

# Ndibeer and Ned Ride Again: Excursions in and around the Fifth Province

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## Abstract

This article tells a dialogical story and describes a process of mutual learning and embodiment over the course of a long therapeutic relationship. The article maps the development of relationship, between my inner voices, my supervisors and those of my client, where stories of self and other are articulated, elaborated and externalised using the metaphor of a "bundle of treasures". A self-reflexive process of personal and professional mapping, using the hierarchical model of the Coordinated Management of Meaning, is described. In a recursive and isomorphic process, supervisory and therapeutic conversations further elaborate these stories, and through joint action, enable the creation of a liminal, reflexive space, a Fifth Province position, a cauldron of creativity where practice-based theory can develop. This process will be illustrated as it arises in the story of relationship and the process of therapy, so this narrative invites the reader to become an active participant in a never-ending process where theory becomes a live metaphor in the quest for being human.

## Citation Link

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The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammied a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment. It was like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past.

Mrs. Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf, 1927, p. 198

## Setting the scene

This article was written on the occasion of Imelda McCarthy's Festschrift in December 2018 (Fredman, Partridge and McCarthy, 2018). I sat down to write an appreciation of Imelda and what emerged was a bundle of embedded stories which described the recursivity of connections between my client Iris and myself, the contributions of my previous supervisors,

especially Imelda McCarthy and Glenda Fredman and my own practice embodied by my Bundle of Treasures.

I have worked with a woman called Iris for nearly twenty years. Such long collaborations are unusual in systemic practice and rarely spoken of but as Vetere and Sheehan (2020) have explored, journeying together over time opens possibilities for life changing learning. In an isomorphic process, this paper is also a tale of rich learning over similarly long connections with significant supervisors from over the years: initially David Campbell and Peter Lang and later Glenda Fredman and Imelda McCarthy. My relationship with Iris, enriched by these supervisory relationships, has been an ongoing process of mutual learning and relational risk taking (Mason 2005), including the transgression of some traditional boundaries and the intervention of Ndibeer Bear, an unlicensed co-therapist (Freeman, Epston and Lobovits, 1967) who intervened at two crucial decision points in our work. Iris's reflections are woven into this story and, as a woman in a same sex relationship, she liked the idea of it being published in an online journal with a diverse editorial team. Ndibeer and Ned will be further introduced towards the end of this paper.

I have loved the above quote from Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" since I was a teenager. The focus on introspection in Woolf's writing and the way in which an episode is repeatedly presented through different people's eyes, fitted with my own experience and my emerging view of the construction of identity and reality. No doubt this prefigured my interest in a systemic approach and narrative ways of working. I think the process I describe in this paper is very much akin to that of Mrs Ramsey burying important moments in the sand, to shine and to illuminate not only the past but also the future.

### **A Wellspring of Emptiness and a Bundle of Treasures**

Iris and I started working together in the Autumn of 2002. The first years were challenging as Iris managed psychiatric admission and a bi-polar diagnosis. As our relationship settled into a pattern, I began to work on my own project to draw together important ideas in my work by gathering together significant moments into a bundle of treasures. This process came to fruition and was presented at the Training in a Woman's Voice conference at Kensington Consultation Centre (KCC) in May 2009. At this time, the end of KCC was not evident but looking back I wonder if I knew it in my body as an "unknown and untold story" (Pearce and Pearce, 1998). My short paper about my bundle of treasures was written hurriedly for an edition of Context in honour of the legacy of KCC after it closed (Partridge, 2010). The process began much earlier with an invitation from Jane Lethem (Lethem, 1994), to create a "therapist's medicine bundle" inspired by the traditional medicine bundles of Navajo culture.

The identity of the Navajo Nation was and is intrinsically bound to their ancestral lands but they have been systematically persecuted, driven from their lands and incarcerated over centuries, most recently in the quest for oil (Pinto, 2017). Traditionally the Navajo's "medicine bundles" held objects: carvings, stones and feathers, symbolic of the spirit of the tribe. These were sacred objects requiring rituals and prayers to open them, (Griffin Pierce 2003). The richness of Navajo heritage is vividly alive in Skeets (2019) prize winning poetry describing "coming out" as gay in Navajo culture. This richness, physicality and situatedness resonated with me and the notion of traditional medicine as medicine for the soul, as well as for the body inspired me.

In order to do this work, I slowly and methodically packed my imaginary knapsack and put together a

bundle of treasures, a collection of relational resources symbolised by precious objects to take with me as sustenance for my therapeutic journey. On reflection, I think I entered and re-entered a space of reverie in order to do this work, holding together curiosity (Cecchin, 1987), uncertainty (Mason, 2015, 2019) and mystery (Cronen, 2006) and entering a “wellspring of emptiness” which was like an overflowing cup of plenty, always new, bubbling with possibilities and new ideas. This, I see as a rich inheritance from the legacy of KCC and a gift from Peter Lang, enriched by Imelda McCarthy’s work on the Fifth Province (McCarthy, 2015). The Celtic myth of the Fifth Province of Ireland is a place, both imaginal and also physically located in Ireland where the ancient warring kings of the four provinces could meet and hold council. The Fifth Province is a sacred space, a place of reverie and creativity in which anything is possible and all opposing viewpoints can be heard, held together and respected.

Here all conflictual, contradictory and opposing viewpoints met and were held together so that divisions could be transcended and new harmonious solutions might emerge. The metaphor is a remembrance of duality transcended and of pragmatic concerns transformed. It might even be said that this was a place where spiritual solutions emerged for pragmatic difficulties.

(McCarthy, 2002, p. 2)

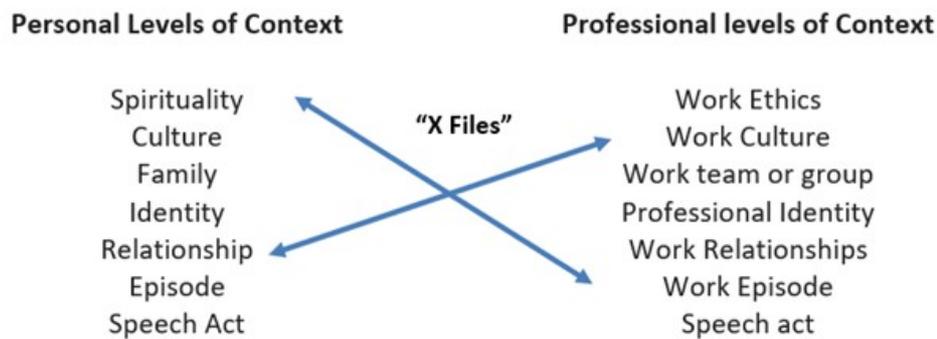
### **Personal and Professional Mapping**

In creating my bundle of treasures, I followed a self-reflexive process of questioning, moving up the levels of context in the hierarchical model of the Coordinated Management of Meaning, (Barge, 2004; Janson and Penman, 2018). This theory sees a person’s stories or beliefs as embedded within each other like a stack of Russian dolls. Peter Lang taught me to question moving up and down these levels of context, from speech act, episode, identity, family/work pattern, to culture/work culture and spirituality/work ethics. Moving up these levels will broaden the context and create new meanings.

Graff, Lund-Jacobsen and Wermer (2003) introduced the idea of shifting between hierarchies of personal beliefs and professional beliefs in personal/professional consultations where the “X-files” represent known and unknown connections between the two hierarchies. My version of the two hierarchies is illustrated in Figure 1. I use these two hierarchies as a map to guide questions in personal and professional consultations both in therapy and in work contexts, asking permission to shift into personal stories when it seems pertinent. This process was used in a weekly personal and professional development session at KCC introduced by Fran Hedges and Susan Lang (Hedges and Lang, 1993). A trainee would present an issue, either personal or professional that they would like to work on and choose another group member to consult to them while the rest of the group shared their thoughts as a reflecting team.

I followed this framework to elaborate connections between the two hierarchies in a process of personal/professional mapping. John Burnham has recently been describing the process of making connections between personal and professional stories as relational integration (Burnham and McKay, 2021). As Bateson (1972) said broadening the context broadens the meaning so this opening out of meaning through questioning changed, elaborated and transformed my stories of self and others. I started the process by identifying “rich words” which resonated with emotion (Fredman, 2004), words which I hoped to privilege in my practice, creating stories of connection and identifying contexts for the performance of these rich stories.

Figure 1: Personal and Professional Levels of Meaning



I began by thinking about a word, an action or characteristic that I would like to see more of in myself and in my work. I thought of a recent episode when I had got closest to living this aspiration in my work, identifying the relationships in the episode I was describing, the way in which this spoke to my identity both personal and professional, my family and work groups, my culture, art, politics, admired world leaders, spirituality and closely held values. The questions moved up the levels of meaning as illustrated in Figure 1 starting at the bottom with the speech act. This series of questions made connections between my personal and professional stories in order to thicken stories and create audiences to my preferred versions of self as a person and as a professional. Each sifting of ideas and stories performed through this questioning got me closer to the values which inform my work and the person and professional I hope to become. Through this self-reflexive process, I created what could be termed a "team of life" (Denborough, 2012) for myself and my work.

### An Externalisation of Values

Finally, it seemed important to me to embody these stories in objects in the physical world inspired by the physical connection between identity and the physical landscape. This created an "in-between" which Winnicott called transitional space (Praglin, 2006), the space where creativity and play can take place. I identified objects which symbolised these characteristics and practices which I hoped to live in my work. Through this externalisation (White, 1988) I hoped to create reflexive space in relation to these privileged ideas in which to explore, expand and extend their meaning. The result of this work was my bundle of treasures (Partridge, 2010), illustrated in Figure 2, a series of objects which are part of my ongoing life. Sometimes when I teach about this bundle of treasures, I wind each of them carefully in colourful silk scarves and place them together in an embroidered bag made by a women's collective in India. I like the fact that the bag is recycled, made from individual scraps of saris, each elaborate, decorated with embroidery with its own rich story now lost. Yet in use the bag is practical and the multiple stories of the making and wearing of the many scraps of fabric fall into the background, much as women's work has often done. Each object holds a multitude of stories and connections too numerous to outline here, some of which are described in my Context article.

My bundle of treasures contains:

- A clay figure of Black woman to symbolise deconstruction and construction. It was once broken into 78 pieces and then mended by my husband. This symbolises the stories that are teased apart and woven together anew in therapy and the hope for renewal that what is broken can be restored to create something even better than the original. It also acts as a salutary reminder that not everyone or everything can be put back together, that some people are broken or lost irreparably in an unjust world.
- A sandstone carving of a parent and child embracing each other in such a way that they evolve into each other. They are both hewn from the same stone, for embodiment, gentleness and deep listening
- A kaleidoscope for pattern and connectedness which continuously evolve and change
- A crystal ball for imagination, creativity and future dreaming
- A piece of coal and a crystal (as a stand in for diamond) for dynamic tension
- Three black elephants, carved from what I fear may be ebony. They sat on my grandmother's mantelpiece and they remind me of the racism of my south London upbringing, the days of empire and the racism and ongoing discrimination experienced by those invited to come to this country to support our NHS and transport systems. The elephants had ivory tusks when I was small which I am glad are now lost. They stand for solidarity and resistance against oppression.

### **The Bundle as a Metaphor for Therapy and Systemic Practice**

The objects in my bundle are held together by Mystery, from Cronen and Pearce's description of CMM as "coordination, coherence and mystery" (Pearce and Pearce, 2003). I remember Cronen and Pearce saying that a deep enmeshment in stories leads to awe and it is this that speaks to the process that I and my clients are entering into. The more I connected with this metaphor the more I began to see that my bundle of treasures could be thought of as a metaphor for therapy itself, where the unfolding of the images represents the unfurling of the text and the objects represent the rich metaphors, images and phrases which drop out of our clients' narratives in the same way that my objects fall from the silk scarves as they are unwound. We can listen for these, notice them, use them as seeds to trigger the elaboration of our clients' stories in an isomorphic process to the one I described above.

In our work together, Iris began to imagine a box of treasures that we were putting together as we talked (Partridge, 2010).

*"It's making a difference you know Karen. It's like a spring of water, very small to start with, gradually trickling through the rocks; the possibility of forgiving myself and telling the story in a different way in which I am not the arch villain, but as behaviour that can be understood and accepted." (Iris)*

*"It's as though there is a box of treasures on the floor between us and you are constantly reminding me of it and taking them out and showing them to me." (Iris).*

This synchronicity between my bundle and Iris's box of treasures was especially striking as I had not shared my own bundle with her until much later when she reviewed the article I had written about our work together for Context.

Figure 2: An Illustration of my Bundle of Treasures



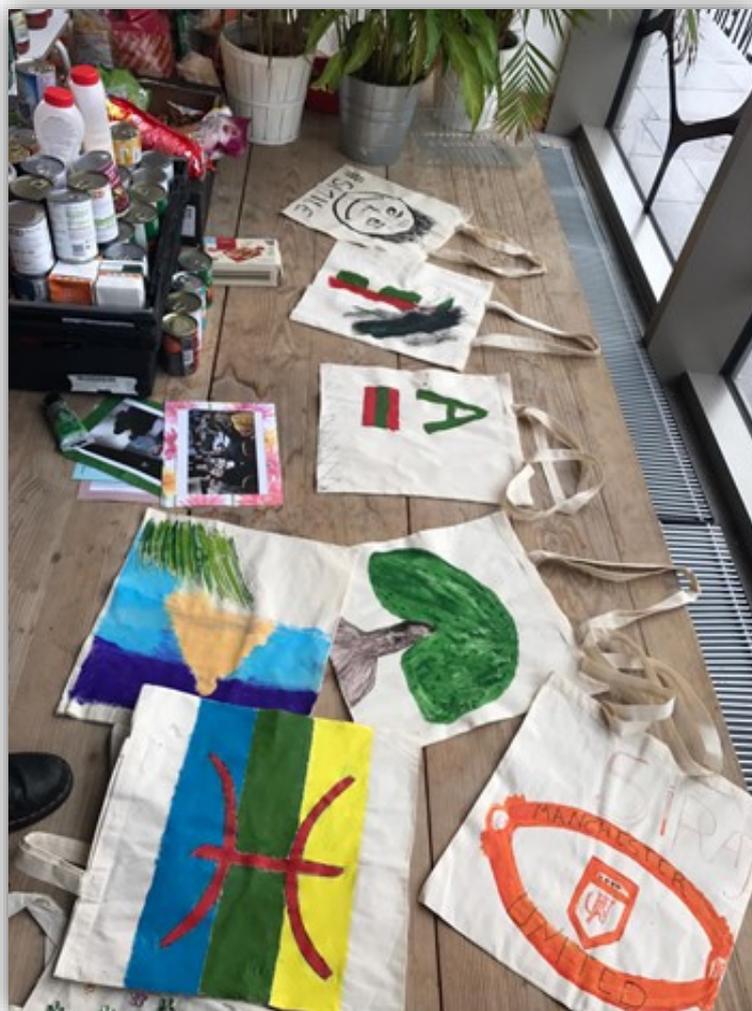
### The Metaphor of the Bundle in other Contexts

My task is to co-create the meaning and actions with my clients that I have created for myself - so this recursive process enriches my clients' bundles which then further elaborate my own, and the telling and retelling adds new images and stories. A beautiful example of this comes from a Well-Being group run with colleagues, for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking young people, while I was working as part of the refugee team at the Tavistock (Amias, Partridge, Rehim and Bisimwe, 2021). We had purchased linen bags which the young people were decorating to hold images and memories of their history and their journeys as well as some items to ground themselves and help with sleep. Some chose to paint the flag of their country on the front, others important national symbols and some their football team colours. Through the interpreters in the group (each young person or two had their own interpreter as they came from so many language groups) we began to explore what songs, dance, art and lyrics they might include in their bags. We listened to Eritrean and Arabic music online. At the end of the group one young person spontaneously asked if he could share a prayer, first in his own language and then, translated by the interpreter, in English. This was spine tingling and a very special moment of connection, bringing tears to our eyes and some of the young people. A picture of these bags can be seen in Figure 3.

The metaphor of the bundle has also become important as a symbol of systemic social work practice in a local borough where I have been working alongside my systemic colleagues over the past five years. We introduced the idea of a systemic rucksack as a metaphor for carrying your systemic ideas with you and to our great surprise, and some amusement, the senior staff bought bright orange rucksacks for all senior practitioners which we then filled with colourful pictorial prompt cards to

illustrate systemic principles and role cards for a systemic supervision process, (Partridge, Dugmore, Mahaffey, Chidgey and Owen, 2019). In an ongoing process of revision these have most recently evolved into cards with examples of systemic questions and the rucksack has been incorporated into a co-constructed social care “tree of life” (Ncazelo and Denborough, 2006), with rucksacks signifying important concepts hanging on the branches. Detail of the Camden Model of Social Work and the Systemic Rucksack can be seen in the Camden Model of Social Work Practice Guide (Camden Children’s Services).

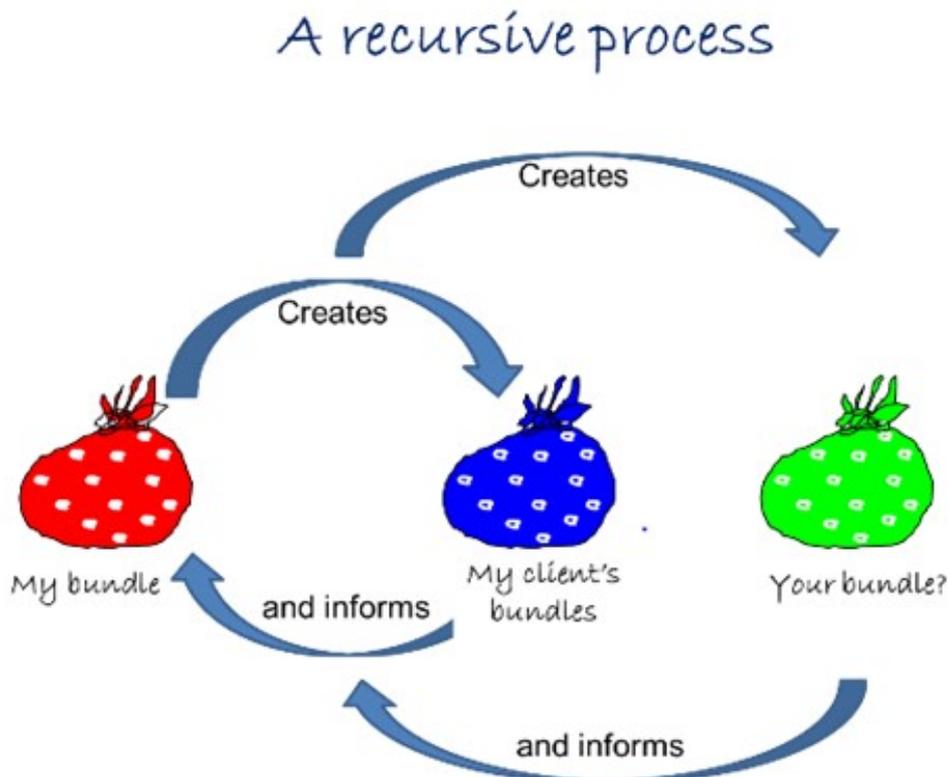
*Figure 3: Bags created in the Well Being Group for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People and the Systemic Rucksack*



My own bundle is in a continuous process of development and one of the joys of this work has been the way in which others have offered stories, images and objects as their own stories resonate with mine, and so my bundle grows. According to the context different aspects are foregrounded and others discarded in a continuous evolution. The act of creating “Bundles” or, as in Mrs Ramsey quote at the start of this paper, preserving significant moments which can elaborate the past and the future, “exoticizes the ordinary” (White 2004) and opens portals to new and creative landscapes of action and meaning. This became the way that I conceptualised my work with Iris and increasing all my work in therapy, supervision and consultation. The ongoing evolutionally process of working in this way is

described by Mahaffey as relational artistry, that is a creative process of navigating through positioning and repositioning in the relational responsive flow of dialogue (Mahaffey 2016).

Figure 4: The Recursive Process of Creating Connections and Elaborating Values



### A Shared Journey with Iris: Fifth Province Diamonds

My bundle and Iris's box of treasures formed the backdrop of our work which led to the further elaboration of stories. Some of these elaborated stories draw on Imelda's diamond formulation of the Fifth Province approach (2018), David Campbells semantic polarities (2006) and the use of imaginary friends as team members (Freeman, Epston and Lobovits, 1997). But most importantly, for Iris, they are grounded in Glenda Fredman's relationship with Ndibeer, her childhood bear from South Africa and his friend and colleague Ned, the green felt horse. Ndibeer and Ned had held a previous important therapeutic role with a little girl (Fredman, Christie and Bear, 2007) but had been retired for a while, hence the title of this article which we will return to later.

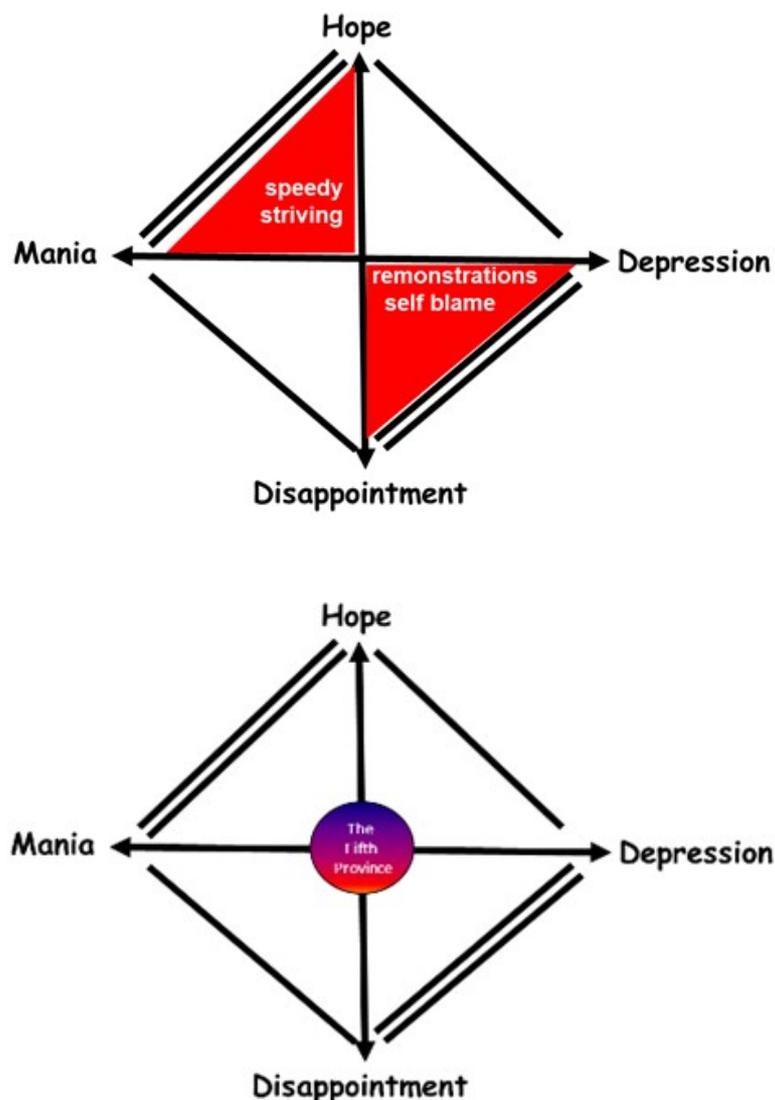
I have had the privilege of working with Iris for nearly twenty years as is only possible in independent practice. I am often in dialogue with her in person and in imagination. When I present our work, she says that she likes to know that I am going to talk about her, as then she knows that I am thinking about her even when she is not there. Our work has passed through many phases and stages and there are recurring themes, including the challenge of resisting the effects of bipolar depression and its paralysing effect on her ability to act and to make decisions. Small acts of resistance (Wade, 1997) like getting out of bed, eating and drinking have been the stepping stones in our work together, when we have both felt cast adrift and stuck in liminal space, a "betwixt and between," an unanchored and

fearful threshold, a place where in some cultures zombies appear but which is also a place for creativity (Poh Lin Lee, 2013).

One year just before Easter Iris was talking about her deeply held Christian faith and the way in which she would “.....get stuck on the Crucifixion, and never get to the resurrection.”

Iris told me that in a series of Lent seminars, her pastor had told her that the crucifixion and the resurrection are actually happening simultaneously all the time. This triggered a memory in me about the diamond formulation of the Fifth Province where two opposing ideas are set against each other to create four quadrants, the idea being that a system might flip between the two quadrants most closely connected to each other, as represented by the double lines and shading (McCarthy, 2018). In the session, I quickly sketched the diamond below, to illustrate, what can only ever be a temporary punctuation, the flip between the positions of “speedy striving” and “remonstrations and self-blame”, an unwelcome repeating pattern which illustrated the familiar pattern of highs and lows experienced by Iris, encapsulated in her bi-polar diagnosis. The second diamond illustrated the fifth province position where the dynamics are clearly visible but you are not caught up in them.

Figure 5: Fifth province diamonds



Iris was quiet for some time taking in the images that I had drawn, then she said: *“Being caught in the cross is like the crucifixion. Rising above the dilemmas without getting caught up in them is like the resurrection. This shift is like a moment of grace.”* (Iris). Sometime later as Iris was leaving the room she said, *“You know Karen, you are turning out to be quite a spiritual therapist.”*

## **The Choice**

At some point in our work Iris moved away and our sessions continued by telephone. Many years previously Iris’s beloved father had died of polycystic kidney disease and sadly her sister had inherited the disease whilst Iris had not. Her sister’s kidneys were failing and Iris was faced with the decision of whether she should donate one of her kidneys to her sister. Iris had initially agreed, as is typical of her kindness and generosity, but as the time came closer doubt set in. This became a tortuous decision, made all the more painful and powerful by Iris’s complex relationship with her sister who lived across the Atlantic. The spectre of the donation pulled Iris deep into disabling depression, and as had frequently been the case, persistent ideas of suicide intruded and thoughts of hopelessness, uselessness and self-hatred took over. She was barely able to leave her bed, the only outlet being sleep and the watching of late-night television, yet somehow, she slowly and painstakingly moved forward towards the preparations needed for the donation. Meanwhile the fears and thoughts grew and grew. At the same time, she was being assessed by a psychologist who was deciding on whether she was well enough to make the decision and make the kidney donation.

As the time approached to travel, the suicidal thoughts grew stronger and stronger. I too was faced with a choice should I, as I had done a number of times before, contact her psychiatrist and GP to express my serious concern about suicide risk? This course of action would almost certainly run the risk of the donation being veto-ed by the assessing psychologist. Alternatively, should I stand alongside her as robustly as I could, accepting that if the worst should happen and she chose suicide that I might hold some responsibility. Once, whilst in a previously very low place, Iris had said to me that if at any point she finally did decide to kill herself that she hoped that I would respect her decision. I chose not to inform her psychiatrist of my concerns.

## **A Positioning Compass to Explore the Choice**

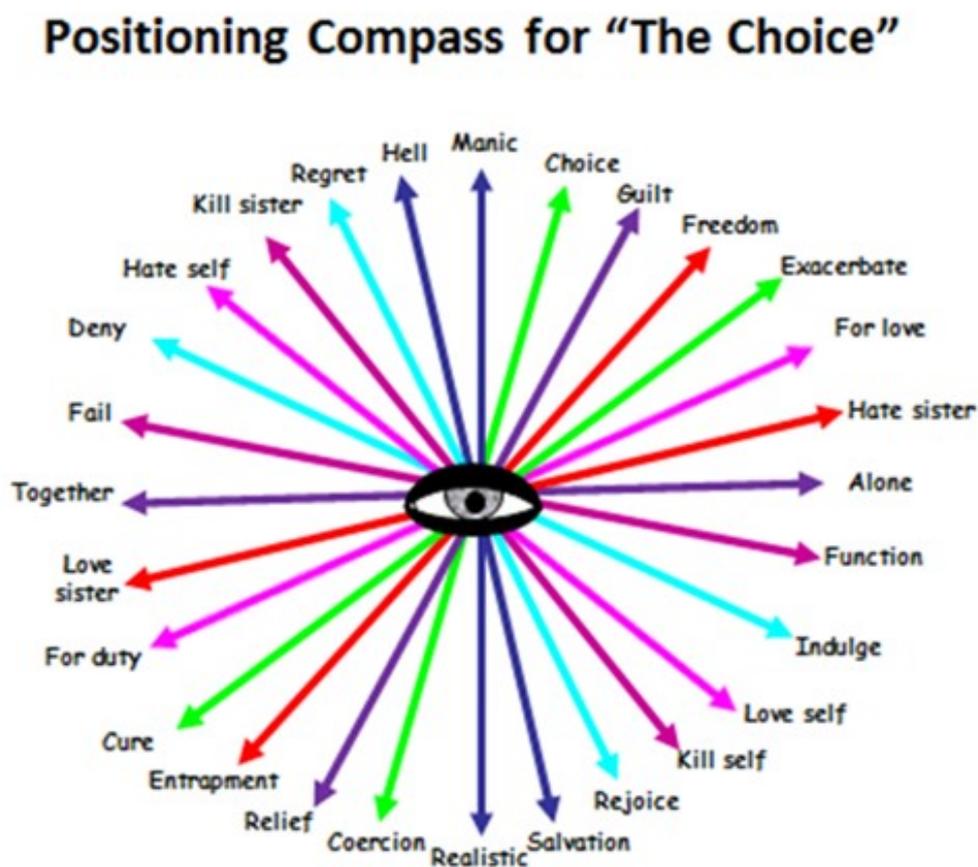
Alongside the putting together of my bundle of treasures I had been developing my ideas about positioning theory. In my bundle the “coal” and the “diamond” symbolise for me dynamic tension. Long ago, Peter Lang had told me the story of being asked to officiate at the funeral of a family therapist, as he had previously been a Reverend in the church. The person who had asked him had explained that the family were religious whilst the person who had died was not. They said that they knew that Peter would be able to hold the tension and respect both positions. Peter taught me to “hold the tension without trying to resolve it”. Looking for the higher-level context which encompasses both positions preserves the complexity of the system in the same way that the higher context of “carbon” enables the existence of both “coal” and “diamond.”

David Campbell would often talk of flipping the context and asking about the opposite so when a client is speaking of disappointment to ask about hope. He would say that the opposite is always evoked when you ask a question in the same way that a coin has a head and a tail. In his work with

organisations he identified semantic polarities, a line between two opposites which he would then invite people to line up against, saying that what was important was not where they positioned themselves on the line but the recursive conversations they held with their neighbours to determine their place (Campbell and Groenbaek, 2006).

For me, these ideas evoke dialogical listening, listening for “rich words” (Fredman 2007) which might become poles for their opposite. I began to draw what I called “a compass” during sessions with families and supervision conversations. This was like a collection of semantic differentials or a mini discourse analysis of all the key themes in a conversation, drawn with the aim of helping me to locate myself and as a trigger to get reflexive and to think about how to go on (Partridge, 2007). I saw my compass as a sort of precursor to the diamonds of the Fifth Province as the most powerful discourses might jump out to help you sketch a diamond. At the centre of the compass, I drew Maturana’s eye (1988) to remind me that this was not real, just a punctuation in time, like a dandelion clock, blown away in the next instant. The central point could also be a Fifth Province where you could observe the polarities without getting pulled in.

Figure 6: Positioning Compass



Over the next weeks Iris and I slowly and painstakingly traced all the possible feelings, decisions and outcomes for the potential organ donation. This was a harsh process, at one point, seeing Iris’s hesitation and therefore panicking at the potential loss of a lifesaving solution, her sister suggested that the donation of her kidney might cure her bi-polar diagnosis. Carefully we explored all the

possibilities and eventualities, the conversations we had could be described as venturing into the valley of death and entering into “death talk” (Fredman, 1997). We questioned whether this might be her salvation, or her entry to hell? Would it cure her bi-polar or would it exacerbate it? Might it be the reason that she was alive, or might it lead to her or her sister’s death? Did she hate or love herself or her sister? Would denying the donation kill her sister or would making the donation kill her? Would the kidney function or would it fail? Was it a way to be together or would she be left alone? Was she doing it for love or for duty?

At this point Iris was feeling coerced, she had to acknowledge that a part of her hated her sister for placing her in this position. In my head I was exploring a compass that was getting more and more complex. I decided to draw it out for myself, but as it felt that the decision was on a knife-edge, this time I did not think it would be helpful to share the compass. Very painfully Iris finally acknowledged that if the donation had been for her father, she would not have had a moment’s hesitation but that she did not feel the same, in this instance, for her sister.

### **The Introduction of Ndibeer**

Sitting uncomfortably in the midst of this extraordinarily brave exploration I suddenly remembered Glenda Fredman talking about some work she had done with a little girl who needed to have yet another operation to enable her to walk. She had gone to see Glenda and her colleague Deborah with her parents who had been fearful that Glenda would side with the little girl and agree that she should not have the operation. Glenda invited Ndibeer, her childhood bear, into the sessions and he whispered to Deborah telling her what the little girl was feeling. Glenda had written up the story with Ndibeer as the third author of the paper (Fredman, Christie and Bear, 2007). The piece of work had ended with the understanding that the little girl “really, really, really” did not want the operation but that she would do it on the condition that she could scream and shout all the way to the operating theatre which is what she did. I told Iris this story and she made no comment.

A couple of weeks later she said to me:

*“You know Karen, I really do feel exactly like that little girl. I will donate my kidney but I really, really, do not want to do so!”*

Iris made the trip to her sister to donate her kidney, and as is typical of her, she made some deep and lasting connections through doing so. When she arrived back, she told me that the night before the trip she had been watching the Simpsons, as she often did for comfort. That night in a magical fifth province way, it had been the episode where Homer donates his kidney but keeps jumping out of the hospital window to avoid it. Ndibeer and Homer Simpson had added some playfulness and humour and saved the day.

Sometime later there was a serious rift between Iris and her sister resulting in loss of contact over a significant period of time. I have the sense that the exquisitely detailed work we had done around the decision to donate the kidney was extremely important in helping Iris through this painful rupture. At no point did she regret the decision, she knew that it had been her choice and hers alone no matter what the consequences. Much later, a tentative reconnection was made. This time Iris was able to hold onto disbelief, standing in the midst of her compass, enjoying reconnection but taking one day at a time, knowing that her sister might once again vanish at any time.

## Another Choice

Another point of choice and painful indecision arose much later in our work whilst Iris was living very happily with her second partner in a different city. It had been very difficult for Iris to contemplate the sale of the house where she had lived with her first partner who had died seven years earlier. She had kept the house which was empty although she no longer lived there. On a number of occasions, she attempted to sell the house but was overcome with anxiety, regret and indecision once more. This was complicated by complex feelings about the relationship with her first partner, an impressive and powerful woman who she had often felt controlled by. Once more the decision was wracked by indecision. On the few occasions she got close to agreeing a sale anxiety about making the wrong decision took over and opened up the door to paralysing depression. This was very hurtful for her much loved and treasured current partner who fell into seeing the indecision as a way to stay loyal to her previous partner who had died.

As with the previous decision we slowly explored all the feelings around this choice. I had the sense that it might be helpful to externalise the house in a way which would explore what it stood for and what it would want for itself in the future. Once again, I stepped into the domain of production and, with Iris's permission, I contacted the estate agent, removal and storage companies in the hope of creating a little movement.

## Moving on and out with the help of Ndibeer and Ned

Eventually Iris found a family of potential buyers who she felt would bring life and love into her empty house. Tentatively she moved towards a sale but got stuck when it was time to sign the contract - anxiety opened the door to another paralysing depression. Whilst we talked about her lost dream of having her own children and the idea of breathing life once more into the empty house, releasing it from its stagnant bleakness and the agony of making a decision, I thought again of the little girl and Ndibeer.

## A Supervision of Solidarity: Outsider witness by email

After we finished talking, I felt quite strongly that Ndibeer could help and that a picture of him would soothe my client in this painful process so I emailed Glenda and asked her if she might still be in contact with Ndibeer and if he might be willing to send a picture.

*Dear Glenda,*

*...I have an odd request. I have a long-term client who gave a kidney to her sister – it was a very difficult and painful decision and we talked about your little girl who screamed all the way to the operating theatre and the help from your childhood bear Ndibeer – is that right?*

*She is now having to make another big decision which she has very mixed feelings about and we have been speaking about the little girl and Ndibeer again and the idea of screaming all the way there. She wants to read your paper and I wondered if by any chance you still have your bear and if he*

*would consider sending a picture of himself which I think would really comfort my client.*

*Hope to hear from you.*

*Warm wishes,*

*Karen*

Glenda sent back an email saying how touched she was by what I had said about my client and attaching a picture of Ndibeer and Ned, a green donkey who had worked with Deborah, Glenda's co-worker, when the family therapy ended.

*Dear Karen,*

*I am warmly touched by your client's story and if a photograph of Ndibeer bear can offer comfort we would be pleased to send one.*

*I am attaching the photo we took while we were working with the little girl you refer to. Her dream was to walk down the aisle as a bridesmaid for a family wedding.*

*Ndibeer sent this photograph to wish her well when the family were making plans for her to participate in the wedding. In solidarity (and a tad competitively!) Ndibeer dressed up in a bridesmaid's dress too! The other character in the photo is Ned (also mentioned in the paper we wrote) who worked with the little girl and a psychologist after our family therapy sessions ended.*

*I hope this is useful. I have also attached the paper.*

*Warm wishes,*

*Glenda*

I forwarded both emails, the picture and the paper that Glenda had sent of the work with the little girl to Iris.

*Dear Iris,*

*I hope that you will get some comfort from Glenda's email and directly from Ndibeer and Ned. Looking forward to speaking to you tomorrow.*

*Warm wishes*

*Karen*

*Figure 7: Ndibeer and Ned sent as an email attachment*



Iris was very touched, both by my email and Glenda's response and the picture from Ndibeer and Ned. When I next spoke to her the paralysing anxiety and depression had been blown away, she was light and playful and had found her agency and active self. Next, she emailed me with the title GOOD NEWS in capital letters. She had had the all-clear from the neurologist following fears that she had become epileptic, and had been given the go-ahead to drive again. She and her partner were making the journey in their much-loved car to the empty house to collect significant things before the removers packed the rest to go into storage.

She ended the email saying, "Ndibeer and Ned are with us!"

### **And then...**

Following her last visit to the old house, Iris let me know that it had been a very emotional and rewarding trip. She and her partner had managed to make the drive back to her old house and they had spent time with the neighbours:

*"It was lovely to see the house empty and as clean as it was when J and I first bought it and to feel the same excitement as when we bought it. I was really pleased. Ned and Ndibeer were with us all the way and will be for the future wherever screaming and kicking are required." (Iris)*

I have a strong sense of Ndibeer and Ned sitting on the back seat of the car and waving.

### **And then again...**

Since this was written we have experienced the pandemic and Iris has been shielding her partner. Increasingly, they have been drawing around them a supportive, small group of loving helpers. They are currently celebrating their recent civil partnership. I am guessing that Ndibeer was there enjoying a second outing of that bridesmaid's dress.

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### **Transgression, pragmatic and respectful responses**

There have been several times in the work together with Iris when I have stepped away from the domain of explanation (the doing of therapy) into the domain of production (the conditions for therapy and wellbeing to be effective). These moves were always a response to having assessed and recognised a need to act on serious concerns for Iris's safety. In some schools of psychotherapy, these may be framed as transgressions but I understand these moves as forms of ethical and practical relational risk taking (Mason 2019).

I used to think that I must set a boundary with Iris and work towards an ending. The systemic narrative of *more than six sessions and you're part of the problem* has acted as a restrictive theory which has worked against the needs of many people coming to systemic therapy. There are opportunities in long term systemic work which are, as yet, insufficiently documented. For therapists and clients to become part of each other's changing stories offers many opportunities for learning and growing. For example, I have been and remain (whether we have therapy further or not) a witness to Iris's heroism in many different situations over time; I have seen her change, rise to some extraordinary challenges and make long, slow gains over bi-polar depression. And she is witness to my development as a therapist. She has seen changes in my practice, watched me having to reflect on my own positioning in a shared and constantly co-created compass.

When I decided not to contact the psychiatrist who might have vetoed the kidney transplant if he knew the extent of Iris's suicidal intent, I took a relational risk and privileged Iris's choice over common professional guidance. In our work using the positioning compass, Iris and I discussed her choices and her wellbeing at length. I decided that in this instance my loyalty to Iris's agency was a higher context than professional guidance.

On the occasions when, with Iris's consent, I decided to offer to contact the estate agent, removers and storage options, I realised that more than talk or reflection was needed. We came up against the limits of the talking therapies. Iris had no-one else to take the lead in doing something practical to get herself out of the stalemate that had descended on her about moving on with the house. She didn't have another few months to work on this in therapy. Action was needed to avoid losing the buyer and prevent a further plummet into depression. She was relieved when I could fill a practical gap so she could carry on with the emotional work of getting through the move.

When I contacted Glenda without first discussing this with Iris, I could feel a dilemma about whether I was doing the right thing. But I wanted to be sure that getting a photo was even possible before raising it with Iris. I had a strong feeling that this would be helpful. I knew Iris trusted me to act in her best interest and I felt that the element of the unexpected and holding her in mind would be pleasing

to her. And of course, Glenda's response was delightful and it turned out that Iris thoroughly enjoyed the correspondence, leaping willingly into the playful yet touching frame of it all, commenting on how much she enjoyed both Glenda and I holding the imaginal frame in addressing Ndibeer as a fellow participant.

Actions that, in some psychotherapeutic discourses, are framed as transgressions arose in the context of a longstanding yet emergent experience of relational artistry in a longstanding therapeutic relationship. Whether we discussed actions in therapy before, during or after them taking place, they became part of a transformative process dependent on relational reflexivity (Burnham 2005).

While I suppose some might think that writing this paper and inviting Iris to comment on this could be seen as an unnecessary demand on Iris, what might be overlooked by this assumption is the richness that arises out of discussing the process of our working together. It adds a change-over-time perspective, has created opportunities for re-storying narratives or reflecting on the positioning compass in our relationship. And we can reselect what to include in our bundles of treasures. The paper becomes another fifth province.

I hope that this article honours my client and the deep regard I have for her and appreciation for all the learning she has enabled in me and all we have created together.

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### **Some questions for readers to take into their own practice**

I hope that in the reading of this story something will resonate for you in your life and work, perhaps triggering you to begin to notice and collect your own rich treasures, however you might describe them. The questions below might be a starting point in supervision, in work with adults, children and families, on training courses for you to gather together resources for future journeys.

#### **What would you place in your bundle?**

*Take a few minutes or a few years!*

- Think of "rich words" which express qualities you would like to embody in your work (speech act)  
Choose one to work on first
- Think of a recent episode in your work where you have come closest to embodying this quality (episode)  
Describe this episode in fine detail, when, where, with whom?
- What did you do to show this quality?
- Where did you notice it in your body?
- How did it feel?
- Who would appreciate this quality in you? (relationship)
- Who are the people who you hold close who embody this quality?
- Who do you admire who shows this quality?

- Who from your past and present teachers most embodies this quality?
- What theoretical ideas speak to this quality?
- You may like to think about your cultural heritage and your gendered stories in thinking about this quality (culture and identity)
- What from your cultural heritage supports this quality?
- How does your gender and sexuality enhance this quality? (identity)
- What pictures, poems, music, lyrics, art, films speak to this value for you? (culture)
- What social and political figures and what religious leaders, dead or alive, hold this quality for you? (spirituality)
- Think of an object which can symbolise all these meanings for you (linking back to action)
- Place this object in your bundle of treasures
- How will these qualities, symbolised by your objects, show in your life and work?
- Who will notice?
- What difference will this process make to your future self and your future personal and professional relationships?
- What difference will this make to your future work with clients?

Enjoy these fruits in your life and work

Good luck on your journey!

## Final Reflections

I hope that I have been able to share some ideas and examples which may be helpful to others. I also hope to have honoured Iris and her humour, her resourcefulness and the “small acts of resistance” across her life and in our work. This work has been made possible through the “supervision of solidarity” (Reynolds, 2010) that I have been lucky enough to experience with David, Peter, Glenda and Imelda.

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