracted us, to be with our environment, to leave our observer position (“what a beautiful tree” or “how fast that squirrel is”) and to relate to the beings around us as fellow guests on planet earth.

My reflections after the workshop

Looking back at my reflections at the time, feeling one with the swan swimming with me, I think of an earlier short text of me I wrote for *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* (2019, p. 83) as a reflection on John Shotter’s “Social Accountability and the Social Construction of ‘You’”.

“The red old cat Dikkie of my stepdaughter Geertje is a lazy cat at home. His garden is his territory where he can lay down and sleep. He is a regular guest in our house and garden. When he arrives, he becomes very active and chases all the other cats from our garden. Geertje didn’t believe he could behave that way till she saw it with her own eyes. I love Dikkie doing that because we have too much cats from neighbours in our garden that use our garden as a public toilet and spoil our fresh air and plants.

Where is the ‘you’, where the ‘I’, or is there a relational ‘youme’?”

One more example

This autumn (2022) I was in the Amsterdam Zoo with my grandchildren, now 4 and 6 years old. I feel a lot of ambivalence looking at the animals in their cages, not as small as they used to be, but still... they are jailed by us. At the sealions we had a joyful experience, Luc (6) started to be in contact with a young sealion. Although the sealion was swimming behind glass they were playing together. Luc running along the long window, the sealion following him, making a circle at the end, biting his own tail, Luc also making a round of himself. They went on back and forth and couldn’t stop. I tried to get the sealion following me, but he didn’t. Where is the “me” where is the “you” or is there a relational “youme”?

The same is true for plants. We know how trees and plants communicate and help each other. Do we know that we can be part of it?

From childhood on I rescued plants that called me from the garbage, all the plants that I took home were generous in their sharing of beautiful leaves and flowers. We have a relationship, we greet each other, we talk, we strengthen each other's resilience. Where is the “me” where is the “you” or is there a relational “youme”?

And what about non-living material? I was happy with the lifting robot that could lift my mother out of her bed the last period of her life and bring her carefully to another place. She (the robot) rescues many backs of nurses, and my mother loved her.

If we can look post- or beyond humans, our world becomes so much richer. Can we include this rich world in our practices? Dogs, horses, and small pets are already part of systemic practices, what do we learn from them, do we acknowledge their intelligence and healing powers? Do we use them from an outside position or do we really collaborate as equal but different participants? And when we include nature, gardening, walking and other outside activities in systemic practices, do we collaborate with the earth, trees, plants, leaves; can they be our co-therapists? And what about stones, mountains, the wind, material...

We take steps, we (re)search, we sense, we fall, we take more steps, we fail, we try again and sometimes we fail better (after Samuel Beckett).

Chiara's photo and reflections – a combination of her earlier and later reflections

"Dance is the hidden language of the soul."

Martha Graham

Dancing with (my) special (?) tree

Looking around to find my dancing partner
My eyes resting on this tree.
What's special about it?
Does it need to be special?
or is it ok to be like any other tree?
Growing, pushing life through its roots
Finding its place amongst
other brother and sister trees
Reaching out to new heights and lights.
Leaning as if jumping into the water.
yet standing strong and tall to bear the weight,
Grounded and yet exposed to the elements
So entangled and yet elegant and ordered
with its wavy branches.

Near the water is its place
 Reflecting in the water like magical mirrors
 Calm waves meeting the liminal pebble shore
 Dancing with the water with lightness and joy.
 Wild sounds and bird songs filling the air
 Resting on the branches for a moment of reflection
 And then flying away searching for another branch,
 Another song, another dance.
 Will they come back to their special tree?
 The air touching the bark, so rough and yet smooth
 Giving warmth and freshness,
 its moss wrapped around like a protective coat
 for the worst of storms.
 Will it for ever belong
 to the forest and the water nearby?
 Will it keep dancing?
 Will it survive?

A quiet inner dialogue

I am not alone
 I need water to refresh myself
 I need the earth to nurture myself
 I need the roots to find myself
 I need my bark to protect myself
 I need my trunk to feel steady
 I need my branches to reach out
 I need the air to ignite my fire
 I need other trees to find myself

A whisper

Stand back and see what's invisible
 Move away to see every movement
 Sit down to see the reflections
 Be silent and you will hear many voices
 The air the earth, the fire, the water,

 the trees and the forest,
 the bark and the bird songs,
 all the mosses and the old leaves,
 the intricate web of fungi underneath.
 Let's start a new dance!

As I was invited to dance with a tree in this workshop, I was reminded of the dancing metaphor (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981), familiar to systemic thinkers as a way to think about the therapeutic process.

When considering which tree I wanted to dance with, my choice fell onto this one. I am not sure why. A bit of an instinct, a pull towards, a fatal attraction to one rather than another? I was certainly intrigued and the tree sparked my curiosity (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1987). My innate wish to explore and my passion for dancing were ignited like fire.

It makes me think about how our clients find us, what they are looking for, their previous experiences of therapy, what information is available to them and what we provide for them to make a choice. Will they choose us based on someone else's recommendation? Or our expertise? Or our ethics? The fees they can afford? Our cultural background? Similarity or difference? A warm connection felt in the heart? Or most likely all of these things at the same time?

I often underestimate that going to see a therapist is a jump into the unknown; taking the risk of starting a new relationship when the very reason for coming into systemic therapy is often because relationships have become difficult and a source of concern.

My initial question to the tree, i.e. whether or not it was a special tree, was a mirroring question about how special I need, and everybody needs, to feel when we engage in a relationship that involves intimacy and exposing our vulnerability. Being aware of my own needs, feeling nurtured and regenerated by nature in my own personal and professional life, allows me to be in touch with my own humanity, vulnerability and need for humility.

As I start the therapeutic dance with new clients, I am aware that my total focus and commitment is to develop a therapeutic relationship where they need to feel safe and special. It is often a dilemma and a challenge for systemic therapists, developing a therapeutic relationship with an individual and everybody within their web of relationships, both parties in a couple, each child and each parent at the same time. Through our systemic training and experience, we have developed the skills to hold the complexity of multiple relationships and perspectives, hold a family system in mind, even if they are not all coming to therapy, exploring intergenerational stories and meaning making in the light of the current situation.

I felt the tree was inviting me to dance and to move around, revealing itself slowly in all of its different facets. I was zooming in and out, moving around and look from different stand points. I got very close, touching the moss and the bark; then distanced myself, to see the context, to notice the surroundings, to gain a different perspective about its place and presence amongst other trees, the lake, and the more distant countryside. I became increasingly curious (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1987) about its own uniqueness, exploring the different parts of the tree, the trunk, the canopy, the leaves, the bark and the moss, listening to the birds singing, imagining the invisible roots and fungi underground. The tree revealed itself slowly through me engaging in this dance and felt special in my eyes.

The tree also invited me to enter into a dialogue with myself, to consider the ripples within my inner pond created through engaging with non-human beings, like the relational ripples created in the therapeutic space in between people (Karamatsouki, 2020, 2022). Again, it reminded me of what happens in the therapeutic encounter as we engage in deep listening with our clients, tuning into our inner conversation (Rober, 1998), constantly making therapeutic decisions about what could be potentially useful to bring into the outer conversation, with the possibility of starting a new dance!



Session participants: Erik, Andreas, Chiara and Justine

Lorna's later reflections

This - the co-creation of these practice notes - has been a surprising journey over five months. When the five of us gathered for the workshop, I never imagined that we would take it forward in this way.

This process has mobilised me, together with others, to launch a project: Llanbradach Colliery Field as a protected green space. The field, once a coal tip, has been under threat for decades for housing and is now a park and ride.

I'm passionate about connecting communities in the care of Planet Earth and social justice.

And local inspiration about community building - and much more - is from nearby Cardiff: Gentle Radical (<http://gentleradical.org>)

Gentle Radical · *Gentle Radical* · Who · What · Why · Where; Projects. Turner Prize 2021 · Palestine Book Club · Doorstep Revolution · Decolonising Faith...

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