

Passing it on – oral traditions and future orientations in a learning community

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Abstract

This paper is written in/as dialogue by two colleagues who have shared connections with (the plus fifty-year history of) The Family Institute, Wales, and the (newer) Centre for Systemic Studies (CSS). CSS, a Community Interest Company, now provides a home for The Family Institute since its separation from The University of South Wales in 2020. The authors offer reflections on the developments over time within and around this community of practice and their hopes for the future. The core themes are of teaching and learning as relational activity and Systemic practice as both situated within cultural and geographical contexts and inherently nomadic and processive in nature. The paper also draws on poetry as a means for expressing the not-yet-said and the hard-to-articulate. Billy sadly died before the construction and publication of this paper but his contributions to it are strewn across its pages.

Citation Link

Leah: Kieran, we were writing a piece for Context magazine recently, reflecting on the life of our dear friend and colleague Billy Hardy, who died at the end of January this year (2024). We wrote the piece for Context as a dialogue, as a purposeful choice, and it seemed important to continue the conversation. Writing conversationally offers distinct opportunities to articulate something which seems to speak into the traditions we uphold, and we might say, fit better with the idea of an *ecology of mind*. I am thinking of Celtic oral storytelling traditions, and I am thinking of the over fifty years of practice of The Family Institute in Wales - a place and space where many people have spent time together, becoming systemic practitioners, systemic counsellors and family therapists, and becoming community. The Family Institute has, over those years, become known by its style of learning-through-dialogue - a form which seems to emphasise learning as a social, relational and often transformational activity.

Since 2020, when The Family Institute separated from The University of South Wales, you and I, alongside our colleague and Co-Director Julia Evans and our Founding Co-Director Billy Hardy, and many others, have forged a

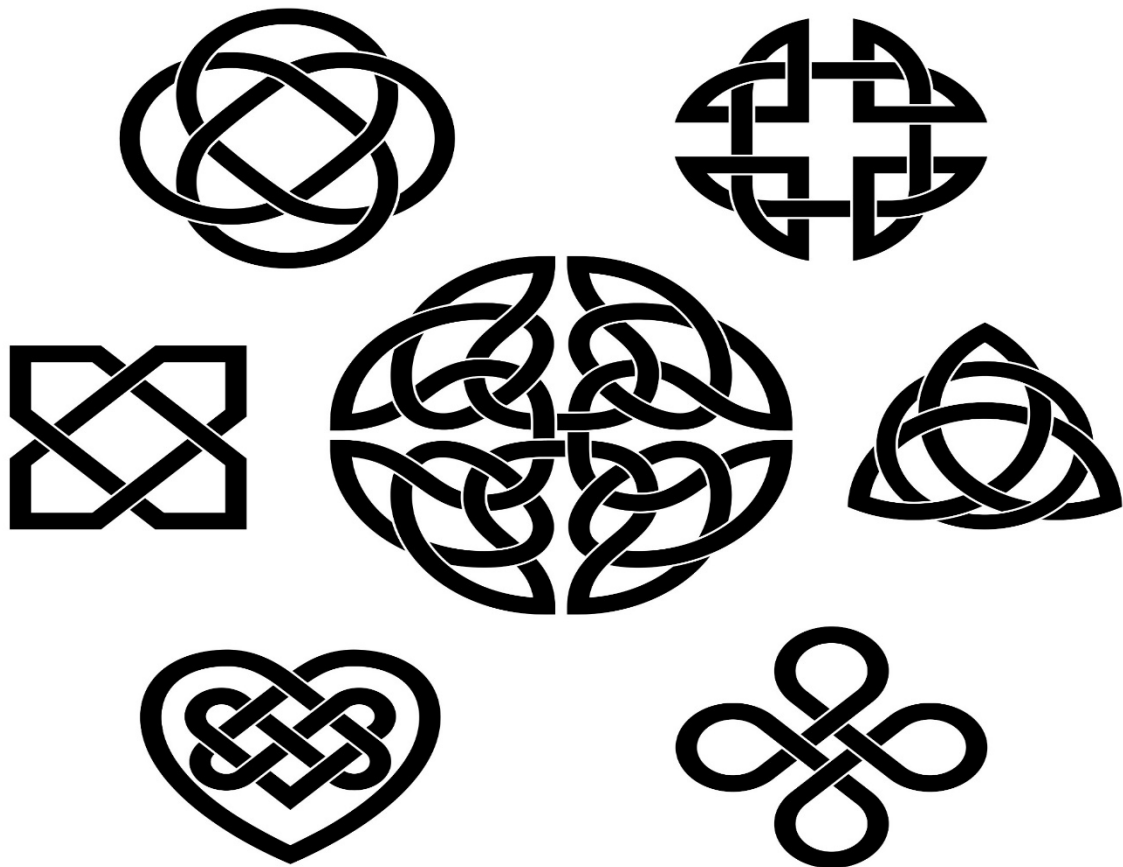
new path for these kinds of practices in Wales. In the same year, the Community Interest Company - 'The Centre for Systemic Studies' took shape. New stories of what it means to be part of something together are emerging through these developments and indeed through this writing, as the conversations unfold. So, as well as forging new paths we have been foraging on less familiar paths.

In Billy's passing, I guess we have become ever aware of what we might be passing on, between, within, and beyond our community(ies) of practice and learning (Wenger, 1998). It feels an important time to look back at some of the traditions we have been a part of as contributors and custodians, and a good time to reflect on what is developing, what is yet to come. It evokes a great sense of responsibility but also a sense of excitement.

We do not yet know what we will create together. Billy was one of the people who first envisioned that this could be possible - that a place of learning like The Family Institute be independent of a University or any other State control and be autonomous and inter-dependent with other projects, working towards similar aims. He truly believed that this would offer new opportunities for learners and for community projects to thrive. He believed in the power of old and new stories to self (or collectively) generate. We might say that we share those beliefs and, of course, we share other ideals, ideas and ethics and have important points of difference too.

I have been thinking since we wrote that piece for 'Context' about how you described Billy as "a 'gas man' – quick to laugh and full of stories" (Salter and Vivian-Byrne, 2024). You note your Irish heritage as a cultural reference point to this. I had never heard this saying before, but I instinctively liked it and felt its fit in relation to our friend. He was a good story teller, and he was as funny as he was wise. He also would have liked the nod to Cultural meaning-making and how this first emerges within the relational context that we create together- that you created together in your friendship- and in the similarities and differences you brought to your working partnership.

It made me think about the Celtic influences embedded within the history of The Family Institute and how this remains part of the story of The Centre for Systemic Studies. I was reminded of a lovely paper that you and Billy wrote, "Beyond the pale" (Vivian-Byrne and Hardy, 2014) that resonated for me in terms of the thresholds we cross when we enter into particular spaces with people - having conversations within clinical environments, moving with people outdoors, coming together in reflective and learning groups, and other resonances too. It connected me with conversations we often have with people learning with us, about their own edges of practice and about the isomorphic processes and patterns they experience, associated with being learners and teachers, supervisors and supervisees, trainees and experienced practitioners, family therapists and family members etc. All these edges we might sometimes experience as opposing ends of different continuum and at other times as just paper-thin gaps; sometimes as sitting proud and privileged and sometimes complete entanglements and knots.



This ‘loops’ me back to Celtic stories told and re-told in our cultures (yours Irish, mine Welsh and Billy’s Scottish) and sometimes captured in print with images of knots (as above) as representations of the interlaced patterns that connect life on earth. Celtic knots have no beginning nor end, and are said to represent the infinity of the soul. They are present in pre and post Christian writings, monuments and buildings in the Celtic nations. In terms of oral storytelling traditions, these stories often also speak to the interconnectedness of life (human and non-human) with animal and human shape-shifting being central to many of the storylines as well as transitioning between worlds and realms and crossing over (e.g. Pwll in the Mabinogion, or Oisín in the stories of the Fianna) (Mabinogion, 1989; Lady Gregory, 1994).

Posthuman theorists remind us that “what it means to be human has been changing” (Simon and Salter, 2019) but-and these ancient stories also remind us that Indigenous cultures have long troubled rigid categorisation. These tales from our Celtic origins offer insights into our cultural and spiritual connections to animism and metaphor, and have been (and continue to be) with us in our teaching, I think - whether we bring them forth directly or not. They are very apparent to me in the poems you write Kieran that you often bring to your teaching. Has this been a conscious decision to pay attention to these types of Cultural touch-points? And to bring your poetry into your teaching?

Kieran: Yes, I would say that we had a heightened consciousness about cultural differences and we sometimes were able to attend to them in creative and fitting ways e.g. when we commemorated the life of our colleague Philippa Seligman in a “Gorsedd of practice” or when we presented at the

TAOS Europe conference in Drammen in 2014 (Morris et al., 2014). Philippa Seligman had been one among many great practitioners and teachers who had created the previous teams before us, and built a sense of the importance of our work as a training Institute in the wider context of the United Kingdom and beyond (Morris, 2018). As a very settled team of 4 for over 12 years between 2008 and 2020, we were an interesting mix, with lots of obvious differences (three big noisy men and one quiet woman), all white but with different shades of ethnicity, Scottish, Welsh, South African and Irish. We had quite differing faith journeys experiences - unusually maybe all three men had received Catholic educations, for some of us, this had been intense (I was one of them - having worked for some time within an Irish-Catholic church context, drawing on liberation and narrative theological influences). We were all around the same age and were in long term intimate partnerships and all had children. Although we talked openly about our experiences we did not often stay with the differences and sadly I think we often skated over tensions when they arose.

Despite not always looking too hard, nevertheless, we often found each other - and when we did, we celebrated. This often happened on trips to conferences where we shared our work with colleagues in different locations e.g. Edinburgh, Krakow, Brussels, Valetta, Istanbul and Dublin. These were times when we connected over shared ideas and had time to think about ourselves as a team- which is how we were working in a therapy and teaching context. We may not have always explicitly enacted what it means to be a team, despite our passion for team working. So, we also often went walkabout alone, or we worked in dyadic pairs (either teaching or writing). It seemed to me that it was difficult to really meet and connect as a whole team often enough. I found some solace and systemic coherence of expression, through poetry which allowed some hint of declaration. I found that poetry was a way of often feeling able to say what might otherwise be unsayable. I realise now that in the context of my sense of the struggle to be a systemically-oriented team, I had hoped for greater interconnection. I think that the solo walkabouts might have achieved greater support and recognition amongst us if we had been able to forge a more consistent shared reflective space between us.

In my work (much of which was done in collaboration with Billy through presentations of workshops and writing) I have consciously drawn on many levels of script and manuscript, which resonate culturally and which we might call 'Celtic'. It is Celtic, at least in the sense that this refers now, to fringe and peripheral environments and stories in these western islands of Western Europe (with some shared musical, metaphorical, linguistic and literary traditions). It is imbued with metaphor and poetic language as that which offers the greatest potential to include, provoke and transform experience. There is a richness of storytelling traditions and ways of greeting and meeting each other, which perform these stories. Billy and I had many conversations, and I know you did too, which looked to privilege oral traditions in the building of community and which in their way led to poetic ways becoming a big part of our expressions at The Family Institute.

Long lament

*Old friends die too young
To ever catch up properly
Before they leave, with what
Needs saying and laying to rest.*

*I wasn't ready for this one
And won't be for the next.
And tell myself to get on now
With some kind of list and tick.*

*And Kiss again, before it is too late
to move to touch to renew
Whatever glow made us so
In the beginning before the slow*

*Relentless take away, of all
Connections ever made towards
An erosion of love-ease
And intimate ordinariness.*

*It seems I looked away
And missed the change
In life-ness that held this man
Or that woman to the earth*

*And wonder now at those who, closer
Than they know to some
Invocation, spend forth to die
Nearby and soon will be in long lament.*

In the latter days of the Institute being situated in the University of South Wales (and even more so since we left for the sanctuary of The Centre for Systemic Studies), Billy and I increasingly took opportunities to speak in more poetic ways, as well as those of the academy - "Gobbling up rigid definitions like crispy salted snacks" (Bateson, 2023 p.3). Billy began to write poetry in earnest and this of course intensified following his diagnosis of cancer (Hardy, 2023).

This embrace of more tentative ways of engaging with the worlds of knowledge and academia in relation to both therapy and education, allowed us to construct and deconstruct again models or patterns of practice towards richer multiple descriptions – 'make the model then discard it and start again'. We told ourselves that we were content to stay close to what all four of us understood as the classic edge between map and territory - Billy and I picked up on Keeney and Keeney's (2012) idea referred to as the 'Model-muddle'. This was often enacted in our teaching as 'flying by the seat of our pants' and making a virtue out of it (with ourselves at least) by calling it live-work (rehearsal unnecessary). This way of working however often excluded the voices of those who might have hoped to find themselves in more thoughtful, careful and conversational planning and who did not perform themselves in that more stand-up kind of way. For me not being prepared seemed somehow less ethically grounded. In the early stages of my work at The Institute I felt I needed much greater structure to support my lack of confidence in what I might have thought I knew.

I hoped we might be, (and sometimes we were) rigorous in building models and punctuating our practices so that we could show each other, and work together for shared meanings – and then importantly simply storing them once used, like old maps e.g. we ran workshops on Supervision which all four of us participated in developing (Vivian-Byrne et al., 2019).

The constant turning over of ideas fit well for us with Cecchin's idea of not marrying our hypotheses (an idea explored by Gianfranco Cecchin in consultation with the Family Institute team and passed on as part of an oral tradition); of John Shotter's 'witness in the moment' (Personal communication circa 2016), of joining in speaking what cannot easily be spoken elsewhere, in the 5th Province working with what is live and emerging (McCarthy, 2010).

I want to make reference to a moment that occurred at The Family Institute around the time that Mary Morris joined the team in 2007. We (Billy Hardy, Jeff Faris and I) had arranged a team away day – and although Mary could not be with us on the day itself – we were consciously preparing for her arrival. On that day, we shared our sense of frustration at the constraints we felt in the University environment and other larger evidence-based organisations to reduce to the formula, diagnosis and reification. It became clear through our conversation that we wanted to embrace cultural, conceptual and poetic 'walkabout' as a team. We wanted to welcome the stranger whenever possible, we wanted to accept invitations to explore and bring those explorations into our teaching and therapy and consultations. We wanted to share stories in building a community of practice and learning (Wenger, 1998). We wanted to more knowingly become aware of our nomadic orientation to life and living, and therefore to teaching and doing therapy work – to be in live procession (Vivian-Byrne, 2008; 2016). This set the tone for several journeys, we were to make together and separately, in the coming years, and for the hosting of many people with whom we would collaborate. This 'walkabout' idea had some benefits - but it may also have sown seeds for more individualised working - with some moving to develop their own specific interests without much reference to the team. This was not always welcomed.

Leah: I connect with this as someone who loves to travel and has spent many years walking and driving (in my camper van) across the differing nations in the UK; and previously more frequently in other countries also. There is something incredibly exciting about ‘being on the move’ or ‘going walkabout’ as you say, and yet I am usually drawn home after some time. I spent a year in Australia in my early 20’s and much of that time was spent on the road in the Northern Territory (moving through the area as part of a travelling carnival) which taught me much about ‘being on the move’ and about other Indigenous cultures, which in many ways re-connected me with my own. I fell in love with the landscape and the representations of land, people and animals in the art work and stories of the Indigenous Australians. When I returned, I wanted to pay the same kind of attention I had spent on my travels learning about culture in the country I was raised- in particular that relationship between culture, land and people. I spent some time living and working in North Wales, for that purpose, and appreciated being in the mountains and immersing myself more in the language and ancient stories. I also lived in a British island community for a number of years which has its own unique points of learning that featured heavily in a narrative inquiry into my own practices and how they connect with the wider ecology (Salter, 2017a; 2019). I have never been strongly connected to my house (wherever that might be at any time) as home, but I am strongly connected to landscape (such as mountains and hills) and cultural reference points (such as songs and stories) linked to home and belonging - often encapsulated in the Welsh word “hiraeth” – a culturally contextual nostalgia for home, tied up with loss and longing. I have written about this connection previously (Salter, 2017b; 2019; 2021) and it is something that continues to be an important source of contemplation and also of tension in my life. As someone who has experienced some significant health challenges in recent years (Salter, 2023) I am also trying to come to terms with being less able to travel and less mobile than I would like, speaking again to loss and longing. There is also the tension between being someone who loves to travel and someone who is deeply concerned about the impact that travel has on our fragile earth. I have not flown for many years, but I have not written this off entirely for the future. I continue to drive, but hope to move towards less and less reliance on a car. Of course, this intersects with my own health status and so these tensions are multi-faceted. This is a tension here between past and future too, I guess. Maybe my poem (below) speaks a little to this. My heritage is caught up in the coal mines and valleys of South Wales - I hold anger and sadness linked to the demise of community explicitly entangled with the demise of the industry - and yet as an environmental activist, I openly advocate for the move away from fossil fuels. So the coal industry is something that signals home and a kind of a longing / “hiraeth” but is more connected to the past than to the present or the future. It is not something I am longing to reinstate but there is a nostalgia attached to it which evokes sadness.

Flight paths

As a child I lived under the flight path of planes
Under the gaze of tyranny
Beneath a smoke line of broken relationships
And threats of aggressions
Sometimes I wondered where others were going

And whether I would ever join them
Mostly planes passed by overhead
With little thought
Or care for me, nor me of them
I heard them like a distant echo
Much like the trains on the tracks
Carrying the coal
An echo of my heritage
A long-line of coalminers
Like the countless-carriages of the train
Never-ending
Connecting me to my past
Clacking out of the monotony
The mundaneness of my home town

I live now under the flight path of geese
I now know what goose bumps are
Not the ones that come with fear
This is majesty, not autocracy
Shared journeying
Gentle, powerful wings
Pump blood to my heart
Run through my veins
Connect me to the lakes
The sand dunes and the orchids
The tide and its daily changes
The trees with their roots
Forging multiples pathways
Fighting the monotony
Resisting the tyranny
Seeding hope
Of what might yet be
Despite what we have done

So, we are talking about complex relationships here, past and present. There is the relationship with, and the loss of, Billy - this is clear and, in many ways, uncomplicated. Then there is the relationship with, and the loss of, a University partnership. This is more complicated. The new freedom, outside of an Institution, is, in part, welcomed but there are elements of the past that are felt as loss, such as the structure and the safety of a larger organisation.

Perhaps there was always a tension between the security of having a home (with the University) and the constraints that come with being less mobile and agile and more constrained by the bureaucracy of a large institution such as a University. Perhaps the team tensions were also a part of this story. I am not sure. As a student through that time, and latterly a colleague, as a visiting lecturer, these might have been in the background, but the learning experience was always one of mutuality - where learner and teacher walked the walk together with smudgy edges between the distinctions of teaching and learning. Maybe this indicates why it is important to not shy away from tensions. They are there to show us our own edges. The tensions can create light.

Incidentally, my cohort was the first cohort that Mary taught- I don't think that word really fits too well in this context - it felt more like Mary guided us through our first year of learning to become a systemic psychotherapist. We were aware that it was Mary's first year and she was transparent about the learning and the transitions she was going through. I think we were aware that we were in something live and living together as we made our way through the reading material, the personal development sessions, the family therapy clinics and the review of our recorded materials. It was scary and vibrant.

Of course I had not been party, at that point, to the idea that- as a team- you were consciously embracing the ways of the nomad. I can locate it now though in my reflections, looking back. I can semi recall that they were visible or at least I can tell myself a story that those ideas were filtering through into the learning experience. I am minded here of Rosi Braidotti's (2014) writings about Nomadic theory. Braidotti's work is often defined as posthuman, feminist, new materialist but I think her call for "more planetary dimensions" goes beyond these definitions and offers a more nuanced description of nomadic theory than my reflections on travel reveal (Braidotti, 2014, p.181). It offers a philosophy that disrupts modernism, takes account of flux and reminds us that we are always in the process of becoming (becoming at a molecular level Braidotti may say) and beyond the labels placed upon us. Braidotti says that "nomadic process... entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification so as to open them up to that roar that lies on the other side of silence" (Braidotti, 2014, p 17).

I think this does have a near-enough fit with what we are talking about here - a kind of ill-defined or not-yet-defined or not-ever-to-be-defined set of waymarkers, that tell you something of who you are and where you are, in relation to all sorts of political, social and contextual forces. They help you to tell stories about where you are going and what you are creating with others, but do not hold you in a fixed position.

Kieran: Ah yes - Billy and I talked about this kind of coherence achievement-in-the-moment as a kind of complex or community reflexivity. This is ideally achieved through a kind of collaborative and generative sifting towards temporary meeting – like panning for gold.

Leah: My colleague from the University of Bedfordshire, Robert van Hennik (2019, 2021) has also written about becoming a posthuman systemic nomad "navigating and systemically learning in

complex adaptive systems" (van Hennik, 2021, p. 1). I have found Robert's work on *systemic* nomadism, as well as your own Kieran (Vivian-Byrne, 2016), most inspiring and often recommend these writings to others. I have noted that many of our students are picking up on these ideas and wondering how to make use of them (or how they will show themselves) in their developing systemic practices. This takes me to a future oriented frame where I can begin to imagine the Centre for Systemic Studies as something beyond my imagination - if you can hold that idea as possible. I mean, we cannot know what it might look like in the future, but we can hope that it be something beyond that which we can currently imagine. And that is exciting.

Kieran: I would say that Mary's quiet way of way-marking in the chaos we often experienced, most clearly expressed the courage 'not to know' and to embody the confusion - not as an ignorance but as an invitation to opening further conversation. The distinction between espousal and embodiment became such an important distinction for us to realise at the Institute. Inevitably perhaps in a teaching environment even (and especially) which was seeking to guide students through to 'becoming' systemic practitioners, counsellors and psychotherapists - there was a cornucopia of ideas and concepts being splashed around onto conversational canvases - ready to be absorbed and used. We often slipped into seeming to know, and spouting about not knowing in a very knowing way. The challenge was to practice our teaching and therapy and consultations with colleagues in ways which embodied the ideas we wanted to privilege most - often ones which seemed to declare our wish to create community and to collaborate. We may not always have had the courage not to know. This was probably most succinctly expressed through the term *Dysgu* - a Welsh word for learning, which appears to make little distinction in this process between teacher and student - all are in the learning.

Leah: I think as a teacher, as well as a therapist, "not knowing" (with reference to Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian, 1992) is easy to state a position on and commendable to aspire to, but difficult to live by. I often find myself being invited into (or inviting myself into) a position of certainty and indeed expertise. The lure or wanting to 'show that you know' is a real pull when people are looking at you for answers. In teaching I find this even more of a lure than in other contexts - perhaps because there are often multiple eyes looking your way and the set-up is one that we have been conditioned, from childhood, to understand through a lens of knower and learner - offered to us as a binary. Despite working hard to notice these moments, I know I often fail to notice, until after-the-fact and I know my certainty about some things - usually things I am passionate about like areas of social justice - shows itself in my words, my tone of voice, the position of my body, and the space I take up in the room and therefore in the relationship with others. We were talking recently in a teaching context, Kieran, when we were engaged in an exercise, and we were reflecting on how we experience each other in relation to power. This brought forth a conversation about gender and power that I think was a useful exercise for us to explore as colleagues who have different gendered experiences of being in the world and which has no doubt shaped us and shaped how we embody ourselves as teacher/learners. I have a sense that we learned a lot about each other through this exercise - an exercise you have developed for learners to identify their own edges. The fact that we did this at the same time as our fellow learners in the room perhaps indicates the kind of environment we hope to create together - one where we are all learning from each other.

Kieran: Yes, this picks up quite well the journey of at the Institute and the emergence of yours and my shared thinking and practice in relation to the continuing development of a community of

practice and learning in the CSS which is open to exploration of matters of power and difference and grounded and dynamic in an ethical ecology. The idea that the spaces we seek to co-construct with clients and colleagues and students might become those where “Learning and therapy become acts of empowerment in relation to Pales which restrain and dominate in families and organisations” (Vivian-Byrne and Hardy, 2014, P.230). This then might be a more transformative approach and one which positions us with our clients in heart and mind and body and where inevitably we risk change in ourselves too. It has been really interesting for me, Leah, to find myself with you through Billy’s dying and death, and on into teaching together in this rich conversation. In this kind of space we demand coherence in the moment to what is emerging (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Schön, 1983). The safety which we seek to offer is based on our invitation to others and our willingness to join them in the ‘not-knowingness’. “My security is grounded in knowledge, which experience itself confirms, that I am unfinished” (Freire, 2001 p120). In a recent shared learning event, where there was a high degree of loss and uncertainty in the space, I was acutely aware that no single description would easily do for my experience in the room with you and our colleagues – a space where only poetry might do:

Messengers

sweeping as we dare like starlings,
to fly from birth and joyful promise
pregnant in our rooms

crying into our holy wells like saints
to change the mind of people
standing in expansive waves, despite us

living in our doubts as worms
to live the always sudden death of someone
in transit across through the pales
learning in our ways like children,
to meet in therapeutic dance
and feel it in our bones and laughter.

Arriving in voice like messengers
To each other’s doors and windows
Escaping everything but the process.

If we were to pull some of these threads together, it seems pertinent to note the use of poetry. This might seem a conscious choice of how we present our writing, but the words emerged spontaneously in poetic form and needed to be told that way. The poems say something that the prose and the dialogue could not muster, or could not hold. Maybe this speaks to the hope we have for the future of systemic practice and for learning together - that our words can hold more and that we can create change by speaking it into being. Systemic practice and training has a long way to go to truly embrace a nomadic and connected lifestyle and hold and celebrate cultural stories and all types of knowing and know-how. As an independent trainer we are now more agile and mobile in many ways. The Family Institute is well placed within the wider ecological and justice-oriented Centre for Systemic Studies and will develop and continue to mature. Without being housed within a University we have less restraints but there are also losses which we are seeking to address with significant, but less exclusive, partnerships. Tensions remain in the relationships between accrediting bodies also, with a reliance on core texts and historic influences that tell certain kind of stories and eradicate others. We need to re-find theory and practice that has been hidden from view and look to the future to allow new and emerging practitioners to lead the way.

Don't push us, now, we
 Are ready to jump and fly
 Off Out Into Light

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