

Move to Live

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Abstract

We, Hans and Justine, share the love of walking with many. To move proves beneficial for body and mind which are connected and interdependent. This article has three parts. We start with a brief introduction about movement with a focus on walking. The second part contains a dialogue about our own experiences with walking. Several themes are addressed: getting stuck and getting unstuck; the art of doing nothing useful; getting back to basics; the body thinks; time and duration; alone and together; silence. In the third part, we try to highlight the relevance of movement, both physical and also as a form of community action, for systemic practice, and its connection to change. We distinguish between first, second and third order changes.

Introduction

Writing this article was like a hike without a clear map and marks, and with unexpected detours and side paths. We started with the wish to write about walking and our own experiences with long walking trips. While walking we decided to write in a dialogical form. Later, we felt that we needed to write an introduction to give the text a context. And when we walked and talked about the relevance to our long working life as systemic practitioners, we came to think about different levels of possibilities for future systemic practice in relation to walking, movement and bodily actions. Our thinking is presented here, in a flow, like our walking and talking. Presenting something complete or exhaustive was not our intention. There is a large body of literature on the subjects we are touching on in this paper and our literature references are by no means complete as we decided to maintain the conversational and flowing quality of the text. Our text has many spaces and is deliberately unfinished. This is similar to some books or theatre plays that do not explain everything and leave much space for the reader, or audience, to come up with their own ideas, feelings, associations, and interpretations. In this way we hope to be part of the creative community of ever developing systemic ideas and practices.

Citation Link

What ideas, images and memories emerge when we focus on movement?

Giulia, an Italian physiotherapist, had once said to colleagues that the very elderly people she works with do not usually need physiotherapy but *movement*. She dances with people in their 90s or even 100s to music that appeals to them. She brings life, it moves them.

The double meaning of “that moved me” (in Dutch “het beweegt me”, in Italian “mi commuove”) already makes it clear that emotion and movement are related. This is also clear with the word *emotion*, which comes from the Latin “*emovere*”, literally meaning “to move”.

So, life, movement and emotion are inseparable.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) writes in his biography (Rousseau, 2022) that, sitting at his desk with pen and paper, he could not think properly. His body had to move to get his mind moving, he could only reflect when he travelled on foot - while walking his ideas were inspired and vitalised. Johan Sebastian Bach, too, appears to have taken long walks that are linked to his compositions (Franck, 2007). The same goes for Friedrich Nietzsche (Manschot, 2020) and more recently Solnit (2019) and McFarlane (2021).

The Dutch Ton Lemaire (2019) follows this thread with his book on slow walking as an art of living.

Driving on a motorway, one finds oneself in the realm of haste and of distance as such. [...] no encounter with the surroundings takes place, let alone bodily contact. In contrast, forest paths and field roads lead into a realm of peace and quiet and the intimacy of the landscape; permanent contact with the immediate environment is possible, with sufficient attention one can communicate with an animated space that is a lot more than mere scenery and mere vastness.

(Lemaire, 2019, p. 102)

Irish neuroscientist Shane O'Mara (2019) also concludes that we need to walk more to stay healthy in body and mind. Both Lemaire and O'Mara describe how people in ancient times were walking nomads in search of food to survive. About 10,000 years ago, people started settling in one place and growing food. However, they continued to move around a lot on foot until well over 100 years ago. Most people walked an average of 15 km a day. Now, people mostly sit and walk small distances from car or other means of transport to home. This can affect physical and mental health.

We, Hans and Justine, identify with this vision and have had the experience ourselves that we need to move in order to live. As systemic thinkers and doers, we also see body and mind not as separate but as a whole. The statement “a healthy mind in a healthy body” can also read “a healthy body in a healthy mind”, we live with a mind body, or an embodied mind.

The problematic dichotomy of the world of the mind and the world of the body has its roots in the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650), among others. Descartes assumed that our material body and immaterial mind are ontologically distinct. He argued that there is a thinking immaterial mind or soul separate from the material, spatial and non-thinking body. He considered the mind or soul to be the essence of oneself, the centre of one's thoughts, doubts, beliefs, desires and hopes, and the entrance to knowledge. He linked this to the distinction between animals and humans; animals, like humans, Descartes assumed, have a body but no soul. (Shotter, 2011). Thus, Descartes also contributed to “anthropocentrism”, the period in which humans considered themselves central and

elevated above all other living and non-living beings. Anthropocentrism allowed people to come to see the world, the planet, as their property, as a resource they could use for their own well-being.

This influential theory has had far-reaching consequences that have permeated every capillary of our society. Even in psychology, the mind is often seen as separate from the body. The “theory of mind” (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985), for example, has long been a highly accepted theory that forms the basis for theorising about children's development into adults and the problems that may arise in the process. The “theory of mind” and its related concept of mentalising (Allan *et al.*, 2008) refers to the ability to attribute mental states such as desire, intentions, beliefs and emotions to ourselves and others. Many psychopathologies are associated with poor development of this mental capacity, either due to predisposition, as in some forms of autism, or to impaired development, as in trauma.

One could say that this theory has acquired a high degree of truth. The theory is almost never questioned and is the starting point for many publications. This theory focuses entirely on mental representations of reality and not directly on reality itself. There has been critical thinking about this theory (McGuire and Michalko 2011; Simon, 2016) in which mind is relocated from the body to the relational and social realm.

In treating trauma, we now know that focusing on mental processes and talking alone does not help enough, body-focused interventions are also needed to process trauma because traumatic traces are also stored in the body (Van der Kolk, 2015). But in the field of psychotherapy, this still seems to have little influence. There is still a lot of talking; very rarely the body is actively involved through movement, walking or dancing.

The distinction between thinking and doing limits our therapeutic possibilities and reinforces the split between humans and our natural environment. These worlds are not at all separate, but rather inseparable. We neglect our connection with matter, nature, our bodies, environment, doing and acting. We become disconnected from the world of living beings, humans, animals, plants and trees, and matter: earth, air, water.

Because we share a love of walking that helps us to connect to, and care for, our rich environment which has a positive effect on our well-being, we are surprised that so little is done with it in the psychotherapeutic profession. We know that depressed people are advised to exercise and run more, and that there are walking coaches. But these are interventions that seem to be separate from systemic therapies as used in mental health care. And when exercise is recommended by general practitioners and media, it is almost always about physical health and about individual responsibility to keep moving.

We suppose that moving and walking can reconnect us with the animal in us that physically and sensorially perceives the environment and can understand and act from there. And that, we feel, can be beneficial in relationships. Moving and walking together, being active together, can bring about more connection, sometimes even without words, than having a sitting analytical conversation.

We feel that in psychotherapeutic practice, we have come to rely too much on the effect of language, meaning and analysis and have neglected our body, which reconnects us to our animal-ness. We want to explore this assumption by writing about walking from our own experience; writing from within and not writing about it from an outsider or expert position. Shotter (2005) calls this positioning 'witness' rather than 'aboutness'.

As we walked, both alone and together and with others, we reflected and conversed about moving, and why we cannot do without it. Our conversations form the starting point of this text. For readability, we have highlighted some themes.

A dialogue

Getting stuck and getting unstuck



Hans: I have to walk; I can't do otherwise. Ever since I could walk, I've been doing it and I've never stopped. And it helps me too. If I get stuck in a train of thought, or on an issue, I start walking. Even if I am not thinking about that issue then, because I am, for example, observing the birds or meadows with fascination, it always gets my thinking, feeling and doing moving. It makes me feel lighter; the movement of my body also brings movement in the perspective on the questions I am working on. When I walk my perspective literally, and inevitably, changes, perhaps that also makes my inner perspective move?

Justine: Recognisable. But I can't say I've always done it. In all the busyness in my life, I started ignoring my walking desire. I spent many days in my chair as therapist/writer/supervisor/trainer/ reader. Maybe that's also why such a strong desire for long walks emerged when I decided to create space for a life not entirely structured by a full schedule. And that imagination of taking very long walks never left me. It was as if I didn't decide it but the desire to walk for months, like some kind of modern-day pilgrim, inevitably forced itself on me. And that 4 month-long walk from Amsterdam across Germany and Austria to Volterra in Italy (2,500 km) spring/summer 2023, helped me make the transition from a life that was completely dominated by appointments and obligations to a slow life with lots of space. Without the transition ritual of the slow and long walk, my 4-month journey, this would have been much more difficult.

The art of doing nothing useful

Hans: It's crazy, while walking you don't actually do anything.

You are on your way and walking in a cadence, a rhythm and you also need nothing or very little except to open up to your surroundings. You need few resources so there is not much between yourself and the world.

Justine: That reminds me of Lao Tse who says, "it's better to do nothing than to be busy doing nothing" (Wagter, 2015). But I also find it striking that you call it doing nothing because I do experience walking as doing something, without being directly useful or productive. In our culture, everything has to be productive, useful, to be recognised as 'something'. Walking helps me break free from that. I walked for months with a fairly light backpack that contained everything I needed, which is very little. Good socks and shoes on, rain gear and cover at hand and a bunch of spare clothes and some toiletries in the backpack. Always carrying water and some food for the road. The realisation that I can live for a long time with so little gives me peace of mind and a sense of freedom and resilience. I also noticed a strong reluctance when I passed through a provincial town on my way to a place to sleep, where people were eagerly looking for and buying highly promoted special offers, maybe stuff they didn't really need.

Hans: Walking is not 'nothing' for me either, of course; it is a way of being able to be in direct relationship with my environment. That long walk you are talking about is pre-eminently a way to get into such a direct relationship with the world you are walking in. You do that with your body-mind and your senses that are part of it. I have hiked for a long time several times, not months like you, but I have hiked or climbed for at least a few weeks every year of my life. You mentioned that you enjoyed going out every day. I recognise that and I marvel at it too. It is not just enjoying that early morning mood, the dewdrops, the low light or an animal scurrying away, but also an almost childlike desire to face the unknown. My experience is that with long walks, the days string together, the landscape changes, the days have their own colour because of the weather, because of the trail, because of the landscape, because of the encounters and invariably my sense of time changes. It is as if each trip is its own unit where I can recall almost all the days before me even later. Those treks have been intense experiences for me. Many of them I have made with others and when we see each other again we always recall the memories of those trips. Remember when we ..., oh yes, and we saw ... and you had forgotten to fill your bottle ...and

Justine: The Italian professor Ordine (2015) connects art, poetry, philosophy and also slow reading with what they call "the usefulness of the useless". We connect that to the art of walking.

Back to basics

Justine: On long walks, the obvious things of my home life fall away: the daily exchanges with loved ones, children and grandchildren, friends and befriended colleagues, a comfortable house with bed, toilet and bathroom, food and drink, stocked wardrobe, nearby shops and going on familiar routes.

Suddenly, these self-evident things become open questions: how do I keep my body warm or cool; where do I find shelter from storms, rain, cold or heat; when and where can I take a break, rest and sleep; where can I pee and defecate; where can I freshen up and wash, what can I eat and drink and how do I get it; how do I find my way. It makes me think of the many nomads and also refugees for whom nothing can be taken for granted. I landed in a comfortable life again after a few months. For them, much remains uncertain.

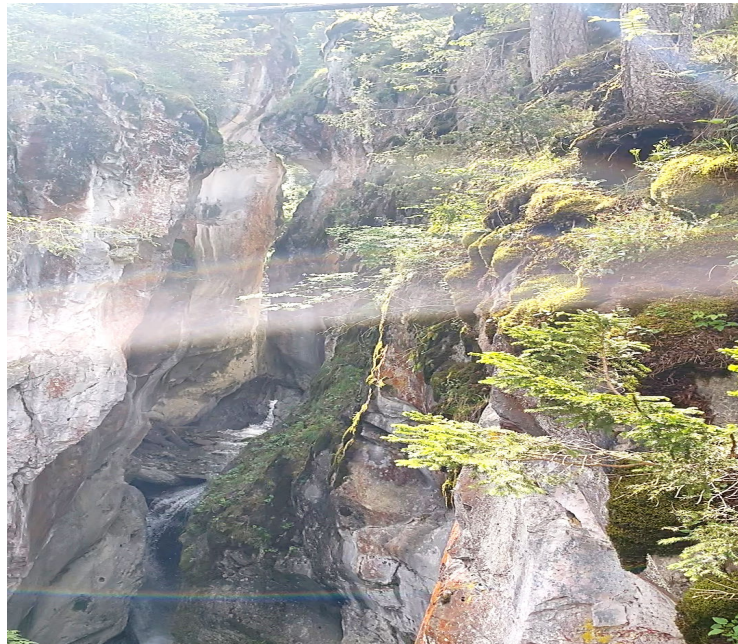
I also experienced strongly how important being with other people is, especially when facing basic questions around sleeping, eating, finding your way around, temperature and moisture.

In Bavaria, I trekked through an enchanting mountain gorge with a splashing and dancing river below me, trees and flowers around me and birds singing above me and a dark sky. At the top, I was following a forest path when the sky broke open and rain poured down. I had nowhere to shelter, and despite my rain gear and covers, I and my rucksack got soaked. I had, following a tick bite, put my trousers into my socks on the advice of a doctor, so the water gushed into my shoes as well. After hours, I reached a village where the streets seemed like rivers. I walked on until I reached a farm where shelter is offered to pilgrims. The farmer's wife looked at me with concern "I was afraid of that" she said. Then I felt how stiffened and cold I was. "You are not the youngest either" she said, I told her I was 73. "Me too" she said, and it turned out we were only three days apart. "I can best help you by undressing you here on the mat, then you will take a hot shower, and I will hang everything in the drying room". Feeling emotional, I accepted her loving help and let her undress me, wrap me in a warm towel and the hot shower made me human again. The intimacy remained throughout the evening, night and

morning I spent there; she was my angel. In need, we need angels and I hope I can be that for others sometimes. There also lies the relational and loving power of our therapeutic work. This intense experience is not an isolated one. Being seen like this and getting the care I needed, selflessly, felt like spiritual experiences to me.

The body thinks

Hans: For me, walking is a way of detaching my mind from the intrusive thoughts about daily issues. While walking, my mind enters a different state and becomes quieter. Musings are not as directed and focused as in my work. Nan Shepard (1977) says it so aptly: the body thinks best when the mind is silent. And strangely enough, that walking also has an effect on the issues I am struggling with. I get answers on how to proceed with a complicated conversation with a family or what I will do in a consultation. Without walking, I would be less sure about what I could do as a next step.



Justine: You mention Nan Shepard, we share the love for her book, “the living mountain”. In my thesis, I quoted a text of hers:

Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think. [...] So there I lie on the plateau, under me the central core of fire from which was thrust this grumbling grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow - the total mountain. Slowly I have found my way in. If I had other senses, there are other things I should know. [...] The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body.

(Nan Shepard, 1977, p. 105-106)

Her words touch me so much because she puts into words what I have been experiencing all my life. I also find her realisation that we would perceive more if we had more senses relevant. Many animals

hear, smell, see and taste better than us humans. We could be humbler. And when I am open to what my body is telling me, I know more easily what I do and don't want to do, where openings are, where movement is possible, both in my work and private life. Walking in nature, it is not difficult to let go of anthropocentrism, it happens. I feel part of the environment and fully immersed in it. Then it is a crazy idea that we humans have made ourselves so central and on top of creation and we destroyed so much. What a loss!

Walking, time and duration

Hans: The slowness of walking does something to time, to awareness and intensity. When I see a landscape or a mountain, I simultaneously see endless unknown and surprising possibilities that I can only discover by walking. From the walker's point of view, a landscape is a promise and a journey of discovery without end.

Now, musing about walking, there are again so many angles. Because long walks are different again from a little stroll which is also very valuable as a daily ritual.

Justine: My daily stroll goes through my own neighbourhood in Amsterdam. Often right in the morning, past the bakery, through the park, dropping off paper and glass and then just walking for a bit. I take time for my daily walks because it is a necessity for me, I simply cannot sit still for too long. And I enjoy it, the movement, the outdoor air, sometimes little chats with the neighbours, the recognition of the same points yet always different. These detours fit into my daily rhythm, like eating and sleeping. In these short walks I stay aware of clock time, I have to be back in a certain time to get things done.

Long walking brings the experience of 'duration' as Bergson (2017) writes about it. Time plays a role in planning. How many hours are the stages? What is the terrain? Any climbing and descending? Once on the road, the experience of time changes. Hours can pass unnoticed. The rhythm of the day is linked to the bodily felt need to drink or eat, to the sun rising and falling, to a distant church bell chiming, to a striking encounter with a plant, animal or human, and to feeling your body getting tired. Then, it can take a long time to reach your destination and time stretches again. Each day has its own character and the days string together. They are different and distinct but also hang together. And together they form a unit, experienced as duration.

Hans: In that sense, time stills (Hermsen, 2010). The direct experience while hiking becomes detached from minutes and hours. All the days of a long trek form a whole and so time takes on something spatial like a dome that spans beginnings and ends like in a cathedral. What you remember is the whole with separate experiences as illuminating elements of the whole.

Alone or together

Justine: The first time we agreed to talk about our article while walking we each walked separately from our home and met after about 8 km and then continued walking together. I found it fascinating to experience how much changes after meeting. The joy of finding each other and walking and sharing together. And: the loss of being alone, not talking and going entirely on my own course, not having to deliberate. For example, I bought a lip balm on the way because I had dry lips. I just did that. If I had already walked with you, I would have had an inner dialogue: 'is it really necessary, isn't it disturbing

if I ask for it now, Hans will have to wait' and that would have led to deliberation 'do you mind if ...'. The switch from alone to together is not a small transition but a big one. Because we spend so much time with others in our working and private lives, I found it beneficial to be alone so much. It not only brought me closer to my surroundings but also brought me closer to my own voice, my own direction by walking naturally, intuitively. In fact, when I was alone for a long time, I felt very connected to my surroundings but also to my loved ones, without speaking to them, as if they were always there.



Walking, tuning in and improvising with others, I have also experienced as joy. Sharing together an enchanting view, a concert of birds, walking the wrong way, being silent, is a different and also joyful experience. When I walked alone, I did not miss a walking buddy, but sporadically I walked for a few days with my adult children, my sister and friends and then I had to get used to being alone again and missed being together. But in a short time, I felt connected again to the trees, the world below my feet, the birds, the rivers, animals, scents and sounds.

There were also unexpected encounters. Travelling alone gives a lot of scope for encounters with strangers. Like in northern Italy, with Maria, who was working in her vineyard and asked me where I was going. I told her my destination and we struck up a conversation. She asked my name and when I said "Justine" tears sprang to her eyes and she hugged me tightly and said, "That was my mother's name who died 2 years ago, I'm sure she organised we meet now". In the two hours she walked with me afterwards, we exchanged a lot about life, our worries, faith, hope and love. We are still in touch.

Silence

Justine: How to write about silence? Being in silence has been an essential experience in my long journey. Silence that was never truly silent because I always heard the rustling of the wind through the leaves, the scurrying of a deer, birdsong and chirping, my own steps on leaves, the gurgling and flowing of water. Yet, I experienced silence. The absence of traffic noise, of human voices and talking. The absence of expectations and assignments brought inner silence. I never got closer to "being". It was precisely in that silence that I felt one with my surroundings and felt connected. was precisely in that silence that I felt one with my surroundings and felt connected.



I carry that experience within me. Many ask me “how do you maintain that in this busy life”. For me, that is an impossible question. It is precisely about letting go and not holding on, only then can that flow also come with me in my daily life in the busy city. Otherwise, it becomes another task, an expectation, a chore related to “holding on to silence and inner peace”. That task is doomed to failure and to disappointing myself and getting stuck. In fact, I see it as a problem that we tend to “compartmentalise” everything. Exercise becomes going to the gym often enough; stillness becomes joining the meditation or yoga group weekly; then life becomes a programmed project in which you will always fall short. In our profession, we also have to be careful of this, that going into therapy, alone, with your partner or family, also becomes part of the programme to get a grip on meaningful and fulfilling life. In my experience, the harder you try to control that, the more distant it gets.

Intermezzo – our living bodies

We, Hans and Justine, realise that we are blessed with a body that can walk. Yet we think our experiences are recognisable even if you have a limitation due to illness, disability or old age.

I, Justine, was deeply touched by Mauro, a terminally ill, dying man in Volterra being pushed around in a wheelchair. We were sitting outside. He stood up, supported by a friend, and took in the magical view noticing a small bird that moved him. Silently he stayed watching for a while and then softly said 'so beautiful...that's why I'm still alive'.

Or, [the video clip of the very old ballerina, doing her famous dance moves in a wheelchair to the music of “Swan Lake”](#), which went around the world and moved many.

The fact that it was later revealed that she was not a prima ballerina in New York and that the inserted clips involve another dancer does not diminish the power of the video, which shows that the body remembers, that movement and music brings (back) vitality, in whatever stage of life or condition.

Walking, systemic therapy and other systemic practices

That brings us back to the relationship between moving in the environment and our work. That relationship is undeniable, but it is not yet so easy to put it into words. We wrote about walking from our own experience and that story could be extended endlessly. Walking and writing about walking and reflecting on it while walking took us to another space. We realise that it is not just about walking. Rather, it is about the space for doing, physical movement and connecting with the environment we live in. And that can be done in very different ways. The essence is that we want to move beyond the exclusive focus on humans, the human-to-human relationships, language and meaning, and give movement and the environment a more active role.

We could be more aware of the limitations of psychotherapy and systemic therapy. We could be more humble. Working therapeutically can contribute to positive change, but much change takes place outside the therapeutic space (van Oenen, 2019).

We know many examples of people who started to feel much better by doing something active. We ourselves are among them. Hans started to feel much better by getting practically involved in nature development on a piece of meadow near his house. Justine was dreading quitting most of her work that brought her so much good. By marking that transition with a long walk, quitting work became an attractive adventure. We also know the example of a neighbour who, after many therapies, medications and admissions, only started to feel better when she was able to give meaning to her life by opening a "kitchen at home" where people could pick up meals prepared by her. Or the client who, after a childhood of neglect, drugs, dropping out of school, depression, therapies, multiple diagnoses and medication, found his way into making furniture for tiny houses. There are countless examples of how people can make sense of their lives. This is also in line with the recovery movement in psychiatry, which is also known in the Netherlands as the new psychiatry, where the focus is on what can still be done instead of being on symptoms and impossibilities. This is why experts by experience have an important role in this. (Jim van Os & Myrre van Spronsen, 2020).

In Justine's doctoral research on "practices of hope" (Van Lawick, 2024), she asked more than a hundred people what helps them when they feel bad or hopeless. Almost all respondents started talking about doing something, like going outside, going into nature, cleaning up, reading and writing, working in a garden, helping others like shopping for a sick neighbour, making (or listening to) music...alone or with others. Few people talked about talking by themselves, and if they did, it seemed to be more about the beneficial experience of someone really listening. All those actions are linked to values, to a meaningful life, and that doesn't have to be big. Emmanuel Levinas (Burggraeve, 2020) talks about "the small goodness".

If we take this seriously, our focus in therapies can also be on what people can undertake, what little activities they can perform, on their own or with others. It is "doing hope" (van Lawick, 2021). We then become part of a bigger picture, a much bigger environment than the therapy room, we work together in a community of therapists, walkers, musicians, neighbours, artists, gardeners, beekeepers, athletes, politicians, activists, craftsmen, scientists, inventors and more.

We want to explore this in the next part of our article in the full knowledge that our exploration is still unfinished.

We started thinking about systemic therapy and doing/moving/walking, realising that a lot has already

been developed at this level. We also think there are further steps to be made that change the positioning of the therapist (Peter Rober & Michael Seltzer, 2010). Thus, while walking, we arrived at a suggestion to do with a first, second and third order change, analogous to Gregory Bateson's ideas (Gregory Bateson, 1972).

First-order change

Change is about learning. First-order learning is the level of learning where adaptation is sought within a known structure or known solutions.

For systemic therapy, this means that we can literally bring more movement and more materials that invite for some activity into our therapies, like taking therapy with individual clients, couples and families as well as supervision sessions outdoors. Much has already been written about working with distance and proximity, creative therapy, movement therapy, drama therapy, sculpting with families and more (Diekman, 2005; Klijn and Scheller-Dikkens, 2006; Maurer et al., 2011; Rober, 2004; Satir, 1998; Yucel, 2022; Savenije et al., 2014, 2023). Despite being a part of systemic therapy training, not much is done with it in practice. It often remains separate interventions rather than an inseparable part of systemic therapies.

Walking outside makes different things happen than sitting in a chair. Although this can be an important extension of therapy as we know it, we regard this as a first order change when the structure remains about a therapist and clients, and the therapist inviting the clients to go for a walk in nature. Talk therapy can become "walk and talk therapy" (Udler, 2023).

Walking and movement could lead to change in another way as well; It could teach us radical listening. Radical listening, can be learned in hikes. Listening to ambient sounds and experiencing silence.

That big other, the world you walk in, that is both familiar and different to us, can tell you something, if you listen. Because you don't know the language of that world directly, you have to do your best to be open as you pass through that world. This is similar to listening in a conversation and certainly also in a therapeutic conversation. While listening, you move into the other person's world, and they have something unique and particular to tell you. That listening is relational, and the storyteller then experiences that the listener is really listening. Like in walking, the hiker walks through the landscape, but is also part of it. It is the same way in conversation. Listening and speaking are equally part of the meeting.

Second-order change

Second-order change involves learning about learning that allows new solutions and forms to emerge.

When we, as practitioners, dare to let go of the position of the systemic therapist who invites individuals, couples and families for one or more sessions, provides (reflexive) questions and helps with useful interventions, we can position ourselves as part of a much larger community working to help improve difficult situations. Then many possibilities open up. We do not limit ourselves to the therapy room and therapy structure. Doing things together is often a good entry point to promote wellbeing. This can be anything. Who does not know the connecting experience of eating together? Conversations unfold and deepen while dishes are passed around, someone is still at the cooker or

cutting vegetables, and all the senses are engaged. The colour palette on your plate, the smell of the different spices, the taste of the dishes and the feeling in your mouth and on your tongue as you eat.

This also allows you, as a therapist, to make yourself part of a bigger picture. With children and adolescents, doing things together, also in the context of a therapeutic relationship, is often beneficial. And what then is therapy? Hans (Bom, 2002; De Bode & Bom, 2008) worked with young people with intellectual disabilities for a long time and the most therapeutic (which really changed things) were things he started doing. For instance, with the boy who was obsessed with police and fire brigades and would set off the fire alarm every so often, Hans went to the fire station to look at all the equipment and fire engines and asked for explanations from the firemen, who were very happy to do so. The fire alarm did not go off again. Another example concerns a boy who was obsessed with fire and started all sorts of small fires which led to very dangerous situations. Hans worked together with him in starting controlled and safe fires. Parents or other caretakers can of course be involved in these activities. Hans also got feedback from a single father who found the conversations useful but said that what had helped most was going with him to a toy shop to help pick out toys for his children. As a therapist, then, you are part of a community with infinite possibilities.

In the already mentioned new psychiatry (Van Os and van Spronsen, 2020), psychiatric problems are understood from the personal and political context. Often trauma seems to be involved, together with unfavourable living conditions such as poverty, violence and exclusion. Rather than diagnostics, there is a focus on recovery-oriented approaches, including peer groups, with a focus on what can be done and how context change is taken as an entry point to promote well-being. Political action can be part of this. Another appealing example is the contextual equine therapy developed by Hester Selbeck (2021) who works with young people with complex problems and their families in Portugal in which the clients, the therapists, horses, the environment in which riding takes place, the accommodation and communal eating, and the reflections and rituals, form an inseparable therapeutic whole. Similarly, there is Sweden's Carina Håkansson's (2009) initiative to house patients with psychiatric symptoms with farming families who are trained to accept the patients without giving therapy, or trying to change the problematic behaviour. They go on with their daily lives of working in the fields, taking care of the animals and the patients can participate or not. There are talks with the families and also individually if there is a need. Sometimes there are celebrations of the families together. There are many more initiatives and projects to mention where action-oriented interventions (which can be therapeutic) and systemic therapeutic conversations (which can lead to new actions) are completely integrated. (Micheal White, 2003, Sylvia London & Dann Wulff, 2009).

This all can be related to the “eco-systemic return” (Palmer and Edwards, 2024). Hugh Palmer and Lorna Edwards edited a collection of papers that were published over the last years in the online journal *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*. The authors share the concerns about the degradation of our environment and consider it an urgent task for systemic therapists to bring “eco” back into systemic practices. In doing so, we can reconnect with the important founder Gregory Bateson (1972) who spoke of an “ecology of mind” and how essential it is to live from a sense of connection with our environment and act accordingly. We have seriously neglected this. The many crises in the world (Simon, 2021) compel us to rethink our practices in the light of the catastrophes that surround us and of which we are a part. We cannot ignore the fact that many of the problems people come to us with, are also linked to the environmental crisis. For too long, systemic therapists

have continued to focus on partner and family relationships and lost sight of the wider environment. In both theory and practice, many perspectives and possibilities are covered. In this sense, the “eco-systemic return” (Palmer and Edwards, 2024) is also related to Johanna Macy's practices of hope. She is an environmental activist, author, Buddhist, working from systems theory and deep ecology.

In the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, my work helps people transform despair and apathy into constructive, collaborative action. It brings a new way of seeing the world as our larger living body. This perspective frees us from the assumptions and attitudes that now threaten the continuity of life on Earth.

(Macy, 2022)

The authors of this paper argue that we are dealing with a paradigm shift that will be unsettling. We think the above-mentioned changes have much to offer. These invitations, theoretical reflections and practices also link with a third order change.

Third-order change

Here, it is about the level of learning where you not only learn to learn, but also learn about that learning as a process that can initiate transformational change. In the words of Bateson “Third-order learning is a change in the process of second-order learning or a change in the system of sets of alternatives from which choice is made”. (Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 293). Bateson also wrote that “...no amount of rigorous discourse of a given logical type can explain phenomena of a higher type” (Bateson, 2000, p. 295). By implication, Bateson suggests that we cannot explain or define level III learning with language alone. He actually leaves a lot of space in the definition of level three learning. In line with this, it is inevitable that we leave a lot of space in our reflections on what a change at level III learning might mean for systemic practices.

Perhaps the most radical change is to stop psychotherapy and systemic therapy in its current form. The different forms that psychotherapy takes are part of a circular nexus. The dominant basic assumption of this is that psychological distress arises from somewhere and can be remedied with (systemic) psychotherapy. A radical systemic change breaks with such a circular nexus. If (systemic) psychotherapy were to stop then something different would have to happen to deal with the suffering and distress of people and their relationships. This then requires radically different responses in which the context must irrevocably change. Again, in Bateson's words: ‘a change in the system of sets of alternatives from which choice is made’ (Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 293). And in that different context, just economics, postcolonialism, emancipation, ecology, sustainability and solidarity are areas in which that change could/should be expressed. A shift in those contexts could change the need for (systemic) psychotherapy in its current form. Maybe this could involve people being more relational and connected to the environment, culture and each other and able to cope with psychological distress in a relational way.

Distress will not simply go away, and people who are relatively more vulnerable will remain. It is an illusion to think that such differences will just disappear. So, broader change will be needed to support people with mental distress or who are otherwise vulnerable and make them a full part of a society. We think building communities is needed, where buffers are built-in based on relational ethics, ecological awareness, mutuality, responsibility and doing things together. We know many examples of vulnerable and sensitive young people staying at home and driving their parents and relatives to

despair. They feel bad about themselves, starve themselves or hurt themselves. Often the world overwhelms them, they do not feel understood, and they often do not understand themselves or the world. Many of them worry about the future of our world and start to feel hopeless and empty. They do not feel at home in society and become susceptible to what we call bad influence. Things then often go wrong in many areas of life: at school, at home and in friendships. This affects the self-esteem of the young person, their parents, family, teachers and helping professionals; experienced powerlessness prevails. Interventions from counselling, therapists and education often are not effective due to lack of motivation of the young people. They move to the margins, run the risk of ending up in crime, get involved in the criminal drug world or become suicidal.

Can we build an inclusive society, based on relational-ecological awareness, ethics and responsibility, where these young people have a future and can live in value? The same applies to other marginalised groups who do not easily participate in the demanding meritocracy we have collectively developed where oppression, racism and sexism are still active. Attempts are being made to initiate change in this. This third-order change involves learning about learning through structural context changes. One example is the many neighbourhood initiatives in which community activities help promote social cohesion which turns out to be good for physical and mental health. In Amsterdam there are many communities working for a healthy environment. They organise actions to protect a food forest, they oppose building more container areas or they fight against factories that discharge sewage and poison local residents. Although there is always doubt about the usefulness of such actions, there is also hope that doing something brings about more than doing nothing. This turns out to be a good medicine against depression and fear (Jan Hassink e.a, 2017; M. Jambroes e.a, 2016; van Lawick, 2024)

Another important example where communities unite comes from Iceland, where concerns grew around substance use and youth dropout. Scientists established a link with the availability of alcohol and drugs, the time young people spend with their parents and the time they go home in the evening. It was assumed that young people start using substances to cope with the stress they experience. Far-reaching measures were taken that restricted the availability of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, a temporary curfew was imposed on young people, and a firm commitment was made to offer and encourage free sports and other leisure activities. Substance use appears to have fallen sharply and the well-being of the youth group is much improved. (Smeets et al., 2019). This approach also shows how beneficial it is to realise that both parents and young people were part of a large community. This was supportive for the parents, often feeling ashamed and alone. This approach immediately showed that they were not alone and that they could take joint action to promote positive development of their children. This project is an example of a systemic practice where the different layers of context are included in achieving desired change: the young people and their families, the neighbourhoods, sports clubs, music and dance clubs, the government taking steps for new policies, and scientists monitoring the changes allowing support for feedback-oriented policies. We realise that the Icelandic context is a specific context. Thinking in complex systems, unique and appropriate adaptations for that context will have to be sought again and again. For us this also is ecological thinking, it is not only about nature, but also about searching for the relevant contexts and finding ways to positive change by collaborating in communities. A subsequent longitudinal study was done in Spain; for nine years the researchers followed hundreds of children around Barcelona. The children were found to develop much better when there was plenty of greenery around their school and residential neighbourhood. They suffered less anxiety and other psychological symptoms. (Osa cs., 2024). That too is linked to more opportunities for exercise, a game of football and community building in outdoor activities. It

fits in with an increasing body of scientific evidence (Hertog & et al., 2022; European Environment Agency, 2020) on the health benefits of nature. If we are open to it, we can observe such initiatives everywhere.

These examples involve public policy, the government collaborating with people, families, researchers and other relevant professionals who help take measures to promote well-being in the environment.

Concluding, we certainly do not want to claim that these initiatives and developments will make psychotherapy, systemic therapy and consultation, or medication completely obsolete. It is a misunderstanding to think of first, second and third order change as a hierarchy where the third order change is the highest level that we all need to strive for. What we learned thinking about these issues is that we should be more modest and open to the many forms of promoting physical/psychic/ecological well-being that already exist and will be further developed. This is where systemic thinkers and practitioners, especially systemic consultants, can play a role, because they are good at examining complex systems to understand which systemic dynamics hinder or promote positive changes and where practices of hope could be initiated (van Lawick, 2024).

What exactly that might look like and what that means for the identity and positioning of the systemic practitioner and consultant we cannot predict.

Many more walks are needed to get a better picture of this, together and separately.

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