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Transforming Encounters and Interactions:
A Dialogical Inquiry into the Influence of Collaborative Therapy
In the Lives of its Practitioners

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Tilburg, op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. Ph. Eijlander, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie in de Ruth First zaal van de Universiteit op maandag 24 november 2008 om 10.15 uur

door

JANICE NADINE DEFEHR

geboren op 6 januari 1965 te Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Promotores: Prof. Dr. H. Anderson

Prof. Dr. J.B. Rijsman
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Abstract

Featuring the voices of 14 Collaborative therapists from 6 different countries, this dissertation presents a series of spoken and written dialogues in response to the following question: “How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself? The project derives its methods from the everyday dialogical practices and premises of its participant-practitioners and from the project dialogues themselves. Part 1 of the following text orients primarily to the project’s face-to-face group dialogue at the International Summer Institute (ISI) in Playa del Carmen, Mexico; the author narrates an account of this inaugural conversation in chapter 1. Chapter 2 addresses the question of how to understand the dialogues in this project: Drawing on both literary sources and collaborative therapy practice, this chapter invites and articulates dialogical understandings of dialogue. Chapter 3 explores connections between three distinct inquiry methods relevant to this project: (1) social poetics methods articulated by John Shotter and Arlene Katz (2) the non-systematic ‘shared inquiry’ of collaborative therapy, and, (3) the unique inquiry method developed within this project. Chapter 4 exposes the “behind the scenes” doing of inquiry in this project, articulating decision points, regrets, changes of direction and developmental landmarks. Chapter 5 returns to the face-to-face group dialogue in Mexico to explore part of it in greater detail, concluding part 1 of this text. Part 2 relates primarily to participants’ written dialogues. Chapter 6 of part 2 prepares readers to participate in the journaling and responsive writing comprising chapter 7, a bi-lingual chapter presenting multiple texts written by 10 participant-therapists, each responding to the project’s central question. In chapter 8, the author responds to the project as a whole, exploring its potential relevance for dialogic practitioners and future qualitative social inquiry.
Abstract

In deze dissertatie worden de stemmen van 14 Collaboratieve therapeuten uit zes verschillende landen gepresenteerd, die via gesproken of geschreven dialogen antwoord proberen te geven op de vraag: “Hoe zou U uw praktijk kunnen beschrijven als zijnde generatief en transformerend voor Uzelf?” De methodes die in dit project worden gebruikt zijn ontleend aan de dagelijkse dialogische praktijken en uitgangspunten van de deelnemende praktijkmensen zelf, alsook aan de dialogen in dit project. In deel 1 van dit boek richten we ons vooral op de face-to-face dialogen in de groep, die gehouden werden in het International Summer Institute (ISI) in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. In hoofdstuk 1 geven we een beschrijvend relaas van deze initiële conversaties. In hoofdstuk 2 stellen we ons de vraag hoe we deze dialogen kunnen begrijpen, en steunend op zowel literaire bronnen als op bronnen uit de collaboratieve praktijk spreken we ons uit voor- en nodigen de lezer ook uit om deze dialogen op dialogische manier te begrijpen. In hoofdstuk 3 kijken we naar de verbindingen tussen drie verschillende onderzoeksmethoden die relevant zijn voor dit project: (1) de sociale poesie methode, zoals die werd beschreven door door John Shotter en Arlene Katz (2) de methode van het niet-systematisch ‘gedeeld onderzoek’ uit de collaboratieve therapie, en, (3) de eigenstandige onderzoeksmethode die in dit project zelf werd ontwikkeld. In hoofdstuk 4 nemen we de lezer mee in onze manieren van doen “achter de schermen” van dit project, zoals belangrijke beslispunten, dingen die we betreuren, veranderingen van richting en mijlpalen in de ontwikkeling. In hoofdstuk 5, tenslotte, keren we terug naar de face-to-face dialogen in de groep in Mexico, om deze nu meer gedetailleerd te bekijken, en daarmee sluiten we deel 1 af. Deel 2 gaat vooral over de geschreven dialogen van de deelnemers. Het eerste hoofdstuk in dit deel, hoofdstuk 6, bereidt de lezer voor op de deelname aan het dagboek- en antwoordend schrijven zoals dat in hoofdstuk 7 uit de doeken wordt gedaan,
en waarin op twee-talige manier verschillende teksten van 10 deelnemer-therapeuten, die elk antwoord proberen te geven op de centrale vraag van dit project, staan beschreven. In hoofdstuk 8, tenslotte, kijken we terug op het project in zijn geheel, en proberen aan te geven wat zijn mogelijke relevantie is voor mensen in dialogische praktijken, en voor verder kwalitatief onderzoek in de toekomst.
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Introduction

“The complex event of encountering and interacting with another’s word has been almost completely ignored by the corresponding human sciences…”
(Bakhtin, 1986, p. 144).

“The therapist is not an expert agent of change; that is, a therapist does not change another person. Rather, the therapist’s expertise is in creating a space and facilitating a process for dialogical conversations and collaborative relationships. When involved in this kind of process, both client and therapist are shaped and reshaped—transformed—as they work together”

Project Focus

Research Question

This dissertation is a dialogical, shared inquiry (Anderson, 1997, pp. 112-122) into collaborative therapist experience of generativity and transformation within everyday collaborative therapy practice. A total of 14 therapists, including myself, come together from Mexico, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Canada and the U.S.A. to participate in a two-part set of spoken and written dialogues responding to the following question: How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself? The dialogues that form in response to this question constitute both the data and the central event in this project. (See Appendix A for an introduction to project participants.)

Philosophical Premises and Practices

This dissertation is situated within a particular dialogical approach to therapy practice that has come to be known as postmodern, collaborative, or, collaborative therapy (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). Known in some circles as one of the “discursive” (Strong & Pare, 2004a) “social construction therapies” (Anderson, 2003b; McNamee & Gergen, 1992) collaborative practice is variously described: as “mere conversation” (Hoffman, 1997), as
“shared inquiry” (Anderson, 1997, pp. 112-122), as the enactment of a philosophical stance (Anderson, 2007; Malinen, 2004), and as a dialogical way of being with others and otherness in practice and in all of life (Anderson, 1997, pp. 108-131; Hoffman, 2002, p. 225). Collaborative therapy is consistently defined as an approach to therapy rather than a step-ordered methodology, theory, or set of techniques (St. George & Wulff, 2007, pp. 403-420). Dialogue, often unnoticed in the background of social work and clinical psychology, is the star agent of generativity and transformation in collaborative therapy (Anderson, 1997, 2001, 2007c; Anderson & Levin, 1998, p. 46; Haarakangas, Seikkula, Alakare & Aaltonen, 2007; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006; Strong, 2007; Sutherland, 2007). Although the therapists participating in this project work within a diverse range of human service settings, each describes their practice as collaborative. (See Appendix B for an open-ended description of collaborative therapy.) I join this international collective as the primary writer of the text that follows, and as a fellow collaborative therapist and active respondent in our shared inquiry.

Outline of Project Events: Spoken Dialogue, Written Dialogue, Responding “Into” the Dialogues

Spoken Dialogue

The first dialogue—a spoken dialogue, takes place with all but one therapist present, in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, at the International Summer Institute (ISI, June, 2005), an annual week-long conference for collaborative practitioners and academics from around the world. Together as a group for the first and last time, we begin to interact with the central question in this project: How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself? I both facilitate the dialogue and participate fully within it.
Months later, I narrate (Shotter & Katz, 2004a) an up-close account of the dialogue as I listen to it through my audio recording, creating chapters 1 and 5 of this text. Narrating an account of the dialogue, for me, means telling a story of the dialogue’s emergence from start to ‘finish’, voice-by-voice, moment-to-moment, as accurately as I can. I narrate the dialogue from my ‘dual’ vantage point within it, first as a participant in the live spoken dialogue, and second, as a listener responding to the recorded conversation many months later. Not every word uttered in the original dialogue is included in the narration, although all words within quotation marks are written exactly as I hear them spoken. At the same time, additional words appear that were never part of the original spoken dialogue: My response to the dialogue recording expands the narration at various junctures. As I develop an account of the dialogue, I participate in the interchange with my colleagues once again. I cannot help but respond—with acknowledgement, questions, replies, additional ideas, and also, with feelings. Without a plan to guide me, I respond into the dialogue again for “another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). My goal in narrating the dialogue is to invite involvement and active response, from readers of this text, and from myself. The production of a tightly coherent narrative end product is not a priority for me as I write.

**Written Dialogue**

The second dialogue—a written dialogue—begins immediately following the ISI as we return to our home communities around the world. Oriented to our respective therapy practices, we agree to begin journaling our responses to the central question in this project as a near-daily practice over a span of two weeks in the time period between July 1, 2005 and August 31, 2005. We then select journal portions to offer for use in this project by our deadline of September 1, 2005. I also journal my responses to the project question, however, when I see the substantial
volume of writing arriving from my colleagues, I set my journaling aside to focus on the texts steadily arriving in my electronic mail.

Nine therapists, not including me, send segments or complete versions of their journalled responses to our project question. I immediately respond, gratefully acknowledging the contribution of each writer. Throughout the next year I respond to each practitioner’s writing a second time, this time in minute detail.

During the period of time when I am writing response to the journals of project participants, I engage in a spoken and unspoken dialogue with several persons influential within the collaborative community: Tom Andersen, Harlene Anderson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson, Kenneth Gergen, Lynn Hoffman, Arlene Katz, Gary Morson, Jaakko Seikkula, John Shotter, Tom Strong, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The co-respondence comprising chapter 7 of this text develops throughout an extended period of time as I tack back and forth between the intimate day-to-day journaling of my project colleagues, and the more formal writings of scholars and practitioners.

**Additional Dialogue: My Conversational Circle**

An additional dialogue supports the spoken and written dialogues at the centre of this project, particularly at its beginning. Prior to the process of inviting therapist-colleagues to join me in this project, I invite 7 practitioner colleagues to form a consulting committee—playfully renamed the “International Conversational Circle of Nurturance, Mystery and Fun” by our Finnish member (Malinen, personal communication, May 6, 2005). (See Appendix C for a brief introduction to the practitioners playing a part in this conversational resource). I invite each person in conversation with my advising faculty member, Dr. Harlene Anderson, internationally renowned therapist, educator, author and co-originator of the postmodern collaborative approach
to therapy. Dr. Anderson recommends the formation of a conversational resource for the project early in its development as a way of lessening the challenges that come with independent study.

As their time and interests allow, participants in this conversational circle arrange to meet with me at conferences, share their own published and in-process work, debrief public presentations of my work, recommend therapist-participants, offer perspectives regarding ethics and research process, reflect on their personal experiences of social inquiry, invite me to facilitate conversational forums with university social work students, reflect on my topic and our process of inquiry, ask provocative questions, suggest reading, mention names of others who might serve as resources to this project, and talk with me about the influence of this project in their own work. They listen, voice support and concern, dare me to start writing, and, eventually, dare me to stop.

I am pleased we abandoned the title of “consultants” early on. Each person within this project plays a consultative role; participating therapists are simultaneously consultants to the project, and consultants are similarly participants, meaningfully engaged with the inquiry from particular standpoints within it.

*The Prominence of Dialogue in this Project*

This project—a series of spoken and written dialogues—can also be described as a dialogue *between* dialogues. Many dialogues emerge within this project, some less prominent than others. Each dialogue influences others in play; none of them ‘stand alone’. The following is only a beginning list:

1. Dialogue between practitioners and their clients.

2. Dialogue between translators and practitioners speaking and writing in Spanish.

4. The dialogue between my self as practitioner, and my self as musician, and the dialogue between my “personal” voice and professional or academic voice (Johnston & Strong, 2007).

5. The dialogue between readers and ‘textual voices’ in this dissertation book.

Although The Playa Dialogue and the subsequent journalled dialogues are “data” in the project, our shared inquiry is part of a web of dialogues, each exerting its influence while at the same time, opening itself to the influence of other dialogues.

Summary of Significant Project Events and Landmarks

The steps of this project include:

1. June 2005: Practitioners engage in a spoken, face-to-face conversation in response to our project research question: “How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself? This takes place at the ISI in Playa del Carmen, Mexico.

2. July 2005-August 2005: Practitioners engage in a two-week period of near-daily journal writing in response to our project research question. Practitioners decide what portions to forward to me for use in this project.

3. September 2005-December 2006: Through writing, I respond to the practitioners’ journaling for the purpose of generating “dialogical understandings” of our project topic, a quality of understanding I discuss in detail in chapter 2 of this text.

**Seven Features of Project Method**

1. **Dialogical Method as Spontaneous, Situational and Unrepeatable**

   Collaborative practitioners joining in the shared inquiry of this project are keenly attentive to process, perhaps in part, because the steps taken within each collaborative client-practitioner conversation are not pre-sequenced and then “applied” or “followed.” Method, in collaborative therapy practice, is always ‘on the way’, always ‘once off’ and unrepeatable, always a first-time ‘premiere’ arising out of a particular, historical dialogical situation. As participants in collaborative therapy, both practitioner and client ‘make the path’ as they walk it (Fernandez, Cortes & Tarragona, 2007). Collaborative therapists strive to co-create an optimal space for dialogue in each practitioner-client encounter, one with room for unforeseen “twists and turns” and sudden departures (Smith, 1997, p. 43). Similarly the developmental steps within this project inquiry emerge incrementally over time, collaboratively and *calibratively* forged by the interactions of project practitioners.

2. **Dialogue Instead of Interview**

   Consistent with the dialogical orientation of collaborative therapy, the data in this inquiry is generated through dialogue rather than interview speech genres (Shuy, 2003, pp. 179-180), blurring distinctions between “observer” and “observed,” between “researcher” and the “subject” of the research (Gergen & Gergen, 2000a, p.1035). Inquiry in collaborative therapy is a mutual, shared activity; all present are invited to participate as curious learners. Unlike an interviewer
who aims, like a skilled journalist, to stay “out of the way” of the story, generating just enough rapport and detachment to elicit disclosure, dialogical speech genres require a collaborative partnership, one in which all persons meeting are full participants in an spontaneous, conversational event (Levin, 2007). I join the practitioner colleagues in this inquiry, in a mutual effort to understand with them, rather than launching an investigation about them (Anderson, 1997; Gustavson, 1996; Shotter, 2005b). Dialogue places the practitioner in a more intimate, interdependent, “withness” (Hoffman, 2007, 1992, p. 9) than is common in interview modes of speech.

Just as I join my colleagues in responding to our research question, they join me as fellow writers in producing chapter 7 of this text, an extensive, bi-lingual, multi-voiced and multi-textual interchange, perhaps in part, exemplifying practitioner Peggy Penn and Marilyn Frankfurt’s (1994) vision of an inclusive “participant text” (pp. 217-231). In this writing, participant voices are not confined to fragmented de-contextualized quotations and authorial paraphrasing. Rather, they present their textual voices directly and fully within the text. I play two roles within the writing process: first, like the polyphonic authors capturing Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986) attention, I invite inscription of a world in which “many disparate points of view enter into dialogue” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 239) and second, I participate fully within that dialogue: “The direct power to mean, which in a monologic work belongs to the author alone, belongs to several voices in a polyphonic work” (p. 239).

3. Sharing the Role of “Respondent”

While interview genres usually require separate roles of interviewer and respondent, all participants in a dialogue are primarily “… responding to each other’s utterances in an attempt to link their practical activities in with those of the others around them…” (Shotter, 2006, p. 10).
Likewise, participants in this dialogical inquiry are present to one another as respondents. The same holds for me: my role, primarily, is to actively respond with my whole being—to the words of fellow respondents, to their utterances, to their voices, spoken and ‘textual’, and to the developing conversation between us all, with its unpredictable possibilities, demands and constraints (Hoffman, 2007, pp. 68-69). Active embodied response extends the dialogue and invites generativity—possibility, movement, and newness, for example.

4. Situating Inquiry Within the Co-motion of the Interactive Present

The shared inquiry constituting this project is situated within the co-motion of the interactive ‘present moment’. At no point will I “close” the dialogues, step outside them, and “de-relate” (Strong, 2004, p. 215) in order to analyze or interpret the dialogues from a non-participatory “meta-position.” Nor will I stand over the dialogues searching for patterns or structural regularities. I will similarly not attempt to establish a static thematic hierarchy requiring the classification or cataloguing of participant utterances. Instead of adopting the role of “translator,” “organizer,” “analyst,” or “interpretant,” (Geertz, 2000, p. 17) of the dialogues, more than any other function, I am—like the other participant-therapists—primarily responding in the moment within multiple emerging conversations, just as I function primarily as a respondent within the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy (Anderson, 2002). In chapters 2 and 3, this dissertation will discuss in greater detail the crucial role of response in dialogic practice, drawing on Bakhtin’s (1986) ideas concerning the indivisibility of understanding and active response, and the concept of “mutual responsivity” or social poetics articulated by communications scholars John Shotter and Arlene Katz (Katz & Shotter, 2004; Shotter & Katz, 1996).
5. Avoiding Overt Processes of Reduction or Distillation

Our project dialogues are presented in the following pages without any overt process of reduction or distillation. In collaborative therapy, the dialogical “space” forming the context specific to each conversation is part of the dialogue, something to be noticed and protected (Anderson, 1997, pp. 112-113). What seems unremarkable at one point in dialogue can prove arresting at some later point of interaction, and similarly, what seems to be “background” to one person, may be “foreground” for another. This, as I see it, is part of the “surprisingness” of dialogue (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 36). I allow the dialogues in this shared inquiry to develop their own ‘shape’ and ‘character’—their own pacing, intonations, moments of focus or ambiguity, just as I do in collaborative therapy practice.

6. Participatory Event Rather than Systematization or Research Product

The dialogues in this project take center stage within it. They do not form an introduction or prelude to processes deemed more scientific. In collaborative therapy practice, dialogue is viewed as inherently generative in and of itself. Similarly, our project dialogues do not drive towards the production of a research product—“an artificial device,” (Garfinkel, 2006c, p. 128) such as a new framework, theory, model (Hoffman, 1998) systematization, interpretation, or static conceptual representation of any kind (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Just as in collaborative therapy, possibilities, or outcomes present abundantly and unpredictably within the commotion of dialogical interaction, offering new ways of seeing the familiar, new practical ways of going on together. Dialogical inquiry yields an unpredictable participatory event, not a new system (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 237). “Nothing is hidden” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 109); everything we need to understand the dialogues within this project is available to us in the context of our engagement with them.
7. Writing as Integral Part of Method

Terms.

Throughout this text I write with an awareness of the interactive presence of others—readers, fellow practitioners, and the ‘textual voices’ of writers I encounter in the literature I read. Oriented to these others, I find myself compelled to use the word “we” continually. With each use, the context or use of the word will suggest who is included in the term (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 93). The reader will also notice the use of several terms referring to the 13 colleagues joining me in this project: participants, practitioners, and therapists, for example. And, to be brief, the approach to therapy known as “postmodern, collaborative” will simply be called “collaborative therapy.”

I have an uneasy relationship with several words appearing frequently in this text. Postmodernism has become one of them, not in any way because I wish to return to modernist psychology. My growing discomfort with the term is evident in this text: My early writing within this project makes use of the term “postmodern” readily whereas my later writing orientst more typically to words such as dialogue, and dialogism. Many of the premises and practices I used to name as postmodern are, in fact, premodern; they are ancient.

Similarly, “therapy” and “therapist” are uncomfortable words for me. Although I am educated as a clinical social worker, and employed as a therapist, or counselor, I do not think of my practice as fitting with any pseudo-medical terms. I do not believe society needs a “therapist class” of well-being experts (Riikonen, 1999). Rather, like others, I prefer more communal and dialogical vocabularies for describing my work. I write more about this in chapter 7.
**Tense.**

Much of this dissertation is written in the “historical present” tense (Wolfson, 1979) rather than the “past tense” commonly found in social science research reports. The “historical present” suits the open-ended dialogical character of our inquiry. While past tense retrospective writing induces a sense of stability and closure, writing situated in some form of ‘the present’ suggests the interaction is still ‘in play’ and therefore open to the influence of reader-participants (Ceglowski, 2002, p. 8). Each time we interact with the text, the dialogue continues. Participation places us once again within the present unfolding interactive moment, in the endless middle of an open-ended dialogue (Shotter, 1999, 2006a, pp. 76-90, 2006c; Stern, 2004). Describing our dialogical process from a single, fixed position after seems nearly impossible to me, as I too, am continually witnessing this project’s development, even now as I write these words.

**Multiple voices.**

Readers will note the frequency and considerable duration of quoted excerpts in the chapters to follow—perhaps also the increased challenge of attending to numerous distinct voices juxtaposed within the text. My aim is to allow others to ‘speak’ as directly as possible. Instead of subjugating ‘textual voices’ to the authority of my own written voice through “paraphrase” or other devices, my intention is to create a generous space for others to join me ‘in full voice’. Presenting the voice of another is preferable to representing that voice “second hand” in a polyphonic work, just as actually ‘hearing’ the voice of an other is more desirable than encountering an author’s writing about that voice. The richness and sensual pleasure of polyphonic music is in the simultaneous sounding and intersecting of multiple but distinctly different melodic lines.
Multiple texts.

Readers will note also the presence of multiple texts within this dissertation. Several distinct writing genres are present in the chapters to follow. Each text emerges from a unique relational, cultural, and dialogical context. Diversity between texts is especially evident in the chapter 7 presentation of practitioners’ journaling.

I write in an explicitly responsive manner within three parts of this dissertation text: chapter 1, chapter 5, and chapter 7. I characterize this writing as responsive, or as co-responsence because I am writing with others from within an unfolding dialogical situation, extending the dialogue rather than writing about the dialogue from a position after or outside of it (Shotter, 1999a). Each ‘responsive writing’ text is somewhat different from the others, influenced by the unique particularities of each dialogical context.

As stated earlier, the first responsive writing piece (chapter 1) narrates our face-to-face dialogue at the very start of this project. The second, chapter 5, explores jostling differences within one portion of this same dialogue. The last responsive writing piece comprises chapter 7. I like to refer to this chapter as “co-responsence”: project participants journal in response to the project’s central question, and I write extensive response to each writer’s journal segments.

Bi-lingual text.

Of our total of 14 practitioners, including me, 9 practitioners in this project speak English as an ‘additional’ second or third language. Only 4 practitioners, including me, speak English as a ‘first’ language. The success of this project obviously depends on language translation services. Geavonna, one of the participant practitioners in this project, graciously provides Spanish and English translation for the project’s first dialogue in Playa del Carmen, June 2005. Like the other practitioners, her identity remains completely anonymous throughout this project in accordance
with the stated wishes of the practitioners prior to, during and following the dialogue in Playa del Carman, Mexico. A two-person team of Spanish and English translators provides certified translation services for Spanish and English correspondence upon request throughout the duration of this project (See Appendix D to read translators’ biographical information as posted at the project blog: http://researchdialogues.blogspot.com).

_The “So What?” Question: To Whom is This Inquiry Important And Why?_

Research journal editor and family therapy educator, Sally St. George, respectfully voiced this question when I began to articulate the focus of this inquiry (personal communication, April 27, 2005). The question is not concerned with the “do-ability” of the project, but, rather, its “should-do-ability” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 9). In other words, why should we launch this exploration? To whom is the collaborative therapist’s experience of generativity and transformation in therapy practice important? Why is this topic worthy of our engagement?

_Relational History of the Central Question in this Inquiry_

My interest in the mutually transforming influence of collaborative therapy derives in large part from my last decade of counseling practice within a publicly funded post-trauma program in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Trauma discourse, both formal and informal, suggests therapeutic practice with people following traumatic events can be especially depleting for practitioners, even vicariously traumatizing. My wish is to explore and “thicken” alternative accounts of practitioner experience. Like many therapists, I have a persistent but vague sense that each person I meet with enriches my life. Often I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude and
wonderment during the course of our meetings together. Each therapy conversation presents first-time challenges, opportunities for learning, new practical ways of understanding our lives. While the focus of my practice is the client’s agenda, I have come to see the dialogues at the heart of my practice as generative and transforming, not only for my dialogical partners, but for me as well. This seems to happen coincidentally and inevitably, apart from any intention or planning on my part. Although I do not think of myself as playing an educational role with my clients, I resonate with the words of my daughters’ teacher as she spoke publicly of her elementary school students: “For every one thing I taught them, they taught me four” (June, 2007).

In 1997, I encountered Anderson’s (1997) claims that conversation is mutually influencing, inherently generative and transforming: “Both client and therapist risk a transformation of self” (p. 110). I began challenging myself to articulate this phenomenon practically and specifically within my practice. As this project began to develop in 2004, I continued to encounter other practitioners who were cultivating ‘reciprocal’ transforming practices in their everyday work, practices that positioned practitioners alongside people in a mutually influencing interchange. In December, 2005, my preparation to attend a conference with Tom Andersen, Peter Finck, Lynn Hoffman, Chris Kinman, Mary Olson, and John Shotter led me to Peter Finck and Chris Kinman’s description of practice as “gift exchange” (Kinman & Finck, 2004, p. 244), a metaphor that grew, in large part, out of Kinman and Finck’s on-going participation in Potlatch celebrations with Aboriginal peoples on the Western coast of Canada. I immediately welcomed this language that seemed to go a long way in acknowledging and honoring the back-and-forth generative influence of everyday practice. I found it resonant with Anderson’s collaborative approach, as it shifted emphasis from the treatment strategies of an
expert practitioner-class to more spontaneously responsive, communal ways of being and
becoming with one another. Possibilities emerging from this kind of “withness” (Hoffman, 1998,
2007) between practitioner and client seemed qualitatively unlike those produced within pre-
sequenced, treatment plan or map-driven approaches (Hoffman, 2002, p. 169). While the client
and the client’s relational network determined the focus of each meeting, somehow the
practitioner was also sustained, challenged, enlivened, and even transformed within the
practitioner-client interchange. I wanted my work to honor and contribute to this way of being
and becoming with people.

**Ethical Stance**

The ways we position ourselves ethically in the world of academic social inquiry is
equally as important as our posture in therapeutic practice (Chenail, 2000; Sutherland, 2007).
Collaborative therapy is a movement away from “doing to” and “doing for” in favour of
responsively “doing with” others. The ways we attempt to understand the others and othernesses
around us are indivisible from the understandings we generate; position, like process, is
inseparable from “content” (Richardson, 1997, p. 73): Our understandings are always
inextricably tied to our relationships with others (Gergen, 1982). We understand differently when
we engage in collaborative inquiry *with* people, rather than scientific investigations *of* them
(Gustavson, 1996).

This present inquiry aspires to a quality of withness (Hoffman, 1998, 2007) that requires
the “researcher” to utilize and privilege the project participants’ ways of understanding—their
“common sense,” their ‘communal sensing’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 1123; Shotter, 1993a,
p. 54). I am drawn to sociologist Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) “… recommendations for the study
of common-sense knowledge and its rejection of analytical frameworks premised on the
assumed, in-principle superiority of social science knowledge over its lay equivalents” (Heritage, 1984, p. 6). Collaborative practitioners’ ways of being lead this inquiry rather than social science methodologies. It is the developing dialogical situation and the participant players within it that determine process and ethical stance within this social inquiry, rather than methodology developed elsewhere.

*Invitation to Readers*

As we enter the text to follow, we continually encounter two inseparable questions, one concerns therapist experience of generativity and transformation in therapy practice, while the other concerns our emerging method of inquiry. We invite you, as *reader*, to join our dialogues as a full participant, questioning, wondering, differing, and most important, responding, extending and enriching this polyphony with your own unique voice.

A summary of the organization of this dissertation may be helpful at this juncture: Following a brief introduction to our shared inquiry project, this text divides into three parts: Part 1 features the practitioners’ spoken dialogue in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, June 2005; Part 2 features the practitioners’ written dialogues, and part 3 consists of my open-ended response to the project as a whole. In the first chapter, I narrate the project’s inaugural dialogue in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, presenting the practitioners’ initial interactions with the research question prompting this study. Chapter 2 questions, “How shall we attempt to understand the dialogues featured in this project?” Proposing that the collaborative therapist understands dialogue *dialogically*, this chapter describes the conversational methods of understanding enacted by collaborative therapists in their everyday practices. The chapter declares my commitment to privilege our project members’ dialogical approaches to inquiry (Rawls, 2006, p. 44).
The third chapter explores the conceptual premises of the project’s shared inquiry method in greater detail, noting its connections with qualitative social inquiry in general, with Wittgenstein’s (1953) philosophical methods of investigation and with social poetics methods (Shotter & Katz, 1996). Chapter 4 exposes the practical doing of the project’s method, identifies significant departures from ‘traditional’ qualitative research methodology and addresses questions related to legitimacy. The text then returns to The Playa Dialogue in chapter 5 to look further into a generative collision of differences as practitioners encounter and begin to interact with the project’s central question.

Part 2 begins with an introduction (chapter 6) preparing readers to participate in chapter 7: a series of ‘journalled’ interactions created by 10 collaborative therapists in this project (9 therapists plus myself). Each writes in response to the question prompting this inquiry and in response to his or her on-going therapy practice; each writer ‘comes at’, enters, and engages with the project’s central question from various unrepeatable, ‘in-motion’ vantage points. In turn, I respond ‘into’ each practitioner’s response. Authorship in chapter 7 is shared, producing a bilingual, multi-voiced, and multi-textual text. A final reflective chapter (chapter 8) concludes this text, highlighting the potential relevance of the project’s method and ‘findings’ for future social inquiry, in collaborative therapy and in qualitative social inquiry in general.

We turn now to our first spoken dialogue in Playa del Carmen, our first meeting as a research collective of collaborative therapists, and our first encounters and interactions with the emerging central question in this project: “As a collaborative therapist, how could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself?”
PART ONE

ORIENTING TO THE SPOKEN DIALOGUE

Chapter 1

The Playa Dialogue

“I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream”

Our first face-to-face dialogue begins with the sounds, colors and sensations of our setting: cobalt blue Mexican ceramic cappuccino cups clinking their saucers, chairs sliding on clay floor tiles, tropical birds in the tangle of rainforest just outside our meeting place, perspiration and the relief of cooling temperatures. All around me, casual conversation, coughing—is that Geavonna? She has been translating so continuously; her voice sounds strained.

We are in one of the only air-conditioned palapas here that is not a guest room. Does it have a window, I can’t remember. It is small, narrow, rectangular with white ceiling and walls inside, like a Mennonite church, plain. I bring in hurricane candles and potted tropical plants ahead of time. The group forms a circle of sorts. It is early evening and the sun is quickly setting outside our room. By 8 o’clock it will be totally dark.

I am remembering a mix of feelings—nervous, so nervous, numb, uncertain. Am I ready? Should I check the recording equipment again? To my left sits Emelie, then Aiden, Abigail, and Olaf; Jillian next, and beside her, Geavonna, then Preciosa, Danica, Seferino, Pasha, Abelinda and Olivia. Anaclaudia cannot be with us this evening but will join us for the journal writing part of the project.
We are late to begin, having stopped for cappuccinos on the way over to our meeting room. What was I thinking—our hotel café is not a coffee chain; it is better, smaller, slower; it takes time to make a dozen cappuccinos.

It looks like Harlene is coming. She takes a seat between Emelie and I and offers to take notes. Smiling, we exchange words about my surprise at her presence, and her surprise at my surprise? Are we momentarily caught in our respective assumptions? I feel honored to have her with us. It is wonderful that she is here. The others will feel the same.

The group seems relaxed and cordial. I wonder if they feel reluctant, uncertain of what will happen next. We are very aware of the equipment in the room, me especially. My father sent the pzm microphone from British Columbia, Canada. I notice the square of carpet attached to its flat bottom, a scrap from the basement of the home where I grew up. The pianos were down there. This was my mother’s space, also mine; I grew up on this carpet. This same pzm recorded my biggest accomplishments as a child and as a young adult: Bach and Mozart concertos, Chopin etudes, Clementi sonatas, Debussy, Gershwin, Ponce. And now, this, a conversation, an improvisation instead of a composition.

How different this feels and how far from home I am. Trying to lighten the moment for everyone, I attempt a camouflage of the microphone with a plant. We laugh a little; it is a bold sign: for the record, it says.

We approach a start. I confirm the digital voice recorder is working, and Geavonna, one of the ISI faculty, asks whether we wish to have the door closed or open. Somehow in her immense workload she thoughtfully asks the hotel staff to bring refreshments in a short while. Looking back, I think of this detail again, appreciating how wonderful it is for communities, however transient, to eat and drink together.
I invite everyone to speak clearly. I want to trace each voice, I say. With at least seven distinct accents, plus my Canadian speech from the prairies, I feel confident that we will have no trouble identifying speakers. And then I say, “I want to say very little at the outset.” And we begin. And, it seems to me now, I say a lot.

Referring to the pamphlet introducing this research project, I introduce the focus of our collaborative inquiry: the collaborative therapist’s experience of therapy. I use a metaphor that I found attractive initially, the metaphor of inquiry as a ‘building site’ for knowledge. I say we will be “building a dialogue,” a dialogue that has been in play before this evening, first between my local colleagues and I, then, amazingly, with Harlene, and then with a circle of consultants as this project began to take shape.

I pause as I listen now, uncomfortable. The language I use here feels awkward: Are we not all consultants in this project? The people most invested in it—the therapists participating in our dialogues—they should have the greatest influence in the process and content of this collaborative effort to understand. And, likewise, the consultants are participants in the project, interacting with it, offering ideas and support.

Continuing, I speak of the “tools” we bring to this site—the history of conversations with our clients, our keen listening ears, our unique styles, our partnerships with our clients, our priorities, preferences, perceptions. I speak of my hopes that our site will be safe—a place where we can take chances and make mistakes. I point to ‘the familiar’ in this construction; we are using ‘elements’ central in our work: dialogue and reflection. And pushing our metaphor further, I make reference to the neighbourhood around our site—other processes of inquiry, the literature, conversations formal and informal that make up the living context around us. Perhaps I was
drawn to the creative, practical and relational aspects of the construction metaphor. Raised in a small, ethnic community, I have often seen people gather to build.

From my vantage point now, this building metaphor is nearly empty of meaning. As I wrote in one of my project blog journal notes, it seems “building” no longer fits for what it is that we are doing. Perhaps it never did. We are not building a ‘thing’ after all—a framework, a model, a theory, a construct, a system, a lens, a representation, or any other kind of “research product” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1031). Strangely, my intention is not to create an interpretation of our project dialogue, although perhaps others will view my work as interpretive. Neither is our dialogue a prelude to the construction of some thing more important; this entire dissertation is a dialogue, a ‘living’, continuously emerging event.

It is impossible to ever capture, present or even represent our dialogue in any complete and final way; it is always on its way to becoming something other than what it presently seems to be. We can never bring it all into some kind of complete, static, pictorial focus; we can only know it partially, historically, from our own movement within its continual unfolding over time. And so my experience of our inquiry dialogue is less like the construction of a building, and more to do with noticing and responding to movement already ‘in play’, incremental, everyday movement and major shifts, both. In this collective conversation together with my practitioner colleagues, I am fully present: I respond spontaneously, passionately, with my whole being.

As I return to this conversation I notice a second moment of discomfort. Imagining we would begin with the task of shaping the research question together, I offer only a vague question in the project pamphlet, an invitation to describe our ‘personal’ experience as collaborative practitioners. I leave room for the practitioners joining me to add to the question, reform it, and perhaps put a finer point on it. It is important to me that every participant has
opportunity to shape the question at the heart of our inquiry, not only the response to the
question. As the group conversation begins to move forward, I notice the participants seem
disinterested in talking about our research question; they seemed eager to begin responding to the
question as it is. This surprises me and it takes me some time to catch up with what seems to be
the group’s agenda.

Just now as I write these words, I notice something I have missed until this moment. As I
read the journal fragments sent to this project from participating therapists, I am astonished at
how continually collaborative therapists seem to articulate questions. Could it be that the
questioning I invite at the beginning of this project is present all throughout the therapists’
writing? I wonder now how these ‘situated’ questions have given direction and character to our
project inquiry. I also wonder how these questions relate to the central question I name as our
research question.

Returning to our dialogue, Emelie raises a question about the limits of our inquiry focus
since a vital part of her experience as a therapist includes teaching and supervisory work. My
response clarifies the particularity of my interest in coordinating this inquiry: I want to
understand collaborative therapist experience of therapy. I speak of the ‘gap’ in the literature I
perceive, suggesting much of the literature discussing practitioners’ experience of therapy
practice relates to topics of vicarious trauma, burn-out and depletion.

Then Aiden speaks, offering a counter perspective. He describes therapy practice as
cyclical and reflective, a process where ‘the personal’ is brought into ‘the professional’ and the
opposite too, “in the same way that the client’s experience of therapy involves so much of what
lies outside of therapy—” his voice trails off as other voices chime in, suggesting, each realm
informs the other. I voice agreement: Much of our experience of therapy as practitioners happens
outside of the ‘therapy hour’. Our professional practices are present in our personal lives, and the personal infuses therapy practice, just as, I presume, supervision, teaching, and therapy practices are inter-related activities. “Maybe,” I add, “we should do away with these distinctions at the outset.”

I remember loving the question that Abigail poses next: “Janice, I would love to hear why this is of interest to you, and how can we offer something to you—how can we contribute to your education and growth?” I respond by speaking of my sense that my practice adds to my life—to the person I am becoming. I say my interest in Harlene’s discussion of the mutual influence of collaborative therapy derives from my years of experience as a collaborative therapist working within publicly funded crisis, suicide and post-trauma counseling programs. I have continually sensed that the therapeutic conversational process was generative and transforming for me too, not only my clients, and yet, I had difficulty articulating this with any specificity; thus my passion for this project. Like “therapy,” this collaborative inquiry is a “journey into articulation.”

One of the most moving moments for me follows next as Abelinda tells of her development as a therapist. Geavonna translates: “I think it will be easier to describe what my collaborative approach is—I can do this contrasting what I used to do when I finished my studies at the university. At first I thought I had to plan every session and that I had to know what I would do with each person… but most important, I felt I had to have an answer to the questions and the doubts the other person had… When I left the university, I could have described myself as a Pepila therapist.”

Geavonna volunteers useful background information to help the group understand. She says, “This familiar Pepila person was a character within Mexican history within the war for
independence. In order to cross the field where they were having the war, he tied to himself a big stone on his shoulders and back in order to cross the field without being hurt.”

Abelinda continues, “I was a Pepila therapist, because I was carrying this stone. And that stone was everything I had to know in order to be a good therapist.” Pausing for Geavonna’s translation intermittently, Abelinda says more:

“Knowing postmodern ideas and a different way of being a therapist has allowed me to take that stone away from my back so I can feel light, free. And I can be myself—with my style—with my comfortable ways of being in therapy. I am using Harlene’s metaphor of being a host; if I can offer a space that is comfortable for me, it can probably be comfortable for the other. In that sense I have been able to connect with myself. Now I can stop worrying about everything a therapist has to know in order to be able to help somebody.” The group sits quietly, as if to say, “continue.”

“In the last month,” says Abelinda, “I have learned life has lots of ups and downs. And when I talk to people, we can talk about all these things that happen in life. And these complicated situations have a very different meaning when we can see them as things that happen in life. Each of us could be in the same kind of experiences. The therapy space is a space where we can speak about our lives, where we can share our experiences without worrying about someone being right and someone being wrong. Each client that I encounter, each new client, is an opportunity to learn new things about life. Each conversation is an opportunity to look at something in a different way than we did before.”

I thank Abelinda. As I return to her story again I notice it is not only the burden of knowledge that she no longer carries. She is also released from the pressure to judge—in professional terms—to evaluate, assess, critique, measure. She speaks of the freedom of working
beyond the relentless search for answers and solutions. And she speaks of the freedom she finds in the assumption that difficulties are part of life, not aberrations outside ‘the umbrella’ of life. How interesting the way she likens “knowledge” to a cold and heavy stone she once carried on her body, constraining her comfort and mobility in her work. The stone weighs down on the body. It is always present between practitioner and client. The Pepila therapist is partly hidden by the knowledge that is there to offer protection. The burden of knowledge changes movement, setting limits on what is possible. Provocatively she imagines that her present comfort as a therapist contributes to the comfort her clients, her “guests.”

Here I am reminded of Mexican artist Jose Clemente Orozco’s massive fresco entitled *Gods of the Modern World* portraying a skeleton giving birth to an endless stream of grey stone-like books while a line-up of professor skeletons in formal academic dress, stands by. Dan Wulff, family therapy and social work professor and practitioner, a part of the conversational circle surrounding this project, kindly introduced me to this work with the presentation of a miniature print of it, postcard size. It reminds me how knowledge, even a ‘dead’, dispassionate, retrospective knowledge, can continue to oppress.

Drinks arrive. We pause to thank our kind hosts, the employees of the small Las Palapas hotel where we are staying.

Olaf voices a question, attempting to coordinate my interest in “fleshing out” the research question with the group’s seeming interest in moving on in response to the one already articulated in the project pamphlet.

“You are inviting us to generate questions?” he asks. I agree, attempting to clarify further. “I guess I reacted the same way as Abelinda,” he confesses.
“I read this nice invitation [holds up the project pamphlet I handed out earlier] and I have been strolling around the beach thinking of what is my experience of being a psychotherapist from a collaborative perspective. And I think you shared with us, Abelinda, interesting things. So I have an idea,” Olaf ventures, gently laughing with his words.

Olaf would like us to continue, following after what Abelinda has begun. I sense the group feels similarly. No one wants to shape the question itself; all seem eager to respond to it as it is. My important invitation, declined! I then let go of the idea of creating the research question together. I suggest we continue with what Abelinda has already begun.

Abigail tells us that Abelinda’s story reminds her of her experience, and then, checking, Abigail asks whether this is a conversation or a “round the table exchange?” I say it is a conversation and I am pleased to hear her make this distinction. We can let the conversation unfold spontaneously instead of monitoring our ‘turn-taking’. Others voice support.

Olivia jumps in. “Well,” she says, “I did not spend two hours on the beach reflecting on my experience [as a therapist].” The groups laughs along with her. “I don’t even know if I should say this or not, but I am wondering, how do we define being a collaborative therapist? What exactly might it mean? I have a hard time labeling it. Is it in the doing or being?” She pauses for a few moments. “I really appreciate what Abelinda has said. I admire her—”

I smile now at the combination of “exactly” and “might” within the same phrase; one word closing in on meaning, and the other word, “might,” as open as prairie sky. And I think, that is about as definitive as we collaborative practitioners get: “exactly might” meanings. But, how interesting, her question: Is the essence of this approach in the doing or the being?

Olivia and Abigail also voice appreciation for Abelinda’s Pepila story. Olaf builds on it. Referring to stories of ‘gaining hope and freedom’ reportedly told by collaborative therapy
clients, Olaf says, “And I must say that is one part of what has also happened to me. I have
gained more hope and freedom.” Olaf, like Abelinda, speaks more specifically about this
freedom: “I think my overall idea that I try to implement, is, how do I create the space for
dialogue? How can I contribute to creating the space for dialogue—no matter what kind of
symptom or problem?” Olaf offers an example of how he collaborates with clients in practical
decision-making, determining together, “… when should we meet, with whom, where. I used to
think I know best and I would inform the patient but now it is something we discuss. Sometimes
it becomes a dilemma, but it is not my dilemma, it is our dilemma.”

“I want to pick up on a couple of words you [Abelinda] used that triggered different
reflections or musings,” says Abigail. She speaks of her training in the “American traditional
sense as a psychologist” and contrasts this as a “completely different way of talking or
organizing” herself. Abigail describes how her collaborative therapy practices fit with “who she
is,” as a person who has always been curious, but also she says it fits with her sense of herself
spiritually and ethically. She says, “I feel there is definitely something special that is created in
the therapy context and it is also playful and very alive.”

Danica returns to Olivia’s earlier question about collaboration with clients. Looking back
on her career, she notes she has been through many different approaches. Like Olaf, she also
began with a psychoanalytic approach and then moved through several, including family therapy,
but she says emphatically, “Each approach claimed to be collaborative!” And when she looks
back at the way she used to work, she says, “I thought I was collaborating actually. I was
listening….”

Danica continues, “I think the client and therapist have more responsibility actually in
this way of working because you do not have a model to take responsibility for what you are
doing—you have to take more responsibility yourself. And also the client must take more responsibility; the client must think about what is needed.”

I voice agreement.

Danica asks, “Should we explain the difference or do we have another word for it—so many claim to be collaborative.” She again notes a distinction in her own history of practice: “…we thought we were listening. But, in the end, we made the decisions about what would happen. And that made a big difference. We’d have a discussion, but it is [already] decided.”

Olaf suggests, “and the difference for you is, you have to take more responsibility.”

“Yes,” says Danica, “that’s one difference…. ”

Abigail imagines another difference in response to Danica: “One unique part of this collaborative practice as I understand it and try to practice it—and that is—the focus on the words as representing, but not completely there—so there is always a step further in understanding.”

Yes, understanding is always open-ended in a dialogue. Abigail suggests one distinctive of the approaches called “postmodern, collaborative” is the thoughtfulness and reflectivity of practitioners. I am uncertain about this idea. Perhaps we tread more carefully when we are working out understandings collaboratively together with people, rather than passing on “already made” knowledges. On the other hand, I used to devote much thought to technique-driven, pre-sequenced ways of being in therapy. I tried desperately to acquire and apply many different lines of questioning: this also took thoughtfulness and reflection.

I also speak about the multiple meanings of “collaborative” in the therapy profession. I share a story from several months ago. At one point a colleague in my workplace, attempting to differentiate his style of collaboration from ‘mine’, said, “what you do is crazy.” I think for
practitioners used to conducting interviews, conversations appear to be ‘out of control’. Possibly they are: No one is steering them. Doesn’t the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer suggest we “fall into” conversation? Yet, as I reflect further now, conversations are not “free falls” without constraints. Each conversation seems to develop its own particular limits and obligations.

Aiden joins the effort to describe “collaborative.” He says, “Maybe one unique part of this style of collaborative work is the postmodern aspect, which has to do with the question of what to do with knowledge. For me, “not knowing” is about not assuming you know what another person’s experience is, but also how you hold your own knowledge. One of my passions is my connection with Buddhism – you deal with it [knowledge] tentatively and provisionally rather than in a realist and absolutist and modernist [way].”

Olaf requests clarification.

Aiden begins to offer an example: “… so I use my expert knowledge if I think my client is at risk of a drug overdose, but if he’s talking about whether he should use drugs or not use drugs, I tend to ask about his point of view. Its kind of pragmatic.”

I wonder, “A postmodern collaboration has some distinctives?”

And Aiden responds, “Very much so. It involves a critique. An irreverence to scientific knowledge.”

Silence now, interrupted by a bird making a broken, percussive call. Paper pages rustle.

Emelie speaks next: “I was thinking; one difficulty I have is that this way of working, being more of a philosophical stance—is so much a part of me, that its very hard to—when I try to describe it, it is illusive, it goes away. Only when something happens when there really is the question that makes a fork, or whatever you would call it, the difference becomes visible.”
We sit with Emelie’s words for a few quiet moments.

Aiden says, “Another part of my experience of doing this work is the shared experience of the rock going off my back in terms of what I need to know before I start, but also in terms of what I need to steer it towards in the future. There is not the need to resolve contradictions to end up at a particular place. And this involves hope and freedom, certainly hope. And trust in people’s ability to do their own work.”

Abigail describes an image that comes to her mind: walking on the beach, an activity we are all enjoying in these days. She speaks of walking too quickly at times, too far ahead of her client. She speaks of the indescribability of these walks. “How can you describe? Once the moment is gone, how do you put it into words? Nor do you want to. It almost takes away from it.”

Turning to her, I ask, “So there are some aspects of our experience that we will find are unspeakable?”

Geavonna replies with passion, “I think that is very dangerous. (pause) And the reason why I think that it is very dangerous, is… I’m having a hard time articulating it—this inability to describe something—I don’t think it should be that difficult to describe. (pause) And I would like to stay with this “unspeakable”—let’s go back to Olivia’s question of ‘how do I describe what I do’. It’s not a mystery—I don’t think what we do is a mystery—and that’s why I think your project is so valuable.” (pause)

Geavonna, an educator and a practitioner, like others in our group, suggests, “we must be able to explain it in a way that people can understand it and learn it. Otherwise,” she says, “My sense of this conversation is that we are just playing around things that in some ways we are afraid to touch. I don’t think it should be that difficult. I don’t exactly know how to say it.”
I am drawn again to these words, “… my sense of this conversation is that we are just playing around things that in some ways we are afraid to touch.” I wonder, how would we know we are touching what it is we are entering, rather than talking about it and around it and alongside it from some safe distance? “Afraid to touch” is a powerful cluster of words for me. Afraid to touch and feel? Is it Geavonna’s sense that we are missing something more important in our conversation this evening? Is tonight’s process too inefficient for some of us? Does it seem to some that we are sidestepping something we could instead be plunging into? Is it alright to take time in feeling our way forward, to stumble a little, just as we do in practice, and to doubt out loud that the central task in this project is possible or desirable?

Seferino speaks. He says, in his beautiful English, “I have been thinking about something that say Tom Andersen in Mexico City. And he say that there is some kind of things that you cannot describe. You can say some metaphor that can describe. We can only imagine how it feels for the other person to have that experience.” Seferino is speaking of Norwegian psychiatrist Tom Andersen’s mention of the usefulness of metaphor at such times when direct description seems difficult. Seferino’s comments seem to suggest we are not in a position to evaluate another person’s personal narrative. “We can only imagine how it feels.” I experience Seferino’s comments as opening space for a multiplicity of descriptions in this project.

I pause now in my listening, turning to the *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975/2004) text I am reading, reminded of Gadamer’s discussion of translation. I understand Gadamer to be saying we need translation when we do not understand. Moving phenomena from the domain of lived experience into the domain of language can feel like a process of translation, as though we are moving from “not understanding” to “understanding.” This translation process can be
difficult, wrought with struggle. We all know what it is like to have a vague, “under-determined” sense of something; we know what it is to grapple with words.

Yet, I cannot imagine our difficulty translating experience to words is due to our lack of understanding. Is it more likely that there are aspects of our lived experience that are beyond words? Perhaps we mistake language for words, reducing language to our own linguistic habits. Influenced by David Abram (1996), I want to imagine the domain of language as utterly vast, beyond words, and beyond the non-human world.

Surely there are aspects of conversation that remain a mystery, aspects we can never seem to retrieve from ambiguity. Just as words can clarify, they can just as readily complicate, it seems. Words do not necessarily bring experience into focus; a single statement can raise a new series of questions. We error in assuming that ‘finding words’ to describe experience is a process of clarification or distillation. The words we use to describe our experiences of practice may inadvertently add to the mystery of our experience, the illusiveness of it, as Emelie says.

Continuing in our spoken dialogue, I remind the group of the initial invitation to this project. Remembering it I say, “I would like the project to have room for mystery, for contradiction and for complexity…..” I join Seferino in thinking of Tom Andersen and the usefulness of metaphor. And, recalling Wittgenstein’s (1953) words, I note how difficult it is to notice that which is “always before our eyes,” (p. 107) in our case, our everyday practice experience. I appreciate Geavonna’s encouragement to press beyond the sense that we cannot find the words to describe. After all, “the project is an invitation to find words,” I add. Geavonna responds, “That would be my caution. At least try, take it a step forward. If we stop short of providing the material to create meaning, which is words, then we can’t move. If you don’t have the words—the main material to express it—you’re going to have blank pages…..”
Abelinda’s next comments take our conversation away from abstraction into practical description of “what we do.” She says, “This conversation could be very complicated, in terms of the philosophical, or the precise way it should be, or it could be much more relaxed where we share our daily life experience of what we do in our work. I was thinking of what I could share in this conversation; suddenly it became very complicated… and I don’t know what happened for it to become so complicated. Is there something trans-cen-dental that I have to say (pause) or just description of what I do when I see someone to talk about life?”

Jillian follows immediately, “I have a question. I wonder if it begins to feel more complicated and divisive, in a way, when we move from a level of description to a level of explanation. And what would happen if we stayed in the conversation longer at the level of description as a kind of discipline, to really bring that piece out. My guess is we would find a different quality of conversation at the level of description than we would at the level of explanation.”

Abigail voices agreement. She then says she only offered her earlier comments as a “place to start… and I appreciate Geavonna’s frustration, very much,” she says, “I respect it. At the same time I felt judged, that maybe what I was describing was not good enough.”

Geavonna says softly, “That was not my intention.”

And Abigail replies, “I know that. I give you the benefit of the doubt. If the question was to inspire other therapists—we had not gotten to that point yet. It was a starter dough; by no means was what I said complete in any way.”

The group is quiet for a moment. Then Preciosa speaks slowly, “I was thinking that there are moments in life… (voice trails off) I would say that for me in this moment I am at a
Preciosa refers to several projects she is involved with at the university where she teaches, and also at a family therapy institute. She continues, “Now is something very new, a different moment in my life. I have new projects going on, and there are many times I am asking myself, what am I doing? Am I being collaborative? Am I being what? At this precise moment in my life, I am not feeling so sure, I am questioning myself. I am being more careful about what I say, and how I describe what I am doing. I find myself going through very different moments. At this moment, I hope it will be something rewarding, something I have a chance to learn from, but I feel very worried, very uncertain of where I am going.”

Preciosa, like Seferino, speaks of how differently we can describe experience, “depending on the moment”. Preciosa offers her view that this shared inquiry is “… a great opportunity to question myself, “What am I doing?”

Abelinda stays with Preciosa’s questions. She says, “for me, this question I am always asking myself. This question is part of my life, like a person. I am always asking if I am collaborative enough.”

“I don’t know quite how to say it,” says Olivia. “Are you saying you are always questioning yourself? And also do you think that comes from working as a collaborative therapist? That that’s something that we do? Because I am always questioning myself too and I don’t know where the questioning is coming from.”

Olivia continues, describing the “weird” experience of “feeling like I have a foundation when there is no foundation underneath me. It’s like it’s solid and not solid at the same time. And I don’t know how that fits in with the questioning ourselves part.”
Abelinda says her questioning reflects her life in Campeche, Mexico. She says, “Campeche is a small place and you can see all your clients everywhere. How can we feel comfortable, and how can they feel comfortable? … I am trying to be collaborative in different situations because we meet in different spaces.”

Seferino speaks of his initial attempts at collaboration as “very tiring.” He speaks of his attraction to collaboration, and his relentless deconstruction of so many practices in order to work collaboratively—including the categories of the DSM IV. The group laughs with Seferino at this story of Seferino’s zealiousness. He continues, “now I discover myself enjoying being there just being me, making things that I want to make, saying the things I want to say, I can share my thoughts—there are some crazy thoughts, maybe—and I can say everything. I feel more free. The metaphor that Abelinda used about this guy with the stone on his back makes sense for me too.”

It is silent for a few moments and I notice we are running short of time.

Danica asks what I really want—she is not feeling entirely sure. Also she picks up on Seferino’s comments about ethics, wondering how we approach “a client whose ideas are not in accordance with our own ethics.”

Olaf suggests that, in part, the answer to this question is present in our conversation together this evening: “There was some sort of difference between us and we managed not to decide what was right or wrong. And that is something that collaborative therapy is to me. Sometimes I have a hell of a problem to not say to the patient, ‘you are wrong’. I have to cope with and be able to see diversity. But on the same hand I am allowed to speak about this diversity and the different consequences that might be. I am not forbidden to speak.”
Then Olaf introduces a surprise idea: “I think the collaborative perspective allows me to be quite lazy.” Silence. Incredulous smiles break out.

I say, “Say more.”

Olaf’s next comments seem to resonate with Abelinda’s Pepila story. He says, “I mean, earlier I had to understand so lot what the patient and the family said. Now I don’t need to understand anything, I can just ask. I am allowed to ask everything, and I think that is wonderful. Unless I don’t humiliate the person, I can ask about exactly everything instead of thinking things out in my head because I ought to know.” And in times of ambivalence or doubt, Olaf says he does not need to approach a colleague or supervisor, he can always ask the person meeting with him directly. He offers examples of how he might gently do this as he picks up the thread Seferino highlighted moments ago. Olaf credits philosopher Martin Buber for his approach. He says that Buber claims, “… in a true dialogue, each person—including the therapist—has to contribute with himself or herself. And that has been a real challenge for me – to dare to contribute with myself.” Summing up then, Olaf adds, “So I am allowed to be lazy. But I must take responsibility for my doubts, my questions.”

Geavonna asks playfully, “So what makes you think that’s lazy?

Jillian adds to the question, “Do you mean lazy or relaxed?” I perceive an amusing tension in the room as we await Olaf’s reply.

Conceding, Olaf confesses, “I want to tease you a little.” Laughter from the group. Olaf and Geavonna spin out the rest of the humor in this moment and we all laugh with them.

“Relaxed, also, you might say,” says Olaf.

We are reaching the temporary conclusion of our talking.
Jillian reflects on some of the language we used, particularly in the beginning of our conversation. She voices caution: “This idea of “being” a collaborative therapist, as if it was an identity—I always find for myself that taking premises and practices that I am connected with at a particular point of time, and locating them as identity is particularly dangerous. I don’t like being labeled. Sometimes I think there are the collaborative or narrative police wherever I was, out to deliver a watch. So I am always in trouble when I think of it as an identity. When I think of it as “ways of being with people,” then I can be more relaxed and really describe my experiences.”

Jillian lets us know she wants to contribute something that is “… a little bit the opposite of what you were saying [referring to Abelinda]. On the one hand I have the experience of “the stone is gone” and on the other hand, I am often quite frightened—fearful, better than frightened. Because [she pauses] the path is not so clear. And I am working to find this path. I don’t know what path I’m on, sometimes for quite awhile. So living with that uncertainty—it has all these beautiful things that everyone says and I wouldn’t give it up for anything. And, I have to accept feeling a little bit frightened, fairly often.”

Jillian then notices something that Olaf said earlier in the conversation, something she finds “very helpful. You [meaning Olaf] said that you have one question that guided you, ‘How can I create a space where we can have a dialogue?’” Jillian notices the question is “how can I?” not “can I?” She appreciates the assumption that dialogue is possible. “So those [words] were helpful and grounding, and I’m still going to be frightened, uncertain.”

I voice appreciation for the timing of the question, “How can we create the space for dialogue” here at the beginning of this project?” I remind them of the diversity of ideas we bring
to this task, and suggest that we are not building a fragile glass house; there is room for
differences.

Pasha adds a comment. She says her way of being with others derives from her question,
“How do I like to be as a person?” and also from her experience of “not being heard” and not
“being asked the questions I wanted to hear.” She says, “When people are interested in knowing
you because of who you are and not because of who they think you should be—I would like to
offer people this kind of experience and this kind of space.”

Pasha then addresses the earlier question: “Where does all our questioning come from?”
We notice we have this in common as collaborative practitioners. Pasha answers, “The dilemmas
people bring to me make me ask these questions. I always had the question of how useful or not I
was for the others. Was I able to create a reflective space? And the only way I can get this
information is if we come back and they speak about what we are doing.”

Pasha provides a wonderful example of this. She describes a man she met with many
times; they talked and talked, and Pasha felt she “was doing nothing.” But when she asked him
to describe his experience he spoke of his experience with astonishing enthusiasm, he likened it
to a party! Yes, we are, at times, surprised to learn how different our descriptions of a single
event can be.

I sense we have arrived at a tentative end, my last chance to speak with the group about
this project. I remind everyone that I can learn of “postmodern collaborative” practices from
textbooks, but I am interested to hear what their practice is like for them. “What is it like for you
when you position yourself that way in your life, with the people you meet in therapy? Take us
with you,” I plead, “and be as personal as you dare to be.” I speak of my wish to trace their
distinct voices, just as we can trace the independent melodic lines in polyphonic music: “Each
line is sustainable on its own and has its own beauty but somehow those lines all work together to create a whole.”

From here the conversation begins to fade out. The group disperses gradually, making arrangements to meet for a late dinner along Playa del Carmen’s bustling Fifth Avenue. I race to my room to shower and check my recording, then call home.

“It went well,” I say. “It went very well.”
Chapter 2

Understanding Dialogue Dialogically

“Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all…. But ask yourself: In what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on’…” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 52).

“Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282).

How Shall We Go On?

With the commotion of our face-to-face dialogue behind us, we now find ourselves reassembled in a very different context—in the silence of this new chapter. Like my project colleagues, I am grappling with the question, “How shall we go on from here?” How shall we attempt to understand the dialogue that took place in Playa del Carmen and the nine written dialogues featured in chapter 7 of this text? Should we close them and begin to analyze them? Should we try to identify their thematic structures by coding, classifying and cataloguing participant words? Should we search for hidden meanings, distilling them in order to reveal a core essence? Shall we use the dialogues to produce a new research product, such as, a framework, a model, a theory, a representation, interpretation or system?

We pursue none of these possibilities within this project. Instead, we turn to an alternative emerging from the conversational “shared inquiry” of collaborative therapy practice (Anderson, 1997). Although practice usually ‘takes its cues’ from research, we find ourselves reversing the traditional direction of influence in this project; we invite practice to inform research, adopting our project members’ everyday methods of understanding dialogue (Rawls,
2006, p. 44) instead of applying systematic methods of understanding developed in other domains.

How do collaborative therapists understand dialogue? Throughout this chapter, I suggest that the collaborative therapist attempts to understand dialogue *dialogically*. Inviting the textual voices of scholars and practitioners influential within the collaborative community of practice, I characterize dialogical understanding as distinctly different from rational, cognitive understanding, private and intellectual, separate from bodily and relational influences, activity of “the individual mind.” I describe dialogical understanding as crucially dependent on spontaneous, embodied, mutual response (Shotter, 2006a, 2006b), as participatory and interactive, as practical, “witnessable,” (Rawls, 2006) spontaneous, open-ended, oriented to the present moment, the everyday and familiar, and oriented to novelty and particularity. In this chapter, I portray dialogical understanding as action, suggesting dialogical understanding comes only from sustained engagement within a particular developing dialogical situation. I draw attention to the collaborative therapist’s preference to understand “with” and “within” rather than “about” (Shotter, 2005b). This chapter describes the dialogical understandings of the collaborative therapist as inherently transforming, infused with uncertainty, as interpenetrative, and as ‘event that happens’ beyond planning and intention. As a fellow collaborative practitioner and as the primary author of this project, I feel strongly compelled to use methods of understanding ‘indigenous’ to the collective of practitioners joining together in this inquiry (Rawls, 2006, p. 44): We must attempt to understand the dialogues in our project dialogically.
What is Dialogue?

Before we begin our exploration of the collaborative therapist’s dialogical ways of understanding, we turn first to look further into the word dialogue itself—its history, meanings and multiple uses within this shared inquiry project. The word “dialogue” does not stand for any one particular thing. Social Constructionism points to the “disjunction between word and world” (Gergen, 1994, p. 31). As sociologist John Heritage (1984) writes, “… human descriptive resources are undoubtedly approximate. Rather than standing in straightforward correspondence with states of affairs, they seem on the contrary to locate fields of possibilities” (p. 147). Bakhtin (1981) similarly writes of the relational history of a single word, suggesting, “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life…” (p. 293). It seems dialogue, a word in use since antiquity, is no exception to Bakhtin’s claim. Philosophy professor Dimitri Nikulin (2006) lists persons associated with the word throughout time: Zeno of Elea, Alexamenus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Schleiermacher, and more recently, Buber, Jacques’, Feyerabend, Bohm, Levinas, Blanchot, Hosde Maistre, Taylor, and Bakhtin (pp. 1-37). Nikulin’s listing does not include women’s constructions of dialogue, nor does his discussion of dialogue “in the past and extant tradition” (p. 1-37) acknowledge dialogue as the pragmatic everyday ‘language’ of the populace. Anderson (2003a) reminds us of North American First Nations cultures’ longstanding dialogic traditions such as Talking Circles, however dialogic practice across time and culture is often construed as ‘not public’: “We like being together sitting and talking” says Nisa, a !Kung woman speaking of her lover in anthropologist Marjorie Shostak’s (1981) classic account of the !Kung tribe from Africa’s Kalahari desert (p. 364).

The parameters of this project do not permit us to formulate a comprehensive and complete definition of dialogue across time and culture, but we would not opt to even if we
could. Wittgenstein (1953) writes, “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that” (p. 93). Establishing a fixed definition of dialogue separate from the circumstances of talk surrounding the word is undesirable and unnecessary in this project. Bakhtin, (1986) describes ‘dialogue’ as unfinalizable, unbound, and resistant to closure and systematization: “There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context” (p. 170). Bakhtin scholar Michael Holquist (2002) suggests, “Dialogism is a phenomenon that is still very much an open event. Any attempt to be “comprehensive” or “authoritative” would be misguided” (p. xi). Rather than constructing a single definition of dialogue, I discuss four uses of the word dialogue within this dissertation: dialogue as conversation; dialogue as speech genre; dialogue as joint action (Shotter, 1993a, pp. 38-40, 1993b, pp. 45-48, 2006, pp. 32-34, 2006a, pp. 29-42); and dialogue as philosophy of life.

1. Dialogue as conversation.

I use the word dialogue interchangeably with conversation—people talking with one another. We speak, at times, of “inner” dialogue, (Andersen, 1995, pp. 32-33) suggesting it is possible to be in conversation with one’s ‘self’. Anderson (1981), one of the first to speak of psychotherapy practice as dialogue, describes her use of the word as follows:

By dialogue, I mean a dynamic generative kind of conversation in which there is room for all voices, in which each person is wholly present, and in which there is a two-way exchange and crisscrossing of ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings…. Transformation occurs in and through dialogue, and intrinsically, relationships transform” (p. 65).

Persons meeting one another in dialogue open themselves to the influence of their conversational partners. Openness, participation, and response, rather than consensus or agreement, are crucial factors in each dialogical situation.
I do not differentiate between “generative” dialogue and “transformative” dialogue implying a sort of ‘generic’ or ‘less than’ dialogue, just as I do not construe dialogue as an elite strain of conversation. The dialogue that happens in bars, coffee shops, living rooms and neighborhoods is equally as important to me as the dialogue involving academics and practitioners. I resonate with Anderson’s (1997) view that although some dialogues appear to be more constructive than others, dialogue is inherently generative and transforming (p. 100). We cannot predict or measure the usefulness of a dialogue; sometimes it reaches a point of fruition long after the last word was spoken.

2. Dialogue as speech genre.

This project also uses the term dialogue to refer to a particular speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986). Dialogue is often contrasted with “monologue”—a way of speaking which does not take into account the presence of an other, although dialogic practitioner, Jaakko Seikkula (2006) distinguishes between monological dialogue and dialogical dialogue, affirming Bakhtin’s (1986) claim that even monologue ‘depends’ on response to others or otherness (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006, pp. 102-103). Dialogue can also be compared and contrasted with other genres such as lecture, report, narrative, debate or interview.

I am particularly attentive to differences between interview and dialogue genres in counseling practice and in qualitative social inquiry. Research professor of linguistics, Roger Shuy (2003) contrasts dialogue with “interview” suggesting conversation “is not a series of questions and answers” (p. 179). He writes of the ‘feel’ of symmetry characterizing everyday conversation, claiming each participant in a dialogue anticipates “… the freedom to introduce topics, change the subject, interrupt, and otherwise speak in the way they do in most of their everyday conversations” (p. 179). Describing interview as an easily recognizable mode of talking
for most people, he cautions “Most people spend very little of their talking lives being interviewed…” (p. 179). Shuy is critical of what he calls an “unequal distribution of interactive power” (p. 180) in interview genres: “When one person is the designated question asker, the power of the interaction clearly falls to that person. The respondent is thus placed in a subordinate relationship to the questioner” (p. 180). By contrast, Shuy describes conversation as “mutually interactive” (p. 180).

Likewise, Katz and Shotter (2004b) contrast conversation with debate and theory-driven inquiry, speaking of the “flow” characterizing dialogue as participants hold themselves “open to being responsive to the otherness of the other… (p. 78). While it can be helpful to contrast dialogue with other ways of communicating, I remain mindful of the claim that no speech genre is “pure,” and further, criteria to evaluate a manner of speaking is far from universal or concrete. Dialogue is not a thing that can be readily contrasted with other things.

3. Dialogue as “joint action.”

When we communicate with one another we cannot simply act individually as we please; we “… act jointly as a collective-we” (Shotter, 2006a, p. 29); we inter-act. Our conversational expressions and responses do not stand alone as outcomes of our own independent efforts or intentions, separate from outside influence. Shotter (2006a) writes of the mutual influence inherent in joint action as follows:

Something special happens when one living being acts in the presence of another—for, by its very nature as a living being, the second being cannot help respond to the activities of the first. But the first did not just act out of nowhere either; the first acted in response to events in its surroundings too. Thus at work in the world of living beings, is a
continuous flow of spontaneously responsive activity within which all such beings are embedded (p. 29).

Shotter (2006a) characterizes conversation as “joint action,” “a continuous flow of spontaneously responsive activity…” (p. 29) within which all living beings exist. Joint action occurs when we meet and begin to interact with one another in mutually responsive ways. As we do so, we “… act just as much ‘into’ the opportunities and invitations or ‘against’ the barriers and restrictions they offer or afford us, as ‘out of’ any plans or desires of our own (Shotter, 1993b, p. 47).

When we respond spontaneously to each other’s utterances in the ‘back and forth’ interchange of dialogue, we inadvertently create a third reality—a “developed and developing situation” (Shotter, 1993b, p. 5). We “act into” and “out of” (Shotter, 1995, p. 62) this emerging situation, according to what it seems to ‘call for’, “… and in the manner called for” (Anderson, 2007c, p. 52). This third ‘other’ seemingly makes its own demands and requirements, opens up possibilities, and imposes constraints. We often sense that the conversation has taken on a life of its own, to the point where it is difficult to ascertain what came from whom. For Gadamer (2004) it is more correct to say it is the conversation, or conversational situation, that leads its participants, rather than the persons in conversation:

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it…. The partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation…. A conversation has a spirit of its own… (p. 385).
Participants in a developing conversation act with intention as they aim to “fit” their utterances into particular conversational sequences. Our words reflect ‘back’ to what was just said, and must also move the conversation forward in anticipation of what might next happen (Rawls, 2006, p. 34; Shotter, 1993b, Strong, 2006, p. 11). And yet, Shotter (2006a) describes the consequences of joint action as beyond our intentions, as ‘over and above’ intention (p. 33). Just as the unfolding dialogue itself shapes our participation within it, the influence of joint action spills beyond the parameters of any particular conversation, as it changes us in our ways of being in the world. Attitudes, identities, desires, priorities, and relationships shift as an unintended result of our dialogic engagement with each other. Such “unintended consequences” are crucial features of the joint action characterizing dialogue. Again, I find Gadamer’s (1975/2004) writing resonant with the concept of joint action. In his view, the transforming influence of a successful conversation reaches beyond the conversation itself:

… in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (p. 371).

In Bakhtin’s (1984b) dialogic world, the communion produced through the interaction of two living beings is not based on consensus, nor the collapsing of one being into the other, but rather such a communion consists of a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses…” (p. 6), an intertwining but not a mergence (Shotter, 2004).

Shotter (1993b) points to the challenge of describing joint action, claiming it is inherently diffuse and under-determined, open to the formative influence of those acting jointly (p. 47).
Using the metaphors of “event” and “action,” Shotter (2006a) describes joint action as a unique “zone” between “action”—that which we do—and “event”—that which seems to just ‘happen to us’ beyond our own control (p. 32). In other words, joint action is somewhat like ‘activity we do’—“a spontaneous, unselfconscious, unknowing (although not unknowledgeable) kind of activity” (Shotter, 1993b, p. 47)—and somewhat like ‘event that happens to us’, one that can not be planned in advance nor ‘driven’ by the application of theory or methodology.

Joint action, as I see it, speaks to the profound intimacy inherent in dialogical interaction. The turns we take in a generative conversation never really belong to one speaker; each one is shared as participants act collectively and responsively in each interactive moment. My conversational partner is present in my expressions, just as my being impinges on the expressions of my partner. But the effects of this interaction cannot be neatly contained within the immediate dialogue. It is not only our speaking and listening that is influenced by the joint action inherent in conversation; We take in the ‘other’ and otherness we encounter in dialogic interchange—into our very being, not only into our words. And in doing so, we cannot remain the same. Again I think of Gadamer’s (1975/2004) words; when we meet one another and interact with one another in conversation, we find ourselves “… transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (p. 371).

4. Dialogue as philosophy of life.

We have discussed dialogue as conversation, speech genre, and joint action, but we also speak of dialogue as a philosophy, not only of language, but also of life (Anderson, 2007, p. 43). Bakhtin’s (1984b) famous quote, “To live means to participate in dialogue…” p. 293), portrays life as an inescapable, continuous invitation to engage with others and otherness. Similarly, Nikulin (2006) proclaims, “To be is to be in dialogue” (p. 253) within a world where, as Holquist
(2002) writes, “… I can never have my own way completely, and therefore I find myself plunged into constant interaction with others—and with myself…” (pp. 38-39). As living beings, we continually encounter and interact with others and with otherness; we are in continual dialogue with our world. Our characterization of dialogue develops further as we now move on to explore what I am calling the collaborative therapist’s dialogical ways of understanding dialogue.

**Dialogic Understanding**

Heirs of Cartesian rationalism and the West’s enthrallment with individualism, (Rawls, 2006, p. 43; Tarnas, 1991, pp. 248-323) we readily construe “understanding” as an individual, exclusively cognitive achievement, a personal state of enlightenment. Bakhtin, among others, challenges this inheritance. Parting from Kant and other rationalists who assumed understanding “… to be the sole basis of knowledge, the realm of concepts in the mind” (Holquist, 2002, p. 4), Bakhtin (1986) speaks of understanding instead, as *dialogical*: ”Even understanding itself is dialogic” (p. 121). Elsewhere he writes, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 110). Understanding derives from participation in dialogue: “The person who understands (including the researcher himself) becomes a participant in the dialogue…. The observer has no position *outside* the observed world (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 125-126). Influenced by the Russian dialogists, Anderson (1997) similarly locates understanding within dialogue, not only within broader discourse, but also within particular dialogical contexts, suggesting understanding “… always depends on the dialogical event itself…. The *logic* of the dialogue often contains possibilities of meaning that emerge only in its context. This is the wonderment of dialogue” (p. 116-117).
Understanding as Active Responding

How is it possible to understand dialogically? In Bakhtin’s (1981) ‘dialogism’, understanding is intricately and crucially dependent on response; understanding and responding are simultaneous events, each making the other possible. As we respond to an other or otherness, we begin to understand the subject eliciting our response:

To some extent, primacy belongs to the response as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 232).

Bakhtin (1986) emphasizes “active” response. In the above quotation, response—itself “action,” furthers action; response “creates,” “prepares” and “activates” understanding. Bakhtin speaks to the pervasiveness of response throughout our communications, suggesting we speak with one another in continual anticipation of active response: “From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response” (p. 94).

Active response transforms the act of listening into an act of speech:

… when the listener perceives and understands the meaning… of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees…. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning—sometimes literally from the speaker’s first word. Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive…. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily
elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker… (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68).

Bakhtin (1986) contrasts ‘understanding as active response’ with ‘passive understanding’, which for him, is

… no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning. Passive understanding, in Bakhtin’s view “… contributes nothing new to the word under consideration, only mirroring it, seeking, at its most ambitious, merely the full reproduction of that which is already given…. Insofar as the speaker operates with such a passive understanding, nothing new can be introduced into his discourse… (p. 94).

Response need not be complete or elaborate. Bakhtin goes so far as to propose understanding is nothing more than the first “preparatory” part of a response: All real and integral understanding is actively responsive and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response…. And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding” (p. 69). Further, response need not be immediate; Bakhtin (1986) does not concern himself with the timing of the response. The response of the listener can develop over time or it can be offered initially:

Of course, an utterance is not always followed immediately by an articulated response. An actively responsive understanding of what is heard… can be direction realized in action… or it can remain, for the time being, a silent responsive understanding… but this is, so to speak, responsive understanding with delayed reaction. Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener (p. 91).
Bakhtin scholar Caryl Emerson (1997) suggests “lack of response” or “failure to respond” is also response. Emerson claims as Bakhtin matured he became more and more insistent that even the most “monological” utterances “want” response. She elaborates, … even language deliberately employed “monologically”—in ultimatums, categorical farewells, suicide notes, military commands—in fact wants to be answered; it wants to be taken as only the penultimate word, and the person who utters such bits of monologic speech is always hoping that the person who hears it will care enough (against all odds and linguistic cues) to answer back (p. 157).

Likewise, Anderson (2007a) notes that what might appear to be an absence of response from a therapist, is, nonetheless, response.

**Collaborative practice and the primacy of responding “into.”**

Like Bakhtin, collaborative therapists couple understanding dialogue with active response. Of the process of listening, Anderson (2007a) writes, “It is a participatory activity that requires responding to try to understand—being genuinely curious, asking questions to learn more about what is said and not what you think should be said” (p. 36). Anderson distinguishes between responses that “clarify and expand” (p. 36) and responses “… that seek details and facts to determine things like diagnoses and interventions or aim to guide the conversation in a particular direction” (p. 36). She clarifies the quality of response required in a dialogue as follows: “A good listener responds, as Shotter (1995) suggests, “into” the conversation; we act responsively “into” a situation, doing what ‘it’ calls for” (Anderson, 2007a, p. 37). Anderson (2007a) allows herself to respond in therapeutic dialogue, as she does when she listens to a story:

I have found it helpful to think of it as if the client begins to hand me a “story ball.” As they put the ball toward me, and while their hands are still on it, I gently place my hands
on it but I do not take it from them. I begin to participate with them in the storytelling, as
I slowly look at/listen to the aspect that they are showing me. I try to learn about and
understand their story by responding to them: I am curious, I pose questions, I make
comments and I gesture… (p. 47).

Acknowledging Seikkula and Andersen’s emphasis on “responding to try to understand”
(2007a, p. 36), Anderson (2007a) contrasts the responsive listening she values with “… listening
as it is historically discussed in the psychotherapy literature, where its primary role has been to
gain clinical information” (p. 36). “Mostly,” she claims, “such listening has been a passive task.
The active part has been the silent sorting out and making sense of what is heard through the
therapist’s interpretive ear” (p. 37). For Anderson (2007a), “The storytelling process in therapy is
far more complex than one person telling a story and another person simply listening to it. The
listener has to be actively involved, hearing and speaking as well” (p. 37). Resonant with
Anderson, therapist Peggy Penn (2007) writes, “Our “listening voices” are our primary form of
care…” (p. 105).

Therapist-authors Peter Rober, Glenn Larner and David Pare (2004) note Anderson and
Goolishian’s interest in the silent conversations that are part of practitioner response in therapy
dialogue. While listening, the therapist maintains a dialogical conversation with herself, one
filled with many truths, many ‘voices’, some differing from others, some “… prominent in the
forefront, others are faintly audible in the background…” (Rober et al, pp. 112-113). Therapist
Marilyn Frankfurt (1999) notes the way her practitioner colleagues Peggy Penn and Tom
Andersen “respond only with words and feelings that are prompted in them…” by what their
conversational participants are saying within the immediate conversation “at the moment…”
(Penn & Frankfurt, p. 177). She describes the way Andersen’s “responsive feelings” have “…

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the effect of opening the exchange of voices” and keeping him in “… a state of new learning, new understanding, and change…” a “ready space,” as she sees it (p. 177).

Christopher Kinman and Peter Finck similarly place active response centrally within their communally oriented practices with disenfranchised youth and children. Influenced by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s articulation of “awakening to the face” (as cited in Kinman & Finck, 2004, p. 243), Kinman describes “response-able” practice as

… something that is not about following rules; it is not about giving obedience to some predefined order, it isn’t even about gaining knowledge and acting on that knowledge. Responsibility is about how we act in a rhizome world…. Responsibility is a constantly shifting quest about how we respond to those people around us, or more precisely, that person facing us. It is about face. It is about how we look someone in the face. It is about whether we look someone in the face. And it is about how do we respond, together, in the context of that looking (Kinman & Finck, 2004, p. 242).

Like Kinman and Finck, I am drawn to narratives of practice offered by Canadian Public Health Nurse, Marjorie Warkentin (2004): “I like the word “responding,” she says. “When I go into a clinic I know I have tasks to do. But our work is really about responding. When I go into a home it is about responding…”(Kinman & Finck, 2004, p. 242). Practitioners Seikkula and Arnkil (2006) note, “the form and timing of the reply often becomes secondary” (p. 103) while at the same time suggesting, “replying becomes more important than asking questions” in conversation (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006, p. 102). They write poetically of understanding “striving” for response:

All understanding is striving for a response in which the new understanding is crystallized. The speaker is throughout in a mutual position with the interlocutors, and at
the moment they start to reply, the speaker becomes an active responder, who, with his own response, affects the one who talks…. In conversation with clients we can affect the situation by our responses. We have an essential impact on what type of space is left for the clients and how their responses can affect the joint forthcoming process of dialogue (Seikkula & Arnikil, 2006, p. 102).

I repeat Bakhtin’s (1986) claim, “For the word, (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response (p. 127). Nothing, not even misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or disagreement (Nikulin, 2006, pp. 220-224) is so damaging to dialogue as passive, non-participatory indifference. Perhaps then, we could agree conversely: the most important aspect of dialogue is response. To actively respond to an other or otherness, is to begin to understand.

**Responding as embodied.**

The active response of the collaborative therapist involves the whole person, not only the intellect, “… not a conceptual or cognitive knowledge but, rather, an embodied knowledge that comes only from engaging in practices in concerted co-presence with others (Rawls, 2006, p. 5). Sharing Bakhtin’s (1986) view that “every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances…” (p. 127), Shotter (2006a, 2006b) characterizes such responsivity as spontaneous, living, and bodily (2006 a, pp. 13-17, 2006b, p. 1). He rejects the Cartesian ideal of persons as rational, “individual thinkers-inquirers” (2006a, p. 2) in full “mastery and possession” (2006a, p. 2) of the physical world, unaffected by the body with its sensual and non-systematic ways of knowing. Philosopher David Abram (1996), influenced by French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, as is Shotter, articulates intricate connections between human understanding and the body’s sensing, suggesting the knowing we have come to think of as intellectual and utterly
separate from the body, is instead a continuation of bodily sensory perception. Abram (1996) speaks continually of direct, prereflective, synaesthetic, participatory and animistic perception (p. 130), “the body’s silent conversation with things” (p. 49).

The diversity of my sensory systems, and their spontaneous convergence in the things that I encounter, ensures this interpenetration or interweaving between my body and other bodies—this magical participation that permits me, at times, to feel what others feel. The gestures of another being, the rhythm of its voice, and the stiffness or bounce in its spine all gradually draw my senses into a unique relation with one another, into a coherent, if shifting, organization. And the more I linger with this other entity, the more coherent the relation becomes, and hence the more completely I find myself face-to-face with another intelligence, another center of experience (p. 127).

Andersen (2007) also speaks of the indivisibility of responding and bodily activity, stressing the importance of looking, hearing, and sensing (p. 166). For Andersen (1992), responding to others and otherness is not an abstract, cognitive process:

When life comes to me, it touches my skin, my eyes, my ears, the bulbs of my tongue, the nostrils of my nose. As I am open and sensitive to what I see, hear, feel, taste, and smell I can also notice ‘answers’ to those touches from myself… (p. 55).

For Andersen (1992), understanding is the “intuitive” action of the whole body, not only the intellect: “… my body, ‘from inside’, lets me know in various ways how it thinks about what the outside touches; what should be concentrated on and what not” (p. 55). When collaborative therapists spontaneously respond to the other and otherness that is part of every dialogic context, they are not present only as meaning-makers and thinkers: they participate as whole persons, with the fullness of their bodily abilities to sense and feel.
Understanding as Collaborative Social Process, not Private Mental Process

The collaborative therapist’s dialogical understanding requires collaboration between people engaged in an open-ended, calibrative, responsive-expressive interchange. “A kind of conversational alchemy, dialogue can be a good way of creating something beyond the contributions of individual speakers…. When speakers talk they usually do something with each others’ words, frames, metaphors, stories and discourses” (Strong, 2005, p. 22). Meaning, from this perspective, is relationally constructed, multi-voiced, negotiated, coordinated and developed together with others; it does not exist within the individual ‘minds’ of people. Like my collaborative practitioner colleagues (Levin, 2007, p. 115), Bakhtin (1984) never speaks of understanding as a solo achievement. To repeat, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (p. 110). Likewise, Wittgenstein (1953) advises,

Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all.—For that is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, “Now I know how to go on…” (p. 52).

Similarly for Gadamer (1975/2004), “understanding” is not privately personal but is at least a “three-way” process—one does not understand an other or otherness, without understanding together “with someone” (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004, p. xvi). In other words, “When two people understand each other” they always do so with respect to something” else (Weinsheimer & Marshal, 2004, p. xvi). Understanding, for Gadamer, depends “… on a common willingness of the participants in conversation to lend themselves to the emergence of something else, the Sache or subject matter which comes to presence and presentation in conversation” (Weinsheimer &
Marshal, 2004, p. xvi). Here we note again the on-going relational engagement implicit in understanding dialogically.

**Understanding as Practical Action**

I like to think of dialogical understanding as a ‘verb’: we “do” understanding in practical ways within the flow of our ordinary activities and relationships. Collaborative therapy is not a site for the application or development of social science theory, or any other abstract, decontextualized, ahistorical scheme, static, complete and closed to further development. Contrasting theory with philosophy, Anderson (2007a) notes, “The focus of theory is retrospective-after-the-fact. Philosophy, on the other hand, focuses on questions about ordinary everyday human life such as self, identity, relationships, mind, and knowledge” (p. 43). Morson and Emerson (1990) suggest along with Bakhtin, “The major philosophical challenge of our time, is not to appreciate the abstract value of time, space or morality, but to resist the temptations of the theoretical and the abstract” (p. 69). They observe,

Hostility to all forms of theoretism was one constant in Bakhtin’s long career. His many attacks on dialectics, his criticisms of the Saussurean view of language, and his attempts to outline a theory of psychology inimical to both Freud’s and Pavlov’s all derive from his concern for the eventness of the event. They reflect as well his belief in the unsystematicity of culture, the unfinalizability of people…. Bakhtin imagined himself as offering an alternative to the view that knowledge in the humanities must be modeled on the hard sciences and that culture, language, and the mind could ultimately be described as systems (p. 101).

embraces a wholly practical notion of understanding, one concerned with people’s ability to ‘move on’. Speaking of understanding as resonance and response, he writes, “… you could say too that insofar as people understand it, they resonate in harmony with it, respond to it” (p. 58). Wittgenstein’s acoustical metaphor, resonate, points to the movement-with in his use of the word understanding. For Wittgenstein (1953), understanding is shown in one’s ability to orient oneself and “go on” (p. 53). Understanding, for Wittgenstein, does not require solution, resolution, shared agreement, or complete or precise knowledge of an other or otherness. Just as we sense we are “understanding” a musical phrase while it is still ‘in play’ (p. 121), we typically navigate our interactions quite successfully with only beginning and partial understandings. Shotter (2006a) describes Wittgenstein’s notions of understanding as follows, stating he was … not necessarily concerned with us ‘understanding’ each other in the sense of us sharing any ‘ideas’, nor with us ‘communicating’ in the sense of sending each other any clear messages, nor with us discovering the ‘true’ nature of our surrounding circumstances, nor with us necessarily doing anything in particular, let along any single thing or principle that is basic to us being human. His primary concern, is with us being able to ‘go on’ with each other (1953, nos. 146-155), with us being able merely to make ‘followable’, ‘responsible’, or ‘answerable’ sense to each other – simply reacting or responding in ways that make it possible for us to continue our relationships in accountable ways is sufficient for him (p. 69).

Shotter (2006a) contends that shared understandings happen rarely in conversation, and only as the result of a negotiated back and forth process between participants (p. 10). Nikulin (2006) similarly claims dialogue is marked more by dissensus than consensus (p. 142). In this
view, then, understanding dialogically is not so much about “being on the same page” as it is about staying in responsive motion with one another, demonstrating ability to go on.

My own experience as a collaborative therapist underscores the practicality of understanding dialogically. I find people come to counselling programs within our community health centre when some dilemma or difficulty seems to immobilize them in some way. Typically I find the client and I do not “solve” problems like mathematicians puzzling over calculus equations. We never achieve a complete knowledge of situations; we do not develop a coherent explanation, a scientific theory, or a new model for truth. Instead it seems people stop meeting with me when their problem no longer feels “unworkable.” When they sense they are able to carry on with life in very practical ways, our ‘therapy’ dialogues are set aside and we move on to other conversations.

Understanding as Unfinalizable and Open-Ended

Dialogical understanding is never closed, static, nor complete. As we engage with the focus of our inquiry, it changes; we also change as the result of our involvement. To lend our attention is, in part, to participate in a continual process of creation that never reaches completion.

Complete understanding is never possible, primarily because through the interactive process of telling and retelling the experience, the teller’s story, including teller’s experiences and teller’s understandings, changes, as does the listener’s story…. In the process of trying to understand, something different is produced (Anderson, 1997, p. 116).

Anderson (1997) continues:
No communicative account—no word, no phrase, no sentence is complete, clear, and univocal. All communications carry unspoken meanings and possible new interpretations. All communicative actions are an infinite resource for new expression and meaning. The subject and content therefore, of all discourse… are open to evolutionary change in meaning (p. 118).

Bakhtin (1986) also describes dialogical understanding as open-ended: “The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to respond to the response, and so forth ad infinitum. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end (p. 127).

The unfinalizability of dialogical understanding is not to be mistaken for relativism. Morson and Emerson (1990) claim Bakhtin clearly rejected relativism with its binary assumptions:

- Either there is a system or there is nothing; either there are comprehensive closed structures or there is chaos; either there is in principle an all-encompassing explanatory system or there is total relativism… The assumption that these are the only alternatives has blinded critics to the possibility of radically different kinds of truth… (p. 233).

For Bakhtin (1984) “… both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)” (p. 69). To understand dialogue dialogically is to understand with all of our biases, preferences and foundations. Neutrality is impossible; we understand from specific positions and vantage points. At the same time, these foot holdings are “transitory,” fluid and porous, continually open to influence (Friedman, 1995, pp. 357-358; Shotter, 2006a, p. 106). Understanding in this way is always in motion and “transient,” a beginning or draft (Shotter, 2000). Wittgenstein (1980a)
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writes critically of our discomfort with incompleteness, and our subsequent urges to explain, thereby closing and making certain what he describes as inherently incomplete:

Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered color-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape.—Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it) (p. 52).

Understanding Dialogically: “Withness,” not “Aboutness” Understanding

To understand the dialogues comprising their practices dialogically, collaborative therapists must enter and participate within a particular social and communicative context. We place little emphasis on the accumulation of facts about our clients, believing we will come to grasp their circumstances as we interact with them. Collaborative therapists trust that the developing conversation between practitioner and client will abundantly provide what the practitioner needs to understand. Anderson (1997), influenced by Garfinkel and Shotter, speaks of the contextual nature of dialogic understanding, proposing, “… understanding in any conversation is always circumscribed by the context of the conversation…” (pp. 114-115). It takes place “…within the development of the conversation itself, and can only be known by those involved in it” (pp. 114-115). Shotter (2005b, 2006a, pp. 29-52, 2006b, pp.17-26) makes a crucial distinction between understanding with or within and understanding about or understanding that. Understanding dialogically requires participation from within an ongoing engagement with others and otherness; understanding dialogically is not possible for an uninvolved observer (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 60).
I offer two metaphors from my life as a way to sharpen the contrast between “withness” and “aboutness” understanding. The first, my neighbourhood, Wolseley. To learn about Wolseley, we could consult our city’s archives and read of the community’s development throughout the last century. We could learn of Wolseley’s many artists, poets, teachers, writers, environmental conservationists, its massive elm trees and ‘alternative’ commercial strip. We could view a map and note Wolseley’s close proximity to the city centre. We might notice its odd shape, set as it is between one of the city’s largest traffic thoroughfares and the winding Assiniboine River. We could come to know that Wolseley receives extended coverage in the local and sometimes national media every summer, and that the rapid “revitalization” of this neighbourhood has led to a costly process of gentrification still in progress.

But a “dialogical” “withness” or “within-ness” understanding of Wolseley is qualitatively different than knowledge about it. To understand my neighbourhood beyond “knowing that” or “knowing about” you must move into it and live within it for some time; you must experience Wolseley. If you know the community in this insider way, you might have sensed its eerie emptiness in July during the city’s internationally famed Folk Festival; you might know with your body the painful cold of a clear January night, and you might recognize the sight of wooden telephone posts with their layers of stapled papers announcing arts events, garage sales and lost pets. You might remember the scent and warm humidity of hot wax in the dilapidated Lipton Street Batik studio, the physical and financial challenge of old-home renovations, the beauty of boulevards-turned-to-gardens and the continual bustle, year-round, of foot and bicycle traffic, pet owners, walkers and runners, in ones, twos and dozens. To know Wolseley in this way is more than to know about Wolseley. A dialogical understanding emerges only within intimate inter-involvement with an other or otherness over time.
A second example of knowing from within comes to mind as I recall my years of student preparation for an Associateship in piano performance with the Conservatory of Music (University of Toronto). Playing music and feeling the unique character of each piece with our hands taught us to understand music intimately, in ways that are not possible when we listen only. We became part of the music, not only the human conduits for its delivery; in turn, the music seemed to become part of us, part of our musicianship, our technical and interpretive skill, our capacity to communicate without words, and part of who we were as persons in the world. While we were learning our piano pieces, we nearly lived within them, moving into practice rooms for extended periods... we ate at the piano, napped at the piano, wept, perspired, cursed at the piano. We learned to memorize music rapidly, freeing our eyes from paper scores—achievement young pianists refer to as “playing by heart.” The understanding we aspired to was intimate, tactile, intellectual, sensual, affective, creative, technical, and practical; it was also relational and continuously becoming. Ironically, we showed our understanding through the sounds we produced.

By contrast, music theory and history studies through the same conservatory seemed to invite a totally different understanding, an “aboutness” understanding. We learned—some more quickly than others—that passing the music history exams required nothing more than a by-rote memorization of a particular preparatory text. We learned to write phrases like, “the horns announce a return to the theme in the third movement, followed by....” describing with eloquent correctness sounds we had never heard, never known responsively in any way, never entered into, never touched nor felt. Similarly our theory courses taught us to approach music analytically, so that we could identify with precision the detailed tonal and harmonic structure of a musical score entirely apart from the production of a single sound.
The dialogical understanding of the collaborative therapist does not result from knowing about, however disciplined and comprehensive such study might be. It cannot be summed up and seen all at once in an abstract theory or model or static system. The collaborative therapist demonstrates understanding through inter-involvement with others and otherness, bit by bit, over time. Dialogical understanding is enacted only from an ‘in motion’, participatory stance, a living open-ended engagement “with” and “within.” I return to Bakhtin’s (1986) call for participatory understanding:

The person who understands (including the researcher himself) becomes a participant in the dialogue…. The observer has no position outside the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object. This pertains fully to entire utterances and relations among them. They cannot be understood from outside. Understanding itself enters as a dialogic element in the dialogic system and somehow changes its entire sense (p. 125-126).

Collaborative therapists pursue such a from-within understanding, not only within the shared inquiries emerging from conversations with their clients, but within every dimension of their lives. Their professional ways of understanding are congruent with their personal approaches to knowledge; each domain, ‘personal’ and ‘professional’, informs and influences (in-flowing) the other to the point where the border between both blurs (Anderson, 1997, 2007, p. 44). Dialogical understanding becomes a way of being and becoming regardless of whether one is engaged with people “personally” or “professionally.” Collaborative therapists share Bakhtin’s (1994b) vast dialogism, viewing all of life as inherently dialogic:

The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue, to
ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium (p. 293).

**Understanding Dialogically as ‘Not-Knowing’**


… not-knowing refers to a therapist’s position—an attitude and belief—that a therapist does not have access to privileged information, can never fully understand another person, always needs to be in a state of *being informed* by the other, and always needs to learn more about what has been said or may not have been said (p. 134).

Not-knowing is not about withholding what we think we know, nor is it a form of relativism, for relativism, as Morson and Emerson (1990) suggest, “precludes dialogue,” just as dogmatism makes dialogue impossible (p. 55). Not-knowing does not mean “anything goes” (Anderson, 2007d, p. 12). Anderson (1997) writes further, “knowing—the delusion of understanding or the security of methodology—decreases the possibility of seeing and increases our deafness to the unexpected, the unsaid, and the not-yet-said…” (p. 134). Anderson (1997) speaks of the importance of orienting to what we are “unaccustomed to” so that we will not miss, “… neither see nor hear, that which is different and unique” (p. 134). These statements resonate with Eero Riikonen’s (1999) claim: “Knowing already dissolves the need to look beyond averages or
categories. It is the prime source of non-participation in dialogue” (p. 141). Further, ‘not-knowing’, for Anderson (2005)

... is neither a stand-alone concept nor a technique. It is part of the ideological shift... and part of a larger view—a philosophy about the people we meet in therapy, our relationships and behaviors with them, and our roles as therapists. This philosophy informs a way of being that I call a philosophical stance-distinguished by several interdependent concepts (p. 503).

Social Work professors Allan Irving and Ken Moffatt (2002) seem to echo Anderson’s attitude to knowledge as they describe their preferred posture of ‘not-knowing’ in the classroom:

We argue for an approach to teaching that values permanent unresolve; proceeds by indirection, obliquity and unknowing; revels in scrambled, broken moments; and enjoys a recursive undecidability. The posture of the professor is one of ‘not-knowing’: a positionality that celebrates nonmethodical methods, abandoned meanings, insurgent, incomplete meanings, an “intoxicated midnight” in Nietzsche’s phrase.

For me, not-knowing is one of the most crucial aspects of the collaborative therapist’s ways of understanding dialogue. As a social work student I learned of the importance of knowing; the idea of ‘not-knowing’ was foreign to me. Social work education taught us to develop “formulations” as early in our practitioner-client encounters as possible. Formulations were typically professional narratives about our clients’ circumstances created with in-house professional terms, often oriented to incapacity and deficit. Formulations were assessment and treatment proposals that featured practitioners’ articulation of the presenting problem, practitioners’ explanations concerning the cause of the problem, and practitioners’ plans for intervention and solution. Under pressure to work efficiently, we frequently established
formulations prior to meeting with our clients, basing our ideas on patient charts, abstract social science theories and brief conversations with referring colleagues. Trained to know best for our clients, we worked hard to stay ahead of them in all matters pertaining to human well-being.

Over time I became increasingly uncomfortable with our professional ways of knowing in my work as a counsellor at a community health centre. I became aware of how much we do not know and can never fully know. I saw how quickly knowledge changes within the counselling profession, and how rapidly my own cherished beliefs and ideas were changing throughout time. As I became more aware of the fluidity and limitations of professional knowledge, I became increasingly curious about the collective knowledge and unique expertise of the people who come to meet with me. I did not want to be part of colonial practices that subjugate local knowledges to the grand truths proposed by social science. Anderson’s (1997) movement from expert knowing to not-knowing is similar to my own experience:

‘Not-knowing’ freed us from needing to be experts on how clients ought to live their lives, the right question to ask, and the best narrative. We did not have to be content-knowing experts. This freedom to not know, in turn, led to an expanded capacity for imagination and creativity (p. 64).

Adopting a stance of not-knowing allows me to join with my clients more meaningfully in the ambiguity and complexity of life. It allows me to wonder alongside my clients—to be curious and creative with them—to work towards understanding alongside them instead of positioning myself over them as though I have access to a supply of hidden and superior knowledge. Rather than diminishing my voice in the therapy context, it is my view that not-knowing allows me to use my voice more fully and more courageously, more responsively and more spontaneously. I do not have to take on a directive voice; I am not compelled to be a
passive conduit for professional knowledge. Instead, my voice sounds primarily in response to the voices joining me in each conversation.

**Understanding Dialogically as Reorientation**

*Orienting to the present moment.*

For the collaborative therapist, time—in particular, the present moment—is especially crucial to understanding dialogue (Malinen, 2004). Voloshinov (1929/1973) suggests, “To understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find a proper place for it in the corresponding context” (p. 102). Finding a proper place, or, orienting oneself to the expression of another, is simultaneous to the act of responding in Voloshinov’s view. “For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words” (p. 102). Understanding is a “present tense” activity; as we respond to the communicative efforts of another, written or spoken or non-verbal, “we are in process of understanding” (p. 102).

Understanding for the collaborative therapist is not an instant cognitive epiphany out of ‘no where’: We understand the dialogues comprising our practices within the back and forth rhythm of each particular dialogue situated within particular moments in time. Collaborative therapists privilege the unique understanding developing in each interactive moment over general knowledge formed prior to the practitioner-client encounter. Anderson (2004), drawing a parallel with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, speaks of her orientation to the present moment in a conversation with Tapio Malinen (2004), Finnish therapist, writer, therapist and consultant: “To be present in the moment where you are involved in this conversation in this room, and you are participating in this conversation and not the one you are bringing from outside” (p. 72).
For collaborative practitioners, understanding the utterance of a conversational partner requires the listener to “experience originally and grasp in immediacy the world of every day life” as it is played out in “the dimensions of the vivid present” (Rawls, 2006, p. 36), not as it is played out theoretically, remotely, or cognitively. Garfinkel (2006) describes “this vivid present” as profoundly social, comprised of real persons engaged with one another, “… a mutually constructed sequential order of interactional bits—an interactional time dimension that participants experience (p. 181). Both speaker and listener experience a “common vivid present” (p. 181) as both ‘vivid presents’ occur simultaneously. A new time dimension is therefore established…. Both can say later, “We experienced this occurrence together” (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004, p. xviii). This cannot be said of abstract, conceptual knowledge, articulated by no one in particular, with no one in particular, at no particular time.

Time also figures importantly in Gadamer’s (1975/2004) notions of understanding. Gadamer translators Weinsheimer and Marshall (2004) claim: “Much of Gadamer’s argument is directed to showing that understanding and the kind of “truth” that belongs to it has the character of an event, that is, something that belongs to the specific temporal nature of our human life” (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004, p. xvii). Instead of language as “… an object of scientific study…” Gadamer is thinking of language, they claim, “… as it inheres in the act of utterance and thus becomes an event, something historical” (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004, p. xvii). Understanding, for Gadamer, is inseparable from particular irreversible moments in time.

Daniel Stern (2004), psychotherapist, physician and author, writes extensively of time in psychotherapy and everyday life. Speaking of the expansiveness and agency of the present moment, he writes, “… the present moment can hold the past within its small grasp…. The past is only “alive” when on the stage of the present moment” (p. 218). In other words, “The past
plays a constant role in influencing what we experience from second to second…. The present moment and the past are each the parent and child of one another…” (p. 218). Relating this idea to therapeutic practice, Stern writes, “Perhaps what is most important therapeutically is that one begins to see how the experience of the present moment can rewrite the past” (p. 28). It can also ‘write’ the future (p. 220). Stern speaks of past, present and future, but his exploration of the duration, vitality and architecture of ‘the present moment’ is not fundamentally concerned with chronological, mathematical time, the linear quantity-time so crucial to Western “clock time” wherein each time segment is numerically exactly the same as the next, like beads on a string. Neither is his idea of “the present moment” an instant “now.” Rather, Stern, like the collaborative therapist, is oriented to a qualitative notion of time similar to the Greek kairos—a period “in which something happens,” something plays out, ‘spending itself’ like a musical phrase (p. 220). Stern writes of the spaciousness and unpredictable potential of the present moment emerging within the messiness and awkwardness of dialogic interchange. For example, as Shotter (2006a) suggests, the present interactive moment can irrevocably change the ‘status quo’ within a relationship (pp. 76-90). Shotter also speaks of the formative influence of ‘thinking and talking’ within the interactive moment. Rather than merely describing ‘reality’, speaking responsively within the present moment shapes a particular situation or circumstance (Anderson, 1997, p. 161).

Focusing attention within the present interactive moment takes discipline and focus. Anderson (1997), like Wittgenstein, cautions against understanding too quickly and speaks of ‘getting there’ “faster by going slower” (p. 161). She continues, “And I get where we choose… faster by walking side by side with the client rather than pushing from behind or pulling from the front” (p. 161). Andersen also advised a careful attentiveness to time in practice, as noted by
Zevallos and Chong (2007), “His approach is about patience, not forcing situations, waiting for people to respond in their own time” (Zevallos & Chong, 2007, p. 85). The dialogical understandings of collaborative practice are enacted “once off,” irreversibly, in time. To understand our dialogical partners in therapy we orient ourselves to the present interactive moment, allowing our interactions the “space” to wind and bend, to race or roam, and finally, if we are fortunate, to reach mutually sensed pause points before we must turn our attention elsewhere. Just as the dialogue of collaborative therapy ‘fills time’, so time fills understanding in collaborative therapy. I am appreciative of philosophy professor Thomas Baldwin’s (2004) description of understanding as ‘located’ within the possibilities and constraints of time:

> We see things from a point of view that is located in space and moves around within it, and equally the fact that things manifest themselves to us only in time, through a series of partial appearances that can be continued indefinitely (p. 5).

Dialogical understanding is neither abstract or timeless in the way that a theory or framework stands seemingly outside of time, but rather, dialogical understanding has a visceral “here and now” quality to it—not an instant “now,” but rather the “now” that is part of each unfolding, interactive present moment in time (Stern, 2004).

**Orienting to the everyday and the familiar.**

Collaborative therapists orient themselves to the pragmatic ‘ordinary’ languages and everyday understandings articulated by their clients. Rather than privileging professional discourse, collaborative practitioners want to honor the wisdom and resources of the client and the client’s relational and communal network. Collaborative therapists are especially wary of mental health deficiency-based vocabularies and classifications (Anderson, 2000, 2007c, p. 26; Gergen, Hoffman & Anderson, 1995; Strong & Pare, 2004a, pp. 6-11; Tomm, 1999). Anderson
(2007a) encounters ‘the familiar’ with new ways of seeing, subjecting the realm of ‘the everyday’ to scrutiny through a process of inquiry shared by practitioner and client. She writes, “A search for understanding is not to seek the undiscovered but to look at the familiar with scrutiny, with new eyes and ears, to see and hear it differently, to understand it differently, to articulate it differently” (p. 34). Wittgenstein’s (1953) investigations similarly orient us to ‘the ordinary’—that which is typically before us but is obscured from view in part, by familiarity and habit (p. 106). Wittgenstein’s notions of understanding do not require the discovery of something new or hidden: “since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us” (p. 43). Rather, he says, we wish to understand “something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand” (p. 36). “Something we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something we need to remind ourselves of” (p. 36).

Garfinkel (2006b) seems to express a similar view; he writes, “Much of the success of our research program will depend upon seeing things anew” (p. 101), an agenda differing from the search for “new things.”

At times I sense that people observing the dialogue between a collaborative practitioner and client from a position outside of it frequently fail to find anything remarkable occurring; the conversation seems ordinary, perhaps even mundane. Active participants within it, however, often report the opposite. Immersed in an irreversible, ‘first-time’ process of creation, participants cannot know ahead of time where the interchange is going, what it will require of them, what will come out of it, nor how it will transform them. Outsiders looking in on the conversation do not belong to it and cannot feel the risk and uncertainty that comes only with direct participation. Perhaps the extra-ordinary within an ordinary interchange is most tangible to
those positioned actively within it. Participants in a dialogue never encounter the familiar without also meeting an element of newness that is part of the creative act of conversation. In my collaborative practice, I find the extra-ordinary is always abundantly present in the ordinary, just as an element of novelty is present in every encounter with the familiar.

**Orienting to particularity and uniqueness.**

Spoken dialogue is comprised of both fixed and novel elements, suggests social linguist Deborah Tannen (1989). We have “prepatterned” ways of offering greetings, expressing intimacy, and voicing concern that repeat continuously throughout the course of our interactions with one another. When we say, “How are you?” our conversational participant will predictably choose their reply from a particular range of recognizable responses, depending on a variety of influencing factors; we do not expect to hear a highly original answer. “Fixed” elements, derived from various speech codes and conventions, help us coordinate our daily interactions expediently.

The understanding practiced by the collaborative therapist is oriented to novelty rather than patterns, categories or types—of people, problems, families, or relationships. The collaborative therapist does not set out to organize or categorize the client’s narrative. Instead of searching for regularity, the therapist is attentive to the uniqueness of the person presenting, their preferred ways of speaking with their unique nuances and intonations. Detail that matters to the client is also important to the collaborative therapist. I appreciate practitioner and educator David Pare’s description of the orientation of the collaborative practitioner:

Instead of viewing clients as one of the ‘class’ of persons identified by a particular population marker or presenting problem; we cherish their uniqueness. We orient to the surprises they bring, rather than turning to our bookshelves, to learn what their “type”
thinks, feels, and needs…. When we experience a person as a “type”… we are dulled to
the aliveness of our encounters with them (Strong & Pare, 2004a, p. 9).

Anderson suggests this orientation to particularity rather than “… diagnosis… or cross the board interventions…” (Malinen, 2004, p. 72) frees the collaborative practitioner to do “what the occasion calls for…” (p. 72). She adds,

You can invite their expertise and be able to do something together that I think is more fitting. If the person feels the sense of belonging and the sense of participation, then what they participate in creating will be more sustained (1990, p. 170).

Novelty is part of even the most routine communications. Morson and Emerson (1990) suggest even highly ritualized speech deviates subtly but importantly from code; even convention is infused with newness and creativity: “… an utterance or an action is never just the “product” of what is given,” it is not simply ‘fixed’ or formulaic. “It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable….,” says Bakhtin (as cited in Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 170). Distinguishing between what Bakhtin calls the “given” and the “created” in conversation, Bakhtin suggests it is the presence of the unique and unrepeatable that irrevocably changes the “fixed” as Tannen (1989, pp. 38-46) might say. “What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (Bakhtin as cited in Morson & Emerson, p. 170). It is the presence of uniqueness in every utterance that transforms “pattern” and “regularity,” for as Morson and Emerson (1990) note— influenced by Bakhtin’s colleague, Voloshinov, patterns of speaking “… exist only insofar as they are implemented by particular speakers. Crucially speakers never just instantiate a pattern, they modify it” (p. 162). Morson and Emerson (1990) also diminish the role of rule-following in understanding: “Rules exist, of course, but their domain is limited, and they must not be understood as potentially explaining everything” (p.
170). Shotter (1993a) articulates a similar view. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1986) work, Shotter’s discussion of the unique and unrepeatable in dialogue elevates the genuine creativity inherent in dialogue as a manifestation of “whatever it is that is ‘living’ in the communicative act” (p. 53).

… no matter how systematic the speech of each may be while speaking, when one has finished speaking and the other can respond, the bridging of that ‘gap’ is an opportunity for a completely unique, unrepeatable response, one that is ‘crafted’ or ‘tailored’ to fit the unique circumstances of its utterance. Indeed, it is on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects, that the life—whatever it is that is ‘living’ in the communicative act—is manifested (p. 53).

When we understand dialogue dialogically, we grasp the unique particularity within the utterance—“whatever it is that is ‘living’ in the communicative act” (p. 53). Perhaps we could say, it grasps us. The unrepeatable novelty within the speaker’s utterance touches and moves us when we understand dialogue dialogically. Specificity, as practitioner David Pare (2004) writes, “… may be our most precious resource. It’s the texture and tone of the particular that opens unforeseen possibilities (p. 10). Bakhtin (1986), like Strong & Pare (2004), laments that our efforts to understand habitually orient to “the repeatable”:

Recognizing and encountering the new and unfamiliar… should merge inseparably in the living act of understanding…. Quite frequently, methods of explanation and interpretation are reduced to this kind of disclosure of the repeatable, to recognition of the already familiar, and, if the new is grasped at all, it is only in an extremely impoverished and abstract form (pp. 142-143).

For Voloshinov (1929/1973), as for the collaborative therapist, it is not enough to recognize pattern or form, that which appears to be fixed or typical within the utterance of an other.
The task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity (p. 69).

Our clients speak specifically and personally about their lives, compelling us to meet them in the same intimate way of speaking, one in which the unique detail of their accounts matter.

**Understanding Dialogically as Transforming**

Pioneering family therapy historian, practitioner and author Lynn Hoffman (2007) takes us beyond our present characterization of understanding as she begins to describe the risk involved in moving away from modernist psychology into a very different kind of “withness” (pp. 63-80), one that is as communal and collective as it is intimate, withness that requires us to “… jump, like Alice, into the pool of tears with the other creatures (Hoffman, 2007, p. 66). For me, Hoffman’s *jumping-into-with* imagery points to a very special aspect of dialogical understanding: when we position ourselves “in” with an other, we cannot remain the same.

Steiner (1989) writes poetically of this mutually-influencing process of change, suggesting, “The ‘otherness’ which enters into us makes us other” (p. 188), so resonant with Merleau-Ponty’s claim (2004), “… I do not live just my own thought but that, in the exercise of speech, I become the one to whom I am listening” (p. 237). “Taking in” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 163) the utterance of an other not only transforms the topic and directions of our inquiries, but also changes us in our attitudes, actions, and relationships—in our ways of being in the world.

Bakhtin (1984) speaks of “creative understanding” as “live entering” (p. 299), understanding that recognizes “the other’s capacity for change” and provokes or invites the other to further growth (p. 299). Anderson (1997) similarly turns to ‘entering’ imagery as she describes dialogue
as mutually influencing—“in-flowing”—and mutually transforming (pp. 100-101; see also Anderson, 2007e, pp. 10-11). Glenn Larner (2004) writes of “being-in-the-other” as a premise of therapy dialogue:

Discourse in therapy begins with this pre-discursive welcoming or taking in of the other. The therapist knows and thinks with the person in a way that is ethically and dialogically responsive, more than empathy, this being-in-the-other defines what it is like to be human (Larner, Rober, & Strong, 2004, p. 19).

Here, “in” and “with” again combine to portray understanding dialogically as inter-involvement and inter-being. Speaking further of her “in-with” imagery for collaborative practice, Hoffman (2007) writes, “This situation is a great equalizer and carries some dangers. But it is the only source of information with the power to transform” (p. 66).

**Risk.**

If understanding dialogically presumes a process of mutually, transformative “in-flowing,” understanding is inherently risky. Anderson (1997) warns, “in my therapy room a therapist is not safe; is not safely ensconced in knowing. Being in a not-knowing position makes therapists vulnerable: they risk change, too” (p. 135). In other words, the risk of understanding dialogically is not only that we will “change our minds” or find ourselves compelled to alter our most treasured premises and practices; we take on a much greater risk when we adopt a stance “in” and “with” an other. For as Gadamer (1975/2004) says,

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (p. 371).
Gadamer writes further, “Understanding, like action, always remains a risk … Understanding is an adventure and, like any other adventure is dangerous…” (Gadamer as cited in Schwandt, 2000, p. 196).

Recently, I heard echoes of the transformative risk of ‘communion’ in the play, Copenhagen (Frayn, 2000) when it opened our local Prairie Theatre Exchange season. Set in 1914, German physicist Werner Heisenberg speaks of his Danish counterpart, Niels Bohr as … wandering about the city somewhere in the darkness, no one knows where. He’s here, he’s there, he’s everywhere and nowhere…. I’m a photon. A quantum of light. I’m dispatched into the darkness to find Bohr. And I succeed, because I manage to collide with him… But what’s happened? Look—he’s been slowed down, he’s been deflected! He’s no longer doing exactly what he was so maddeningly doing when I walked into him!

Bohr replies: But, Heisenberg, Heisenberg! You also have been deflected! If people can see what’s happened to you, to their piece of light, then they can work out what must have happened to me! The trouble is knowing what’s happened to you! (pp. 68-69).

In this fragment of the play, connection is in part, a process of finding, colliding, slowing and deflecting another being, a complex and unexplainable mystery. This is, as I see it, part of the risk of understanding others and otherness dialogically.

**Interpenetrative rather than interpretive?**

Perhaps then, we could characterize dialogical understanding as a process of interpenetration rather than a rational, cognitive process of interpretation. Philosopher Dmitri Nikulin (2006) diminishes the importance of interpretation and sense-making in dialogue in the following claim:
Furthermore, dialogue is not a mechanism whose primary purpose is to produce and originate meaning by means of negotiations, as for instance, Bohm takes it to be. A meaning, no doubt, can be established in the process of the unwrapping of a dialogue, although this is quite often unsuccessful…. Still, even if established, a meaning should not necessarily be one that is shared and accepted by all the interlocutors, whose relations are actually much more marked by dissensus, in which case the establishment of a meaning does not appear as the primary intention (pp. 141-142).

Hoffman (1998) similarly identifies with a growing movement away from analytical and interpretive practices. Describing instead a turn towards a more reflective, vulnerable, expressive, evocative, and “feelingful” practitioner-response, she writes the following:

Drawing on my own experience of the reflecting team, I was amazed by its ability to generate images. My colleagues and I found ourselves moving away from analyzing family dynamics or making interpretations. More and more these practices seemed to objectify people and to feel offensive. Instead, we expressed ourselves by using metaphors, legends, poetry, and stories—including our own. It seemed appropriate to share personal experiences that mirrored the difficulties of those who consulted with us. We also felt freer to show feelings… (p. 107).

Shotter (2006a) likewise perceives a movement away from an interpretive practitioner agenda towards more partial, transitional, and actively responsive understandings:

In the past, we have talked of our words as exerting their influence on us in terms of them as *shapes* or *forms* that can convey a particular *content* to us, by our being able to place them into an already existing framework or structure of some kind. We thus talked of *interpreting* their meaning or meanings. But if… shared understandings are achieved in
practice, step-by-step, by people testing and checking each other’s talk, by them
questioning and challenging it, reformulating and elaborating it… without relying on
making sense of each other’s talk by placing it within already determined frameworks, or
interpreting it according to already existing conventions—then something very different
from such a process of interpretation must be occurring (p. 15).

Perhaps that “something very different” has to do with the far-reaching influence of our
expressions. Of greater importance than interpreting meaning is the practical function of our
speaking, ‘what our utterances do’, what is happening when we talk with each other. Shotter
notes the power of our responsive expressions to help us navigate our communicative efforts, our
relationships, and our lives (Shotter, 2004). Like a compass, the words we utter help us sense
where we are in relation to the others around us, and where we might be going. Similarly, for
Goldberg (2006), the practice of writing about our lives helps us “penetrate” and shape our lives
(p. 7). Writing ‘wakes us up’ to that which is most important to us in our lives. Law (2004) and
others propose that the act of writing about reality produces reality. Beyond the articulation of
meaning, something of much greater influence happens to us when we meet others and otherness
through written interchange.

Seikkula and Arnikil (2006) articulate a similar movement beyond interpretation as they
describe commonalities between Open Dialogues and Anticipation Dialogues approaches with
persons and networks of persons. “In both… the aim is not to gather information for a correct
interpretation of a client’s problem” (p. 94). Proposing several guidelines for supporting dialogue
in crisis situations involving psychosis, these practitioners advise against interpreting and
orienting psychotic comments to reality and instead, encourage on-going inquiry about patient
experience:
This is not merely a cognitive process but is, instead, an embodied emotional experience. It is not only “seeing” or “understanding,” but also becoming touched as a human being. The new understanding is generated in a shared emotional experience, which means that people become connected with each other in a new, active way (p. 92).

They continue, sounding somewhat like Bakhtin (1986) to my ears as they describe their process as “orienting to the response…” (p. 92).

Seikkula and Arnkil’s (2006) approach seems to resonate, unsurprisingly, with Andersen’s way of being in practice. Abrahamsen, Haaland, and Michaelsen (2007) offer the following description of Andersen’s priorities: “Tom tells us: just look, don’t think; just observe, don’t interpret; just listen to the words, don’t make opinions” (p. 215). “His respect for the others was very strong, from my point of view. No interpretations, no assertions,” writes Victor Muller (Zevallos & Chong, 2007, p. 85). Similarly, Andersen’s colleague Eva Albert (2007) speaks of what she learns from Andersen’s practice: “to show respect for a person’s way of reacting when confronted with death and loss, rather than interpreting what they say and do” (p. 190).

In his exploration of “the present moment” Stern (2004) speaks to the necessity of interpretation, but he also puts “the emphasis on experience and not meaning,” (p. 221) making a distinction between “the cognitive understanding of experience and the enriching of experience” (p. 226). “With an emphasis on implicit experience rather than explicit content, therapeutic aims shift more to the deepening and enriching of experience and less to understanding its meaning” (p. 222). Stern (2004), like George Steiner (1989), turns to music to explore the distinction between direct “experience rather than cognitive meaning” (Stern, 2004, p. 226). Steiner (1989) notes that the deconstruction of music does not always lead to a deepening experience of it (p. 20). Rather, “knowing” deepens with participation, “subsequent hearings,” on-going
involvement. Steiner (1989) writes of performance – the actual *doing* of music – as the “most ‘exposed’, engaged and responsible act of musical interpretation” (p. 20). Illustrating this point, Steiner claims when “asked to explain a difficult *etude*, Schumann sat down and played it a second time” (p. 20). Stern (2004) clarifies further, “In talking therapies the work to interpret, to make meaning, and to narrativize can be seen as an almost non-specific, convenient vehicle by which the patient and therapist “do something together” (p. 227). Stern’s (2004) emphasis on “implicit experience rather than explicit content” (p. 222) shifts the goals of therapeutic inquiry “more to the deepening and enriching of experience and less to the understanding its meaning” (p. 222).

**Understanding as Event ‘Happening’ to Us**

When we understand dialogically, we open ourselves to the formative influence of others and otherness; we allow ourselves to be captured, arrested, possessed by things outside of ourselves. Gadamer’s (1975/2004) portrayal of understanding is similarly not a calculated or mechanistic result of “rule-based rationality,” (p. 385) the outcome of our willful plans and intentions. Rather, Gadamer suggests we fall into understanding, just as he insists we “fall into conversation… far less the leaders then the led” (p. 385). In what is known as his most influential work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975/2004) speaks of his affinity with the dialectic of the Greeks, because they did not conceive understanding as a methodic activity of the subject, but as something that the thing itself does and which thought ‘suffers.’ This activity of the thing itself is the real speculative movement that takes hold of the speaker (p. 469).

An earlier edition (Gadamer, 2000) of the same text seems to put the same ideas in slightly different words, stressing understanding as something that cannot be imposed on our
surroundings through deliberate, methodic activity. Understanding, says Gadamer (2000), is the action of “a real presence”:

Such original understandings are not “a methodic activity of the subject,” not something that we ourselves do deliberately and impose on our surroundings; it is “something that the thing itself (as a real presence) does and which thought ‘suffers’” (p. 474).

In other words, understanding dialogically can be described as an event that happens to us as we “come under the influence” of both the conversation and the subject matter itself (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 371). In this view of understanding, the one inquiring is not the only active agent, setting out to capture and dominate passive and voiceless phenomena, but rather the phenomena ‘in question’ exerts a moving force on the person seeking understanding, imposing ‘itself’ on the person who understands. For Gadamer (1975/2004) the person who understands is the one captured:

Someone who understands is always already drawn into an event… When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes…. In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe (484).

In my view, this perspective resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s (2004) writing of the “undividedness” of the sensing and the sensed” (p. 295). In Merleau-Ponty’s world of embodied, sensory perception, everything has agency, voice, and penetrative capacities. He writes, “The painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him—those gestures, those paths which he alone can trace… to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of
the constellations” (p. 299). Merleau-Ponty writes of painters’ common sense “things look at them.” He records Andre’ Marchand’s words, who, influenced by Klee, writes,

In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…. I was there listening…. I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it… (Marchand as cited in Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 299).

Wittgenstein (1953) similarly puts forward the view that each word has a “single physiognomy. It looks at us…” (p. 155) like a face in a painting. Understanding is a responsive, participatory enterprise, a sensual, dialogical interplay between a diverse range of visible and invisible subjects who seem to look, touch, speak and listen and feel.

How strangely wonderful, understanding dialogically. For in such a way of knowing, we, as “researchers” do not set out alone to conquer and capture phenomena, returning with souvenir-like proof of contact. Instead, those inquiring participate responsively within the subject of inquiry. Participation necessarily changes the focus of the researcher’s inquiry: “… his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object…” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 64) and as we have just discussed, this process of change is inherently and dangerously reciprocal. If anything is “captured” it is the participants themselves. Led by an unfolding conversation, as Gadamer (1975/2004) holds, understanding dialogically is not only an intentional intellectual achievement, but it just happens to us, beyond our rational control, “over and above our wanting and doing” and choosing (Shotter, 2006a, p. 105) as we participate in conversation, lending ourselves to the emergence of something else (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004, p. xvii). Understanding dialogically thrusts us forward into new unforeseen possibilities with one another, practical possibilities for going on.
Summary

This chapter invites us to understand the dialogues featured in this project dialogically, just as collaborative practitioners attempt to understand the everyday dialogue comprising their therapy practices. We characterize such understanding as inseparable from responding, as multi-voiced inter-action, evident only within the open-ended, back-and-forth movement of our engagement with others and with otherness. We describe understanding dialogically as demonstrated practical ability to “know one’s way about” and “to go on” as Wittgenstein puts it, and at the same time we speak of a stance of tentative “not-knowing” as essential to the collaborative therapist’s dialogical ways of understanding. We portray dialogical understanding as collaborative movement and skill, as a relational process, not as private mental process or personal state of enlightenment. And we describe dialogical understanding as oriented to historical time, to the everyday and the ordinary, to detail and particularity, and to unrepeatable creativity and novelty rather than to what is presumed to be timeless, hidden in the depths, universal, abstract and general. Finally, we consider the transforming, interpenetrative influence of dialogical understanding noting the unpredictable dangers and risks of understanding dialogue dialogically. This, I submit, describes, in part, the understanding practiced by collaborative therapists, the quality of understanding we wish to enact in this shared inquiry.
Chapter 3

Dialogical Method of Inquiry:

From Systematization to the *Social Poetics of Collaborative Shared Inquiry*

“If we are to let ‘something’ speak to us of itself, of its own inner ‘shape’, we need to follow where it leads, to allow ourselves to be moved in a way answerable to its calls” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 78).

“The less planned the process the greater the possibility of letting the situation determine its form. It is important that those who take part in the process can say and do what feels natural and comfortable” (Andersen, 1995, p. 19).

*Preparing For This Chapter*

At the start of the previous chapter, we asked, how shall we understand *The Playa Dialogue* and the other nine dialogues in this project—through description, analysis, explanation or interpretation? Shall we try to distill the dialogues, represent them or summarize them in some way? If we are to understand the spoken and written dialogues in this project *dialogically*, in ways coherent with the “shared inquiry” process of collaborative therapy, our task, as I have been suggesting, is primarily to respond to them as active participants within them. Undoubtedly we are accustomed to casting research “subjects” or “participants” as respondents (Adler & Adler, 2003); editors Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2003) entitle part one of a recent research text, “Subjects and Respondents,” for example, but it is peculiar to cast the “primary author” as *respondent*. This, however, is the role of collaborative therapists within the ‘shared inquiry’ of therapy practice. As full participants in the dialogues constituting their practices, collaborative therapists do not function as expert analysts or interpreters, but instead, they respond spontaneously to the words of their conversational partners. They respond *into* the dialogical situations developing as they encounter and interact with the others and otherness in
each dialogue. I adopt the role of respondent in this project, keenly aware of Bakhtin’s (1981) emerence of response and understanding. Before we move into this chapter, I repeat his words because they have been so influential in this shared inquiry process:

To some extent, primacy belongs to the response as the activating principal: it creates the ground for understanding; it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other (p. 282).

To actively respond to the voice of an other with one’s whole being, is to begin to understand that voice. To respond into a particular conversation, is to begin to understand that conversation. When we actively respond to the others and otherness around us, we generate practical understandings, new possibilities for going on together.

In this new chapter we focus more explicitly on the research method in this project. We suggest the collaborative therapist’s method of inquiry exemplifies social poetics methods (Shotter & Katz, 1996) more so than systematic qualitative social research methodology. We therefore explore social poetics in detail, giving additional attention to Wittgenstein’s methods of investigation—a central influence within Shotter and Katz’ articulation of social poetics methods. Before we begin to look more closely at the methods operative within this project, we pause first to consider ‘research method’ within the broader qualitative research context.
Method in Qualitative Social Inquiry: Background

Method as Macro and Micro Process

Method can function as both a macro or micro term. We speak of ‘micro’ methods of sampling, or coding, for example, but also, more broadly, we use the term to refer to expansive traditions of inquiry, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. Each holds ideas about “… the best means for acquiring knowledge about the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005c, p. 183) just as each methodological tradition, as John Law (2004) claims, tends to … set up rules for discovering realities. These rules distinguish between good and bad method. They tell, for instance, how results should be acquired, and the proper ways in which they should be reported (p. 152).

Each methodology specifies its own set of micro-methods regarding preparation prior to the study, procedures and strategies for collecting, organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and representing data (Cresswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 3-8; Tesch, 1990, pp. 55-75) just as each methodological tradition invites both researcher and research participant into a particular relational posture (Ceglowski, 2002; Chenail, 2000).

Diversity of Methods

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000), internationally-recognized leaders in qualitative research note, “Qualitative research, as a set of interpretive activities, privileges no single methodological practice over another” (p. 6); it has no distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own (p. 7). Multiple disciplines practice qualitative research—education, nursing, psychology, sociology, anthropology, to name only a few—and many conventional qualitative methods are linked with particular academic disciplines (p. 7). For example, ethnography has developed largely within anthropology and grounded theory research has close
ties with sociology. Research professor and sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman (2003) suggests the diversity across qualitative methods is only appropriate: “Science cannot be spoken in a singular, universal voice. Any methodological standpoint is, by definition, partial, incomplete, and historically contingent” (p. 342). The lack of uniformity throughout qualitative research is therefore inherently necessary, not problematic.

**Systematic Methodology**

Qualitative methodologist John Creswell (1998) observes that some research traditions are more systematic than others (p. 5). Systematic methodology determines the general process of inquiry somewhat like a travel itinerary or recipe offering participants a sense of order, certainty, coherence, legitimacy and predictability. Although researchers never simply apply a systematic method, the shape or form the research will take is generally established in advance; one turns to the research tradition to answer process questions of “what to do next.” All major turning points and landmarks are set up in advance of the inquiry. The credibility of a systematic research process is determined in large part by the degree to which the work aligns consistently with a particular methodological tradition.

**The Problem with Systematic Pre-Figured Research Methods**

Does the selection and utilization of legitimate research methodology ensure the production of scientific knowledge, truth, rigor and validity in qualitative social inquiry? Response to such a question varies. In his book, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, sociology and technology scholar, John Law (2004), raises radical questions concerning several aspects of our methodological inheritance in the social sciences. He notes social investigators generally do not question the need for methods of inquiry: “… as a framework, method *itself* is taken to be at least provisionally secure” (p. 10). Law continues,
TRANSFORMING ENCOUNTERS AND INTERACTIONS

Method, as we usually imagine it, is a system for offering more or less bankable guarantees. It hopes to guide us more or less quickly and securely to our destination, a destination that is taken to be knowledge about the processes at work in a single world…

(p. 9.)

Law questions the popular assumption that right methods will lead us to the right truths. He further questions what he describes as the dominance of certain methods of inquiry in social science, in particular, those methods that “seek the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable” (p. 6). Law further questions if the production of knowledge should remain the ultimate goal of social inquiry: “Perhaps the academy needs to think of other metaphors for its activities— or imagine other activities” (p. 3).

Rather than pushing for an abandonment of conventional research methods, Law (2004) calls for an expansion of methods “… unusual or unknown in social science…” (p. 2), welcoming methods of inquiry that are more relevant to those aspects of life that are messy, ephemeral, vague, complex and contradictory, methods that do not distort ambiguous and complex realities into a false and meaningless clarity (p. 2).

For the inquirer wanting to understand dialogically, the practice of applying systematic methodology formed in advance of social research contexts is itself problematic (Andersen, 2007, p. 82). Decisions about how to proceed emerge from within dialogical inquiry as participants respond into the emerging dialogical event, moment to moment. Dialogical methods of inquiry develop in response to the intricate movements and continually shifting requirements of a developing dialogue, becoming evident only through the dialogue’s development over time. It is the emerging dialogical event that teaches participants within it how to proceed; in
Andersen’s (2006) words, “The dog will teach you how to stroke it.” Shotter (2005a) likewise suggests,

… if we can allow ourselves to be spontaneously responsive to the others around us in a
dialogically-structured manner, the conversation itself will provide us with a sense of
where to go next. For everything that occurs will be sensibly connected to everything
else—nothing can come into the conversation from the ‘outside’, so to speak, without
being in response to, in answer to, events occurring within it (p. 7).

The conversation itself provides its own currents and under-tows in abundance. In a dialogical
method of inquiry, these flows must be allowed to influence where the inquiry will go, and how.
It is the unfolding multi-voiced dialogue and its immediate relational context that leads the
process of a dialogical inquiry, not a methodological directive articulated in advance, outside of
the dialogue.

*Practicing the “Mutual Responsivity” of Collaborative Therapy in Qualitative Research*

How might the researcher function as active *respondent* rather than as someone “doing
to” the dialogue “data” in order to meet the requirements of a systematic method established
prior to the inquiry? How can this social inquiry project utilize and honor the methods of the
collaborative therapists joining together in this collaborative effort? To help us articulate a useful
response to these questions, we turn now to the work of Katz and Shotter (2004b). Influenced by
Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Vygotsky, Garfinkel, Taylor and Bachelard, but most crucially, by
Wittgenstein’s (1953) practical methods of philosophical investigation, Shotter and Katz
introduce us to social poetics, (Shotter & Katz, 1996), “a non-systematic set of methods”
(Shotter, 2005a, p. 1)—a special, responsive ethical stance resonant with the dialogic approach to
inquiry that characterizes this collaborative project. In a moment we explore social poetics
methods and their intricate connections with the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy, and therefore, the shared inquiry comprising this project. To prepare ourselves, we first look more closely at Wittgenstein’s (1980, 1953) methods of inquiry, identifying six features of his approach that influence social poetics methods. I see Wittgenstein’s methods, social poetics, and collaborative therapy ‘shared inquiry’ practices and premises as inter-related. Noticing connections between these distinct philosophical and practical vantage points will help us to articulate and navigate the method of inquiry within this project.

**Wittgenstein’s Methods of Investigation: Six Features**

1. **Practical action.**

First, as we have already discussed in chapter 2, Wittgenstein’s (1953) methods are deeply influenced by his commitment to practical understanding, understanding that allows us to know our way about and go on rather than ‘understanding as private mental process’ situated within autonomous individual minds, (p. 53) or, understanding as “… a feeling that comes to me when contemplating what I must do” (Harré & Tissaw, 2005, p. 176). “Understanding” is an action word in Wittgenstein’s vocabulary. As Hare and Tissaw write, “Understanding is expressed in what one does” (Hare & Tissaw, p. 175). “I show that I have understood by acting in any one of a variety of relevant ways. To understand is to have acquired a certain skill or capacity” (Hare & Tissaw, p. 176). In this project, I demonstrate understanding by “going on” within our dialogues, by taking ‘a next step’ within them, adding to them, not by analyzing them or attempting to identify their structures or thematic essence. The same action-oriented understanding takes place in collaborative therapy; we demonstrate our understanding in the ways we ‘go on from’ the utterances of the people we meet in dialogue.
2. In motion.

Second, Wittgenstein’s (1953) methods also insist words must be understood within the flow and movement of their everyday practical use, “… not in ways disengaged from any involvement with the practices to which our cases, claims, or principles are meant to relate…” (Shotter & Katz, 1996), and not through the application of abstract theories and concepts. Wittgenstein suggests that words only have meaning “in the stream of thought and life…” (Wittgenstein, 1981, no. 173). The function of a word is determined by its use: “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 93); for, as Wittgenstein continues, “… every word has a different character in different contexts…” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 155). Similarly, in collaborative therapy, practitioners ‘understand’ the words of their conversational partners within the commotion of each interactive moment. Practitioners do not stop the interaction of dialogue in order to analyze it from a static, non-participatory position outside of it.

3. Arrest or interrupt.

Third, Shotter (2006a) observes that Wittgenstein’s (1953) remarks give “prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, pp. 43-44) and thus Wittgenstein’s’ methods “arrest or interrupt (or ‘deconstruct’)” (Shotter, 2006a, p. 21; 2006d, p. 2), creating an indeterminacy in place of determinate meanings (Katz & Shotter, 2007). These complex moments—when one person’s words arrest the being of another, are of enormous importance “… because it is in these fleeting moments that something utterly extraordinary, utterly new and unique, spontaneously occurs…” (Shotter & Katz, 1999, p. 7). Shotter and Katz (1999), encourage a view of words as “actions, as doing something—rather than as already-spoken forms or patterns…” (p. 2). Beyond “meaning” and beyond forming
recognizable regularities, our engagement with the words of an other moves us, repels us, captivates our attention, comforts us, and unsettles us in our attitudes, beliefs, desires and actions. “Indeed, a crucial use of words is to ‘move’ or to ‘strike’ others by the saying or the writing of certain words at certain moments…” (Shotter & Katz, 1999, p. 2). For the collaborative therapists in this inquiry, it is more important to notice and respond to moving or striking moments in conversation than to be able to identify patterns within words spoken.

4. Reminders.

Fourth, Wittgenstein’s (1953) investigations function as “reminders;” they draw our attention to that which is “in plain view” (p. 36), “something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it…” (p. 36). In other words, Wittgenstein’s methods remind us of what we “take for granted” in the background of our everyday lives. We fail to notice so much of what happens in the contexts around us because, as Wittgenstein claims, simplicity and familiarity can blind us and dull our senses: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes)” (p. 43). For Wittgenstein, our need is not for new discoveries of things deeply hidden, for “everything lies open to view” (p. 43). Rather, we need reminders so that we can see anew. As Shotter (2006c) suggests, everything we need to understand is available to us in the circumstances of our conversations. Our “everyday” languages and ways of investigating are, in Wittgenstein’s views, fully adequate (Shotter, 2006d). No obscure “metaphysical” language is required (p. 43). Shotter and Katz (1996) elaborate this perspective, noting in puzzling circumstances

... we feel that our everyday language is inadequate to the task, for the ‘real’ influences determining the phenomena of concern must, in fact, be hidden from us, ‘behind
appearances’. Yet, the fact is, in our everyday affairs, we do negotiate and navigate some extremely complex and subtle issues without too much trouble. Thus, not only must the detailed information we require to do it be present to us, in some way, ‘in’ our circumstances, but the linguistic means must be available to us, as required, also (p. 3).

Rather than searching for something hidden from view, Wittgenstein’s (1953) investigations point to that which is always before our eyes, that which, as Garfinkel (1967) writes, is “seen but unnoticed,” expected, background features of everyday scenes” (p. 36). Familiarity and habit can obscure aspects of our lives; our ways of speaking can render things “in plain view” invisible to us. Wittgenstein (1953) proposes, “The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known” (p. 40). Collaborative therapy is similarly often a process of seeing the familiar anew.

5. Similes, metaphors, images.

Fifth, Wittgenstein uses metaphors, similes, analogies and pictorial images to help draw attention to aspects of our relational landscape that pass by us unnoticed. Such description is more poetic than complete or systematic; Wittgenstein (1980) would suggest it is misleading to complete, close, and finalize the ‘shape’ of something that is continually changing form: “(If you complete it, you falsify it),” p.52. The construction of static and fixed frameworks, models and theories falsifies and distorts phenomena that is inherently transitional, complex, and continually changing: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it” (p. 41). It is misleading to “systematize” that which is not systematic. “If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all…” (Law, 2004, p. 2) how useful can it be to draw-up
static, complete pictorial representations of such phenomena? As Law (2004) holds, “… simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent” (p. 2). At times, “techniques of deliberate imprecision” (p. 3) might be more helpful than methods that simplify, clarify and organize. Collaborative therapists never see the complete picture with their clients; each participant in a collaborative therapy dialogue gains only a partial and open-ended sense of the subject of the inquiry.


Sixth, Wittgenstein (1953) uses comparisons in his methods of investigation, juxtaposing contrasting “language-games” or ways of talking (p. 141) and contrasting scenes: “The comparison, or the bringing into living contact, of different scenes… cannot be overemphasized” (Shotter, 2006d, p. 2). Each juxtaposition creates particular distinctions, leading to new movement, new connections, and new ways of participating, awakening us to possibilities we might otherwise fail to notice. For Wittgenstein, noticing connections within the landscape of our everyday lives is crucial to understanding and navigating our way within “… our own linguistically shaped forms of life” (Shotter, 2006d, p. 2). Therefore Wittgenstein’s notion of “perspicious representation” is vital to understanding his methods of investigation: “A perspicious representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (Shotter, 1995b; Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 42). A collaborative therapist is similarly more interested in exploring multiple relationships and connections between others and othernesses than establishing the “nature” and core essence of single entities (Hoffman, 1992, p. 18.)
Summary and application.

Wittgenstein’s methods produce new practices rather than new theories and concepts—relational understandings, rather than representational understandings (Shotter, 1995b). Rather than defining and discovering the precise nature of things, Anderson (1997) suggests Wittgenstein’s methods help us become practically oriented within the everyday events of our lives (p. xvii). They help us to ‘see’ unnoticed aspects of our everyday realities ‘in plain view’, not through “once and for all” explanations and representations, but, more poetically and partially, Wittgenstein’s methods help us gain some new sense of the subject of our inquiry, enabling us to ‘find our way about’ and ‘go on.’ Wittgenstein’s methods of investigation crucially inform what Shotter and Katz call social poetics methods. Because our project method is more akin with social poetics methods than systematic qualitative research methodology, we turn now to explore social poetics, and its relevance to the method of inquiry in this dissertation.

Social Poetics as Method of Inquiry

Mutual Spontaneous Response as Central Feature

What is social poetics? Not surprisingly, I find multiple partial descriptions instead of a single definition (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 74, 2007; Katz et al., 2004; Shotter, 1995b, 2006, pp. 103-113; Shotter & Katz, 1996, 1999). Shotter and Katz (2004b) describe social poetics as an informal conversational stance, a mutual, unplanned and intimate way of meeting and relating to others and otherness, and a way of being present within that meeting in a manner that not only grants a sense of the other’s uniqueness, but at the same time, influences it “…in ways that matter” (p. 74). Shotter and Katz articulate what they view as crucial to social poetic methods as follows:
Crucial to our approach, then, is the importance of people relating to one another (and to themselves) in a fully spontaneously responsive fashion. In short, in an intimate way…. Only if people meet one another in this fully mutually responsive fashion, can they have a sense of one another’s inner being—the unique individuals they are. And only if people are present to one another in this sense can they affect one another through their interactions in ways that matter (p. 74).

Shotter and Katz declare their disinterest in testing theories and conducting scientific experiments, and instead describe mutual spontaneous response is a key feature of social poetics methods:

We are interested, then, not in a stance toward our surroundings, in which a theory is tested in a sequence of discrete, punctuated experiments, but in what occurs when we take a conversational stance which allows us, so to speak, to remain continually “in touch” with our dialogue partner, with the “contours” of his or her being. It is our focus on people’s spontaneous responsiveness to the others and othernesses around them that is, we feel, the key feature in our approach (p. 72).

**Talking “With” Instead of Talking “About”**

People relating to one another from a social poetics stance are talking responsively with each other, moment to moment, instead of constructing abstract, theoretical representations about their talk, after their talk (Shotter, 2006b). Positioned informally, “up close” with one another, participants in social poetics ways of meeting remain “… in a more sensuous contact with each other…” (Shotter & Katz, 1996, p. 6) rather than meeting in “abstract, distant and professional” ways dependent on “fixed and finalized concepts” (Shotter & Katz, 1996, p. 6). They are
listening to voices, and actually engaging with them, rather than encountering ‘after the fact’
descriptions, interpretations or analysis of them (Nikulin, 2006, p. 42).

**Situating Talk Within a Living, Communicative Context**

We can describe our utterances as “living” in that each expression—each response,
emerges within a particular conversational flow and must be seen by participants to ‘fit’
meaningfully within it, (Rawls, 2006, p. 11) not only with what has already been spoken, but
with people’s anticipations of what might yet be said. In a dialogue, each utterance exists in a
continual, responsive and calibrative relationship with its context (Strong, 2005). Nikulin (2006)
describes how separative processes of scientific analysis and hermeneutical interpretation
deadens the voice, turning it into “a petrified object for scientific study or hermeneutic
interpretation,” trading the “live music” of people’s voicings for dead “notation:”

… in order to be able to analyze the voice, one has to be a scholar rather than an
interlocutor, one has to take the voice as an objective phenomenon which shall be either
studied by means of a science, using its various techniques and methods, or else
hermeneutically interpreted. In either of these approaches, the voice must be represented
through a text that is submitted to thoughtful investigation. Instead of live music, one has
a notation… (p. 42).

Shotter (2006a) also questions the pervasive habit of ‘stopping’ the living processes we study in
order to position ourselves as over and outside the focus of our inquiry:

The impulse to stop our activities, to step out of the flow and to take the standpoint of an
external observer is very strong in us. But, as we have seen, it is not an appropriate
impulse upon which to act in every case. In some cases we have to make that seemingly
impossible effort to ‘catch ourselves in the act’ (p. 127).
Social poetics methods are enacted within the commotion of dialogical engagement, within developing conversational situations; they are reflexive in that they relate to ‘what has just happened’ in the dialogical event, but not retrospective as though they are looking back on something that has already taken place.

**Social Poetics Writing**

Social poetics methods are relevant beyond spoken communications. Written texts assuming a social poetics style are open, ‘close-up’, situated, participatory texts that invite and even require the interactive involvement of both reader and writer (Adams-St. Pierre, 2002; Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Hunt & Sampson, 2006; Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005; Shotter, 1999b, 2006a, pp. 83-93; Tyler, 1986). Social poetics styles of writing honor the relational and creative influence of our expressions (Katz & Shotter, 2004) offering a sharply contrasting dialogical alternative to retrospective, theory-driven writing that is presented as complete and closed, without context, is no longer developing, seemingly offered by no one in particular for no one in particular. As writer Dave Barry observes, “There is a lot of what I call ‘God writing’…. We’re taught to sound authoritative and impartial and professional and often to sound boring” (as cited in Yagoda, 2004, p. 132). In the production of a social poetics text, the writer maintains the role of responsive interlocutor all throughout, relating simultaneously to other textual voices, to the subject of the writing, to an imagined or known reader, to the emerging dialogues that develop. The writer continually tunes and re-tunes to the others and otherness present throughout the writing process. Efforts to generate practical understanding are situated within “first-time” interactions. Each time writers and readers engage with the text, they do so for “another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9).
In my view, anthropologist Stephen Tyler’s (1986) preferred style of writing fits well with a social poetics stance. He calls for living, textual presentations rather than representational texts that function to remove the reader from the visceral tangibility of life. Tyler invites us to create texts

… of the physical, the spoken and the performed, an evocation of quotidian experience, a palpable reality that uses everyday speech to suggest what is ineffable, not through abstraction, but by means of the concrete. It will be a text to read not with the eyes alone, but with the ears in order to hear ‘the voices of the pages’ (p. 136).

**Constraint in Social Poetics Methods**

The absence of systematic theory in social poetics does not mean these methods progress without any guidance, evaluative criteria, constraints or requirements. Social poetic methods are not a ‘free-for-all’ and neither are such methods obedient nor subordinate to the will of a single person. Beyond the fact that dialogue involves a plurality of voices, each dialogical inquiry introduces its own shifting requirements: invitations, demands, obligations and limits. Evaluation of the generativity and utility of a social poetics process happens primarily within it as participants continually sense if the response of their conversational partner is appropriate (‘called for’) and generative within the communicative encounter. Bakhtin (1986) describes dialogue as inescapably evaluative (p. 142). Such evaluation is an on-going, perceptual and relational process in social poetics methods, carried out by all participants within an unfolding dialogue, rather than by formalized criteria external to it (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 78; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 3).
Possibility in Social Poetics Methods

Each conversation generates possibility, novelty, creativity, movement, and therefore, transformation. Social poetics methods encourage attentiveness to those moments when we find ourselves “struck” by something within a conversation—possibly a particular word, an image or idea; perhaps the tone of voice, or the ‘feel’ of the talk with its rhythmic pauses or resonance with the circumstances of one’s life. As Merleau-Ponty (1973) writes so poetically, “… the conversation pronounces itself in me. It summons me and grips me: it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what from it” (pp. 18-19). At times we sense this movement in our conversational partners; we see that certain moments seem to “touch” or ‘capture’ them. Social poetics methods require us “… to responsively follow the movements of the other wherever they might lead” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 76). Andersen (2007), in an interview with Per Jensen, suggests we locate our work within these poignant conversational movements:

… I think that one participates in the shadow of the other’s movement and notices that something of what they express, which is also a part of the movement, affects them. It is that we should work with. One is actually working with the movement of another by speaking about what they said (Andersen & Jensen, 2007, p. 166).

Shotter and Katz (2004b) speak further of the responsive agility required by social poetics methods:

There is a kind of fluidity in conversation that is lacking in a theory-driven inquiry or debate about ideas. If we are to let “something” speak to us of itself, of its own inner “shape,” we need to follow where it leads, to allow ourselves to be moved in a way answerable to its calls (p. 78).
Method emerges from “within” the inquiry.

While methodology-driven inquiry systematically specifies the details of process in advance, the developing conversation takes on this role in social poetics methods. As Tyler (1986) writes, “The point is that questions of form are not prior, the form itself should emerge out of the joint work…” of those participating in the inquiry (p. 127). It is the “joint work” that leads. Listening to the “speaking” of others, participants spontaneously fashion each step forward. Social poetics methods invite participants to notice and play into the movement generated within particular dialogical moments thereby generating additional movement. When this happens in therapeutic settings, people often profess they are able “to go on;” circumstances that previously seemed fixed and unworkable become workable. When this happens in our more formal inquiries, in research for example, we understand dialogically, practically, inter-actively, and responsively.

Social poetics in education.

In their article, Intoxicated Midnight and Carnival Classrooms: The Professor as Poet (2002), Social Work professors Allan Irving and Ken Moffat compare and contrast what I think of as a social poetics approach to learning in our social science academies, with the usual confines and rigidities of classroom conventions perpetuating the still-popular Enlightenment perspective “… that reason, empiricism and right methods will lead us from darkness into light” (p. 1). Calling the professor to reorient to “the event” in the classroom, with all its elements of surprise and indeterminacy, they draw on the writing of Bakhtin, Foucault and Beckett to form an argument for “… drawing upon dialogic relationships to promote education within the classroom” (Irving & Moffat, 2002). Like the collaborative therapist using social poetics
methods, they turn themselves towards particularity and ‘the unusual’ within unfolding events. According to Irving and Moffatt,

The challenge for the professor is to refocus on the event on the one hand; on the other, it is to let the event happen, and unfold…. The play for the professor is to watch for those languages, ideas that are most surprising. It is in the surprise perhaps that we can avoid the self-evident and promote the “violation of the usual” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 166; Irving & Moffat, 2002, p. 4).

This vigilant “watching for and cherishing the event…” with all its surprises resonates with Morson and Emerson’s (1990) characterization of dialogue as oriented to “surprisingness” (p. 2) and Shotter’s (2006b) expectation of creativity and the continual emergence of novelty in dialogical processes.

**Our familiarity with social poetics methods.**

Katz and Shotter (2004b) contend that the spontaneous “mutual responsivity” at the heart of social poetics methods is unfamiliar to us within the context of social theory but “quite familiar to us in our daily lives” (p. 72). In social sciences inquiry, much effort has gone into representing patterns in people’s already-spoken words, a very different undertaking from the process of becoming present to one another’s words, becoming present to the contextual particularity around those words, and becoming present to the developing conversation itself. I want to add, perhaps repetitively, that this same “mutual responsivity” —the “process of people becoming present to one another in their interactions” (p. 72)—is also very familiar to collaborative therapists within the shared inquiries comprising therapy, but it may not be as familiar to us as an approach within our more formal shared inquiries comprising social sciences research.
I am drawn to Merleau-Ponty’s (2004) invitation to leave behind a science that “manipulates things and gives up living inside them” (p. 291). “Scientific thinking,” he writes, … a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the “there is” which underlies it: to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts (pp. 292-293).

Summary and Reflections

Social poetics methods plunge us, as participants, into a living, expressive-responsive, animated world, into the “there is” beyond and ‘before’ science. Instead of objectively “acting on” inert data, systematically “doing to it” from positions outside of it, rather a more ‘living’, reciprocal and relational process of influence occurs when we inquire from a social poetics stance. Particular moments in our dialogues surprisingly ‘act on us,’ touch and move us, enter our being, seemingly calling out from us various responses as we participate within them.

As participants in a social poetics approach to our project dialogues we function primarily as involved respondents; we “let something speak to us of itself…” allowing “ourselves to be moved in a way answerable to its calls” following “where it leads” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 78). The challenge for us, as I see it, is to find ways to stay in the event as it unfolds, to maintain a stance of “withness” (Hoffman, 2007) as responsive participants, willing to be surprised, captured, “enveloped and inhabited” (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 18-19) by the other and otherness we encounter. Following Bakhtin, we must resist the temptations of the theoretical and the abstract (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 69).
My hope is that we can learn to live in a way that is less dependent on the automatic. To live more in and through slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method. Multiple method. Modest method. Uncertain method. Diverse method. Such are the senses of method that I hope to see grow in and beyond social science (Law, 2004, p. 11).

**Hesitations**

I have hesitated to create a “method” chapter. Instead I have wanted each chapter in this text to ‘show’ and thereby ‘tell’ our developing project method within its particular, relational, interactive context, one that is continually in motion. Presenting “method” abstractly and conceptually, separate from its detailed, “witnessable” interworkings seems to create an uncomfortable contradiction within this text: I am using distant terms to speak of a process that is inherently ‘up close’ and intimate. How much better to experience the developmental shifts and leaps of this project method ‘first hand’ as reading and writing participants within it.

In discussing method as a separate section of this text, I do not want to imply that the “work” of method can be confined and completed within a single chapter or stage of this collaborative inquiry. Collaborative therapists attend to “method” continuously in practice, as the process of shared inquiry is unique to each dialogue, always taking shape as long as the dialogue is in play. Dialogical methods of inquiry cannot be chosen and then applied. Just as in collaborative therapy practice, we are attentive to our developing process throughout this entire project, including the production of this text.

Despite limitations, my attempts to articulate Wittgenstein’s methods of investigation and Katz’ and Shotter’s social poetics methods helps me articulate the methods of shared inquiry I use in my everyday practice as a collaborative therapist. Most important, the work of
Wittgenstein, Shotter, and Katz helps me to see the non-systematic dialogic methods at work in this project, the methods of the collaborative therapists joining together in this social inquiry.

**Looking Forward**

In chapter 5 we will compare and contrast the features of our project methods with the common features of ‘mainstream’ qualitative research methodology. We will raise questions about the legitimacy of our approach to inquiry. But first we consider my practical account of the actual *doing* of our methods within the specific context of this shared inquiry in chapter 4. In this fourth chapter, I present the development and enactment of our dialogical inquiry method in detail. This “back-stage” narration with its confessions of decisions made, regrets, changes of direction and surprises shows the minute workings of our methods ‘in action’, situated within the commotion of this emerging conversational inquiry. I invite readers to evaluate the extent to which our practices appear to fit with the premises we have just discussed.
Chapter 4

Exposing the “Doing” of Method in this Inquiry:

Returning to the Playa Dialogue Reflexively

“Write writing stories. These are reflexive accounts of how you happened to write the pieces you wrote…. What these writing stories do is situate your work in contexts, tying what can be a lonely and seemingly separative task to the ebbs and flows of your life and your self” (Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005, p. 975).

This chapter is a writing story, a detailed account of the practical “doing” of our project method. It situates the dialogues in this project, “tying” them to “the ebbs and flows” of my life and my self, and invites readers “back stage” to witness the more practical doing of this project. Multiple writers join writer, sociologist, and literacy professor, Adams-St. Pierre’s invitation to “write writing stories.” Paraphrasing anthropologist Gregory Bateson, research journal editor Ron Chenail (1995) notes that writing openly of our research processes builds trust, just as openness generates trust in any relationship. For Chenail, writing reflexively about the research process story presents a critical opportunity for both researcher and reader to ‘study the study’ undertaken:

It takes two studies to present one in qualitative research. One study is the “official” research project and the other study is the study about that study. In a well-done research study, in addition to seeing the results of the labor, the reader should have ample opportunities to examine the particulars of the inquiry…” (para. 5 & 6).

Approaching the task of writing from a different angle, creative writing teacher, Natalie Goldberg (2005) dares us to avoid general abstractions and “write the real stuff. Be honest and detailed” (p. 39). In their discussion of the power of observed detail, Sampson and Hunt (2006) also call for the writing of detail, stressing the importance of recording both what is “key” and
what is seemingly inconsequential (p. 136). Ensuring each study contains a detailed study of itself may mean, as education professor, Deborah Ceglowski (2002) puts it; “researchers no longer escape their own ruthless gaze” (p. 7). With these provocative invitations in mind, I offer the following detailed account of the interactive process of writing The Playa Dialogue—the first chapter of this dissertation text, and the first and only group ‘in-person’ dialogue in this shared inquiry project.

Preparing for our Project Dialogues

The conversation between project participants in Playa del Carmen is part of a larger conversational context between the practitioners involved in this inquiry. We can trace its origins back to May 2005 when I carefully begin inviting therapists from various countries to join me in a series of spoken and written dialogues forming the ‘data’ for our inquiry. (See Appendix E for initial letter of invitation). The project’s “conversational circle” is especially useful to me at this juncture as they recommend names of practitioner colleagues they feel we could learn with and from. The invitation to participate in this project extends only to therapists planning to participate at the International Summer Institute (ISI, Playa del Carmen, Mexico, June 2005) an event organized by Harlene Anderson and her Grupos Campos Eliseos colleagues. This restriction ensures the possibility of project participants meeting face to face, and also allows participants additional time to get to know me as well as other therapists participating throughout the weeklong conference.

Shortly before the ISI, I send each prospective therapist-participant a letter and a brochure introducing the focus of the proposed inquiry and my initial ideas regarding their roles with in it. Each invited therapist responds to the invitation to participate; thirteen of fifteen accept. As planned, we meet for the project’s only face-to-face dialogue in Playa del Carmen,
Mexico, launching our project, and allowing us to raise questions that develop, clarify and complicate our way forward. It is in this conversation that we begin to turn our collective attention towards the therapist’s experience of therapy, as narrated in chapter 1, The Playa Dialogue.

**Interacting with the Recorded Dialogue in Playa del Carmen**

Following the ISI, I return to my Canadian home to begin July 2005 and, within a few days of my arrival, I sit down in my home study to listen to the entire recording of our dialogue in Playa. No one else is with me; I take no notes with this first encounter; I only listen. I do not want to be pre-occupied with “capturing” the dialogue. Instead I want to participate within it again, this time, from a very different temporal and geographical location.

How wonderful to hear our voices intermingling once again. At certain junctures I smile; my eyes wince in places of awkwardness and discomfort. From the vantage point of “after,” the recorded Playa dialogue feels far away, like an echo. I am keenly aware we have dispersed around the world and many of these colleagues I may never see again. I am moved by the voices I hear. I feel overwhelmingly grateful for their presence in this inquiry. I sense their enthusiasm for their work. Perhaps this common passion, more than anything, creates the bond between us all, making us into a collective of persons—a community—not just a series of separate ‘cases’ (Stake, 2000, p. 437).

**Concerns and Regrets**

Yet, to hear words already spoken is different than to hear them within a developing conversation. As a participant, I found the conversation utterly riveting and yet now as I listen I am uncomfortably aware of the pace of the conversation. It seems tediously slow. Did we really
move ahead as slowly as the recording sounds? I write to Olaf, one of the Scandinavian therapists, voicing my concern. He replies as follows in English, an additional language for him:

Did I find the pace of the dialogue to slow? No—is my answer. You say that as a comment to your listening to the tape/recording? I have been reading, recently, a research report (a qualitative research project) in which the author talks about the difference between being in a conversation, compared to listening to it afterwards. The researcher listening has not been able to share the semiotic context of the conversation—and therefore might miss something. So one question I came up with was: Did you feel the same, "a too slow pace" being in the conversation with us in Playa? Or did that reflection appear to you sitting with the tape recorder? To me that is important, if the feeling was "instant" there in the room or afterwards? Does that make sense? (Olaf, personal communication, August 11, 2005).

Olaf and Preciosa each write later to say they admire my willingness to change directions at the beginning, to respond to the group’s suggestion regarding a starting point, and again Olaf considerately asks if I am disappointed with the beginning of our Playa dialogue. I write back to say I felt we did the right thing.

Continuing in my process, I carefully read through the notes Harlene took during the conversation, curious to see what she had been writing so steadily. Her notes form an abbreviated transcript without any of her own added commentary. Seeing my copy of her pages I immediately regret writing during the group dialogue in Playa: It was unnecessary. I believe the pad of paper on my lap formed a symbolic barrier between the others and myself. I rarely write in counselling conversations with my clients, and when I do, I keep the writing fully visible to others present. So why did I write during the Playa dialogue? I believe my note taking resulted
from my worry about recording; I knew if something was to fail technically, this same group of people might never meet again. The next ISI was a year away, too long to wait for a second try.

**Transcript Writing: The Dilemma of Transferring Spoken Word to Written Text**

I also notice the recording of the spoken dialogue in Playa del Carmen translates awkwardly into the “language” of writing, as Olaf anticipates. It looks remarkably inefficient on the page, full of stops and starts, “unreturned serves,” to use tennis language. The recording is complete and technically perfect, and yet it seems to be missing most of the conversation. Perhaps we are struggling to understand one another across our various accents and language preferences. I am convinced more was said than the total of words might suggest. The gaps between utterances are complex in a multi-lingual group dialogue, and speakers depend heavily on the generosity and active response of listeners in every attempt to communicate. With the meaning of words less certain, the non-verbal movement of the body figures more prominently into the spoken conversation than the written account indicates. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) remind us, that even in usual circumstances,

People talk in spurts and fragments. They accentuate or even complete a phrase with a gesture, facial expression, or posture. They send complex messages through incongruent seemingly contradictory and ironic verbal and nonverbal expression…. Furthermore, people do not take turns smoothly in conversations: they interrupt each other, overlap words, talk simultaneously, and respond with ongoing comments and murmurs (pp. 75-76).

Blake Poland (2003) makes a similar observation:

Verbal interactions follow a logic that is different from that of written prose, and therefore tend to look remarkably disjointed, inarticulate, and even incoherent when
committed to the printed page. Inherent differences between the spoken tongue and the
written word mean that transcripts of verbal conversations do not measure up well to the
standards we hold for well-crafted prose… with the result that participants often come
across as incoherent and inarticulate (p. 270).

Poland (2003) suggests the situation can be worsened by insistence on
… verbatim transcription in which all pauses, broken sentences, interruptions, and other
aspects of the messiness of casual conversation are faithfully reproduced, despite what
this messiness might lead one to presume about the participants. Speaking from
experience, I should add that interviewers themselves can find their own contributions,
committed to paper, a rude awakening (p. 272).

The challenge of creating a fair but faithful transcription intensifies with the linguistic
diversity within our group and my own unilingual limitations. Several participants choose to use
available translation services, while others venture to speak in English as an additional language,
however translation, even at its highest caliber, cannot level and smooth the conversational table
entirely.

Within the week following Playa, I create a hand-written transcript of the conversation,
pausing the dialogue to write every few seconds. Some months later I write a second hand-
written copy, wanting to notice more of the detail within the dialogue. My decision to produce
the transcripts without outside assistance demonstrates my priorization of involvement in this
process. The conversation is not translated from oral to written language from the non-human
vantage point of computer technology; neither do I hire a transcriber. Rather, I stay fully present
in this stage of our inquiry, creating the transcript of the conversation from the vantage point of a
human participant within it, a position that is simultaneously personal and relational. Maintaining
my relational stance throughout the entire inquiry contrasts with usual practice in qualitative social inquiry. As Strong (2004) writes, “Much research is undertaken with a sense that we can de-relate—to some extent—from our research partners, to go outside our relationship to comment on its products and proceedings like a stranger” (p. 215).

Neither interview nor transcript can capture or copy the ambiguity, fluidity and complexity of life. I reject a realist ontology that assumes the transcript is an accurate reflection of the conversation—“just the facts”—and, like Poland (2003), I cannot accept the notion “… that the research interview adequately captures social reality as it is experienced and expressed by the respondent” (p. 268). When I create a transcript, I try to accurately report the content, sequence and intonation of a conversation, but the task seems impossible. How shall we define accuracy within a social constructionist perspective that claims no objective meta-vantage point is available? Regarding claims of accuracy, we must always ask, “Accuracy according to whom? In which moment? In what place? From what position? Within which relational context?” Poland (2003) claims,

Even when a transcriber attempts to produce a verbatim account by remaining faithful to the original language and flow of the discussion, and even when the transcriber has a suggested syntax to follow in transcription… there are a number of logistical and interpretive challenges to the translation of audiotape conversation into textual form (p. 270).

Likewise, Kvale (1996) is wary of interview transcripts: “Transcribed interviews are often vague, repetitious, and have many digressions containing much “noise,” (p. 50) very different, I imagine, from participants’ sense of the interview as it is happening.
The value in creating transcripts, for me, relates to involvement. Writing each word I hear seems to sharpen my listening and pull me back into the event. I find this work time-consuming, and yet as I handle the details of the task to the very best of my ability and attention—words becoming paragraphs and then pages—I become acquainted with each utterance, with each unique voice. I gain a sense of the conversation that I believe can only come from thorough engagement within it. Writing the words spoken seems to require a more attentive acknowledgement on my part than listening only. Perhaps this is because writing increases the physical involvement of my body as I listen; it requires the movement of my eyes and hands, not only the act of hearing. It slows me down, making it possible for me to notice detail I might otherwise miss. I am surprised to see Goldberg (2005) express a similar view:

What people don’t realize is that writing is physical. It doesn’t have to do with thought alone. It has to do with sight, smell, taste, feeling, with everything being alive and activated… you are physically engaged with the pen, and your hand, connected to your arm, is pouring out the record of your senses (p. 86).

In the autumn of 2006, I type a complete and final transcript of the conversation.

*Writing The Playa Dialogue: Responsive Writing Instead of Report Writing*

With transcript writing behind me, I return again to the audio recording of the dialogue in Playa del Carmen. It is, by now, November 2006. On this occasion I write both more and less than what I hear, creating *The Playa Dialogue*, the first chapter of this text. *The Playa Dialogue* lessens our spoken dialogue because I cannot possibly evoke the fullness of live conversation; my written narrating inadvertently diminishes the spoken interchange in many significant ways. At the same time, the *Playa Dialogue* account is more than the original dialogue in Playa del Carmen; it is infused with my unplanned response to it as I encounter it and interact with it,
moment by moment, for “another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). I refer to this style of writing as responsive writing.

Responsive writing such as _The Playa Dialogue_ is not common practice in social science academia. Bakhtin (1986) notes that the dialogical process of meeting and engaging with the words of others is typically of no interest to social scientists: “The complex act of encountering and interacting with another’s word has been almost completely ignored by the corresponding human sciences” (p. 144). In the field of counseling, a similar disinterest in dialogue seems to persist. I join Strong (2007) in speculating, “perhaps the most taken for granted activity in counseling is conversation” (p. 2), and yet we are continually ‘in conversation’, continually interacting with the words and embodied expressions of others.

Writing my response into _The Playa Dialogue_ is one way of being in dialogue with a dialogue. My silent ‘inner conversation’ becomes public as I aim to evoke and extend this once-spoken dialogue beyond its initial beginnings. Returning to the recorded dialogue and interacting with it again softens the distinction between past and present in this study; it keeps the dialogue open and invites our continued participation within it. I want to think of _The Playa Dialogue_ as present tense, participatory, “withness” writing, rather than the past-tense “aboutness” writing more readily available in the social sciences (Shotter, 1999a). I am narrating the dialogue, telling it, rather than setting out to create “a thing”—a narrative, or third-person retrospective report of what happened (Shotter & Katz, 2004a). Writing responsively helps me to understand our group dialogue dialogically.

Andersen (1995) describes writing as an example of inner talk, noting, “The writing forces us to form longer and more coherent sequences” (p. 33) compared to the dreams and the conversations we have in daily life “when we talk inaudibly with ourselves” (p. 33). I want to
suggest that *The Playa Dialogue* responsive writing is similar to both “inner talk” and audible “outer talk.” In writing the piece I am aware that readers will also in turn respond to it; the writing process is not a private inner excursion, but rather, is oriented to others—to the participant colleagues in my project, to future readers, and to the community of thinkers and practitioners surrounding this inquiry. In this way, responsive writing is not only inner talk; it is also public, social and relational.

*Text in context.*

*The Playa Dialogue* text begins with context (Chenail, 1995). I ‘set’ the scene, evoking details from the cultural, geographical, and social place that is benevolent host to our conversation. I note ordinary sensory detail—the sounds of birds, ceramic dishes, the taste of Mexican coffee, the visual simplicity of our gathering place, warm sounds of human voices intermingling, the approaching darkness and drop in temperature at the end of the day. I expose feelings in this writing, my own and my sensed feelings within the group as the dialogue moves forward—awkwardness, pleasure, tension and release. I note changes in my perspective as I engage with the dialogue over time. Chenail (1995) claims, a text begins with a particular context: “… researchers must re-construct the data’s setting and allow us to return to the place where the data once lived” (para. 18). Linguistic scholar Deborah Tannen (1989) suggests attention to contextual detail, emotion, particularity, and the setting of scenes invites involvement in dialogue (pp. 9-29) and as we propose earlier in this text, involvement is essential to understanding dialogically.

*The accidental.*

Meaning seems to shift unpredictably in the course of my engagement with the recorded dialogue in Playa del Carmen, and as I write, I am aware of my surplus of editorial power. My
writing of the words in our conversation, far from innocent, is invasive and alterative in ways I do not intend as my continual response to the sounds I hear in turn influences what I am hearing, sensing, and writing. As Tannen (1989) asserts, even reported speech within quotation marks is a “misnomer”—as soon as we take an utterance from one context into another, we re-create its meaning (p. 101). We cannot ‘move’ speech to a new textual setting without transforming it. As careful as I try to be, my textual voice influences the expressions of the others, just as theirs’ influences mine. No voice is granted an autonomous moment in the creation of a polyphonic text, for just as we “act jointly” in a living dialogue, we “act jointly” when we respond spontaneously to the words of another through writing. Authorship is a dialogical, collective practice in this “chiasmic realm” (Shotter, 2006a, pp. 52-64).

The intentional.

Much of my response is also intentional as I write *The Playa Dialogue*. As I write what I hear, in the sequential order and the ‘way’ that I hear it, I allow myself the privilege of pausing to respond further. The importance of pausing is frequently part of Anderson’s presentations at the ISI (June 2006, 2007). Following her lead, and the example of her Scandinavian colleagues, I take advantage of the opportunity to “take time”—in this case, time that is not available to me in the live conversation.

My response varies. The simple act of noticing words and phrases we use as I write them constitutes my response to some parts of the dialogue. At other times, I wonder further, I question, grapple, consider an additional perspective, and make connections between the words I hear and my on-going ‘silent’ conversation with my own “inner voices.” Often my written response extends an idea, or moves on from it. I aim to approach this writing performatively, without over-working it, maintaining the focused but conversational genre of speaking we utilize...
within collaborative therapy practice. Keeping in mind expectations of dissertation writing, I aim also to write in ways resonant with the style of our collective speaking together in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Most important, in writing *The Playa Dialogue*, I encounter and interact with the responsive expressions of my colleagues, their words, ideas, gestures, laughter, and, at times, their tears.

**Not-knowing stance.**

In saying my response is intentional I do not mean to suggest it is planned prior to writing. Writing from a collaborative “not-knowing” stance is not writing that “mops up after” inquiry, after ‘knowing’ (Richardson, 1997, pp. 86-95, 2000; Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005, p. 971). I am not writing *up* my response, I am *writing it*, and writing my way *into* it. At the outset of this writing, I have only a vague sense of what might follow. Working from a place of ‘not-knowing’ is familiar to collaborative, conversational practitioners but not-knowing as an approach to writing is very new to me, particularly within the context of social science writing. Perhaps this combination of familiarity and newness accounts for my interest in Laurel Richardson’s and Elizabeth Adams-St. Pierre’s descriptions of writing “as a method of inquiry” (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005). As I see it, Adams-St. Pierre’s (2005) articulation of nomadic ethnographic writing fits well with Anderson’s articulations of a not-knowing stance:

I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytic induction. This was rhizomatic work (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) in which I made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not foresee or control…. *Thought happened in the writing*. As I wrote, I watched word after
word appear on the computer screen—ideas, theories, I had not thought before I wrote them (p. 970).

This account reminds me also of author Jonathan Raban’s writing process, which in turn, reminds me of my own dissertation writing process: “I write books for the same reason people read them,” he claims, “which is to find out what happens next (Yagoda, 2004, p. 144).

The challenge of responsive writing.

Writing responsively as I do in writing The Playa Dialogue is not only unplanned and formed ‘in the moment’; it is a slow and laborious process for me. How can it be spontaneous and laborious both? In responding to our group dialogue in Playa del Carmen I am not adding an independent “solo” line that I can develop as I wish, “following my bliss” as we say. I do not cloister my writing in a “Findings” or “Discussion” essay, nor in paragraph form at the end of the dialogue, nor as an introduction preceding it. Rather I am responding directly into the flow of a particular dialogue. My voice must be resonant with the ‘melodic’ lines already in play; it must neither duplicate nor diminish any other voices. I must work respectfully and attentively within the possibilities and constraints inherent in the Playa dialogue, situating my work within the complex and dynamic space between what has been said, and what might still be said. In this way the writing is at once responsive, expressive, and anticipatory; it must relate to the past, present and future within the dialogue, and it must do so in a sequential orderly way that earns trust (Rawls, 2006, p. 30).

Writing responsively in this way demands my sustained engagement with four “others”—first, with my interlocutors’ utterances, including their words, their intonation, and their manner of speaking. Second, the process calls for a high level of involvement in the conversation itself. I write into the tempo of the interchange, into its silences, its rhythm and flow, its varying
intensities. Through my involvement within the dialogue, I gain a sense of it as a felt presence with a particular character and agency ‘in its own right’. Third, writing responsively also demands I actively give myself to the subject of our inquiry—the question prompting our dialogues, the phenomena we wish to understand more practically. With our inquiry, we enter and shape the subject of our study, just as it in turn, *in-forms* us (Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007). Fourth, I must listen to my ‘inner’ conversation as I hear the recorded dialogue that took place in Playa del Carmen. I must notice, always, what is happening for me as I listen to our recorded conversation. How is it touching me? What does it elicit from me? What is capturing my attention? These questions are more relevant for me as I write, than the question of “what can I do with this material?”

*Writing to Listen: “Addressive Surplus”*

Much of the labour of writing responsively is in the activity/event of listening. In writing *the Playa Dialogue*, I am writing to listen. I exuberantly agree with Goldberg’s (2005) claim that writing is “… 90 percent listening. You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you” (p. 90). Perhaps we more readily associate response with speaking than with listening. Yet, in responding to my colleagues’ voices through writing, I believe I am using writing to listen as much as I am writing to speak, just as therapist and writer, Lois Shawyer construes dialogical *speaking* as *listening* (as cited in Hoffman, 2002, p. 247). Similarly, when our written expressions respond to the utterances of the others, our writing can become an act of listening. From this perspective, listening is not the work of the ears only; the whole body can become “all ears” as the colloquial expression suggests; the whole body participates in the act of listening. Perhaps when we say we are touched or moved by the utterance of an other, we acknowledge listening as more than auditory process—and more than
the action of a single body. Such listening is improvised in collaboration with the bodily
movements of our conversational partners.

In my efforts to write responsively, I want to achieve what Morson and Emerson (1990)
call “addressive surplus” (p. 242) —listening that generously exceeds the pragmatic
requirements within a particular dialogue: “The addressive surplus is the surplus of the good
listener, one capable of “live entering” (Bakhtin, 1984c, p. 299).

This surplus is never used as an ambush, as a chance to sneak up and attack from behind.
This is an honest and open surplus, dialogically revealed to the other person, a surplus
expressed by the addressed and not secondhand word (p. 299).

Bakhtin (1984a) describes such surplus as avoiding mergences of characters—voices must never
collapse into one another, and neither should any character be “finalized.” Addressive surplus,
“the surplus of the good listener,” retains the multivoiced, open-ended quality of dialogue, rather
than an “objectivized” and finalized image of a dialogue” (p. 63).

Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, (2006) —authors and creative writing educators—
present the following question: “How can we write from and beyond the group to whom we
belong” (p. 167)? My interest is in writing from the group, to the group, but most important, with
and within the group to whom I belong, the group of collaborative therapists that join me in this
shared effort to articulate the influence of our practices for ourselves. I use writing to engage
with the dialogues in this project, just as I involve myself in the dialogues comprising
collaborative therapy practice. Like a collaborative therapist, I respond into the conversational
context created by this project, doing what it seems to call for, following where it seems to lead
listen to the dialogues in this project, to enter them, participate within them, and respond to them.
And, just as in collaborative therapy practice, new practical ways of ‘going on’ become visible to us as our voices intermingle again “for ‘another first time’” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9).

**Divergence From Qualitative Research Methodology**

The remainder of our chapter uses *comparison* to illuminate differences between our project’s dialogic methods of inquiry and conventional methodology within qualitative social inquiry. Bakhtin (1986) writes of the usefulness of difference: “A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures” (p. 7). Likewise, Wittgenstein’s methods, as we note earlier, frequently employ comparison (Shotter, 2006b, pp. 52-73). Constructing social inquiry as a dialogic-responsive event rather than analytic, cognitive achievement creates several departures from the usual practice of qualitative research.

**Diverging From Research ‘Report’ Writing**

Although *The Playa Dialogue* is written as I listen to each moment of the recording of our conversation, I am not attempting to create a third-person report of our first dialogue in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Joining Bakhtin (1984), I wish to claim, “This is no stenographer’s report of a finished dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and over which he is now located as if in some higher decision-making position…” (p. 63). To report the dialogue using the “indirect speech” (Tannen, 1989, p. 25) of a single textual voice located outside of it, is, for Bakhtin, “‘transcribing away’ the ‘eventness’” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 236) of the dialogical occasion. “Everything about it that makes it particular, unfinalizable, and open to multiple unforeseen possibilities” (p. 236) can be so easily lost in the writing process. Rather,
The Playa Dialogue is written with “direct speech” (Tannen, 1989, p. 25) in attempt to present the “plurality” of “unmerged voices” in the original spoken dialogue without closure or reduction. Dialogue, claims Tannen (1989), is not a general report (p. 133), “… it is particular, and the particular enables listeners (or readers) to create their understanding by drawing on their own history of associations. By giving voice to characters, dialogue makes story into drama…” (p. 133). Listeners and readers who create their understanding as they encounter the voices of others are actively participating in the dialogue, and as we discuss earlier, participation and involvement is crucial to understanding dialogue dialogically.

Diverging From Representation of Others

Likewise, in writing The Playa Dialogue I do not strive to create a representation of the living dialogue in Playa del Carmen. Dialogue, written or spoken, is unrepeatable; each time we return to engage with the Playa Dialogue text, we encounter it again from a different moment in time, within a new, developing context; we find it is becoming something other than what it seemed to initially be.

In the field of qualitative research, multiple writers speak of “the crisis of representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, pp. 18-20; Fine & Weiss, 2002, pp. 267-297; Finley, 2005, pp. 681-694; Gergen, 1994, pp. 30-63; Richardson, 1997, p. 13) questioning the “do-ability” and “should-do-ability” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 9-10) of representing ‘other’ and otherness in social inquiry (Bava, 2007). In their discussion of the “rights of representation” in qualitative research, Gergen and Gergen (2000a) observe,

Critical reflection on the empiricist program has provoked a second roiling of the qualitative waters, in this case over issues of representation, its control, responsibilities, and ramifications…. Increasingly painful questions are confronted: To what extent does
research convert the commonsense, unscrutinized realities of the culture to disciplinary
discourse? In what ways does research empower the discipline as opposed to those under
study? When is the researcher exploiting his or her subjects for purposes of personal or
institutional prestige? Does research serve agencies of surveillance, increasing their
capacities of control over the research subject (pp. 1033-1034)?

In Bakhtin’s (1984a) study of the novel, second-hand representation is considered most
undesirable, part of the legacy of monological speech. For Bakhtin, characters must have the
dignity and the agency to exist—to “mean directly” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 238)—to
‘announce’ themselves, for themselves, on terms negotiated with the author and other characters.
They develop in relation to one another, speaking in their ‘own’ voices; the author of a dialogical
text cannot possibly speak “for” a character. Rather, each character, responding within a
particular relational context, retains an independence from the author, demonstrating an ability to
act in surprising and unpredictable ways. It is not as though the author occupies no position:
“The issue here is not an absence of, but a radical change in, the author’s position… (Bakhtin,
1984a, p. 67). As an author of this dialogical dissertation text I am also bound by the same
standard; I must not use my voice to represent the voice of another. “The direct power to mean…
belongs to several voices in a polyphonic work” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 239).

A social construction perspective might counter: “To what extent is Bakhtin’s (1981,
1984, 1986) dialogic ideal possible?” Meaning is always multi-voiced, always a shared
accomplishment; No one enjoys the privilege of meaning directly: “… an other is required to
supplement the action and thus give it a function within the relationship” (Gergen, 1994, p. 264).
As Bakhtin (1981) himself writes, “The word in language is half someone else’s (p. 293).
Perhaps intention is important here. While textual account of the spoken dialogue in Playa
cannot be entirely free from re-presentational elements, it is not my intention to represent the
living dialogue as it initially happened. I anticipate my best efforts would fail; a reproduction can
never be a production, just as representation is not presentation. I find Tyler’s (1986) writing
helpful at this juncture. He proposes ‘evocation’ as an alternative to representation, calling for
text that

... is no longer cursed with the task of representation. The key word in understanding this
difference is “evoke,” for if a discourse can be said to “evoke,” then it need not represent
what it evokes…. Since evocation is non-representational, it is not to be understood as a
sign function, for it is not a “symbol of,” nor does it “symbolize” what it evokes (p. 129).

Further, Tyler notes evocative texts do not call into being those things presumed absent.
“Evocation” as he sees it, is not a link between past and present, but rather, “evocation is a unity,
a single event or process, and we must resist the temptation of grammar that would make us
think that the prepositional form “x evokes y” (p. 130). Drawing on Tyler’s idea, we need not
think of The Playa Dialogue as representing the spoken dialogue, nor does it evoke the living
dialogue as though spoken dialogue and written account of it are two entirely independent
processes. Rather we can imagine the subsequent written account as continuous with the spoken
dialogue in June 2005. I am drawn to the term “evoke” because it seems to resonate with our
everyday experience of spoken and silent conversation; we frequently evoke and extend spoken
interchange through our inner, unspoken conversations, particularly when the utterances voiced
move or touch us in some way.

**Diverging From Analysis**

Just as we anticipate analysis will follow the production of interview data, we might
anticipate our spoken dialogue in Playa would similarly be subjected to analysis, a major feature
of most qualitative research in the social sciences (Creswell, 1998). Sociologists Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont (2004) state, “We want data to be analyzed and not just reproduced and celebrated… (p. 822). Analysis usually requires the social investigator to shift focus. Researchers Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) describe the analytical phase of ethnography, for example, as a time of repositioning for the researcher, a time of turning away from participants and “local scenes.” When moving into the analytical phase of the inquiry

… the ethnographer turns away from local scenes and their participants, from relations formed and personal debts incurred in the field. Now an author working at her desk, she reviews her recordings of members’ everyday experiences and reorients to her fieldnotes as texts to be analyzed… (p. 169).

This project offers no systematic analysis of the dialogues within it. Collaborative therapy practice is a movement away from analytical traditions in the psychotherapeutic domain (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). The practitioners in this project do not function as analysts of people’s lives, their words, and their circumstances. We have lost faith that such analysis draws forward the essence of a particular situation; further, we do not think in terms of “essences,” nor fixed and hidden-in-the-depths “cores” (Gergen, 1991, pp. 41-47; Hoffman, 1992, p. 18). Inviting a movement away from analysis, Shotter (2006a) writes:

When confronted with a perplexing, disorienting, bewildering, or astonishing (!) circumstance, we take it that our task is to analyze it (i.e., dissect it) into a unique set of separate elements, to find a pattern… and then to try to invent a theoretical schematism… to account for the pattern so observed…. We seek ‘the content’ supposed to be hidden in the ‘forms’ before us, by offering ‘interpretations’ to ‘represent’ this content. In short, we formulate the circumstance in question as a ‘problem’ requiring a ‘solution’ or
‘explanation…. But to the extent that this style of thought is based in mental representations of our own creation, it leads us into adopting a certain relationship to the phenomena before us: Instead of leading us to look over them or into them more closely, from this way and that way, it (mis)leads us into first turning ourselves away from them, while we cudgel our brains in the attempt to construct an appropriate theoretical schematism into which to fit them (p. 124).

How different from the dialogical, withness stance and participatory shared inquiry methods of the collaborative therapist.

Continual participation.

In research methods congruent with the shared inquiry process of conversational, collaborative therapy practice, dialogical understanding happens within the ongoing flow of our interactive engagement within the interactive event. Dialogue yields “not a system” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 93), not a finalized end product, but “a concrete event made up of organized human orientations and voices” (p. 93), a participatory process all throughout. Anderson (2007b) also underscores the importance of sustaining a participatory stance: “The participatory nature of the conversational partnership is of prime significance” (p. 45). “We cannot be meta to an event or to a therapy conversation. We simply participate in it,” she writes (Anderson, 1997, p. 115).

Likewise, Rawls (2006) insists, “In order for the observation to have any validity, the observer must remain embedded in the action and not ask either themselves or the parties observed to answer questions that would take them out of the action” (p. 18). We maintain the same expectation in this present inquiry.
Alternative to thematic analysis.

*The Playa Dialogue* is not part of an effort to identify thematic structure, regularities and patterns, an undertaking of central importance within most qualitative research, particularly within “realist” traditions wherein words are believed to directly “stand for things.” Qualitative researcher Valerie Janesick (2000) advises,

… categories, themes, and patterns come from the data. The categories that emerge from field notes, documents, and interviews are not imposed prior to data collection. Early on, the researcher must develop a system for coding and categorizing the data (p. 389).

Themes are traditionally determined through the use of numerical criteria; words that are repeated most frequently are presumed to hold greater significance than those appearing less often (Tesch, 1990, p. 80). Identifying themes secures a particular hierarchy; it finalizes an order of “clout” within research “findings;” “themes” at the top, sub-themes beneath, and material belonging to neither is often un-named. “Categorization or classification…” says research educator Renata Tesch (1990), “is a way of knowing…” (p. 135).

Identifying themes and sub-themes is, in contrast, not necessary to understanding within the shared inquiry between collaborative therapists and their clients. “Typifications are also essentially irrelevant to an understanding of how practice-based structures work,” suggests Rawls, (2006, p. 90) articulating the features of Garfinkel’s ‘folk methods’. Within dialogism, meaning, and thus the naming of themes is unfinalizable, fluid, local, multiple. “Themes” within a living interactive process are always slipping, “leaking,” always morphing into something else. Part of the “surprisingness” of dialogue is the experience of not-knowing with any certainty what will be most significant for us (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 38). Within an emerging dialogic process, we assume that significance will continue to change. Instead of organizing and
stabilizing the dialogue-data by labelling portions with fixed titles, we respond to what captures
our attention ‘on the run’ as we relate to the dialogue within each interactive moment. Each time
we engage with it, different aspects strike us, and we, in turn, respond differently within each
encounter in the dialogue. This is true also for the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy. We do
not find it necessary to dissect the dialogues comprising our practices into separate parts. The
inquiry is always in motion; we begin to understand the utterances of our conversational partners
within the open-ended flow of our interactions together.

“Patience and a knowledge of details.”

The shared inquiry of collaborative therapy takes place within the details of people’s
lives. People discuss persons by name, they speak often of brief, specific moments in time; they
narrate stories setting particular scenes, using specific imagery; they do not come to discuss a
concern regarding “life in general.” The collaborative therapist meets the client within that detail.
While collaborative therapists could discuss the inquiries comprising their practices in abstract,
conceptual terms, the moment-to-moment work of collaborative therapy is an interchange
focused on the particularity of particular people’s lives. Often we find it is not the conspicuous
content of the conversation that arrests our attention, but rather something seemingly by the
wayside, or perhaps an utterance barely spoken at all. At times what proves most generative or
influential ‘lies waiting’ in the playful domains of the accidental and coincidental. David Pare
(2004) suggests specificity may be “… our most precious resource. It’s the texture and tone of
the particular that opens unforeseen possibilities” (Strong & Pare, 2004b, p. 10). Bakhtin (1993)
urges such attention to unrepeatable detail, suggesting,
It is an unfortunate misunderstanding (a legacy of rationalism) to think that truth can only be the truth that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it (p. 37).

In his call for “a social science that matters,” Danish scholar and practitioner, Bent Flyvbjerg’s (2001) ideal of practical wisdom (phronesis) makes particularity the priority, focusing “… on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules…” (p. 57). Unlike ‘theoretical’ understanding, understanding dialogically is tied to specific persons within a specific place and time; a phronetic social science is highly sensitive to its context (p. 165). Such sensitivity is not in pursuit of grandiosity; it is not pompous. “Phronetic researchers begin their work by phenomenologically asking “little questions” (p. 133). Citing Nietzsche and Foucault, Flyvbjerg emphasizes the importance of “patience and a knowledge of details…” (p. 133) echoing anthropologist Clifford Geertz’ disdain for approaches that extract “the general from the particular and then set(s) the particular aside …” (p. 133). It is the very presence of detail that allows us to generate practical understanding of phenomena. Perhaps this is in part, because the sharing of detail invites intimate involvement, a crucial requirement for understanding in conversational discourse (Tannen, 1989, pp. 134-165). “Alterative” ethnographer Arthur Bochner (2002), similarly claims detail in abundance helps him understand and feel with a story (p. 263). “First, I look for abundant, concrete detail; concern not only for the commonplace, even trivial routines of everyday life, but also for the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life’s contingencies; not only facts but also feelings” (Bochner, 2002, p. 263). Rawls (2006), articulating Garfinkel’s passion for detail, writes that a “practice-based view” requires a major shift in the way we view the world:
With sufficient attention to practices in details we can learn to see what we have been doing all along, to see this in a new way, to see the details of situated practice, rather than performing conceptual reductions—a practice of Seeing Sociologically (pp. 90-91).

**Diverging from Distillation Processes**

The Playa Dialogue is not the prelude to a “real science” to follow. It is not the first step in a distillation process taking us from the complexity and commotion of an emerging, living, dialogical interchange to something more manageable, something finished and complete, a process of “pseudo-scientific reductionism” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 101). I am not wanting to “rise above” the dialogue (Bergson as cited in Shotter, 2005b, p. 2) to attain a kind of “disembodied subjectivity”; nor am I searching for something “radically hidden” in its depths, or, as Shotter suggests—an “ideal, orderly state of affairs existing in reality, in itself, independently of any relations we might have to it (Shotter, 2005b, p. 2). This project is not moving towards the generation of a static “research product” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 39)—a framework, model, system, summary, a picture, explanatory theory, an interpretation (Rawls, 2006, pp. 64-65; Shotter, 2004; Wittgenstein, 1953/2001). Although some readers may consider this work “interpretive,” it is not my primary intention to create an interpretation of our dialogue in Playa del Carmen. It is not my interest to turn from the living interchange begun in Playa towards the production of a thing—in Garfinkel’s words, “an artificial device” (Garfinkel, 2006c, p. 128).

With Garfinkel, Rawls (2006) proposes that the social scientist’s habit of “reducing” the lived detail of our social lives to abstract “concepts, typifications, or models” (p. 6) does not capture the phenomena under study, but rather loses it entirely (see also Shotter, 2006b, pp. 72-81). Rawls articulates Garfinkel’s commitment to understanding social life through ‘witnessable’
detail, carried out by real persons, in real time, in particular contexts, rather than through social science abstractions built retrospectively:

It has been Garfinkel’s point from beginning to end that approaches which reduce the detail of social life to concepts, typifications, or models lose the phenomena altogether. They end up focusing on the self as a carrier of concepts instead of on the situations in which they are given meaning. Learning to see differently sociologically means learning to see social orders in their details as they are achieved in real time by persons through the enactment of those details, instead of through conceptual glosses on those details after the fact (Rawls, 2006, p. 6).

Resonant with Garfinkel and Rawls, Anderson (2007) reminds us of the way newness comes into being in the dialogical shared inquiry of collaborative therapy:

Therapist and client construct something new with each other. The something new is not an outcome or a product at the end of the encounter. It continually emerges throughout the duration of the encounter while at the same time informing it and continuing afterwards. That is, each conversation will be a springboard for future ones… (p. 52).

We demonstrate understanding of the dialogues comprising our practices by the ways we participate within them, in the ways we ‘go on from’ the utterances of our conversational partners and ourselves. Practitioner and client do not attempt to create an end product in order to finalize their dialogues or represent them in some way. Wittgenstein (1980a) seems to voice a similar perspective as he suggests we “falsify” phenomena when we complete what is inherently incomplete:

Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered color-patches, and
said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape.—Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it) (p. 52).

**Diverging from the Production of a Narrative**

The Playa Dialogue is not an attempt to establish a new and better narrative of therapy practice. Initially this idea appealed to me; at the start of this project I invited colleagues to join me in creating “a narrative” in one of my first invitational letters, dated June 2005:

The purpose of this collective case study is to co-create a poly-vocal, multi-cultural narrative of postmodern, collaborative therapy as generative and transformative for therapists. This research forms a central part of my PhD program requirements for the Taos Institute-University of Tilburg Doctoral Program (Appendix E).

Dialogue and narrative share numerous features and storytelling undoubtedly permeates our conversational therapy practices; stories often emerge dialogically in a ‘back and forth’ sequence as people ‘tell’ together. Everyday conversation is saturated with story. As practitioners, we also rely heavily on stories as we speak of our work. But throughout this project I have come to hold the view that dialogue and narrative also differ in important ways.

Narrative, often told by a single speaker, generally requires more coherence and more dramatic content than dialogue. Dialogue, inherently multi-voiced, tends to be less predictable in its unfolding, and tends to concern ordinary events (Morson, & Emerson, 1990, p. 34). Dialogue proceeds sequentially, turn by turn, and yet is not driven by an overarching plot or scheme. Its outcomes are utterly unpredictable at the outset. Dialogue can be characterized by an uncombed ‘inefficiency’ that narrative often cannot afford; dialogue makes room for “dead ends,” and tangents. Although I am narrating an account of the dialogue that took place in Playa del
Carmen, it is not my primary intention to create a coherent narrative that might inspire understanding of our project question. Rather, in *narrating* the dialogue, I engage with it again, responding to it and ‘into’ it, in a mutually influencing exchange rich with possibilities I could not construct on my own (Shotter & Katz, 2004a). Narrating the dialogue allows me to ‘go on from it’, demonstrating understanding in action, and understanding as action, in other words, it shows *dialogic* understanding.

*‘Summarizing’ Remarks*

Just as in a collaborative ‘therapy’ conversation—and in any intimate dialogue—I respond spontaneously to our project dialogues without a pre-determined methodology to tell me when or how. As I write and listen, certain words and phrases in the conversation announce and assert themselves, make demands, and issue pleas, evoking at times an explosion of additional words or ideas. In an utterly inter-subjective, uneven process, the words I encounter seemingly call out to me, each with a different invitation. At times, I sense the other speakers and listeners are touched by a particular word or utterance, and so I allow my self to be drawn further into those moments in the conversation. Sometimes I am ‘taken by’ the manner or tone in which something is said, and the way the group seems to receive it. I do not plan-out or engineer my response nor interrogate it; I simply follow and surrender into it.

As we have discussed, Shotter and Katz (1996) refer to such “*relational-poetic*” talking as “*the practice of a social poetics,*” a way of meeting people quite familiar to us all in our daily lives (Shotter & Katz, 1999, p. 1) and familiar to collaborative therapists in daily practice. Drawing on a ‘social poetics’ set of methods, I do not set out to work through the dialogue systematically, ‘translate’ it, interpret it, organize it, winnow the ‘riff-raff’ out of it in order to create a distilled representation of it; I do not gather words spoken as things to collect and
represent in another setting. Rather a fundamentally different inter-action occurs; I shape the dialogues within this project as I respond to them, while the dialogues, in turn, in-form me, a reciprocal process. I encountered the following proposal early in this collaborative inquiry and have never lost sight of it:

If we abandon the traditional goal of research as the accumulation of products—static or frozen findings—and replace it with the generation of communicative process, then a chief aim of research becomes that of establishing productive forms of relationship. The researcher ceases to be a passive bystander who generates representational products…. Rather, he or she becomes an active participant in forging generative, communicative relationships, in building ongoing dialogues and expanding the domain of civic deliberation (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1039).

**Questioning the Legitimacy of Dialogical Methods of Inquiry**

In the absence of a pre-established, guiding methodology, how can we be certain our inquiry is adequate, valid, and legitimate? By what criteria shall we evaluate our situational, dialogical methods? We cannot answer these questions in a single or simple way. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) remind us of the increasing conflict concerning qualitative methodology in the epilogue to their comprehensive third Handbook of Qualitative inquiry:

We have called the current moment the *methodologically contested present*, and we have described it as a time of great tension, substantial conflict, methodological retrenchment in some quarters, and the disciplining and regulation of inquiry practices to conform with conservative neoliberal programs and regimes that make claims regarding Truth (p. 1116).
At the same time, Denzin and Lincoln claim inquiry contexts are increasingly “open and varied as a growing number of people wish to launch their inquiries within “a communitarian sensibility…” (p. 1116). “The search for “culturally sensitive” research approaches—approaches that are attuned to the specific cultural practices of various groups… is already underway (p. 1123). In my view, this present project is an example of a research approach attuned to the practices of a particular group.

**Not-Knowing and the Question of Legitimacy**

To address the question of legitimacy within this project, I turn first to the collaborative, conversational practices and philosophies I share with my therapist-colleagues in this project (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). As we note earlier, inquiry in collaborative practice proceeds from a place of not-knowing, not as preliminary to a more rigorous or objective scientific knowledge, but as an on-going way to invite generative dialogue. While modernist therapeutic practice teaches therapists to systematically and strategically lead their clients through pre-formed sequences towards pre-determined outcomes, collaborative practitioners, like *bricoleurs* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp. 4-6; McLeod, 2000) improvise with local ‘materials’ already ‘on-hand’, available in abundance within each conversational context. Our methods are unplanned and unique to each conversational inquiry; we make no advance claims about knowing how best to respond within the shared inquiries comprising our therapeutic practices. “Therapy conversations, like everyday conversations, weave back and forth; they do not follow linear paths” (Anderson & Burney, 2004, p. 10). Uncertainty and tentativity accompany us in every moment. Questions of legitimacy take on new meaning amongst collaborative therapists who premise their work on not-knowing. We are continually asking our conversational partners and ourselves, “Is this conversation useful, generative, helpful
in any way? Does our conversation together seem to make a practical difference? What is needed? What appears to be working? The collaborative therapists’ methods continually vary according to the shifting requirements, possibilities and constraints within each unique dialogue and so, similarly, for the collaborative therapist, the legitimacy of a method cannot be established once and for all.

**Dismissing the Question of Legitimacy**

McNamee (2004) observes challenges related to legitimacy often turn into a “… debate format in which one truth oppresses another—all couched in that old tradition of persuasion” (p. 18) as modernist and ‘postmodernist’ perspectives both attempt to discredit and disregard opposing perspectives. Kvale (2002) notes many qualitative researchers have come to simply ignore questions related to legitimacy, dismissing them as “… oppressive positivist concepts, hampering a creative and emancipatory qualitative research” (p. 301). In his invitations to a “poetic social science,” ethnographer Arthur Bochner (2002) reflects critically on what he describes as an obsessive preoccupation with criteria in the social sciences:

> Frankly, I find most of the incessant talk about criteria to be boring, tedious, and unproductive. Why do we always seem to be drawn back to the same familiar questions: “How do you know?” “Which methods are the right ones to use?” “What criteria should be applied?” For most of my academic life—almost 30 years—I have been baffled by this obsessive focus on criteria (p. 258).

Bochner (2002) reminds us the social sciences have established no single criteria for evaluating the legitimacy of method. Claiming criteria are made, not found, Bochner joins Geertz calling for methods “… in which investigators are liberated to shape their work in terms of its own necessities rather than according to received ideas about what must be done” (Geertz (1980))
as cited in Bochner, 2002, p. 261). Shotter and Katz (2004b) seem to articulate Geertz’ perspective using other words: “If we are to let “something” speak to us of itself, of its own inner “shape,” we need to follow where it leads, to allow ourselves to be moved in a way answerable to its calls” (p. 78). We cannot impose a “shape” formed in advance.

**Evaluation as Internal and Incremental**

In my view, evaluative “criteria” emerge continually and incrementally from within each social inquiry process whether in collaborative therapy or more formal inquiries in academic settings. Evaluative criteria are sensed, felt, communal and fluid, created in the back and forth of dialogical interchange according to the unique constraints and possibilities inherent in each conversation. Andersen’s (1995) discussion of the ‘usual’ and the ‘unusual’ in therapeutic dialogue provides us with an example of evaluation inherent in conversational interchange. If the practitioner’s utterance is too unusual for the client, it will not “make a difference,” just as what is too *usual* is likely to be ineffectual (p. 15); participants in dialogue demonstrate their evaluation of the communicative moves of their conversational partners as they either decline or “take up” and build on what they hear spoken in conversation (Strong, 2006, p. 7). Such evaluation within conversation is often finely nuanced. As McNamee (2004) suggests, participants in relational processes of meaning making are less concerned with the most ‘legitimate’ way to proceed in practice. Rather they give their attention to “… the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each brings to the current context” (p. 18).

Kvale (2002) endorses a position regarding the question of legitimacy that is neither one of extreme relativism nor positivist belief in a universal truth. I am drawn to his call for an “affirmative” approach that “… accepts the possibility of specific, local, personal, and
community forms of truth, with a focus on daily life and the local narrative” (p. 302)—an understanding of validity that begins “… in the lived world and daily language, where issues of reliable witnesses, of valid documents and arguments, are part of the social interaction,” (p. 302) rather than external to it. Method, like all truth, cannot be discovered once and for all, but rather, each inquiry must move forward in ways responsive to a particular, local, relational and conversational context. As Shotter (2006a) writes,

> We want a truth in practice, here and now, that is appropriate to our current, local circumstances, that does not (mis)-lead us into treating them as ‘really’ being other than they in fact ‘are’, due to our imposing on them a speculative theory of our own (p. 106).

Kvale (2002) suggests further that “appeals to external certification, or validity stamps of approval…” are rendered irrelevant within inquiries “so powerful and convincing in their own right that they carry the validation with them, such as a strong piece of art” (p. 323). Further, he imagines,

> A stronger way out of the validation paradox is to live in ways that go beyond a pervasive distrust and skepticism of social interaction and the nature of the social world. This amounts to creating communities where validity does not become a primary question in social relations, neither in the scientific community nor in society at large. The question then becomes how shall we live so that we do not have to continually pose questions of validity (p. 323).

In this project my practitioner colleagues and I fashion ways of proceeding that seem appropriate and useful within the unique context of this particular inquiry; we do so intentionally, and also, beyond our intentions as we respond ‘in the moment’ to the needs of this developing inquiry. We are not so different from others; qualitative researchers commonly
modify and improvise familiar methods or create new approaches to inquiry (Chenail, 1995). Our collaborative methods for generating understanding are responsive to our linguistic and geographical diversities, our orientations as dialogical practitioners, and the multiple communities that will evaluate this work. Rather than totally dismissing the question of legitimacy, collaborative practitioners continually question their inquiries as they continually attend to the emerging process that is unique to each dialogue. Questioning the usefulness of the process of inquiry happens “locally” within each dialogue, not in an effort to create a universally acceptable methodology, but rather as a way of collaboratively evaluating process, and correspondingly, calibrating the method of inquiry continually (Strong, 2005, pp. 22-23). I agree fully with Law (2006):

The guarantees, the gold standards, proposed for and by methods, will no longer suffice.

We need to find ways of elaborating quiet methods, slow methods, or modest methods. In particular, we need to discover ways of making methods without accompanying imperialisms (p. 14).

We need dialogical approaches to inquiry that respond to the uniqueness and fluidity characterizing each developing social inquiry project, methods that are familiar and important to the people who come together to participate in the collaborative effort to understand, and methods of inquiry practiced by all of us as we encounter and interact with the ‘other’ and otherness around us in every day. The goal of such an approach is to participate in “the ongoing dialogue and praxis in a society rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 139).
Looking Back, Looking Forward

Review

We have been discussing our project’s method of inquiry as an extension of the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy, a process more closely aligned with social poetics methods than systematic qualitative research methodology. We began our text with my narration of the spoken dialogue that took place with project participants in Playa del Carmen in June 2005. We then asked, “How shall we try to understand the dialogues in this project?” Will conventional qualitative methods of analysis, distillation, and the production of an end product suffice? We opt, instead, to take our cues from the collaborative therapist’s ways of understanding dialogue.

We portray the dialogue of collaborative therapy as an open-ended, in-motion, participatory process. Collaborative practitioners work from moving positions within each dialogue, attempting to arrive at “do-able” relational, understandings, not abstract conceptualizations taking the form of theories, frameworks, models or systematizations of any kind. Primarily, like their clients, collaborative therapists function as respondents within each dialogue, responding to both ‘the ordinary’ and the “striking moments” within the conversation, responding to the movement of an other, responding into a particular conversational situation, from within it. We have used Shotter and Katz’ (1996) social poetics methods to understand in more vivid detail the mutual responsivity ‘in play’ within each collaborative shared inquiry.

In the last section of our chapter, we began to address the question of legitimacy, proposing neither a complete disregard for the topic, nor a return to the positivist belief in truth-through-method. Rather, we respond to questions of methodological legitimacy continually within each inquiry, seeking internal, everyday, local and communal signs of generativity and practical utility rather than external, universal, stamps of approval.
Preparing for the Next Chapter’s Return to One Segment of the Playa Dialogue

Before we move into the second part of this dissertation, I would like to return to one part of the Playa Dialogue that troubled me as a participant in it, and stirs my curiosity as I listen to my recording of it after. The following chapter develops as I again encounter and interact with this particular segment of the audio-recorded dialogue. I listen and write from the vantage point of February 2007, and from the vantage point of the initial spoken dialogue of June 2005. Not wanting to write “about” it, interpret or analyze it but rather invite “withness” understandings (Shotter, 2006b), I use what I earlier refer to as responsive writing to engage with it again for “another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). Active response, as we propose throughout this dissertation, is crucial to understanding dialogue dialogically.

As I listen, I write what I hear and I pause to write response to what I hear. Frequently I replay parts of the conversation, allowing myself to stay longer with words or moments that move or touch me in some way. I enter into the conversation and notice the changing tones in our voices, our quickening pace and increasing tension as we find ourselves in the misunderstanding and “dissensus” that is part of every understanding (Nikulin, 2006, pp. 52-53; Shotter, 2006, p. 10).

I am present in the chapter that follows in two different locations in time: My February 2007 response is marked with a corresponding date and written throughout in unbracketted italicized text while my initial June 2005 response as a face-to-face participant in the dialogue is indicated with my first name, just as the other participant voices are marked with names. Again, my name is the only project-participant name that has not been changed to conceal identity. This last interaction with the face-to-face group dialogue in Playa del Carmen takes us to the end of
part 1 in this dissertation text, and returns us to our central research question: How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself?
Chapter 5

Returning Again to the Playa Dialogue of June 2005:

Responding to Differences

“Ordinary, unsystematizable events are hard to study. Indeed they are very difficult even to notice”
(Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 34).

This part of the recorded Playa dialogue begins with silence. Out of that silence, birds call, and then, more silence. I have pressed “play” and am now listening, leaning forward, sitting quietly. In this present chapter, I write what I hear, and interact with what I hear, pausing the dialogue intermittently to write response. I respond to the dialogue and into the dialogue because I want to understand it dialogically, through active response, the way the collaborative practitioners in this project understand the dialogues comprising their everyday practices. As I listen and write, I notice I am still captivated by this part of our spoken conversation in Playa del Carmen.

Emelie is about to speak of the challenge this project poses:

Emelie: One difficulty I have is this way of working—being more a philosophical stance—is so much a part of me that its very hard to—when I try to describe it, it is illusive, it goes away. Only when something happens—when there really is a question that sort of makes a fork… the difference becomes visible.

Janice Responds, February 2007: Yes—is the invitation to describe our experience of our practice like an invitation to describe our breathing, or our heartbeats? Wittgenstein (1953) quotes Augustine’s famous remarks about time as something that we profess to understand, that is, until someone asks us to give an account of time, and then we find, surprisingly, we do not know; we have little to say (p. 36). As you know, collaborative therapists readily affirm the
mutual influence of dialogue, and yet we find it enormously challenging to articulate this specifically, in everyday, practical terms.

You say your way of being in practice is a part of you, so much a part of you that when you try to describe it, it goes away. And I agree, our ways of working are so much a part of us. But the last of your statement mystifies me: Why does it ‘go away’ in our efforts to describe it? If we found a place to begin together, would the first tentative step lead to another? You note it is often in coming up against a “difference” that makes “a fork” that detail of your own experience become visible. How similar to Bakhtin’s (1986) view that things (texts) show themselves most fully in encounters with difference (p. 162). Here I think of the incremental growth of children’s bodies and how this miraculous event proceeds every ordinary day without our notice until suddenly, shirt sleeves and pant legs are visibly too short, shoes begin to hurt, or another tooth separates from the gums! Is this the way transformation occurs—quietly and without our notice, until we encounter a surprising difference, a difference that “makes a fork” or sounds an alarm, and then we notice we have changed and cannot change back?

Still I return to that sense you have that ‘it’ goes away in the effort to bring it into language. Should we not expect the opposite supposed to happen—to speak of it is to invoke it, to call it forward, to constitute it again through language? I am reminded of Wittgenstein’s comment (1980a): “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background…” (p.16). Shotter (2006a) also writes of the difficulty of accurately portraying this “simple and natural” everyday reality into words:

Such ‘eventings’ are so simple and natural, so much an everyday part of our feelingful way of ‘going on’ with the others and othernesses around us, yet they are very hard to portray accurately in words…. Yet although they must always startle us, and are capable
of changing our lives in irreversible quantum jumps… they are in fact a perfectly normal aspect of our everyday lives (p. 89).

**Aiden:** *(starts out softly)* Another part of my experience of doing this work is the shared experience of the rock going off my back in terms of what I need to know before I start, but also in terms of what I need to steer it towards in the future. There is not the need to resolve contradictions to end up at a particular place. And this involves hope and freedom, certainly hope. And trust in people’s ability to do their own work.

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** Aiden, I am so delighted with these ongoing references to the “Pepila therapist” who dares to remove the rock *(representing knowledge in Abelinda’s wonderful historical story)*. Are your words are informed by your practice-focus of working with people who struggle with addictions? I think your comment is relevant to this entire dissertation project, especially the start of our project dialogues, where we are all ‘groping in the dark’ wondering how we might approach our project question, which at this point, seems to feel elusive. What if we were able to be free of the stones of knowledge we carry with us in academic shared inquiry? What if we did not have to “resolve contradictions” and pursue any particular ending?

**Abigail:** *(turning to Aiden)* You think of an image *(pause)* and I think of the image of going on a hike or walking on a beach. There is something quite indescribable, its *sacred*; it’s almost without words. You can walk with someone, and you can’t later on describe. *(pauses)* How do you describe?

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** I recently encountered Stern’s *(2004)* writing about micro-journeys, *shared feeling voyages that begin* “at the moment of meeting” *(p.172)*. “During a shared feeling voyage… two people traverse together a feeling-landscape as it unfolds in real
time… they pass through an emotional narrative landscape with its hills and valleys of vitality affects…” (p. 172). I wonder if Stern’s ideas resonate with what you are telling us in this part of our dialogue in Playa?

*I hear a tremor in your voice and I remember your eyes were filling with tears and as you spoke you looked upward away from us as though you felt more than you wanted to show in this moment. I think, had we all not been with you as a somewhat large group, you might have paused now. And had this been the case, I would cross the room to sit beside you, and my eyes might also fill with tears. And I would be silent with what you are saying, silence being, of course, “sayable.” As practitioners we have all witnessed and entered into such unspeakable realms in our work—those moments of inter-being that flood us with wonder and awe (Einstein, 1941). As Hoffman (2007) says, we jump, like Alice, into pools of tears along with the other creatures (p. 66).

*Abigail: (continuing)... once the moment is gone, how do you put it into words? Nor do you want to; it almost takes away from it.

*Janice Responds, February 2007: In his book Real Presences, George Steiner (1989) joins your “… poetic challenge to the sayability of the world:”

The aura of certain settings in nature, [like your hike or walk along the water’s edge] of certain privacies of desire or of pain, resists communicative transfer into speech. The only just response to Helen’s mystery of loveliness and to the surge of Eros in her step is not speech but silence. It is not, says Kafka, the song of the Sirens, but their silence which carries the true charge of illumination and of menace. Not even the purest tautologist (a lexicographer in extremis) has ever held the total sum of essence to be convertible into the currency of the word and the sentence… (p. 92).
I appreciate the wisdom of Steiner’s words as I think back nearly twenty years to the time when my mother was dying of a terminal illness. I remember one senior voice in my circle of family and friends kindly urging me to speak with her to ensure I left nothing unsaid that might later cause regret. I have always been grateful that instead I took my cues from my mother, a woman who often found words un-easy, especially those spoken in conversation with others. Nearly every evening I sat with her for her last three months. I learned from her to speak a language of silence; words would have been an abrasion. Sometimes circumstances require us to speak responsively with nothing other than silent presence. Silence is more than the absence of sound; it also speaks in shouts and whispers.

Janice: So there will be some aspects of our experience that we will find are “unspeakable”—where we cannot find words to convey… (voice trails off)

Geavonna: (after a few moments of silence) I think that is very dangerous. (pause) And the reason why I think that it is very dangerous, is… I’m having a hard time articulating it—this inability to describe something—I don’t think it should be that difficult to describe. (pause) And I would like to stay with this “unspeakable”—let’s go back to Olivia’s question of “how do I describe what I do.” It’s not a mystery—I don’t think what we do is a mystery—and that’s why I think your project is so valuable…. (pause) There should be a commitment to explain it in a way that people can understand it and learn it. Otherwise, my sense of this conversation is that we are playing around things that we are in some ways afraid to touch. I don’t think it should be that difficult. I don’t exactly know how to say it.

Janice Responds, February 2007: Geavonna, hearing your voice again I am drawn to this word “dangerous,” a word that still stuns me each time I hear you say it. I want to explore this word; I
feel its sharp edges in the context of this conversation. You say you “would like to stay with this word “unspeakable”… and I think you are connecting the “unspeakable” with “dangerous.” So perhaps we could stay longer with both words together.

I hear a sense of alarm in your response to what Emelie, Abigail and I are voicing. Again your words remind me of Wittgenstein (1953) and his insistence that “nothing is hidden”(p. 109). “We want to understand something that is already in plain view (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 36). “I don’t think what we do is a mystery,” you say. “For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand,” continues Wittgenstein (p. 36). As Shotter (2005b) holds, “Everything we need—at least to ‘go on’ in our practical affairs—is available to us out in the activities occurring between us…” (p. 2). Critical of academic practices of “… searching for something hidden, something that can only be arrived at as an ‘interpretation,’ a ‘reading,’ or a ‘representation,’ of something that, seemingly, is radically unavailable to us in the events that are unfolding around us…” (p. 2), Shotter (2005b) writes,

It is this background of ceaselessly ongoing, spontaneously responsive, expressive living bodily activity—from out of which all our more deliberately structured activity emerges and back into which it is directed—that we must, somehow, bring into rational visibility (p. 3).

Shotter (2006a) urges us to ‘cure’ ourselves of both our tendencies to see language as merely representative, and our urge to theorize—looking for things hidden behind appearances—instead of noticing the familiar and simple right before us in plain view (p. 74). He calls us to be courageous in our explorations of the everyday background of our lives:
Dare to grope around, dare to be tentative, to hesitate, to try different ways of expressing the ‘it’ that seems to be ‘there’, awaiting our further creative development of it within our lives together. Dare to creatively stumble around in words (p. 122).

Perhaps Wittgenstein (1953) would agree our challenge is not to acquire some new metaphysical discovery, but rather our task in this project is to notice that which escapes remark only because it is “always before our eyes” (p. 106). In this case, the challenge of bringing our experience into language is not so much due to its mysterious, transcendent or hidden essence, so to speak, but exactly the opposite—it is “already in plain view” (p. 36) and familiarity with that which is “always before our eyes” can be blinding. Joining with Shotter and Wittgenstein, then, we can agree with you Geavonna, it should not be so difficult to describe what is already visible to us. Surely it is possible to speak openly and explicitly of our experience of our practices in ways others can understand.

At the same time, Wittgenstein (1980) describes a “pre-linguistic” world, a world upon which language games are based (p. 31), a world “prior to our thoughts, perceptions, actions, evaluation or words of our own” (Shotter, 2000, p.1). Affirming Wittgenstein’s (1980) characterizing of language as a refinement of “reaction,” a refinement of “the origin and the primitive form of the language game…” (p. 31), Shotter (2006a, 2006b), influenced also by Garfinkel (1967) and others, writes of the first time nature of this realm, describing it with a plethora of words we associate with your word “dangerous,” Geavonna. Yes, I also join Emelie, Abigail and Wittgenstein; it is so difficult to put this ambiguity into words without distorting it.

Glenn Larner (2004) makes an attempt relevant to our conversation, I think. He writes of the “non-discursive condition of the discursive, the bridging of a chasm between two persons through what is unsaid and cannot necessarily be put into words” (Larner et al., p. 19) as he
refers to Frosh’s (2001) discussion of the “unsayable in therapy” (Larner et al, 2004, p. 19). For Larner, discourse in therapy begins with a pre-discursive orientation to the other, for the other. “An ethical encounter is not merely discursive but presupposes a physical and non-verbal experience of the other person” (Larner et al, 2004, p. 19).

Perhaps we can see now more clearly the danger you speak of, Geavonna. We notice that as we attempt to speak of our practitioner experience of practice, we find ourselves in the same precarious “not-knowing” position that pervades our practices and every other aspect of our lives. We find ourselves grappling and groping in the complex juncture between what has been said, and what is yet-to-be-said—that great gap in dialogical interchange infused with risk, possibility and constraint (Strong, 2005, p. 17). I do not offer a questionnaire, or any other pre-figured sequence that would nudge us along in a particular direction. We do not know how to begin in this project, and we do not know where “beginning” will take us. And that, in itself, carries risk. As an author in this project, I have felt this risk keenly in every moment of its development.

But further, if as Abigail might be suggesting, we move about relating to our clients spontaneously and responsively in a “pre-linguistic” world prior to our rational examination of it, prior to our verbal ‘ordering’ of it, without any certain “knowing,” we are in danger in our practice domains as well. This idea is not new to you or to any collaborative practitioners. What are we risking as we meet one another in such “primeval chaos” (Wittgenstein, 1980a/1977, p. 65)? Do we risk transformation? Collaborative practitioners never graduate from their stance of ‘not- knowing’ to positions more certain; and this is possibly why Anderson’s writing warns, like you, Geavonna, of danger. “In my therapy room a therapist is not safe; is not safely ensconced in

In the vision of early Wittgenstein… the existential real ‘on the other side of language’, the categories of felt being to which only silence (or music) give access, are neither fictitious or trivial. On the contrary. They are, indeed, the most important, life-transforming categories conceivable… (p. 103).

Shotter (2006a) also turns our attention to this perilous “other side of language”:

It is this central focus almost solely on language, and on the importance of our ways of talking which worries me…. Clearly, our ways of talking are very influential in shaping our actions. But there are… good reasons for assuming that it is not simply by choosing to construct different linguistic representations of circumstance that we can come to act differently in relation to it; something much deeper and less open to our deliberation and choice is at issue. [And here again I think of danger: project participants beware!] Rather than to do with our minds and ways of thinking, it is much to do with our bodies and our ways of acting; perceptual rather than cognitive changes are crucial. [And this next statement is especially important for me:] It is our spontaneous bodily reactions to events occurring around us that have come to be of central importance in the approach I have adopted… (p. 5).

Developing his “more bodily less cognitive approach” Shotter (2006a) elaborates the risk of connecting:

Such moments are crucial in that those who participate in them find that after them, their relationship is changed. There has been a discontinuous leap, a quantum jump. Certain distinctions have been ‘redrawn’, new dimensions of relation have been created, what
was background becomes foreground, coherence and complexity have been enlarged…. They are changed and are now related to, or oriented toward, each other differently for having changed one another… in such relations, one has a chance to get immersed in another’s experiences, to become ‘possessed’ by their otherness (p. 88).

*I cannot help but think of Jacques Derrida’s (2004) writing of a similar risk in his description of travel. For him,*

To travel is to give oneself over to commotion: to the unsettling that, as a result, affects one’s being down to the bone, puts everything up for grabs, turns one’s head and leaves no anticipation intact. After each commotion one has to be reborn and come back to consciousness. Nothing is more frightening, nothing more desirable (p. 36).

*The ultimate danger in travel of course, is not the risk of commotion and unsettling, but the real possibility that return may not be possible. “Nothing is more frightening…”.*

**Seferino:** *(takes in a deep breath)* I have been thinking of something that say Tom Andersen in Mexico City. *(pause)* And he say that there is some kind of things that you cannot describe. You can use some metaphor that can describe. We can only imagine how it feels for the other person to have that experience.

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** Seferino, thank you for your mention of the usefulness of metaphor at this juncture where we are wrestling with the challenge of this project. Of course, using metaphors to describe some aspect of experience is an important part of Wittgenstein’s methods of inquiry. I understand you to be suggesting we cannot know how our colleague experiences practice as a therapist. But if we speak metaphorically we can perhaps evoke some aspect of it. I think this connects with Wittgenstein’s (1953) idea of “perspicuous representation” (p. 42). “A perspicuous representation produces that understanding which consists in ‘seeing
connections”” (p. 42). Yes, I agree, using metaphors to describe can help us get a sense of what it is we wish to describe without attempting completion. When we shift from thinking of our words as “meaning” and as directly representing or mirroring our experience, to words as formative and evocative in their use, instead of reducing reality, language becomes a powerful, creative, generative and transforming field of possibilities.

Geavonna: (turning to Seferino, offers a gentle reminder) Janice is only interested in our experience as therapists. She’s not interested in the client’s experience. She was very clear in wanting to hear our experience.

Janice Responds, February 2007: … and I agree, Geavonna, I am at this time, focused on the practitioner’s experience of practice. I am assuming Seferino’s words are directed to us, reminding us that we will each describe our practice experience differently and incompletely, and we cannot evaluate another’s description. Perhaps others heard this differently though, I’m not sure.

Seferino: (attempts to respond. Accidentally—how unfortunate—Janice interrupts)

Janice: … and your comments (Seferino’s) relate to that too.

Seferino: Yeah.

Janice: … that your… I guess I’m thinking back to my invitation, or at least in some places where I said I would like the project to have room for mystery—I did say that—for contradiction, and for complexity. And so I thought we would start with a very simple question and then, ah, and then move from there to something very rich and diverse. And so I think there may be space for both. Hoffman (2007) speaks of therapy as art—(The Art of Withness) and something about art—to me there is a piece for me that is, um, for me, maybe transcendent to language… and I am appreciating your contribution too…. I
am reminded—Is it Wittgenstein?—his encouragement to consider everyday practice that is so common that it escapes our notice. So not to be satisfied with saying, “I can’t find the words for it” and then leaving it at that. The project is an invitation to find words for it, right? But there may be pieces that we cannot, you know….

Geavonna: That would be my caution….

Janice: O.K.

Geavonna: (continuing)—not to stay there [without words]. At least try to take it a step forward.

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** Yes, because even beginning might lead to possibilities we cannot imagine at this point. Sometimes we underestimate the power of language.

Abelinda: *(in Spanish)* This could be very complicated, in terms of the philosophical, or the precise way it should be, or it could be much more relaxed where we share our daily life experience of what we do in our work. I was thinking of what I could share in this conversation; suddenly it became very complicated… and I don’t know what happened for it to become so complicated. Is there something trans-cen-dental that I have to say *(pause)* or just description of what I do when I see someone to talk about life?

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** I agree, suddenly it became very complicated, and I am not sure what happened for it to become complicated either, but I welcome the complication and want to explore it. I agree, talk of what we are “doing” is in some ways more accessible and useful then talking of how we are “being” and “becoming” through our everyday involvement in therapy conversation. I am thinking here of Olivia’s earlier question: Is collaborative therapy more a matter of “being” or “doing”? And I am reminded just now of a recent workshop facilitated by one of the friends of this project, Tapio Malinen and his colleague John Pihlaja in
Finland, called “The Doing of Being in Psychotherapy.” It seems challenging to articulate our own experiences of collaborative therapy, perhaps because we are used to keeping such activity in the vague background of our work. The client’s experience is obviously our priority.

**Janice:** *(turning to Jillian)* Do you want to respond to that? You look like you have a thought.

**Jillian:** No, I just have a question. I wonder if it begins to feel more complicated and *(pause)* divisive in a way when we move from a level of description to a level of explanation. And what would happen if we stayed in the conversation longer at the level of description as a kind of discipline, to really bring that piece out. My guess is we would find a different quality at the level of description than at the level of explanation.

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** Yes, Jillian, Wittgenstein would smile on you for saying this, no? I like your mention of discipline: “staying on the level of description as a kind of discipline…” As ‘social scientists’ we would do well to move beyond explanation.

**Abigail:** I agree. It was a place to start… we were asked to describe our experience…. It was a starter dough; by no means was what I said complete, in any way.

**Janice Responds, February 2007:** Abigail, I agree, your admission of the difficulty of finding words to describe experience helped make a starter dough. We all played a role in making it. I think of the children’s game Canadian children grow up to play, called, Hide and Go Seek. The person searching for those hiding is taunted by the derogatory name of “goal sticker” if they stay too close to the “home free” plate. The game becomes more intense and engaging when the one searching takes risks. I am deeply grateful for the risks you and each participant took in voicing perspectives during this dialogue.
February 27, 2007

I turn off my recording of the conversation. Scanning the piles of books and papers around me I search for my written copy of the *Playa Dialogue*, the first chapter in this text. I open it up, page by page, grabbing pen and paper to jot what I notice as I move quickly throughout, start to finish. How tempted I feel to talk *about* the dialogue in Playa del Carman now, finally and at last! At the same time, I am convinced more than ever that such an approach would introduce an abrupt change of direction, one inconsistent with the understanding we aspire to enact in this project. Schwandt (2000), speaking to the participative, conversational, and dialogic essence of understanding, reminds us, “Moreover, understanding is something that is *produced* in that dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis of that which he or she seeks to understand” (p. 195).

To the 12 practitioners who ‘took a chance’ in meeting with me and with one another in the small, white *palapa* with the thick grass roof, in June, 2005, and to the readers of this dissertation text, who, in some way, participate later, I again want to say, “Thank you.”
PART TWO

ORIENTING TO THE JOURNALLED DIALOGUE

Chapter 6

Preparing to Participate:

Navigating the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Textual, Bi-Lingual Text

“The issue here is not an absence of, but a radical change in, the author’s position…” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 67).

“One must read not for the plot, but for the dialogues, and to read for the dialogues is to participate in them” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 249).

Review

We continue our shared inquiry into this project’s central question: As a collaborative therapist, how could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself?

With our spoken dialogue behind us, this chapter ‘looks forward’ to the multi-textual interchange comprising chapter 7. To review, chapter 7 presents participants’ journaling of their “inner dialogues” in response to our project question. Participant journaling takes place throughout a 2-week period following our dialogue in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, June 2005. Each practitioner decides “what” and “how much” journaling to make available to our shared inquiry. Over a period of time, I write detailed response to each practitioner’s journalled contributions. Our task now, as I see it, is to prepare ourselves to participate as readers, in the journalled co-respondence we are soon to encounter.
Diversity of Writing Styles

What do we mean when we say “journaling?” As shown in the initial invitation to prospective participant-practitioners, our use of the term is diverse and inclusive:

Participants are invited to write in whatever intelligible style that feels most comfortable for them (i.e. storytelling, prose, poetry, letter writing, linear or non-linear, formal, less formal, travel diary, etc.). Unfinished or “beginning” thoughts are most welcome, as are unanswered questions, contradictions and multiple perspectives from varied vantage points. Coherence and pre-planning are not necessary. The dialogue generated by this project will be reflective, but not laborious. Improvisation will be more useful than composition. Similarly participants should feel no obligation to explain or defend their work. Like dialogue ‘on the street’, in coffee shops or collaborative therapy rooms, the “inner dialogue” recorded through reflective journaling can be allowed the freedom to gallop or “roam over a whole range of possibilities” (Shotter, 1995a, p. 68). It can be spontaneous, “living, breathing… formed in the moment.” (See Appendix E for letter of invitation to prospective project participants).

I notice connections between Geertz’ (2000) descriptions of anthropologist James Clifford’s writing and the journalled texts to follow. Geertz notes Clifford’s texts use first person voice without any “continuous, building narrative…” (Geertz, 2000, p. 108) offering, instead, “an unordered series of “personal explorations,” that show “people going places” (pp. 108-109), moving throughout the ordinary interactive moments of their lives. Geertz (2000) describes the prose as abstract; sometimes it is “‘experimental’, that is, inward and impressionistic; always, it is discursive, backing and filling, giving with one hand and taking away with the other, turning aside to pursue a notion, retracing steps to get back to the subject” (p. 109). From Geertz’ (2000)
perspective, Clifford’s texts are, at times, “… more atmospheric than substantive” (p. 109), conveying tone, more so than meaning. Morson and Emerson likewise suggest,

> Often tone is *all* an utterance conveys. A meaningless word or a mere interjection may be uttered simply to carry a tone…. Indeed, tone itself is a sort of gesture…. Such “meaningless” words and gestures may be complete, and highly expressive, utterances (pp. 134-135).

At times, readers may find Geertz’, Morson, and Emerson’s descriptions coincidentally resonant with the journalled writings presented in chapter 7.

**Ordinary Language**

Initially, I find the ordinary, everyday language throughout the practitioners’ writing startling. I wonder, at first, how it will fit within a literary context—within this dissertation text. As our project develops, however, I become increasingly grateful for this writing just as it is, because it is within the realm of ‘ordinary language’ that we do our ‘therapeutic’ work (Anderson, 2007d, pp. 26-27; Seikkula & Trimble, p. 471). Our practices are entrenched in ‘the vernacular’—the spoken language of the people—the same language citizens use in their daily interactions. It is in the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘everyday’ that we encounter that which is extraordinary, generative and transforming. Seikkula and Arnkil (2006) write of the importance of encountering people within understandable everyday language, an affective language of the body that moves speakers and listeners:

> You have to formulate your questions in an understandable everyday language; you have to ask about concrete acts and incidents; you have to proceed slowly to allow time for the formulating of answers and searching for the right words; and you have to be sensitive to the client’s emotional experiences and embodied messages as responses to your
questions. You will become moved yourself, as well, when the participants speak of sad things (p. 94).

**Multiple Languages**

Four therapists journal in English as their ‘additional’ language instead of using their first language together with the translation service made available within the project. Two therapists write in English as a first language and three therapists write in their first language of Spanish; the Spanish journaling is translated into English. I am unilingual. Scandinavian, Mexican, American and Canadian cultures permeate the writings that follow. Respecting each participant’s right to speak and write in their first language, I fully include original Spanish texts with English translation in this part of the dissertation text, allowing readers fluent within both languages to experience the writing in two different ways. Including the Spanish translations tangibly reminds readers that four speakers are in dialogue with each translated journal, not only the practitioner and myself: Two translators are also present in the interchange. As a result, there are more voices intermingling than readers might initially notice. (See Appendix D for translators’ letters of introduction as published at our project blog).

**Shared Language and the Continual Production of Novelty**

As we involve ourselves with the dialogues that follow, readers may recognize a vocabulary common to all participants in this project. Words indicating play, uncertainty, risk, freedom, surprise, beauty, mystery, curiosity, and ‘not-knowing’ appear repeatedly along with various synonyms. Edward Sapir suggests our perception is primarily determined by the common language of our community: “We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir as cited in Abram, 1996, p. 91). Similarly Gergen (2006) suggests, “Our
capacity to make meaning together today thus relies on a history, often a history of a century’s duration” (p. 40).

Shared language does not mean “shared meanings.” I invite readers to attune to the ‘first-time’ (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9) novelty within each writer’s expression, rather than perceived patterns of speech. In the journaling correspondence to follow, notice how, as Bakhtin (1986) claims, each written

… utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable…. What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (pp. 119-120).

Anderson’s orientation is similarly not towards “sameness” or repetition in dialogue. In an interview with Malinen (2004) she says, “Most important, the first step is sincerely trying to understand that which is different. Try to understand the other person, their perspectives, and their actions…” (p. 74). Shotter (2006a) similarly reminds us

… although the intermingled movements occurring between us and our surroundings may involve a high degree of repetitiveness… they also contain many departures from exact repetitiveness. And it is in the often minute variations of our living interchanges with our surroundings, that everything of importance to us uniquely expressing our unique selves, and the nature of our unique circumstances take place…. The novelty in such responsive reactions are crucial. They are what makes it possible for us to gain a sense of each other’s uniqueness, of the unique particularities of a previously unknown form of life in a previously unknown world (pp. 110-111).
I invite the reader to listen—as collaborative therapists do—for each writer’s creative and local use of language and for each writer’s voice. It is the unique particularity within each written expression that allows us to understand our topic *dialogically*—practically, sensuously, collaboratively, intimately, responsively—rather than abstractly, theoretically, and monologically.

*My Process of Responding to the Journals*

The process of writing my responses emerges directly from the unique situation created by this conversational inquiry. Prior to the arrival of the therapists’ journal entries in my electronic mail, I had not considered the possibility of writing extensive response to each participant as an alternative to traditional data analysis; I had never come across this possibility in any other qualitative research project. Our invitational letter and brochure did not indicate what would happen to the journaling. As the journal excerpts began to arrive, this became a major concern for me. My extensive and persistent search for a legitimate and appropriate qualitative method to “apply” to our dialogue-data seemed increasingly futile. No method seemed to fit, as we discussed in earlier chapters. I began to turn away from my research methodology texts as I began to listen and orient myself to the textual voices of my peers. In retrospect, I see this turning action—an ‘inter-action’—as creating a pivotal ‘fork in the road’ in this project.

As I read the journaling of my colleagues, I was drawn into dialogue with each one. The impulse to write detailed response to each practitioner was immediate and compelling. Without the endorsement of a conventional methodology, I began writing one response at a time, filled with uncertainty as to how my actions would be judged by others evaluating this inquiry. I dearly hoped my responsive writing would not count against me at some future point. Initially I
imagined the process of responsive writing would lead to my discovery of a ready-made,
established research methodology, one that would help us understand the journals more fully.

Even as I began to enter into the journaling of my colleagues, I still believed the right method for
my project was “out there” in a book; my job was to locate it and apply it.

Throughout the process of writing my responses to my colleagues, I became acquainted
with Bakhtin’s (1986) fusion of active responding with understanding. I learned also of
Wittgenstein’s (1953) ideas related to understanding as demonstrated finding our way about and
going on from the utterance of others. I also came to embrace Shotter’s “withness” or “within-
ness” versus “aboutness” knowing, and wanted to come to know my colleagues’ utterances from
interactive, in-motion positions within the dialogue, not from analytical places outside. I began to
compare the social inquiry of qualitative research with the dialogical ‘shared inquiry’ of
collaborative therapy. It became increasingly important to me to utilize methods of inquiry from
everyday collaborative therapy practice, the methods familiar to the people participating in this
project. Finding the process of writing responses generative and totally involving, I decided to
make my encounters and interactions with the words of my colleagues a feature of our project,
something Bakhtin (1986) claims almost never happens in the human sciences or in literary
scholarship (p. 144). Dialogue is often in the background, the scaffolding for method, not the
method itself, as it is in the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy.

Just as I write “to listen” in writing The Playa Dialogue, I write to enter into the
expressions of my colleagues, to take them in, and also, to actively respond to them. I do not plan
my response in advance. The process is subjective and unsystematic. Attempting to acknowledge
my colleagues’ writing as fully as possible, I do not respond only to that which immediately
moves or strikes me. Much of my writing involves repeating their words. Frequently my written
response goes on from theirs’ as I pose questions, wonder, tell a resonant story, and voice appreciation. My part in the process is laborious and intense, but I do not try to be clever or academically sophisticated. Primarily, I see myself as functioning—as I do in collaborative therapy practice—as a respondent, an active participant in a process of co-respondence with my partners in dialogue. It is through active response that we come to understand dialogically.

**Readers as Responsive Participants**

Although each practitioner’s journal ‘speaks’ of some aspect of the generative and transforming influence of practice for the practitioner, these writings do not form a complete answer to the question motivating our inquiry. Readers will find the journals can be read in any order. What seems most crucial, is the manner in which we read:

Unlike quantitative work, which can be interpreted through its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meanings in its entire text. Just as a piece of literature is not equivalent to its “plot summary,” qualitative research is not contained in its abstracts. Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading (Richardson, 2000, p. 924).

Just as we cannot know a play or musical performance by reviewing program notes, we can only come to know the journalled texts that follow through responsive participation within them. Shotter (2006b), like Morson & Emerson (1990, p. 249) calls for a particular style of reading. I want to borrow his words and suggest we will need to read the following journal fragments … not for the plot, not for their overall outcomes, but for the active unfolding of the dialogues involved—for to read the dialogues will be to participate in them…. Indeed, to repeat, it is the intense intermingling of inner and outer dialogues, in the drama of the “*live event* played out at a point of dialogical meeting between two or several
consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 88), hearable in the emotional-volitional tone of a person’s utterance, a person’s writing, that its force can be felt (Shotter, 2006b, p. 16).

The impact of the journal writing to follow (chapter 7) can only be felt as we encounter and interact with the utterances, intonations, ideas, and stories generated in this collective effort to understand collaborative practitioners’ experience of therapy. If we read the therapists’ journaling in search of coherent narratives and final outcomes, we will miss the possibilities available to us in this next portion of our text; if we hover over the journaled texts scanning them from a distant position outside of them, we will miss the novelty and formative influence that comes from dialogical engagement with the words, voice and being of an ‘other’.

**Anticipating Readers’ Questions**

*Why not offer a summary of the dialogues in my own voice?*

Morson and Emerson (1990) offer a beginning and perhaps critical response: “When monologic thinkers encounter such conversations, they usually try to extract just such a finalizing proposition, but in doing so they are false to the dialogic process itself (p. 237). The separateness and multiplicity of voices in the following eight dialogues is crucial. I could not possibly convey the range and diversity of response within our collective of practitioners with my voice alone.

These voices cannot be contained within a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather their separateness is essential to the dialogue. Even when they agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 237).

Each practitioner’s voice must retain its own uniqueness; each therapist responds to the central question of our inquiry from unique positions that no other living being could possibly occupy.
We must not collapse into a single consciousness but rather retain our distinct voices—“a plurality of “unmerged voices” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 236). As we began to propose earlier, Bakhtin’s (1986) idea of understanding is multi-voiced, existing on the “…threshold of several interacting consciousnesses” (p. 236). Holding Dostoevsky’s dialogical writing as an ideal, Bakhtin, (1984) notes Dostoevsky’s prose contains “no secondhand referential word” (p. 237), where one person speaks for another, and no “…ready-made existence, whose meaning the writer must uncover, but open-ended dialogue with an evolving multi-voiced meaning” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 298). To represent the following written dialogues with a retrospective, systematic summary, is to adopt a “monologic form” that deadens the voice of the participant-subjects in our inquiry. A subject, says Bakhtin (1986), must not be treated like a voiceless thing:

… for the exact sciences constitute a monologic form of knowledge: the intellect contemplates a thing and expounds on it. There is only one subject here—cognizing (contemplating) and speaking (expounding). In opposition to the subject there is only a voiceless thing…. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject, it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be dialogic (p. 161).

The voices in this project are distinct, but not entirely independent: “a dialogue’s participants thus need each other unconditionally insofar as dialogue is simply impossible without the other, i.e., without a plurality of speakers and listeners…” (Nikulin, 2006, p. 156). The dialogical participants in this project are “… both independent and mutually dependent and are therefore in need of the other” (Nikulin, 2006, p. 156). Nikulin reminds us that while dialogue is impossible without a “plurality of independent participants” (p. 156), neither is it possible “without their mutual reliance…” (p. 156).
Creating a dialogical text does not necessarily require “… an explicit, overt dialogue in which two voices are engaged” (Lysack, 2004, p. 91), but a dialogic presentation of ‘data’ does require participants to relinquish their rights to speak alone. Bakhtin (1981) makes such a point in his comparison of poetry and dialogic prose: While “the language of the poet is his language… a pure and direct expression of his own intention… an obedient organ, fully adequate to the author’s intention” (pp. 285-286), dialogic prose is multi-voiced and interactive, open to surprise, contradiction, and participation. Hunt and Sampson (2006), influenced by playwright Luigi Pirandello (1921, 1995) and Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986, 1993) suggest the author of polyphonic text “… has to develop a dialogic relationship with his characters, which involves giving up his privileged position as omniscient creator and entering into the fray of language as one amongst many speaking consciousnesses…” (p. 98). In the correspondence to follow, readers encounter multiple voices and multiple texts. Each practitioner enters the topic of our inquiry from a multiplicity of places in time, from multiple situational standpoints, within a diversity of relational contexts.

**Why not present fragments of the dialogues instead of the whole?**

Not wanting to separate my colleagues’ utterances from their textual contexts, I refrain from cutting parts away from ‘the whole’. Each utterance responds to the words preceding it just as each utterance ‘anticipates’ what might still be said as the dialogue develops. Each responsive expression gains it’s meaning, in part, from the utterances around it. Throughout this project I try to avoid “doing to” the dialogue data. Instead of organizing, distilling, or ‘dissecting it’, I engage with it and respond to it. When I participate in therapy dialogue, I similarly avoid overtly steering or directing the dialogue, but rather I participate with others within the conversation that
develops. “The important word here is “with”: doing with and within, rather than for or to from the outside” (Anderson, 2007, p. 34).

Each written expression in the following journalled texts must retain its ‘dual citizenship’, as the words within them “live” in and between two very different contexts—the context to which each practitioner belongs, and my context. “The word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context” (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 284). Bakhtin speaks of “rejoinders”—utterances in response to utterances—and their “double lives,” each “structured and conceptualized in the context of the dialogue as a whole” (p. 284). Anticipating the reader’s participatory presence in the following texts, and considering the “…multiple, simultaneous and even contradictory perspectives…” (Anderson, 2007a, p. 39) that each reader might hold in play in any one interactive moment, perhaps we are justified in revising “double” to “multiple.” Each utterance “lives” in and between multiple contexts that form its dialogical context. The word of another cannot be understood apart from its dialogical context “… without losing its sense and tone. It is an organic part of a heteroglot (multivoiced) unity” (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 284). Moving portions of the therapists’ writing out of the larger texts surrounding them diminishes their meanings and influence.

My early search for themes within our dialogues underscores the importance of presenting participants’ words within their chosen, original contexts. Aware of tradition in qualitative research, my first impulse was to look for thematic patterns within our dialogues. Searching for repeated words that might form portable, clear answers to our research question, I created a preliminary list of words I thought might deserve such special status in this project. I was soon disappointed: Each word selected seemed to lose its richness as I added it to my list. Separated from their use within their conversational contexts, taken from all the intricate
“rhizomatic” connections animating these words, these potential “themes” sounded as impoverished as single notes played separately from the rhythms, harmonies and movements comprising music. On its own, a single ‘high’ G note, sung by a soprano voice, may impress a listener’s ear, yet, set within a musical context, like Purcell’s *Dido’s Lament*, that same note exerts a fundamentally different force; it becomes utterly haunting in its beauty; its relationship with the sounding of the other notes makes it so, allowing it to possess an agency and penetrative fullness it could never acquire as a single note. In this project, influenced by Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, I must understand the words of my colleagues *in their use*, just as I do with my clients in everyday practice.

*Why place the dialogues prominently in this text?*

If I want to engage in social inquiry in ways coherent with the collaborative therapist’s approach to inquiry in practice, I must demonstrate an ethical stance of “withness” in each moment of this project’s development (Strong, 2004). Moving away from doing research “on” others and “about” others, I am compelled to invite my project colleagues into the direct production of this text. I want to write with them instead of writing about them. I am aware that research participants traditionally do not directly contribute pages to the dissertation text. Richardson (1997a) influenced by C. Wright Mills (1959) voices her dissatisfaction with conventional presentations of data. She writes

I rejected… the publication of the interview transcript, because—to modernize Socratic wisdom—the unanalyzed transcript is not worth reading. I rejected the paraphrase style because it lacked credibility and was boring. I rejected the self-centered reflexive style, where the people studied are treated as garnishes and condiments, tasty only in relationship to the main course, the sociologist (p.20).
Chenail (1995) suggests the data must be the central feature in the research text:

I believe that the data… should “be the star” in the relationship. By this I mean, the main focus in qualitative research is the data itself, in all its richness, breadth, and depth….

Present as much of the data you collected as is physically possible in your papers and presentations (p. 2).

Likewise, Richardson (1997a) radically invites participants of social inquiry into the heart of the text as coauthors, a process she speaks of as “showing”:

Showing, I submit, can happen when different voices deeply penetrate our texts. Voices do not deeply penetrate when they are interview snippets or homogenized story (re)telling. They do penetrate more when the voices become “characters” in dramas, but most deeply when the voices become embodied, take form, as legitimated coauthors, writing different meanings in different styles, rupturing “our” texts” (p. 73).

The placement of our dialogues within the dissertation text also reflects the central place of dialogue in this project. Just as dialogue is the key feature of the ‘shared inquiry’ of collaborative therapy, dialogue forms the emerging essence of this dissertation inquiry. It is neither prologue nor epilogue. Instead of presenting the journaling as mere “unanalyzed” data, and instead of distilling, reducing, summarizing or representing it, my task is to respond to this writing and ‘go on’ from it, inviting dialogical understandings of the dialogues in this project.

**Is written dialogue less ‘dialogical’ than spoken dialogue?**

We might anticipate an additional question concerning the dialogic interaction to follow in chapter 7: How can the texts comprising chapter 7 of this project be considered “dialogues?” They are written texts, and not live speech. For Nikulin (2006) and others, “dialogue is thus oral: written dialogue imitates live dialogical exchange and inevitably betrays it” (p. 154). Dialogue
“… lives in the freedom of live oral exchange… even if it is crude and not stylistically elaborated… (p. 152).”

For Bakhtin (1981), dialogue includes written text, which “… never appears as a dead thing; beginning with any text… we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being” (p. 252-253). Speaking further to the “aliveness” of written text, Bakhtin writes “… the material of the work is not dead, it is speaking, signifying (it involves signs); we not only see and perceive it but in it we can always hear voices (even while reading silently to ourselves)” (p. 252). “… I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them,” writes Bakhtin (1986) towards the end of his life (p. 169).

The text, suggests Bakhtin (1986) “lives” as it encounters other texts: “Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue” (p. 162). Emerson and Holquist (1986) write of Bakhtin’s “tendency to think through a central problem by coming at it in a number of different texts, each of which has its own particular way of bringing out nuances less apparent or even missing in the others” (p. xiv).

This is how we explore our inquiry’s central question: we ‘come at it’, as participating writers and readers, through our involvement with multiple textual voices, within multiple texts. Each text presents the therapist’s dialogue with the research question, with life, with the therapist’s multiple ‘selves’, with the dialogues forming the therapist’s practice. Each text is written in anticipation of response from me and from future readers. Each text, in a sense, is in dialogue with the other texts in the chapter.

I notice our conversational collaborative approach does not yield concise answers to our research question in the way that a mathematical question sets up a specific reply. Feeling
somewhat like John Ashbery (2000) who reportedly remarks, “please don’t tell me it if all adds up in the end” (as cited in Irving & Moffat, 2002, p. 7), I do not think of this lack of completion as a flaw. Instead of producing polished, representative “research products” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1039), we gain a more subtle, sensual and open-ended understanding of the generative and transforming influence of practice for practitioners within our dialogical exploration. We achieve this moment-to-moment through our participation in *The Playa Dialogue* and the diverse journalled texts to follow.

In this style of writing… meaning is not a matter of picturing or representation, but a matter of shifting between different ways of talking, in different voices, with different ways of being in the world—in short, it is a dialogical style of writing” (Shotter, 2006, p. 113).

**Preparing to Participate**

Just as the therapists prepared to participate by collaboratively raising questions and testing out various ‘ways to go on’ together, I have attempted to help readers of this text prepare for participation in the written dialogues in chapter 7. I am aware of the reader’s power at this juncture; I am also aware of the vulnerability of the writers who contribute. Recognizing the role of the listener in granting meaning and value to the words of the speaker, I return to Bakhtin’s (1981c) words, “The word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293). Only as the reader engages with the written dialogues to follow, and only if the reader joins them responsively can the voices in these texts cry out and come to life. Until the reader signals a beginning like an orchestral conductor, the words lie silent on the page like unplayed notes on a musical score. As Tyler (1986) suggests, evocative text

… depends on the reader’s supplementation. The incompleteness of the text implicates the work of the reader, and his [or her] work derives as much, if not more, from the oral
world of everyday expression and commonsense understanding as it does from the world of the text (p. 138).

**Looking Ahead to Chapter 7**

Chapter 7 presents the written interactions featured in this project, illustrating the dialogic practices and premises discussed in the preceding chapters. A total of 9 practitioners engage in a 2-week period of journaling in response to our central research question. Drawn into engagement with each practitioner’s writing, I feel compelled to respond in writing to each practitioner’s response. The co-respondence we create in the chapter that follows generates dialogic understanding of our project topic—open-ended, ‘in motion’, withness, practical, relational understanding that can only come from responsive engagement with the being of an other. As the dates on each piece indicate, most of the participant journal entries are written within weeks of our June 2005 spoken dialogue in Playa del Carmen. My response, in contrast, is written over a much longer period of time, as I move back and forth between practitioners’ informal journaling, and the published writing informing this project.
Chapter 7

“As a Collaborative Therapist, How Could You Describe Your Practice as Generative and Transforming for Yourself?”

“If you want to go down deep you do not need to travel far; indeed, you don’t have to leave your most immediate and familiar surroundings” (Wittgenstein, 1980a/1977, p. 50).

Written Dialogues With Pasha

Pasha Responds, July 2005

Original Spanish journaling.

Para mí, comenzar un trabajo colaborativo significó empezar a cambiar primero mi vision del mundo y de las personas, así como la manera en la que entendemos las diferentes situaciones que se nos van presentando en la vida. Es solo a partir de que uno comienza este viaje, este caminar diario... que como persona sientes como se va transformando tu manera de ponerte en relación y en interacción con los demás. No creo que pueda ser al revés, creo que el cambio va en ese orden.

Lo mas hermoso, es que me doy cuenta de que cada vez encuentro mas y más interesantes a las personas, soy capaz de captar su riqueza unica, sus formas de pensar y la manera en la que estructuran sus pensamientos y sus significados. Creo que cuando empiezas a apreciar esto, te das cuenta de lo enriquecedor que resulta para ti este proceso, tan enriquecedor como para lo otra persona, y finalmente… te das cuenta de que nunca eres la misma persona, sino que en cada conversación eres diferente y te transformas, por consiguiente, te mueves y cada ves te puedes volver mas curioso acerca de la vida, tanto la personal, como la vida de la persona que este trabajando contigo.
Este es el principio de mis ideas… mas adelante te escribo mas… no quiero cargarte con ideas….

whit love,

Pasha

_Spanish to English translation._

For me, beginning a collaborative project meant beginning to change first my view of the world and people, as well as the way in which we face the various situations in which we find ourselves in life. It is only with taking the first step that this journey can begin, this daily walk… that as a person you undergo a transformation in the way in which you relate and interact with others. I don't think this can be done in reverse, I think the change happens in that order.

The most beautiful thing, is that I realize that I find people more and more interesting, I am able to grasp their unique richness, their way of thinking, and the way in which they structure their thoughts and meaning. I believe that when you begin to appreciate this, you realize how enriching the process is for you, equally enriching for you as for the other person, and finally… you realize that you will never again be the same person, rather in each conversation you are different and you are transformed and consequently, you move and each time you can become more inquisitive about life, your own personal life, as well as the life of the person that is working with you.

This is the beginning of my ideas…. I will write more…. I don't want to overload you with ideas….

with love,

Pasha
Janice Responds, September 2006

Pasha,

Your reflections take us back to your beginnings as a collaborative, postmodern practitioner. You write, “For me, beginning a collaborative project meant beginning to change first my view of the world and people, as well as the way in which we face the various situations in which we find ourselves in life.” A few words later you add, “… you undergo a transformation in the way in which you relate and interact with others.”

Your descriptions of change sound both personal and social. You speak of changing your way of looking at the world, and people, and situations… and yet I note that each of these phrases allude to relationship, you in relation to others and to otherness. I return to your words, “… beginning to change first my view of the world and people, as well as the way in which we face the various situations….”. You are writing of change in the way you “view…” and change in the way you “face…”. The way we “face” situations is perhaps a statement about orientation and the continual re-orientation our circumstances require, after all, your phrase “… in which we find ourselves…” leads me to believe we do not simply position ourselves from the outside… We “relate and interact with others” from within “… the various situations in which we find ourselves in life.”

I suppose we could understand the word “face” in additional ways as well. Sometimes we speak of “facing” as ‘courage’. In English we use the phrase “facing up” to something or someone—meaning, not hiding, becoming visible and vulnerable and open to critique, so to speak. I also wonder if we could understand your phrase about ‘changing the way we face situations’ in a yet another way. Could changing the way in which we face situations also mean acknowledging the humanity in the situation, responding to it as though it sees and hears and
calls us, as though it is a present “Other” in relationship with us? Maybe this stretches our metaphor too far…? I wonder what you think…

I am very grateful for your comments. I too feel that a dialogical, collaborative approach became my way of being; a way of living, and a way of becoming that transformed every dimension of my life. It was not just an approach to practice. I resonate with your words, “… this daily walk.”

You speak about change as orderly and this intrigues me, particularly since I am, in the last years, more and more aware of the chaos inherent in change, of the “inefficiency” of change, and the way change unpredictably disrupts order. You suggest that a certain way of being precedes collaborative practice, and you speak of the practitioner changing first. “I don’t think this can be done in reverse,” you suggest, “I think the change happens in that order.”

You continue, extending your description of collaborative postmodern practice:

“The most beautiful thing, is that I realize that I find people more and more interesting, I am able to grasp their unique richness, their way of thinking, and the way in which they structure their thoughts and meaning.”

Yes, I find this too! In my previous ways of practicing it was important for me to identify patterns, so that I could in turn, respond with well chosen ‘ready-to-go’ interventions: patterns matching patterns. Over years of ‘postmodern, collaborative’ practice we have developed a heightened sensitivity for ‘deviation’ from pattern… for the quirky, novel and aesthetically interesting ways we all speak and live. I find I am not hearing the tedious repetition I used to hear from others as well as from myself. Like you I do not consider my clients to be representatives from various ‘mental health’ or psychological categories. My orientation is to the
particularities I continually encounter, the fine nuances, the seemingly infinite detail present that contributes to ‘the feel’ and the ‘character’ of each conversation.

You speak of “structure” as part of the novelty in each conversation. You are interested in the ways “… in which they structure their thoughts and meaning.” I imagine the structure you sense in your clients’ speaking is a kind of order that emerges in time. I think of structures of “thoughts and meaning” as fluid, collaborative, improvised, open-ended in a living conversation; they can never be repeated in any future conversation.

You write, “I believe that when you begin to appreciate this, you realize how enriching the process is for you….” Yes! To begin to “grasp their unique richness…” is to begin to take part in this great abundance. I find this portion of your writing responds so directly to our project question: “As a postmodern, collaborative therapist, how could you describe your practice as generative and transforming?” You are suggesting here that the enriching reciprocity of conversation is dependent on the therapist “appreciating” and “realizing” and “grasping” the unique richness of the person they are in conversation with, appreciating “their way of thinking, and the way in which they structure their thoughts and meaning….” I return to your words, “I believe that when you begin to appreciate this, you realize how enriching the process is for you, equally enriching for you as for the other person….”

I love your use of the word “grasp.” For me, grasping implies touch… touch that is deliberate, sustained and energetic… it implies something worth holding on to… something precious. It implies embodied connection. Grasping something, for me, is not an intellectual “knowing how” or “knowing that” or “knowing about” kind of understanding—although it could include these kinds of knowing. It is more than that, though; it is about the kind of “knowing within” that John Shotter and others speak of… it is a relationally-responsive knowing….
The last paragraph of your note I would like to write in a poetic form, even though I work with a translation that paradoxically takes me both towards and ‘away from’ your original Spanish words…

“You realize that you will never again be the same person,
rather in each conversation you are different and you are transformed and consequently, you move

and each time you can become more inquisitive about life, your own personal life, as well as the life of the person that is working with you.

This is the beginning of my ideas….

I will write more….”

Your words “never again” speak to the irrevocability of change we find in collaborative dialogical processes. You speak of the difference, the transformation, and the movement that is
part of “each conversation.” And you so beautifully write, “...each time you can become more inquisitive about life,” not only the lives of the people talking with us, but also our own personal lives.”

I add my own ‘jottings,’ some echoes of your words before I move on to your second piece:

I am drawn to the “beginning” that seems to be intrinsically a part of this orientation. Beginning, newness, movement, growing curiosity, “in each conversation…”

“... each time…”

“... each time you can become more inquisitive about life, your own personal life, as well as the life of the person that is working with you.”

“... I find people more and more interesting…”

“... the various situations in which we find ourselves in life...”—the element of random chance

“... the unique richness of each person.... I am able to grasp their unique richness…”

“... when you begin to appreciate this, you realize how enriching the process is for you, equally enriching for you as for the other person…”

“... never again.... you will never again be the same person…”

“... in each conversation you are different…”

“... consequently, you move…”

“... and you are transformed…”

I must now put your writing aside, although I am reluctant to do so; every time I return to it I find more to learn. You write, “This is the beginning of my ideas,” probably meaning that your reflecting is simply a starting point—there is more to follow. However, I think too, that
“this is the beginning of your ideas” because your ideas give me a sense the importance of “beginning” in your work and in your philosophy of life.

Your brief reflection ends simply with your words, “whit love, Pasha.” I think, “How fitting, this closing cadence.” Do these words also say something about your way of being in practice and beyond? I think they do.

**English to Spanish translation.**

Traducción:

Pasha,

Tu reflexión nos lleva al comienzo de tu práctica posmoderna colaborativa, donde tú escribes: “Para mi, comenzar un proyecto colaborativo significa comenzar, primero que nada, a cambiar mi punto de vista del mundo y de los individuos, como a asimismo la manera en que confrontamos las diversas situaciones en las que nos encontramos en nuestras vidas.” Más tarde agregas, “… comienzas una transformación en la forma en que tratas y conectas con otros.”

De la manera en que describes cambios, parece ser personal como también social. Hablas de tu manera de mirar el mundo, la gente y otras situaciones…sin embargo, veo que cada una de estas frases mencionas tu relación, queriendo decir tu relación a otros y otros eventos. Regreso una vez mas a tus palabras, “… comenzar primeramente a cambiar mi punto de vista del mundo y su gente, también a la manera a la cual enfrentamos diversas situaciones….” Escribes de cambio en la manera en que tú “miras….” y cambio en la manera que “enfrentas….” De la forma en que “enfrentamos” situaciones es quizás una declaración acerca de orientación y la reorientación continua que requieren nuestras circunstancias, porque finalmente, tu frase “…en la cual nos encontramos….” me hace creer que no nos vemos desde una posición externa….
“Conectamos y relacionarnos con otros” internamente “... con las diversas situaciones en las que nos encontramos en nuestra vida.”

Me imagino y supongo que la palabra “enfrentarnos” la podemos interpretar de otras maneras también. Algunas veces hablamos de “enfrentar” como ‘valentía.’ En inglés usamos la frase “enfrentarnos” a algo o alguien, significa que no nos escondemos, somos vistos y expuestos a la crítica, hablando figurativamente. Pienso, también, si podemos comprender en otro sentido tu frase “… cambiando la forma en que enfrentamos situaciones”. Si cambiando la forma en que enfrentamos estas situaciones, significaría que aceptamos la humanidad de esta situación, respondiendo a su llamado como si nos viera y escuchara, ¿como si fuera “Otro” presente, en una relación con nosotros mismos? ¿Quizás esto es diluir demasiado nuestra metáfora…? Que piensas tú….

Estoy enormemente agradecida de tus comentarios. Además, también siento que el enfoque de este diálogo colaborativo es mi manera de ser, mi manera de vivir, una manera que ha transformado mi vida en todo sentido. No fue solamente un enfoque diferente a practicar. Vibro y siento tus palabras “… esta caminata diaria.”

Hablas de cambio como algo ordenado y esto es muy curioso para mi., especialmente, ya que desde hace un par de años, estoy consciente de el desorden innato producido por los cambios, de la “ineficiencia” y de la manera impredecible en que los cambios interrumpen el orden. Tú das a entender que cierta manera de ser, se antepone a la práctica colaborativa, y hablas del practicante, quien cambia primero. Sugiriendo, continuas, “No creo que esto se lleve a efecto al revés, creo que este es el orden en que ocurre.”

Continuando con la descripción de la práctica posmoderna colaborativa, tú dices lo siguiente: “Lo mas hermoso es que comienzo a darme cuenta que las personas son cada vez más
y mas interesantes. Recién comienzo a tener una idea de su riqueza tan especial, de la manera en que piensan y de la manera en la cual estructuran sus pensamientos e ideas.”

¡Si, me sucede lo mismo, también! En la forma en que yo practicaba era muy importante identificar patrones, y de esta manera responder con intervenciones seleccionadas y “listas”:

Juntando patrones semejantes. Con tantos años de práctica ‘posmodernista y colaborativa’ hemos desarrollado una alta sensibilidad a “desviarnos” de los patrones…por la caprichosa, original y estéticamente interesante manera en que nosotros hablamos y vivimos. Encuentro que no escucho la repetición aburrida que estaba acostumbrada a escuchar de otros como también mía. Tal como tú, no considero a mis clientes ser una muestra representativa de las diferentes categorías de ‘salud mental’ o sicológica. Mi orientación es hacia las particularidades, que continuamente encuentro, los sutiles matices, los aparentes detalles infinitos y presentes que contribuyen al “sentir” y al “carácter” de cada conversación.

Tu hablas de la ‘estructura’ como una novedad en cada conversación. Estas interesada en las maneras… “en las cuales estructuran sus ideas y significados.” Me imagino que la estructura que tú presientes en las conversaciones de tus clientes es como un orden que aparece con el tiempo. Yo pienso en estructura de “ideas y significados” como una fluidez colaborativa, improvisada, abierta en una conversación viva; las que no serán nunca repetidas en el futuro.

Tu escribes, “Yo creo que cuando comienzas a apreciar esto, te das cuenta de lo rico que es este proceso para ti.” ¡Si! Comenzar a “darse cuenta de esta riqueza única…” es comenzar a participar en esta gran abundancia. Encuentro que esta parte de tus escrituras responde directamente a la pregunta de nuestro proyecto: “Como terapeuta colaborativo posmoderno, ¿como describirías tu práctica como generativa y transformadora?” Sugieres que el enriquecimiento recíproco de la conversación depende de la “apreciación” del terapeuta,
“dándose cuenta” y de la riqueza única de las personas con quien conversan, apreciando “la manera que tienen de pensar, y de la manera en la cual estructuran sus ideas y significado....”

Regreso a tus palabras, “Creo que cuando comienzas a apreciar esto, te das cuenta de lo rico que es este proceso para ti, igualmente enriquecedor para la otra persona también....”

Me encanta como usas la palabra “darse cuenta.” Para mí, darme cuenta, significa tocar. Un tocar que es consiente, sostenido y energético...significa algo que vale la pena sostener, es algo precioso. Significa una conexión completa.Darse cuenta de algo, para mi no es intelectualmente “el saber que, como o eso” o “saber acerca de” como un entendimiento—sin embargo, podría incluir este tipo de saber. Es mucho más que eso, es como el “saber que es interno,” el saber del cual John Shotter y otros hablan... es el saber responsivo-relacional...

En el último párrafo de tu nota, me gustaría escribir de una forma poética, aun cuando trabajo a través de traducciones que paradójicamente, al mismo tiempo, me “acercan y me alejan” de tus palabras originales en español.

“Te das cuenta que nunca serás la misma persona, sino que en cada conversación eres diferente y te transformas y por consiguiente avanzas
y cada vez eres
más inquisitiva
acerca de la vida,
tu propia vida personal,
como también de la vida de la otra persona
que trabaja contigo.

Este es el comienzo de mis ideas….

Continuare escribiendo….”

Tus palabras “nunca de nuevo,” hablan de un cambio irrevocable que encontramos en el proceso dialógico colaborativo. Hablas de la diferencia, la transformación, y de la dinámica que es parte de “cada conversación.” Maravillosamente escribes, “… cada vez que eres más inquisitivo acerca de la vida, no solamente de la vida de las personas que hablan contigo, pero también de nuestras vidas personales.”

Antes de continuar con la segunda parte, agrego mis propios ‘apuntes,’ algunos resuenan a tus palabras anteriores:

Me lleva al “comienzo” que parece ser intrínsecamente una parte de esta orientación.

Comienzo, novedoso, dinámico, creciente curiosidad, “en cada conversación…”

“… cada vez…”

“… cada vez eres más inquisitivo acerca de la vida, tu vida personal, como así también la de la persona que trabaja contigo.”

“… Encuentro las personas cada vez más y más interesantes…”

“… las diversas situaciones en las que nos encontramos en nuestras vidas…” los elementos fortuitos
“... la riqueza única de cada persona... Me doy cuenta de comprender esta riqueza única...”

“... cuando comienzas a apreciar esto, te das cuenta de lo enriquecedor que ha sido este proceso para ti, igualmente rico para ambos, tu y la otra persona...”

“... nunca de nuevo... nunca serás la misma persona...”

“... en cada conversación eres diferente...”

“... por consiguiente, avanzas...”

“... te has transformado...”

Debo colocar tus escritos a un lado, aun cuando resisto esta idea, cada vez que regreso a ellos, aprendo mas. Tu escribes, “Este es el comienzo de mis ideas,” probablemente queriendo decir que simplemente es el punto de partida de tus reflexiones –continuará mas adelante. Sin embargo, pienso, que “este es el comienzo de tus ideas” porque tus ideas me dan a entender la importancia de “comienzo” en tu trabajo y en tu filosofía de la vida.

La brevedad de tu reflexión finaliza simplemente “con cariño Pasha.” Pienso, “Que cadencia mas apropiada para finalizar.” ¿Significan estas palabras algo acerca de tu manera de ser en la práctica y más allá? Creo que si.

Janice

_Pasha Responds, August, 2005_

_Original Spanish journaling._

En la vida hay eventos que hacen que uno se sienta muy movido, como si algo te enpujara con gran violencia hacia moverte a otro lado, "crecer" se le dice a veces... pero pareceiera que hay un solo momento para desarrollar ciertas cosas y cuando tienes cierta edad
debes ya saber que quieres y como debe ser tu vida. Creo que la propuesta de trabajo postmoderna lo que hace es rescatarnos de estas presiones, uno no las deja de sentir, pero al menos te das cuenta de que puedes elegir hacerte a un lado de la presion, poder disfrutar de varias cosas… ya no usamos una sola descripción de nosotros mismos, sino que vamos aprendiendo múltiples formas de definirnos y de mirarnos, por consiguiente también aprendemos múltiples formas de relacionarnos y de demostrar afecto por los demás; si somos tan diferentes ya no podemos decir que somos únicos o auténticos, porque ser único también resulta limitado, pareciera que decimos que solo somos de una forma "única"… y creo que si somos seres en relación, no somos únicos, sino que somos una mezcla de relaciones previas y de historias contadas… podríamos ser cualquier cosa… si embargo decidimos ser como somos… y eso eso es la terapia colaborativa, un espacio en donde uno cae en la cuenta de que esta decidiendo como ser… y que en cualquier momento puedes decidir algo diferente y aprender a disfrutar de esas posibilidades!

_Spanish to English translation._

In life there are events that cause one to feel deeply moved, as if something violently pushed you to move to another place, “growth” is how it’s sometimes referred to…but it appears as though there is only one specific time allotted in which to develop in some areas and that by the time you reach a certain age you are supposed to know what you want and how your life should be. I believe that the intention of postmodern work is to rescue us from those pressures, one does not stop feeling them, but at least you realize that you can choose to put the pressure aside, you can enjoy many things… we no longer describe ourselves in just one specific way, rather we learn many ways in which to define ourselves and how to look at ourselves.

Consequently, we also learn many ways in which to relate and to show affection towards others;
if we are so different, we can no longer say that we are unique or genuine, because being unique is also limiting, it seems that we say that we are “unique” in only one way… and I believe that we are humans in interaction, we are not unique, rather we are a combination of previous interactions and many histories… we could be anything… but we decide to be the way we are… and that is collaborative therapy, a space in which one enters into the realization that one is deciding how to be…and that at any moment you can decide something different and learn to enjoy those possibilities!

Janice Responds, September, 2006

In your second reflecting you write, “In life there are events that cause one to feel deeply moved, as if something violently pushed you to move to another place….” For me this statement speaks to the involuntary dimension of “growth,” the way it so often is more, or different—something other than what we might have chosen for ourselves. Our plans and intentions, however carefully drawn, are often entirely irrelevant to our development. And you add,

... it appears as though there is only one specific time allotted in which to develop in some areas and that by the time you reach a certain age you are supposed to know what you want and how your life should be.

Your comments reminded me of an undergraduate course I took in Developmental Psychology nearly twenty years ago! We gave the majority of our attention to the first decades of human life, and we discussed “growth” exclusively as step-wise, linear process. We used the words “normal” and “abnormal” freely and without much question in these classes. Like you, I felt a persistent and growing discomfort with the claims and assumptions that seemed foundational to this knowledge about “growth.”
You write, “the intention of postmodern work” is to free us from these kinds of pressures. “One does not stop feeling them, but at least you realize that you can choose to put the pressure aside, you can enjoy many things…. We no longer describe ourselves in just one specific way....”

Yes, Pasha, I also find the postmodern valuing of multiplicity liberating. We are not limited to a singular Truth about anything; we have the luxury of engaging with multiple interpretive communities. Growth can be limitless throughout our lives, irrespective of age. I re-read your next lines several times, and I feel somewhat challenged by them! Here you seem to write about the impossibility of uniqueness as follows:

… and I believe that we are humans in interaction, we are not unique, rather we are a combination of previous interactions and many histories…. We decide to be the way we are…at any moment you can decide something different....

I find these lines to be in an interesting tension with the first portion of this reflecting and the first reflecting you share in this project. On the one hand, on August 17, 2005, you are struck by people’s “unique richness” and you state, “… that when you begin to appreciate this, you realize how enriching the process is for you....” And at the beginning of the first reflecting, sent August 31, 2005 you speak of “events” that cause us to feel deeply moved, my translation says “… as if something violently pushed...” us to another place, and you seem to tentatively use the word “growth” to refer to this kind of movement we do not design ourselves.

Yet here in this particular part of your process, you seem to offer a contrary perspective—I wonder if you would agree…! You write, “… we are not unique, rather we are a combination of previous interactions and many histories... we could be anything... but we decide to be the way we are....” Your writing takes me into two questions I have asked throughout my
exploration of social constructionism: “To what extent do we choose and simply assemble ourselves and our interactions with re-cycled social and cultural resources?” “And to what extent are our circumstances unchosen, thrust upon us, quite apart from our personal or communal agency?” Can the truths implied in both questions be possible, even if they contradict one another—Is it possible to be a unique combination of “… previous interactions and many histories…?” Or is genuine creativity not possible—must we always draw from the same cultural and social wells throughout time? Considering all the sameness and repeating pattern in human communication, what shall we make of the following claim—that not one other person co-occupies a person’s precise place in this world—no one previously, and no one could in the future. Is not my place, as the third child born to Eldon and Vivian, in Southern Manitoba, in 1965… only mine, even though it is situated within an intricately complex and deeply influencing web of social connection?

Perhaps these divergent perspectives are present in your reflecting. I think they correspond with two distinct strains of social Constructionism—one emphasizing the “againness” of human interaction, and the other emphasizing the uniqueness inherent in every person, and therefore the “genuine” novelty in every communicative event. I would like to return to this elsewhere in my dissertation writing. I wish you could instantly be here with me now so that we could talk further. I would love to hear more from you about this!

But for now, I want to return to some of your other statements about the word “unique.” You refer to the potentially limited meanings associated with the word: “… being unique is also limiting….” Your writing raises many questions for me. Is the very idea of “uniqueness” possible without its binary opposite term, “sameness?” If everyone is unique, what can unique mean…? Are you suggesting the description of “unique” is often too singular? I think here of your words,
“… it seems that we say we are “unique” in only one way…. ” Previously we have understood “unique” within the context of Western, individualistic psychology where the “unique” individual was a ‘free-standing’ entity separate from others. We grew up with the dream of ‘self-actualization’ and “being your own person.” Now our understandings of ourselves are so much more communal, more relational, more tentative.

Before you pause, you write these words: “… and that is collaborative therapy, a space in which one enters into the realization that one is deciding how to be… and that at any moment you can decide something different and learn to enjoy those possibilities.”

I find it both practical and aesthetically pleasing to think of collaborative therapy “… as a space in which one enters into…. ” And you continue: “… a space in which one enters into the realization that one is deciding how to be…. ” I too see collaborative approaches to therapy as featuring a space where practitioners refrain from imposing ‘pre-understandings’ on the people they meet with, a space where people can explore together multiple ways of being and multiple meanings through conversation and shared inquiry. Possibilities emerge in the moment, and “… at any moment…” you can decide something different. We need not wait for approval or initiative from an expert class in our conversations. Further your reflecting draws attention to the challenge of “… how to be…. ” Many contemporary approaches to therapy focus on the achievement of goals, and the solution of problems. These agendas are not required in our collaborative practices.

Your reflecting seems so positive, so hopeful. Where deconstruction seems to lead to the disassembling of meaning, social construction seems to invite imaginative co-creation and engagement. Our interest is not so much with what is, nor with what is presumed to be, but rather with what might be possible.
Pasha, thank you for adding your wonderful voice to our project dialogue. I know your participation in my project takes place during your own research work… and so I am doubly grateful for your presence with us. I will return to your writing many times more throughout my work.

With my respect and admiration,

Janice DeFehr

*English to Spanish translation.*

En tu segunda reflexión escribes lo siguiente, “Hay hechos que en la vida te conmueven profundamente, como si algo violentísimo te empujara a irte a otro lugar….” En mi opinión, esto refleja la dimensión involuntaria de “crescer,” tan a menudo es mucho más, algo tan diferente a lo que habríamos escogido para nosotros. Nuestros planes y nuestras intenciones, aunque hayan sido cuidadosamente preparados, son, por lo general, absolutamente irrelevantes a nuestro desarrollo. Y a lo anterior agregas,

... da la impresión de que existe un tiempo específico y determinado en la cual se te permite desarrollarte en algunas áreas, y cuando llegas a cierta edad, se supone que ya debes saber lo que quieres y como debe ser tu vida.

¡Tus comentarios me recuerdan a un curso en Desarrollo psicológico que tome hace veinte años en la universidad! Dedicamos la mayoría de nuestro tiempo a las primeras décadas de la vida humana, y discutimos el “crecimiento” exclusivamente como un proceso paso por paso, lineal. En clases, en ese entonces, sin preguntar, usamos libremente las palabras, “normal” y “anormal.” Tal como tu, sentí un constante y creciente desagrado, con el hecho y las suposiciones que parecen ser la base/fundación de este conocimiento con respecto al “crecimiento.”
Escribes, “la intención del trabajo posmoderno” es liberarnos de este tipo de presiones. “… Uno nunca deja de sentirlas, pero por lo menos te das cuenta que puedes escoger y dejar las presiones a un lado, puedes disfrutar de muchas cosas… y no nos auto describimos de una sola manera....”

Sí, Pasha, yo también encuentro librante la multiplicidad valedera del postmodernismo. No estamos limitados a una Verdad única acerca de todo; tenemos el lujo de participar con múltiples comunidades interpretativas. El crecimiento puede ser infinito a través de nuestras vidas, independiente de nuestra edad.

He leído varias veces las próximas líneas que escribiste, y de alguna manera ¡me siento desafiada por ellas! Me parece que aquí escribes acerca de la imposibilidad de la singularidad en la siguiente manera:

… y creo que somos humanos en interacción, no somos únicos, sino que una combinación de interacciones previas y muchas historias... decidimos ser de la manera que somos...y en cualesquiera momento puedes decidir algo diferente....

Encuentro que estas líneas están en una interesante tensión con la primera parte de esta reflexión y la primera reflexión que compartiste en este proyecto. Y por otro lado, el 17 de Agosto del 2005, donde estas asombrada “de la riqueza única” e indicas “… cuando comienzas a apreciar esto, te das cuenta de la riqueza de este proceso para ti....” Al comienzo de la primera reflexión, que fue enviada el 31 de Agosto del 2005, tu hablas de “hechos” que nos conmueven profundamente, mi traducción dice “… como si algo te empujara violentamente...” hacia otro lugar, y me parece que usas la palabra “crecimiento” de una manera tentativa para hacer referencia a un tipo de movimiento que no es diseñado por nosotros.
A pesar de todo, específicamente, en esta parte de tu proceso, me da la impresión que das una perspectiva diferente—¡Pienso si estas de acuerdo…!” De nuevo escribes, “… no somos únicos, sino que somos una combinación de interacciones anteriores y muchas historias… podríamos ser quien quisiéramos... pero decidimos ser de la forma en que somos....” Tus escritos me dirigen hacia dos preguntas las cuales me he preguntado constantemente durante mi exploración de construccionismo social. “¿Hasta que punto escogemos y simplemente nos reconstruimos junto a nuestras interacciones, con recursos sociales y culturales reciclados? Y ¿hasta que punto nuestras circunstancias son escogidas, impuestas en nosotros, totalmente separadas de nuestras agencias personales o comunales?” En ambas preguntas, esta verdad implícita, ¿serán posible aun cuando se contradigan la una con la otra- es posible que sea una combinación única de “… interacciones previas y muchas historias….?” O ¿la creatividad innata no es posible—y a través del tiempo debemos continuar usando siempre del mismo manantial social y cultural? Teniendo en cuenta la monotonía y los patrones repetitivos en la comunicación humana, que podemos hacer al respecto de esta declaración—ningún otro individuo puede co-ocupar el lugar preciso de otro individuo en este mundo—nadie con anterioridad, y nadie podrá en el futuro. ¿No es mi lugar, como el tercer hijo nacido de Eldon y Vivia, en el sur de Manitoba en 1965, solo mió, aun cuando esta situado dentro de una compleja, intrínscico y profundamente influyente red de conexiones sociales?

Talvez estas perspectivas tan divergentes están presentes en tu reflexionar. Pienso que corresponden a dos corrientes muy distintas de construccionismo social—une que enfatiza la “repetición” de la interacción humana, y la otra enfatizando la singularidad inherente en cada persona, y de esta manera la novedad “genuina” en cada hecho comunicativo. Me gustaría regresar a esto de nuevo en otra parte de mi disertación escrita. Como quisiera que estuviervas...
instantáneamente presente aquí conmigo para continuar hablando. ¡Me encantaría enormemente saber que piensas al respecto de esto!

Por el momento, voy a regresar a tu declaración con respecto a la palabra “único”. Te refieres al potencial limitado que está asociado con el significado de esta palabra: “... ser único es también ser limitado...” Tu escritura me plantea varias preguntas. La idea de “singularidad” ¿es posible sin el término binario opuesto de “monotonía”? Si cada uno de nosotros es único, ¿que significa entonces único…? ¿Sugieres que la descripción de “único” es a menudo singular? Aquí pienso en tus palabras, “... me parece que decimos que somos únicos de una sola forma....” Con anterioridad hemos entendido “único” en el contexto occidental, individualista, psicológico en donde este individuo “único” es una entidad en ‘si mismo’ separado de los demás. Crecemos con el sueño de ‘re-actualizarnos’ y de “ser un individuo propio.” Ahora, el entendimiento de nosotros mismos es mucho más comunal, más relacional, más tentativo.

Antes de la pausa, escribes las siguientes palabras: “... y eso es terapia colaborativa, un espacio en el cual te das cuenta que uno es quien decide como ser... y en cualesquier momento puedes decidir algo diferente y aprendes a disfrutar de esas posibilidades.”

Encuentro que es práctico y estéticamente agradable pensar que la terapia colaborativa es “... como un espacio al cual entran....” Y continuas: “... un espacio en el cual entran y te das cuenta que es uno quien decide como ser....” Yo veo también este enfoque colaborativo de terapia el cual resalta un espacio donde los practicantes se frenan de imponer un ‘pre-entendimiento’ de las personas con quien se reúnen, un espacio donde los individuos pueden conjuntamente explorar múltiples maneras de ser y múltiples significados a través de conversación y de información compartida. Las posibilidades salen en el momento y “... en cualesquier momento...” tu puedes decidir algo diferente. No necesitamos esperar por la
aprobación o la iniciativa de una clase de expertos en nuestras conversaciones. Continuando, tu reflexión se concentra en el desafío de “… como ser….” Muchos enfoques contemporáneos de la terapia se enfocan en el resultado de los objetivos y en la solución de problemas. Estas agendas no son necesarias en nuestra práctica colaborativa.

Tu reflexionar parece ser tan positiva, tan esperanzada. Donde la deconstrucción parece llevar hacia el desarmamiento del significado, la construcción social parece invitarnos a un proceso co-creativo, imaginativo y envuelto. Nuestro interés no es solamente con lo que es, ni tampoco con lo que presume ser, sino que con lo que podría ser posible.

Querida Pasha, te agradezco el hecho de agregar tu hermosa voz al dialogo de nuestro proyecto. También se que tu participación en mi proyecto se lleva a cabo durante el mismo tiempo de tu trabajo e investigación… y por esto estoy eternamente agradecida de tu presencia con nosotros. Re-visitaré tus escritos en muchas oportunidades durante el transcurso de mi trabajo.

Con toda mi admiración y respeto,

Janice DeFehr

Written Dialogues With Emelie

Emelie Responds, June 29, 2005

Second meeting with a client.

Hanna, the tall blond women in my therapy room had expressed a desire to learn to know herself better. I suggested a genogram, and her response on my question on where she was born surprised me: ” In Nanning.” The answers about brothers and sisters as well as about her mother were the same: ”In China.” Her family background was like a textbook on Christian mission
enterprises in Asia from 150 years back up to our time. Stories about adventures as well as sacrifices, parents leaving their children for long times, repeated changes of job and place all through lifetime for several family members, I was fascinated.

So many things were so strange to me, that I didn’t know how to word any questions; I just watched this colorful tapestry as it developed and expressed my admiration. As we moved on I wondered how to connect her telling to her wishes for our meetings. Many things that I often ask in genogram work were not asked. Two things we were coming back to our conversation.

The first one was connected to our first meeting when Hanna had told me her fear of being to demanding on other people when she was in charge of a task or was asked for advice. She often thought that they “could to better than this” and became unsure if she had the right to think as she did. I suggested that with all her own experiences of mastering difficult situations, and all that she had heard in her family, no wonder that she had other expectations than many people around her, and that maybe she had a fortune there, even if it sometimes caused difficulty in relationship to people with very different backgrounds.

The second concerned the most difficult time in her own experience, as an eleven year old child coming back from Asia, feeling altogether strange among people she had expected to feel at home with. No one seemed to reflect on that this child needed some support in adjusting to a normal Scandinavian environment, she felt extremely lonely, and decided not to show anything or tell anything about her difficulties. This loneliness was a theme we could talk about in several ways in subsequent meetings.

Afterwards I wondered about some aspects of this way of using a genogram, maybe they had to do with my collaborative therapy approach.
1. my experience of surprise and awe, just fascinated by this piece of history being present in the room

2. respecting the client’s opinion that being put in a boarding school in China at eight years of age was not a problem, but coming to her country of origin with parents and all at eleven was a major problem

3. my suggestion of the possibility that this vague feeling of “being too demanding” could be seen in a very different light from the story

**Group supervision, August 24, 2005.**

Two supervision groups, social services in a suburb of Stockholm, the first group a family support team, the second a youth assessment team. We have seen each other for a year, every other week for 2½ hours for each group of 7-8 people. This was the first meeting after the summer vacation. In this reflection I am thinking of the kind of choices I made during the day.

**Family team.**

This group during the spring had heard about my personal situation with the little baby grandchild where I had supported the family. I decided to share about the death of the baby and some of the events that we as a family had been through including the death of my mother. Several people cried and at first there was a lot of encouraging statements about strength in families. Then a new participant of the group told that it was very painful for her to hear about “the good death” as she was having a very difficult time trying to get medical and social help for her own mother up in the north of Sweden. As I didn’t know her very well, I am not yet sure of if I did validate her concerns when I went from this conversation to the concerns for their work. Did the conversation become too private? Was I too much into my own sharing and not enough sensitive to where people were? I am not very proud of how it went. The rest of the session went
smoothly with everybody taking active part in sharing work and reflecting. I will return to these questions next time I see the group, but I am not sure how. This kind of dilemma, about sharing personal thing, I find very difficult in these open group conversations, but most often I find that there are possibilities to learn from whatever outcome of a session.

**Youth assessment group.**

In the group there were three new participants, two of them straight from school. “Oh, are they so young coming out of school these days!” I thought, but didn’t say. At the end it was just the three of them left because of meetings. Then they almost exploded in sharing their frustration of coming to the unit at the time when the boss just had left, the new boss was not yet employed and of their five experienced colleagues, two were on holiday and the others so overloaded with work that the newcomers hardly dared to disturb them with questions. As most all of the circumstances had been mentioned in the team in this session before the others left I felt OK about validating their concerns. Yet I did not want them to walk away with all that frustration and nothing else, so I asked them: Are there any problems that you do not have in this situation, I mean, like, the three of you are coming at the same time, not just one? They quickly started working on that question and seemed to leave in a good mood. I noticed afterwards that I didn’t feel like a therapist or supervisor at all, I felt like a very very old almost wise women that they liked to have a chat with.

**Three sessions with a couple, June 30, 2005.**

A couple, came a year ago, told about 30 years of marriage difficulties. We have been seeing each other about once a month. After the previous session, I had felt sad. Both of them say that they regard the conversations good and they keep asking for the next session, but the wife, says that she does not see much of change at home, the husband has a slightly more positive
view of that. This time, I start with a very rare feeling, it is as if I saw a vast open space behind each one of them. I find no words for the feeling, so I just say that I am glad to meet with them again, not knowing if the extent of my excitement comes through in my voice, or is even intelligible.

The husband reports that he has told his wife about things he was worrying about, practical and economical issues. She admits that she appreciates that and starts telling about how she does not dare to take any small sign of change like that very seriously after all the disappointments through the years. I feel a warmth towards her during her sharing, nothing of my frustration from last time.

_Session, July 22, 2005._

Since last session the wife has had a heart attack and the doctor has told her to stop every work and activity that is stressful for her. Our conversation centers around what that is in their lives that ends up as stressful for her. I suggest some of the things that we have been talking about earlier on, but more from a perspective of what kind of bodily sensations that these events included and what they thought about that. They were interested of noticing more on that level in their daily life.

_Session, August 25, 2005._

All the conversation concerns health issues. The wife gives detailed reports about what kind of inner demands she has noticed in her efforts not to give in to stress and haste. The conversation is lively and mutual.

Looking back on these sessions, to me it seems that now, when we don’t talk about relationship issues, the relationship is working much better, with the common goal that she should avoid serious heart failure. Both of them are verbally very competent, after several
sessions on what kind of difficulties they had experienced through the years, through the winter we have been sometimes talking details about their family business, with not much change happening. One session was just mother and daughter, a very good experience as they both said, but it did not seem to fuel back into the couple’s life. Yet I have a sense that the change of themes through the time somehow has given a close connection between the conversations and their life at home. But, how sad that a serious physical threat should be needed in order to give a real mutuality in the conversation. Shouldn’t a collaborative therapist be able to accomplish that with smaller means?

Janice Responds, September 2006

You begin telling me about your conversations with a woman you call Hanna. Hanna “expressed a desire to learn to know herself better.” Part of your early focus with her involved working on a genogram, and it is in doing this work that you learn of the enormous challenges she has faced, beginning with her separation from both her country and her parents at a young age.

You were fascinated with her story, fascinated with its connections to a particular time in history. You use the words “surprise and awe” to describe your feeling as you participated in it’s telling. And you write, “I just watched this colorful tapestry as it developed and expressed my admiration.”

Some aspects of the work were also difficult, it seems. You write, “So many things were so strange to me, that I didn’t know how to word any questions....” “I wondered how to connect her telling (her narratives) to her wishes for our meetings. Many things that I often ask in genogram work were not asked.”
Part of your struggle (and mine as I read your reflecting) concerned her account of “...the most difficult time in her own experience....” It was so different from what I imagine most therapists would expect. You write of the importance of “respecting the client’s opinion,” respecting that the part of her story that was perhaps most disturbing for you, the practitioner, was “not a problem” for your client. In fact, what we, as practitioners might be inclined to think of as the welcome resolution of her dilemma, your client perceived to be at the very heart of her struggle.

When I first read of the wish to “learn to know herself better” I confess I recognized this as one of those vague, generic statements a practitioner might hear at the outset of a first-time therapy conversation. But as you describe the details of the situation and your dialogue, the “desire to know herself better” took on an urgent and rich meaning for me. Like you, perhaps, I had to run to catch up with your client—I had to ‘travel,’ ‘re-locate’ to join in her struggle and in yours, as you entered into the challenge of navigating your way through opinions and feelings “commissioned” by a community quite different from your own.

I think you offer a wonderful example of ‘not-knowing.’ You allow yourself to intermingle with difference, difference so profound that it leaves you seemingly without words for a time—it overwhelms you to the point where you cannot imagine what questions to ask. We all experience this when we travel in a country foreign to us, with foreign currency, foreign language, foreign customs, foreign gestures, foreign structures. Without a shared ‘foreknowledge’ we struggle to orient ourselves within our immediate surroundings.

As I read your reflecting, I notice you do not seem to be listening “theoretically;” you are listening “responsively.” You write of respecting your client’s opinion—and I remind myself that respect is an optical metaphor meaning “to look again.” And so I picture you looking again
within her words, within her world of lived experience, allowing her own personal and relational story to shed “a very different light” on aspects of her experience that were still troubling for her, rather than importing a professional “knowing” derived from theories, models, frameworks. You seem to stay within the abundant richness of what she is offering you, and within the interchange generated by both of you together. Is it Wittgenstein who says, “The phenomena themselves are the theory?” In recent correspondence with you, I recall you writing about the preference many of us have for “fresh” and “local” ideas, over concepts that have been “canned” and exchanged in the marketplace for years. I find this preference shows up vividly in the reflecting you share with this project.

The story of talking with Hanna is open ended in your reflecting. You draw no conclusions for us. Your write, “afterwards I wondered…” And you articulate a “maybe…” and I imagine your written reflecting process shows something of the curiosity and openness of your spoken conversational process with your clients.

*Group supervision August 24, 2005.*

From your reflecting I learn that facilitating a regular group supervision session with other therapists is part of your practice. You describe a particular meeting following an extraordinarily difficult spring and summer for you, one filled with tremendous loss for you and your family. At this meeting you decided to share some of the events that you as a family had been through. After, you asked yourself many questions of this part of the conversation even though you note that “the rest of the session went smoothly with everybody taking active part…” and you resolved to return to your questions the next time you saw the group, although you say, “I am not sure how.” You write of the difficult dilemma of sharing personally within these open
group conversations, but you add, “there are possibilities to learn from whatever the outcome of a session.”

You write of a second group supervision meeting, one in which the newly graduated practitioners were bursting with frustration. Wanting them to leave your ‘supervision’ conversation with something besides all their frustrations, you ask, “Are there any problems that you do not have in this situation, I mean, like, the three of you are coming at the same time, not just one?” It seems they eagerly took up your question, and seemed to leave in more optimistic spirits. I love your last statement in this entry: “I noticed afterwards that I didn’t feel like a therapist or supervisor at all, I felt like a very very old, almost wise woman that they liked to have a chat with.”

*Three sessions with a couple.*

You describe aspects of your conversations with a couple, and your concern and sadness, that although they have a high regard for the conversations with you, and consistently book the next session, they report very little change between themselves in their everyday lives. You notice also a “very rare feeling” one day as you meet with them. You write, “I find no words for the feeling, so I just say that I am glad to meet with them again.” You also speak of feeling warmth towards your client while she was speaking.

In your account, you note that movement forward seems to occur finally as one partner in the couple begins experiencing a health crisis between two sessions. Not surprisingly the conversation becomes more oriented to the body and bodily sensations. It shifts from the discussion of “relationship issues” that seemed to comprise the focus of earlier conversations. You reflect, “Looking back on these sessions, to me it seems that now, when we don’t talk about relationship issues, the relationship is working much better....” You “have a sense that the
change of themes through the time somehow has given a close connection between the conversations (in therapy?) and their life at home.” I wonder at the same time, if it is also possible that since the relationship is “working much better,” there is less talk of relational difficulties in your therapy conversations?

Again, you raise questions: “… how sad that a serious physical threat should be needed in order to give a real mutuality in the conversation. Shouldn’t a collaborative therapist be able to accomplish that with smaller means?”

Here especially I wish I could join you face to face over coffee. I have recently experienced a similar situation in my own practice, a situation where it seems if anything has changed, it has deteriorated. I see no tangible signs that our dialogue has been generative. I find it frustrating and sobering to acknowledge this. At the same time, I remind myself that this story is not over and the conversation continues in our own inner dialogues. And further, I remind myself from time to time: I am not the change agent. I am only a participant in a conversation, a passionate, wholehearted, devoted, immersed participant, a relationally-responsive participant, but only a participant. I am a participant in a process that is much larger than me, much larger than the conversation with my client; it is a process that plays itself out socially and culturally, not only personally. I think here of Bakhtin’s “world symposium” and his idea that we participate with our fate. I am certain you would have much to add to these ideas.

Returning to the situation you describe, I find it interesting that movement forward did not occur with what we might describe as the “resolution” of previous “issues…” or even with the introduction of some new element of good fortune. Ironically, you suggest it is a new difficulty, a health crisis, that seems to free them to ‘live out’ and ‘live into’ new themes in their relationship.
Some months after your first written contributions to this project, you sent an additional fragment from your written reflecting. You spoke of your conversation with a supervision group that meets regularly. They said you always give them “something to land on, and go on with” even though they present their struggles without any kind of “reasonable order,” wondering how you will be able to make something out the “mess!” You then wrote of a specific event, a disagreement between practitioners in the group and their employer, and you wrote about your assessment that you had not been very helpful in one particular ‘supervision’ session where this disagreement was discussed. But they countered your perspective by saying, “You gave us a room where we could talk together, the only space we had where things actually could be talked about—that was necessary. We don’t think you could have done more.”

So, giving them something ‘to land on’ implies their sense of falling, of un-control, of risk. Instead of a crash site, these practitioners you describe as “very bright and professionally competent” are able to land in a conversational room, “the only space we had….” And what was the gift for you? You write, “I felt very honored.” You also write about “following them, following their thoughts and ideas, “… often I feel one step behind….”

So perhaps “following” is part of collaboration. We often speak of walking “alongside” another as the collaborative ideal but perhaps we should not ‘understand’ this metaphor too quickly. Maybe it is enough, at times, to be ‘close at hand,’ to be within reach. Here I think of Harlene’s metaphor of our clients as our teachers, and we, as practitioners, their students, under their mentorship, so to speak, followers.

I want to offer an additional thought before I paperclip your journaling pages and set them aside for the time being. Lately in my walking from home to office, I notice paths veining all throughout the neighbourhood park I pass on my commute. My city recently created one set
of paths using some kind of dark black concrete-like substance; it looks as though someone has drawn heavy lines with a giant permanent ink marker. I also see a series of footpaths throughout the grass where walkers have obviously devised their own routes. Some of these are long and extend through the whole of the space, and some are only slight revisions to the city-made paths.

I am, for the moment, now thinking of therapy process not as journey, but as path. Our profession lays out multiple paths to match with particular dilemmas. Many practitioners and clients circulate back and forth over the same paths, asking the same pre-figured questions, employing the same strategies, techniques and interventions, observing the same landmarks.

Because your orientation—philosophically and practically—is dialogical, you are not directing anyone towards any particular path. Each person, in conversation, and in relationship with you and with others, sets out on a unique trail, one neither of you have encountered before, one you are forging together, and, forging communally, influenced as you are by hosts of relational realities. This means you are not a guide, but you are also much more than an escort or accompanist—your role is indefinable—it is inter-dependent, involved, creative, practical, dialogical and in continual emergence.

I encounter signs that you are “off the black concrete path” of our profession throughout your writing:

• When you allow Hanna’s response to surprise you, fascinate you, overwhelm you

• In your interest to work within your client’s opinion and “common sense”

• In your way of inviting “a very different light” from her own story to help illuminate her way around a particular dilemma troubling her

• In your unusual use of genogram

• In your willingness to talk about “loneliness in several ways”
In your noticing that you did not feel like a therapist or supervisor—the professional roles you occupy

And in your drawing on a role that has nothing to do with office or title, a persona that extends beyond professional distinctions—_an old, almost wise woman_

In you’re noticing “a very rare feeling….”

In your questioning, at one point, of one of the popular ‘givens’ of therapy culture: _It is good to talk about what troubles us_

In allowing yourself to follow your clients and ‘supervisees’

In co-constructing “resolution” provocatively, and provisionally

_Thank you_ again for sharing your reflecting processes. I think of Hoffman’s (1992) phrase _the art of withness_ (p. 9) as I read your writing. You seem to courageously join your clients and your ‘supervisees’ at the very edges of newness, at wonderful but also uncertain places where the way forward is not in an answer, a technique, a model, or theory. The way forward is found through the messiness and unpredictability of conversation, through continual shared inquiry, through sensing, responding, anticipating.

Your writing is brimming with questions, and they leave me with ‘a feel’ for the earnestness of your searching. Yet, according to your reflecting, your work is rewarding; it takes you to astonishing beauty where you are an involved witness to the development of “colorful tapestry;” the co-creation of something “to land on;” the construction of “a very different light,” signs of generative movement.

Now I must pause for the time being. As I have said earlier, I have no expectations of a particular response from you. So feel free to respond as you wish—with silence, correction, additional comments, et cetera.
Gratefully,

Janice

*Written Dialogues With Anaclaudia*

**Anaclaudia Responds, October 24, 2005**

*Original Spanish journaling.*

Reflexionando acerca de las consecuencias que ha tenido en mi práctica las ideas posmodernas, creo que puedo enumerar algunas:

- La primera es que me dejé de pelear con el mundo, ya que no siento tanta responsabilidad por lo que las personas deciden.

- Me ha permitido sentirme lo suficientemente cómoda y libre para hacer del trabajo algo agradable.

- Me relaciono de manera diferente con las personas con las que converso.

- Me ha enseñado a ser mucho más curiosa.

- La postura de “no conocer,” me ha permitido ser una escucha atenta y no esperar respuestas específicas.

- Por otra parte, puedo permitirme tener una relación suficientemente cercana y afectuosa con mis clientes. Establecer muchas relaciones.

- En cuanto al lenguaje, una de las cosas que más me ha permitido hacer es tomar mi trabajo como algo que no es pesado y que puedo disfrutar mucho.

- También me ha permitido entender que la intención genera un discurso diferente en las diferentes actividades que realicé (facilitaAbelinda, supervisora, terapeuta).
Reflecting on the impact that post-modern ideas have had on my practice, I can observe the following:

- The first is that I ceased fighting with the world, in that I no longer feel such great responsibility for what others decide.
- It has allowed me to feel sufficiently at ease and free to make something pleasant of the work.
- I relate differently with those that I converse with.
- It has taught me to be much more curious.
- Having an attitude of “not-knowing.” Has allowed me to listen carefully and not expect specific responses.
- Also, I can allow myself to have sufficiently close and affectionate relationships with my clients. To have many relationships.
- As for the language, one thing it has especially allowed me to do is to treat my work as something that is not a burden and I can really enjoy it.
• It has also allowed me to understand that the intention generates a distinct type of discourse in the various roles that I have (facilitator, supervisor, therapist).

• Also, it allows me to understand that one assumes a position depending on the discourse one is involved in. You understand that at the beginning of a discourse you build upon it, and if you construct the reality on that discourse, you can also deconstruct it and modify the discourse.

• The importance that you give to any certain thing has more to do with the history or narrative through which you explain these things in therapy.

Anaclaudia

Janice Responds, December 2005

Hello Anaclaudia,

I am so grateful for the reflection you sent. What follows is my response to your reflection, with my questions, noticing, wondering, appreciating…. I have been doing this with each reflection that has been offered to this project.

If you wish to respond to my response (!) with more writing, that would be wonderful. But, no one should feel that that I am expecting more writing from the participants in this project. No one should feel obligated to ‘expand’ on his or her reflection, nor to explain it. Rather, my response to your reflection is my way of stepping into your writing as fully as I can. It is my way of listening in this project.

When I read your reflection, I consider the way you position yourself with the people who come to meet with you. You say that postmodern ideas have taught you to ‘cease fighting’ with the world, assuming responsibility for others’ decisions. You describe yourself as ‘at ease’,
curious, free to make your practice a source of joy rather than a burden.

This is something we (in this research collective) seem to share in common. We have let go of the practices of guiding, steering, enticing, coaxing the people who meet with us, in favour of joining together with them, searching and learning from within our conversations with our clients. It is as though we have stopped trying to ‘move’ others, and are instead, moving with them. This is what comes to mind as I read your reflection.

A question: When you say you “relate differently with those (you) converse with” I wonder if you mean, differently from how you used to relate, or perhaps, differently from how other therapists relate, or both…? Or neither?! Just a wonder.

You speak of how “not-knowing” positions you to listen with care and readiness to hear something different, something unexpected. Perhaps this connects to the idea of “surprise” that others in our research collective described as an important “generative and transforming” aspect of their work. I also find, that having an “attitude of not-knowing” seems to make space for a vast range of perspectives in our work—so that we do not expect certain “specific responses,” as you say. We are not stuck in the same repetitive, predictable conversations from session to session! So, I wonder if you would agree that “not-knowing” means we are continually ‘traveling’ with people, mixing with customs and assumptions that are not our own. We are not simply working within our own narratives. Each collaborative therapy conversation invites us as therapists into some measure of unfamiliarity, ‘difference’ and newness.

Your use of the word “allow” is so intriguing to me. You use this word four times, which might suggest its importance for you. You speak of “allowed to feel… at ease,” “allow(ed) to have… sufficiently close and affectionate relationships with my clients,” and twice you say, “allowed… to understand”….” I wonder if this word “allow” derives its original meanings from
“law”? I too think of postmodern practice welcoming new ‘allowances’…we are “allowed” to
“really enjoy” our work, as we both already mentioned.

A second question: You write that you are “allow(ed … to have sufficiently close and
affectionate” relationships…. I am curious about what you mean by ‘close and affectionate’? Are
you saying you genuinely feel a fondness for the people you meet with, and you feel closely
connected with them in ways that feel natural and authentic? In your mention of “allow,” I think
again of “freedom.” “Freedom” seems to emerge as a big theme in the dialogue this research
project invites.

And you speak of postmodern ideas allowing you to understand reality as something that
is socially constructed within various discourses. It seems you are speaking again of “allowance”
in suggesting that one can choose what discourse to become “involved in,” since a discourse
seems to invite some possibilities, and make others less possible. Also, you suggest we ‘are
allowed’ to de-construct the discourse, or also modify it. For me, this resonates with social
constructionist perspectives of reality.

You suggest that the importance you assign to various aspects of life and practice derive
largely from the “history” or “narrative” you engage with. This seems in sharp contrast with
much of modernist psychology, which attempts to understand people through realist, and
individualist lenses. Personal history in family of origin, personality traits, ‘mental’ disorders are
seen to be real, intrinsic and fixed factors, which people are essentially, “stuck with.” What you
describe offers an alternative to this framework, suggesting a wider range of possibilities in the
ways that the individual can relate to the whole. Your perspective seems to invite fluidity and
movement.

I certainly resonate with the postmodern, collaborative approach so evident in your
reflections. Do these “allowances” spill into your life beyond your therapy practice? Into other conversations?

For some reason, I have the understanding that you are a dancer. Is this correct? I wonder if your experience in dance and in therapy conversation connects in any ways? Would freedom, the “unexpected,” curiosity, a feeling of “at ease,” close relationships, ‘not-knowing,’ openness, enjoyment, also be part of dance for you?

Again, my deepest thanks for this opportunity to learn from and with you!

Janice DeFehr

*English to Spanish translation.*

Hola Anaclaudia:

Estoy tan agradecida por las reflexiones que me has enviado. A continuación, te envío respuestas a estas, y al mismo tiempo mis preguntas, alerta, preguntándome, apreciando, … mucho más. He hecho lo mismo con todas con las reflexiones que se han dado para este proyecto.

Si deseas responder a mis comentarios, respuestas (!) con comentarios adicionales, sería maravilloso. Pero por favor, que nadie se sienta obligado a enviar notas o material adicional, no es eso lo que espero. Por favor, nadie está obligado a “explayarse” en sus reflexiones, ni tampoco a explicarlas. Por el contrario, mi respuesta es una manera de “sumergirme” en tú escritura y poder ser parte de ésta. Es mi manera de escuchar y participar en éste proyecto.

Cuando leo tus reflexiones, me imagino como te planteas con las personas que vienen a verte. Me dices que las ideas del postmodernismo te han enseñado “a dejar de luchar” con el mundo, y no asumir responsabilidades por las decisiones de otros. Te auto describes cómo “a gusto,”
curiosamente, libre de tomar tú práctica profesional como una fuente de gozo en vez de un calvario.

Esto es algo que nosotros, (en el ámbito profesional) tenemos en común. Hemos dejado la práctica de guiar, dirigir, atraer y manejar a las personas que nos ven, sino que nos unimos a ellos, buscando y aprendiendo de las conversaciones con nuestros clientes. Como quien dice, hemos dejado de “empujarlos,” sin embargo, “avanzamos” con ellos. Esto es lo que pienso cuando leo tus reflexiones.

Tengo una pregunta: Cuando tú me dices qué “te conectas de un modo diferente (tú) con quienes conversas,” me pregunto que quieres decir, “de una manera diferente a como te conectabas” o tal vez “diferente en el sentido de cómo otros terapeutas se conectan?, ó ambas… o ninguna? Nada serio, sólo una pregunta.

Me hablas de cómo tú posición de “no saber,” te permite escuchar atentamente y estar preparada a escuchar algo diferente, algo no esperado. Quizás ésto hace conexión con la idea de “sorpresa” que otros en nuestro ámbito profesional describen como un aspecto importante “generador y transformador” de nuestro trabajo. También encuentro que teniendo esta actitud de “no saber” da espacio para una gran gama de perspectivas en nuestro campo, de ésta manera, no esperamos “respuestas específicas” como tú lo dices. No estamos estancados en conversaciones predecibles que se repiten sesiones tras sesiones! De ésta manera, me pregunto si estarías de acuerdo cuando digo “no saber” significa que “viajamos” continuamente con personas, mezclando costumbres y suposiciones que no son nuestras. No trabajamos simplemente con nuestra propia narrativa. Cada conversación en terapia colaborativa, nos invita, como terapeutas, y en cierta medida nos lleva a un terreno poco familiar, “diferente” y completamente nuevo.
La manera en que usas la palabra “permitir” es muy interesante para mí. Usas esta palabra cuatro veces 😊, lo que sugiere que es muy importante para ti. Hablas también de “te permite sentirte … a gusto,” “te permite o permitió tener una relación cercana y afectuosa con mis clientes,” y en dos oportunidades dices que “te permite… comprender….” Me pregunto si la palabra “permitir” tiene sus origines de la “ley”? Pienso también en la práctica del postmodernismo, en la que permite nuevas “concesiones”… se nos “permite verdaderamente disfrutar” nuestro trabajo, tal como ambas mencionamos con anterioridad.

Una segunda pregunta: Escribe que se te “permite (o permitió)... tener una relación suficientemente cercana y afectuosa” Mi curiosidad me pregunta que quieres decir por “cercana y afectuosa”? Quieres decir que verdaderamente sientes un cariño por las personas que ves, y te sientes íntimamente conectada hacia ellos de una manera auténtica y natural? Cuando mencionas la palabra “permitir,” pienso de nuevo en el termino “libertad”. “Libertad” aparece como un tema central en el dialogo que la investigación de éste proyecto ofrece.

Hablas, además, de postmodernismo, cuyas ideas te han permitido comprender la realidad como algo construido socialmente dentro de varios análisis. Me da la impresión que hablas de nuevo acerca de “permitirse,” sugiriendo que uno puede escoger en que análisis poder participar completamente, considerando que este análisis invita a ciertas posibilidades y hace otros menos posible. También sugieres que a nosotros “se nos permite deconstruir éste análisis, y también modificarlo. En mi opinión, esto resuena a la perspectiva social constructonista de la realidad.

Tu sugieres que la importancia que le das a varios aspectos de la vida y la practica, son largamente resultado de la “historia” o “la narración” en la que estas envuelta. Me da la impresión que está en contraste con la mayor parte de la sicología moderna, la cual trata de comprender individuos a través de focos realistas y personales. La historia personal del origen
familiar, rasgos de personalidad, desordenes “mentales” parecen ser reales, con factores intrínsecos y determinados, de los cuales las personas no se pueden despegar.” Lo que tú describes ofrece una alternativa a este marco de trabajo, sugiriendo una gran variedad de posibilidades con la cual las personas pueden relacionarse al todo. Tú perspectiva parece invitar fluidez y movimiento.

Por supuesto que resueno con el postmodernismo y el enfoque colaborativo tan evidente en tus reflexiones. Estos “permisos” fuera de tu practica profesional, ¿influyen en tu vida diaria? ¿En otras conversaciones?

No sé, por alguna razón, tengo entendido que tú eres una bailarina. ¿Es eso correcto? Me pregunto si existe alguna conexión entre tu experiencia en danza y en tus conversaciones terapéuticas? ¿No será que la libertad, lo “inesperado,” la curiosidad, esa “sensación de agrado,” la estrecha relación, la “mente abierta,” la apertura, el gozo, son parte de la danza en ti?

De nuevo, mi más profundo agradecimiento por ésta oportunidad de poder aprender, al mismo tiempo, de ti y contigo.

Janice DeFehr

Written Dialogues With Abigail

Abigail Responds, July 2005


Thank you for the invitation to be a part of this conversation. Participatory research, Live! And, as lived, in my everyday experience. I say thank you, because I have never taken the time to put into written words a description of what that is. I’m sure I will learn something
meaningful from others and hope that I can contribute another a voice to the collective conversation.

Perhaps I should start where I somewhat left off in Mexico… surprisingly without words to describe my experience of being a collaborative/postmodern psychologist. That evening at ISI, given the room environment, others present, slight confusion and insecurity, and day of thoughtful reflection leading up to our meeting… left me focusing on one significant aspect of it for me: the rather intimate and almost sacred experience of participating in another’s story. Being entrusted to go along side of someone, typically in a period of struggle, confusion, or pain is such an awesome responsibility! My spirit is both touched by these conversations and enlivened with the challenge of introducing other ways of talking that might prove less of a dead-end for them. Ah, the enterprise of helping others construct stories that can move!

Now, for someone who is rarely without words, I was taken by surprise at my heartfelt reaction to Abelinda’s story. This elicited the “indescribable” witnessed. Perhaps frustrating or “dangerous” to some, but it just was…. Later, on my flight home to LA, I was also reflecting on what Jillian mentioned about the rare occasion it is to be asked to reflect on OUR personal experience as therapists…describing what that is like. For me, it is certainly easier to verbalize reflections within a relationship… to step outside of that and talk about it is a bit trickier. That’s a personal discovery in and of itself. To add another layer of complexity is the commitment to respecting those interchanges as so private and confidential that to share any aspect of them would imply acting unethically, immorally, and every other unsavory practice that would question my “good-ness” as a competent therapist. Well, but I’m not being asked to share details of my clients/students lives? Could it be that they have become such a part of me…that to describe my experience is also exposing them? I think so.
So many different thoughts about why some aspects of my professional and personal life are without words… and feel almost sacred. At least these are the ones accessible at the present.

*Hey Dr. Edwards... we need your help on this… do you think Tom Cruise is bipolar or just in love?” July 4, 2005.*

This is how I began my day as I walked into the private psychiatric hospital where I see individuals from time to time. The estate where this hospital lies is a large beautiful property. A retreat-like place. My private practice is situated on one end of this estate…so it is not an unfamiliar scene for me to get outdoors of my office in order to take walks with individuals with whom I work…to find a shaded bench or a spot of grass to have thoughtful conversations. It’s truly a blessing to work here much of the time. Environments are so powerful. Anyway, as I was walking on the grounds earlier today, I heard this question yelled at me across the garden. It didn’t really matter that I was in a “session” listening intently to the drama being described by a woman who feels that her life is crumbling before her as her husband is “held hostage” to Alzheimer’s, and her teenage daughter displays more acting out and disconnection. This group of in-patients was out enjoying a cigarette break…laughing and talking between scheduled groups… engaged in intense dialogue… and this was clearly the latest spirited topic of the day. I felt pulled: Do I acknowledge their provocative and inviting conversation about the embeddedness of such a question that has been much in the news lately (not too mention the public banter between Tom Cruise and Brooks Shields about postpartum depression and the use of medication)… or do I remain engaged in my client’s difficult dilemma? Well, I decided to stay in the immediate conversation… to which my client looked over at this group and laughed (perhaps nervously at being distracted momentarily from her own heaviness), “Hey, that’s a
good question… what do you think about all of that?” I asked if she was ok with going and seeing what kind of ideas they had on the issue.

Within a minute, we were all standing around sharing what the meaning of such a question implied for all. What is helpful or not about the differing implications individually and culturally. Now to paint a picture… this new group was a mix of Good Housekeeping or Lady’s Home Journal meets the MTV bloggers (perhaps American-specific metaphors?) and I was the friend that introduced them all. I was thinking to myself while this was happening, “is this one of those great moments that is perhaps reflective of a postmodern therapist? I’ll write about this….”

Well, 20-30 minutes later, after much listening, laughing, inquiry and playful arguing of ideas amongst ourselves, my client and I continued on our way. We began to talk again about her situation at home. Her tone of desperation and hopelessness that was dominant, had shifted slightly. Perhaps due to the temporary distraction or improvisational direction our session took. As we made our way back to my office she said, “well, that’s a conversation I never thought I’d have… (silence)… but it was fun.” She mentioned later as we reflected on the hour, how one of the young girls reminded her of her daughter with whom she has felt unable to connect.

**Reflecting on yesterday’s interchange, July 8, 2005.**

So what, in fact, was my “expertise” there? That I have created an office where people come and talk? That I felt like it might be good to go outside and walk? My restlessness? My desire to not be rude to two sets of relationships—thus inviting a different conversation all together? To listen to those around me but “hear” that some connection between their contrasting lives might be good for us all to engage in? Not sure, but I know it was influenced by many things. And most assuredly by my sense that this might help somehow. An openness to moving where the lives around me direct and similarly I co-direct. My relational sensibility and mastery
of much pop culture? Perhaps a playful irreverence (in the spirit of Gianfranco Cecchin) to traditional therapeutic “rules?” And simply my expertise of sharing reflections on that talk? Seeking to understand my role is a lot less fun than being in it!

**Joint activity, July 25, 2005.**

Growing up I had my sights on Wimbledon. I was obsessed with tennis. The competition, the challenge, the friendships, the outdoors, the playfulness, and thrill of mastering something requiring both a focused mind and healthy body. It gave me something to do after school, weekends, summer tennis camps. Not that I was ever hard up for things to do with myself. But all of my siblings and friends had their “things”—tennis and being a good friend were mine.

With time and many tournaments and tennis coaches of investment, I began achieving much in the sport. I discovered along the way an incessant curiosity for just about everything… especially about ideas and understanding what moves people. I am appreciative today for a family and faith culture that indulged all of the questions… even reinforced my curiosity instead of discouraging it. That said, there have been many that did (and still do) say “Abigail, you think too much!”… only leaving me to feel that there was/is something inherently weird or unlikable about my curious mind (Note: these are not people I surround myself with if I can help it!)… I digress….

My sights remained on the Center Court at Wimbledon. When I wasn’t playing tennis in my youth, I loved watching it. I enjoyed the drama of long rallies of rifled hits from the baseline, the adrenaline of fast paced doubles matches in which partners seamlessly coordinated their moves requiring much focus, practice, and agility to respond to whatever shot is moving towards their side of the net. Funny thing about playing doubles; you do adjust or “calibrate” (my
mistranslation [with] Felix [regarding the word] ‘collaboration’) your game with each different partner or opponent. Or at least you need to if you want to be effective.

I could go on and on about tennis and share fun stories organized around it (including my trips to Wimbledon—minus qualifying for tournament play). But I have occasionally thought of my experiences playing and watching tennis as similar to some of the skills I use coordinating action in therapy, teaching, and life. So please humor the sports metaphor…not the most deep and spiritual, but a conversational resource. Like a tennis match, there is a back and forth quality to it... the longer the ball is kept in play between the individuals the more agility and focus is required. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I thought of this today as I observed the rather counter-productive interchanges between people. Not much back and forth. Not reflective of coordinated activity.

_A few more musings, August 5, 2005._

Beyond the going back and forth in coordinated talk…I was thinking how much my “expertise” in relation to others is an orientation to often catch the “ball” moving towards me and hit one back that has greater potential for keeping things in “play.” In a way, as a collaborative therapist, I support and help the other to be more encouraged by their own actions and capabilities. Not fish for the underlying pathology. I seek to offer contagious encouragement and some hope about their circumstances through our relationship… through that which we do together. I assume they are more competent than not. I believe in their resilient human nature. This is in contrast with many who feel that their therapist or professor is so knowledgeable, so articulate, _so far from where they are_, that they fail to experience any ownership of that idea.

This is helpful to write about and find words for. So many more questions emerge for me…. Am I doing this more than not? How can I do a better job of this in helping those around
me? Who are the clients that seem to leave me feeling more encouraged and hopeful about who I am and how I am contributing to their lives? What are the words I might choose to use in dialogue that I believe are more generative? And thus, which are the ones I am choosing to not use…within the repertoire of that which is familiar.

I am appreciative of this re-search.

*Good grief! Or an “orientation of the spirit,” August 11, 2005.*

Just prior to leaving for ISI, a Bishop for the Latter-Day Saint (Mormon) Church phoned seeking my help. He indicated that he was calling on behalf of himself and four other Bishops in need of information on how to help many individuals and families in their “Wards” who are enduring a traumatic loss. The description of scenarios was not unusual for a psychologist to hear… a widow adjusting to the loss of her young husband to a sudden heart attack… parents grieving a stillbirth child… a family struggling in the aftermath of a 8 year-old daughter who died of cancer…a woman who’s husband has been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease while also raising three teenagers and caring for her elder mother… an adult daughter seeking to accept the loss of her greatest ally—her father…a mother who’s adult son was brutally murdered while pushing his grocery cart to his car, leaving a pregnant wife and 3 year-old…. People going about their everyday lives… and suddenly they are struck with a blow which leaves them questioning everything. Themselves. Their relationships. Their faith and their God. After providing a few handouts on ways to respond practically and relationally to those grieving and respecting the needs if the dieing I offered to facilitate a weekly support group free of charge. The handouts offered went beyond Elizabeth Kubler Ross and C. S. Lewis… but reviewed different cultural traditions, faith practices, and scriptural accounts of enduring through and caring for those grieving. I elicited these Bishops’ own stories with painful losses and ways they could use these
experiences with those with whom they served. These church leaders were further invited to participate in our weekly conversations.

The group has grown from 6 to 16 participants presently with four Bishops consistently attending. This has proven to be one of the most unexpected and satisfying journeys. I am eternally changed by this experience. I feel humbled and aware of the awesome responsibility. They teach me more than I can describe. There is something transformative going on between us all. An orientation of our Spirits. A sort of joint sanctuary, honoring and moving through the pain in a collaborative way...at least more than had been felt before.

I have often thought of Emelie. Appreciative of the timing of meeting her and sensing the rather understated heroism of her making it to ISI. Such a noteworthy loss she had just been going through with her family. Her willingness to share was inspiring. As I sought to understand... to hear and watch her “go on” with others... I felt an orientation of my Spirit.... Going along side others in their everyday lives—is an “orientation of the Spirit.”

*Occupational hazards, August 19, 2005.*

Had an interesting informal dialogue today over lunch with my colleagues. The group was probably a good representative sample of the differing theoretical and philosophical stances in the psychological community, at least in Southern California. We were talking about “burn-out,” or as my analyst friend said “the personal occupational hazards that come as a result of consistently hearing others’ problems and pain.”

Wish I had tape-recorded the talk. I was definitely distinct in my position relative to the others. Acknowledging the weary-ing aspect of participation in others lives... the exhaustion of opening oneself to feel and share feelings of my own... but burn-out is not a predominant result of this work.
I was aware of how fragmented many of them feel in clearly separating one’s professional “being” with their personal “being,” their playful “self” and spiritual/religious “self.” I don’t experience this delineation really.

Janice Responds, September 2005

Hello Abigail,

What a wonderful gift to read your reflections, written at various times throughout your summer! I am grateful for the glimpse you offer into the ways you gently shape ‘therapy’, and the ways ‘therapy’ in turn, shapes you.

I am writing as a way of acknowledging what I appreciate so deeply about your writing. I hope it is o.k. that my response includes some questions, some of my wondering/wandering as I read and re-read what you sent. You can, of course, do with this whatever you want. I certainly don’t expect that each question requires a specific response, and hence, more work on your part. Your participation in this project has already been incredibly generous.

A few pieces emerge prominently for me as I ‘listen’ to what you wrote. And in mentioning some aspects, and leaving others just for now, does not mean I will only attend to themes and motifs; that would be wasteful. I only offer this as a preliminary reflection, knowing I will learn more with every re-reading.

Sacred.

I first notice your sense of the sacred in the therapeutic process, the awe you begin to describe, something so precious that you hesitate to assign words to it. You describe a sort of “…joint sanctuary…” co-created through dialogue. Reference to the sacredness of therapy conversation was also part of your contribution to the dialogue at the ISI. I understand that some
of this sacredness pertains in part, to the privilege and responsibility you see as inherent in your role. It seems that you view your clients’ disclosures as sacred in many ways. You mention your wish to protect the stories you hear, and to avoid exposing them inadvertently, carelessly and unethically.

I understand that you also connect your therapy work with your faith, describing the collaborative “going alongside” others in their everyday lives in the language of your faith—as an “orientation of the Spirit.” This nuance, this uniqueness, could not be learned from a textbook. Only through your willingness to share so personally and vulnerably can we learn of the ways your work is “generative and transformative” for you in this spiritual sense. I appreciate your openness.

Integration.

I also think of integration as I read your writing, the integration of the “common every-day” walking and talking outside—with the ‘sanctity’ of the process between you and your client. I picture the seeming casualness that might come with the outdoor environment and the walking alongside together, integrated with your ‘high view’ of the conversation that takes place.

You also mention the integration of professional and personal as something that is augmentative for you. When I think of integration, I also think of the sense I get of your ‘integration’ with your clients, and for me, it shows up in your questioning, “Could it be that they have become such a part of me… that to describe my experience is also exposing them? I think so.” You note “it is easier” to verbalize reflections within a relationship…. And I think you articulate an important question: How shall we talk about our experience as therapists as though it is separate from the client? It is hard to imagine that as possible within our shared, relational approach. Your writing, I believe, offers a clear picture of your conversations as “joint activity.”
Play.

I notice that “play” and “fun” are words that show up a fair bit in your reflecting, just as they coincidentally do in my own journaling. And you use multiple meanings of the word “play.” So interesting to read of your passion for tennis, and your reference to keeping the ball “in play.” And the requirement of “agility” and “focus.” You speak of the “fun” of “being in it” (and I love the word IN here too) and also of your “playful irreverence to traditional therapeutic “rules”. And your story of the Tom Cruise conversation that arose as a surprising but useful tangent speaks to the fullness of your spontaneity and openness to quick changes of direction (agility)—did tennis prepare you for this? I also appreciate your reference to action, and coordinated action.

I am so delighted to see the re-appearance of the word “calibration.” I remembered this as a rich and evocative addition to the large group conversation at the ISI… and funny how a ‘mis-understanding’ could so enrich understanding. I am new to thinking of calibration as the continual adjusting required by partnership, as part of collaboration, perhaps a central aspect of the “back and forth” process you describe.

Thanks too, for your mention of Emelie and her “understated heroism of making it to the ISI” during such a difficult time. I also saw her willingness to include us in her experience, to “go on” with us, as a great gift for those of us who had the chance to talk with her. I am so glad others were able to participate in Emelie’s story also.

“Hazards.”

So, the “occupational hazards” (to borrow your last heading) that come with your way of working include participating in something that is sacred, in many respects, transcendent to words. As you say, “being in it” is more fun that trying to understand it. Perhaps it is true that words will never be able to fully account for the richness of the dialogical process.
Fun, laughter, playfulness (‘irreverent playfulness at times, keeping the conversation “in
play,” spontaneity and openness to surprise…’) are also occupational “hazards” in your
everyday experience of therapy. And, the relational connectedness, the togetherness of what you
accomplish with your clients, is an additional “hazard!”

Questions emerged as I moved through your writing. Thinking about the Tom Cruise and
Brooke Shields conversation that made its way into a therapy dialogue outside of your office
building. I appreciate this story for many reasons. Do you also recall experiencing a “shift” as a
result of that conversation? How was that particular dialogue “generative” or “transformative”
for you? Sometimes, we cannot re-collect a response to such a question; I certainly can’t give an
account of how each conversation in my work affected me! I am just curious.

Would you be open to saying more about what “orientation of the Spirit” means? I think this
phrase may be unfamiliar to many of us—at least it is to me, and I’d like to hear more. Do you
speak of profound human connection in using this phrase?

You mention the environment that ‘hosts’ the therapy dialogue as powerful. I would love to
hear you say something more about the walking outside while you talk with your clients. I am
curious about what that practice does for you, as opposed to the more common practice of sitting
in offices with closed doors and predictable sights, sounds, lighting, smells, seating, aesthetics,
people.

Well, that is where I will pause. This in no way captures the width and length of what you
sent. If I misunderstand you, or if you feel you would like to underline something, or change
anything, I’m happy to hear more from you. Of course, this can happen at any point in our
inquiry.

Gratefully,
Janice

Written Dialogues With Preciosa

Preciosa Responds, August 2005

Dear Janice,

Thanks for your understanding. It is relieving. I’ll be sending you more. I decided to write in English. This is not so easy but it has been a very good experience. I hope I make myself clear, if not, let me know. Best regards, Preciosa.

Reflection 1, August 14, 2005.

The idea of starting reflections, I would call it “reflecting in processes.“ I cannot talk about “starting” because reflecting processes are taking place all the time in my personal and professional life, without even noticing them. What your invitation means to me is: Is in a particular period of time, starting and a finishing point; intentionally reflecting on your questions and my ideas. It will be my responsibility and decision the themes and the development of them. The idea of “starting” means an intentional stop to contemplate my living, thinking, feeling, acting, relating to… becoming aware, focusing my attention to these processes. Thanks for the opportunity.

Going back to the ISI, to our meeting…. Building a collaborative learning community: How careful you have been in sending email invitation, organizing the meeting, audio/video filming, having fluent ongoing communication.

Two things caught my attention:

1. What I perceived was happening with you when the participants started talking about other things than expected… I was thinking… Hey Preciosa! What would have had happened to you in similar situation? There had been moments when I was not ready to
listen. It takes me time to realize what was going on. And more time to switch. Is there anything to be done? The answer was: wait, the process is the process.

2. The “tone.” This was like “fantasyland”: On one side being a postmodern therapist was easy, no dilemma at all. On the other hand, there were not words to describe the process. Is this a dilemma?

My answer, more questions:

What are the challenges of living our thoughts or ideas (Philosophical stance)?

How do we describe our experience?

What are the meaningful parts of my experience to share?

If language and dialogue are transforming processes, do we need to choose words to express ourselves?

How could we listen to thoughts and ideas if not through verbal language?

How could I be writing without written language?

What about non-verbal language?

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Janice Responds, August 2005

Dear Preciosa,

Thank you so very much for sending your first reflection to be shared in this research project. It is very exciting for me to hear from you, and to know that others are also reflecting on our research question, and writing. I appreciate your point about "starting" because I agree that a postmodern, collaborative stance invites continuous reflection. And so, in a sense, this starting is only about the time frame of our project. I totally agree. Glad you see it this way.
Its interesting to me—Olaf also wrote about how our dialogue in Mexico demonstrated collaboration, as we all sorted out together, how to focus our time and make the most of it. It took me a little while to change directions and join everyone else! Sometimes it is like that.

I appreciate your comments about the "ease" of finding words to describe our practices as "generative and transformative," and also, at the same time, the difficulty of it! I too have been reflecting on the research question(s). I find that as I step forward, another stone in the path emerges, and so on, with each step I take. As I reflect, and begin the act of writing, that very process carries me forward, and soon, like you, I have created something.

So, I think possibly both statements you make are true: It is difficult to describe our practices as transformative and generative for ourselves; and, it is also remarkably easy.

And thank you for your additional questions. I think each one would merit a project of its own. And I wonder how participants will describe their experiences as transforming, and if any will choose some kind of non-verbal language? We will see.

The very best to you in your reflecting. Thank you again for your generosity in sharing.

Warmest wishes,

Janice

Preciosa Responds, September 1, 2005

Alfred is a 28-year-old client diagnosed with depression and Asperger. We have been talking about the dilemmas of having a diagnosis. How these descriptions represent him, in which ways and what parts. I could describe this process like walking on eggshells. Each time we talked about a new description the first reaction is, “I don’t think so; the problem is that I am
depressed.” So I take a step back, to his preferred description and we stay there. I am thinking about Bateson’s idea of moving from the familiar to the newness (this is not a quote).

I have been learning to stay there, to visit his ideas. In the beginning it surprised me, until I started understanding what works better for him.

    ... ¡Oh! My first description was: we have been enjoying, we were more relaxed...when I read it back I realized I was missing a part of my experience, so I wrote it again. What I would do now is to talk about what I wrote. One thing is to read about Asperger and Depression, another to live it.

    The experience in each session is the same and different, when I feel like walking on eggs shells, [it] is an automatic (non conscious) sign to slow down. It is like falling in a trance where nothing else exists, just Alfred and I, the relationship, his words, his body reactions. And I am learning, learning from him and from myself.

Janice Responds, September 2, 2005

Hi Preciosa,

    Thank you for sharing your reflection with this project. I think your English is wonderful. Too bad I can't speak Spanish... yet.

    You write that Alfred is teaching you things, and that, in the work with Alfred, you are also learning from yourself too—IF you stay with his preferred description, and "visit his ideas" (what a lovely way to put it) and "slow down."

    So now I am very curious about what you are learning in the conversation with Alfred. Is the learning about the usefulness of matching Alfred's pace and understandings? Is it more than that?
I find it interesting to read about the deep, 'trance-like' listening you do with Alfred, when "nothing else exists," just you and Alfred, "... the relationship, his words, his body reactions.”

What a wonderful and rare quality of attentiveness. Does this attentive way of being also benefit, or enrich you too? What seems to come along with this quality of listening for you? A heightened ability to understand?

I find your reflection to be rich and also so useful to our project. My questions are my curiosities. You can, of course, do with them, whatever you wish.

Gratefully,

Janice

Written Dialogues With Olaf

Olaf Responds, August 20, 2005

Hello Janice!

"How my participation in the dialogue with Hanna and her family was transforming and generative for me, as a therapist?" I will try to share some moments with you from the "journey" me and my colleague, Cecillie, was invited to with this family.

1. To have more trust in the relationship that develops.

Sometimes, when I was hesitating, and starting talking to my inner self: "Are we doing the right thing just now?" I didn’t get any good answers. But when I "moved" this dialogue from in to outside myself, turned to my colleague, the parents and after some meetings directly to Hanna with this very question: "Are we doing the right thing just now for them/you?" my uncertainty most often disappeared. I could hear my self more clearly, and sometimes my own voice told me what I was uncertain about, some times they gave me response that was clarifying.
And when there was no answer, just silence—it became possible to be in it together! It became even possible, when silence was there, to ask, "How can we, together find out—what is the best way to go on?"

2. **To INVITE/include people who behave openly psychotically to participate, rather then exclude them.**

Persons, who at the moment, are in psychotic crises, can participate without talking/saying anything in a conversation among others—as long as it doesn’t become a threat against them. If I, as a therapist can cope with them not saying anything!! (Not every therapist can, is my experience—it’s hard for some to leave them "alone" for as long as they want to). You, as a therapist can try to "build" a psychologically save enough context in that room, that moment—together with the others.

3. **To expect of myself to respect the other/s as unique individuals.**

In some moments, the mother was afraid of what might happen, but the father, living with Hanna wasn’t so afraid. To accept that the mother "had her doubts" but ask her if she could trust in her ex-husband as a father—or if that was to much to ask of her. To allow Hanna, when she started to participate verbally, to try things out even if I myself was hesitating—but then share that with her and ask her to "lower my anxiety,” so that I should not "become a roadblock" in her new way.

4. **Change of my personal view of psychotic behavior.**

Psychotic behavior as a result of some kind of fear in contrast to psychotic behavior as a result of an illness. This was a shift that perhaps happened some years before I met with Hanna, but it was very important to me. Instead of being afraid of psychotic behavior I became interested, both intellectually and emotionally.
Well, I better stop there, or I will go on fore some hours more. Is this understandable?
Does this answer some of that you had put in your question to me?

*Janice Responds, October 2006*

Hello Olaf,

As I mention in my earlier email, I have returned to your writing in my dissertation process. You write in response to my interest in your work with a particular client experiencing what is commonly called a psychotic crisis, a woman you name Hanna. I participated in a workshop where you described the generative and transforming dialogical process between you, Hanna, her friend/university roommate and her family. You begin your journaling by reiterating the question, "*How my participation in the dialogue with Hanna and her family was transforming and generative for me, as a therapist?*"

You speak first of trust, of your experience of gaining "*… more trust in the relationship that develops…*" between you and those meeting with you. And you take us into this process a little further, describing your feeling of hesitation and the questioning you begin in your inner dialogue, "*are we doing the right thing just now?*" And you note that this ‘thinking’ was often not fruitful in any tangible way. Then you describe your action to “move” your dialogue from “in to outside myself.” You turn to your colleague and to the parents of Hanna, and eventually to Hanna in later sessions as you voice the question that persists in your inner dialogue, "*Are we doing the right thing just now for them/you?*” And you notice that in moving your dialogue from “in” to “outside” yourself, your "*… uncertainty most often disappeared.*” You write that you could “*…hear myself more clearly.*” Sometimes your "*… own voice told (you) what (you) were
uncertain about,” and sometimes others involved in the conversation with you gave you responses that seemed to bring clarity.

You continue, “And when there was no answer, just silence—it became possible to be in it together.” Even “… when silence was there,” it was possible to ask, “how can we, together find out—what is the best way to go on?” You write it was possible to be in the silence together, and to ask questions of it. Even in the silence the conversation continued.

I can not help but think of a workshop Tapio Malinen and John Pihlaja are facilitating in Finland in December 2006—called *The Doing of Being in Psychotherapy—Seeking Balance of Mindfulness, Effectiveness and Well-Being in Psychotherapy*. The poster announcing the workshop speaks of letting go and balancing doing and being. It explores “doing” as effortless emergence from “being”—I would love to participate. I mention this because I imagine the extremes in your work must in turn require an exquisite responsivity, not only to sound but also to silence.

I doubt the trust you speak of gaining is a common construction of trust, but I do expect it resonates with practitioners who approach their practices collaboratively and dialogically. We are perhaps familiar with using this word within individualist frameworks—we trust ourselves, or perhaps another person, in a level of skill, in bodies of knowledge. But to gain trust “… in the relationship that develops…” is to trust the ambiguous, mysterious, unpredictable and unfolding connections between persons, more specifically, between you and the people meeting with you in your practice.

In this first paragraph I have a sense of the inter-dependence you nurture in your work. You describe it as a “journey” and it seems the route is so uncertain, as though you have never walked this way before, and yet, you are an advanced practitioner, with many years of teaching,
supervisory and clinical experience. Your questions of “doing the right thing” are not directed to your profession, to your literature, nor to your colleagues; rather, here you are asking yourself and the people who join you in the ‘here and now’ of your conversation.

In “moving” your inner dialogue “out,” the dialogue, now spoken aloud and shared with others, in turn, moves you. You sense signs of ‘movement’—the uncertainty you initially felt seems to dissolve as you share it with the others. And you write of a change in hearing—you note it seems more possible to hear your own voice more clearly, and other times, clarification seemed to emerge from the responses of your conversational partners.

I continue in your reflecting as you to speak of your practice of inviting and including “… people who behave openly psychotically to participate, rather than exclude them.” As long as participation does not feel too threatening: “… persons, who at the moment, are in psychotic crises, can participate without talking or saying anything in a conversation among others—as long as it doesn’t become a threat against them.” You write that you can cope with people “… not saying anything…” but that “… not every therapist can….” Some are unable to leave them “alone” for as long as the person wants to be left. You speak about your role as a builder, so to speak; you are building “… a psychologically safe enough context in that room, that moment—together with the others.”

Olaf, I have very little experience working with people in psychotic crisis. You are working with such extremes—extreme quiet at times, and conversely, you work with sounds that are perhaps difficult to hear. When we cannot make sense of sound, when it is expressed at high volume, in rhythms, pitches, and tempos that are unusual for us; we usually name such sound as noise. In both scenarios—prolonged silence, and prolonged ‘noise’—we find very little space for the linguistic interchange we expect to comprise therapeutic practice. It might be easy for the
practitioner, in such a setting of contrasts, to shine as the articulate meta-knower, the stable one, the calm expert…. But you do not occupy such a role. You are with them…in the silences, in the speaking, in the soundings that are not easily understood, and you are hesitating, asking, wondering, feeling anxious… you are helping to build the dialogical space, and you are simultaneously in dialogue with those meeting with you. And as we note earlier—you are gaining trust in the developing relationship in all this.

You write of your expectation of yourself to “… respect the others as unique individuals.” You write about differences between family members, and your respect for these differences. You write of accepting their doubts, and you describe your inquiry into the differences in the family member’s experiences. When Hanna begins to participate verbally, you write about allowing her to “try things out.” And again you write of hesitating and of sharing that uncertainty with her. In fact this sharing is an invitation for her to help you with your own anxiety so that it might not get “… in her new way.”

*To allow Hanna, when she started to participate verbally, to try things out even if I myself was hesitating—but then share that with her and ask her to “lower my anxiety,” so that it should not “become a roadblock” in her new way.*

How carefully you ensure you are doing everything to stay with her to ensure that your dialogical space has been cleared of any obstacles.

In the last paragraph of your writing, you speak of how your personal view of psychotic behavior has changed. You call this a “shift” and you write that this “perhaps happened some years before I met with Hanna, but it was very important to me.” You write, “Instead of being afraid of psychotic behavior I became interested, both intellectually and emotionally.” And so
your reflecting chronicles something of your movement from feeling fear to interest, while at the same time you understand psychotic behavior more as “some kind of fear” rather than as illness.

I pause to gather some words and ideas from my reading of your reflection, and I write them below as incomplete jottings, as notes to myself:

• Hesitation—because collaborative practitioners use an extensive vocabulary to describe uncertainty. Hesitation is “big” in our way of working.

    Related to hesitation, it seems, is the idea of gaining trust—gaining trust in a relationship that is as you say, *developing*… in motion… unfolding.

    Moving your dialogue from an inner conversation, to a spoken dialogue that includes others outside of you… and the difference you notice this seems to make.

• “Being in” the silence together with your clients—because this seems to say something about the extent of your involvement—not just being with them, but being *in* with them…. This word “in” is significant for me.

• Other “in” words: *invite, include*….

• Interest that is both intellectual and emotional… two more “in” words.

    You come to a pause in your reflecting with these words: “Well, I better stop there, or I will go on for some hours more.” And you do not assume—you ask, “Is this understandable?” And I reply in my inner talking, “Yes… and no!”

    Yes, it is understandable: I find your English articulate and compelling, and the relational processes you write of resonate with my own experience in practice, and also connect in many rich ways with what other practitioners are saying within this project. And no, it is not entirely understandable: It is possibly beyond my understanding. For me, dialogical process is still
mysterious, astonishing, beyond explanation. My understanding of it will always be vastly incomplete.

You ask, “Does this answer some of that you had put in your question to me?” Yes, Olaf, it does. I send my deepest thanks to you for allowing us to participate in your reflecting process, in your practice and in your life. I will return to your writing many times throughout my work.

Sincerely,
Janice

**Written Dialogues With Olivia**

*Olivia Responds: My Journal—A Work Without a Title*

*Some random thoughts written on a notepad in the car, June 25, 2005 – July 5, 2005.*

Upon my return from Playa I found myself tired, emotionally drained, longing for what was not and more free time. It will be a challenge for me to separate the process of the summer institute from the research project. Is separation possible? Perhaps others are struggling as well. I also struggle with wanting to help and wondering what I have to offer.

Anticipation—I am beginning to think about “the new” and how to apply learnings.

I do have a belief that there is a difference in this approach and want to take a closer look to get some ideas as to what is different and what makes it so. One thing I can think of that is different in this approach is that history seems to come out of the interview and is not a laborious diagnostic process. Another has to do with the way we listen. One of my clients has been diagnosed with a chronic mental illness. She has seen several therapists. She says my approach is different. By this I think she means that I listen in a different way and she feels like she has been heard.
Where does the conflict go?

*Practice issues group, Tuesday, June 28, 2005.*

I am trying to increase my awareness of the Post Modern Collaborative (PMC) approach in a group I facilitate. The group is made up of several therapists who each practice differently. We meet monthly to share the varied ways in which we practice. How do we apply PMC principles and philosophy?

Today we discussed the process of the group and some basic “operational rules” such as the need for time boundaries, listening actively, suspending the expert position while being helpful to each other in some way. While we each come from a different place (i.e., PMC, Jungian, art therapy, general counseling, faith based) we all seem to share commonalities. Sharing our different views and approaches expands the group and leaves us energized. I want to look more closely at my role as the group’s facilitator.

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I am aware that one place I sometimes have difficulty is when someone seems to want me to “do” something but asks tentatively, not directly. I am left wondering “Should I?” or “Should I not?” Because I have in the past jumped in and taken on too much, I remain cautious. It is then that I may feel washed out, like the ocean waves that come and go with no distinction. And when I respond to a tentative request by asking questions I sometimes feel as though the person making the request is wondering why I bother, if it is part of my insecurity, and, “What’s the big deal?”

This process or asking tentatively sometimes moves me beyond “not-knowing,” into the realm of incompetence. Or is it “uncertainty?” How can I be uncertain and remain competent? I am challenged to move toward mastery of mystery….
Perhaps what is missing for me is feedback from the others as to the effectiveness of our interactions. Often when I inquire I am greeted with positive reactions and sometimes reassurance and most often, thankfulness that I cared enough to ask. Perhaps I am amazed that the PMC approach is often so effective so quickly with little residue or residual activity.

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I am wondering how a research project would be structured that reflects the process. And how could the data be quantified? Perhaps through the language? And Janice’s instructions? What will her advisors tell her? And is it possible that the more we question, the more uncertainty we create—to what place—to the point of transformation and then what? Can the transformation or “new” be trusted and will stability return? How soon?

How do I define what I am studying? What is postmodern collaborative therapy? Is the work I do collaborative? Yes. Is it postmodern? Yes. How can I keep it so? Over the years a clearer definition of postmodern has emerged for me. How is this work different from what other therapists do? What I do is more of a conversation. Do others conversate? What is collaborative? With the client? With other therapists?

Issue of therapist in private practice—What to do with no reflecting team? I have found it useful to have a “team” in my head and share with the client after a break. The student role is seductive, but not reality for most of us. Fantasy is a place to retreat occasionally. Peer consultation with colleagues is useful.

How to manage the technique? Management of anxiety that comes with the technique.

Technique vs. Philosophy
Dream—I had a dream that I heard a medical doctor telling me that I was still a virgin. I interpreted this to mean that I was still in the initiation stage of this project. I wondered how the term “virgin” applied to my work as an experienced clinician.

June 29, 2005.

Sometimes I think I don’t work/am not working collaboratively—when I am direct, focused and to the point. Mostly this happens in committee work. Then I think of how these are often the times I am “in flow” and others are connected to me and with each other and something is accomplished. Perhaps this IS collaborative work in that it is generative, etc. and the directness is a matter of style.

Collaborative with whom?

The client

Other therapists/Colleagues

Anyone involved

Myself

How can I be collaborative with myself? Collaboration may be mistaken for dependence, rather than independent thought, actions. Is it really inter-dependence?

I am working with others on our high school reunion. I wonder if the committee chair will let go and let it happen, allow others to take part in creative, engaging ways. I am aware of how too much control (of others, of the situation) limits and too little can make for sloppy management. I am hoping that the reunion will be a transformative event and that our work as a committee can create a space for fun and resolution.

Today I had the occasion to stumble into a conversation among several artists. The group was lamenting about the financial side of art and how almost no one is compensated adequately for their work.

One guy was removing his work, taking it home, from the gallery because it had not sold over a very long time. He had spent more than a year working on the piece and was wondering if he had priced it too high or if there was another reason it had not sold. The piece was very detailed, with bright colors and seemed to convey a deep cultural/political message.

The gallery owner commented about her own works and how they did not sell. So she had gone to simple works, with large splotches of color and no apparent meanings and that could be produced quickly. Basically she felt like she had lowered the price (or quality) to pay the bills. Perhaps the simplicity welcomed and connected with a larger audience than the specific.

The group kidded her about how one of the privileges of owning one’s own gallery is selling more of one’s own work. I thought about how similar this was to my own experience as a therapist. I wondered if, as a collaborative therapist, I had given up the depth of my calling in favor of quick fixes for timely rewards—cash. I also empathize with the frustration of having so much to give and no one to receive.

I found myself complimenting the guy on his work and saying that maybe he could consider increasing the price and that when someone who really wanted the piece came along they would buy it, no matter what the cost. I really wondered later about saying this, and how could I have said it differently, but the whole conversation seemed to flow at the time. Before I left he shook my hand and introduced himself, as if to make sure I remembered his name for some time or work in the future. He seemed to enjoy the appreciation and recognition from me.
and from his peers. My vision, I encouraged him to share, is that he would sell the piece soon and for a respectful price. Who knows what will actually happen? It seems, however, that out of that well of frustration will come something creative.

I wondered what this conversation had to do with collaborative therapy? And if my being there made a difference in any way? Perhaps a question is, “How is collaborative therapy different from or similar to a collaborative conversation such as this one, where connection seemed to be key. Perhaps it is the creative connections that are most meaningful in collaborative work.

July 4, 2005.

Today I had a conversation with another artist—a photographer, with an exceptionally creative gift. He described himself as “self-taught.” From looking at his works and talking with him about several of his photographs it appears that he has a very significant connection with his subject matter. For me this is an example of how connection with self and others (even objects) is a key to mastery. He talked about “discovering” his method and technique. He also noted that he had a brand new $4K camera, still in the box, because he didn’t want to take the time to figure out how to use it. He found reading the instructions laborious and confining. Yet his work is an artistic blend of multiple techniques, and deep connection between himself, the subject matter and the viewer.

What does this have to do with collaborative work? Imagine a triangle with the points: Therapist, Client, Story. In the middle is a spiral with the words: Source/Creativity/Change.

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On the idea of specialness:

What happens when the therapist/client does not feel special?
Is the therapist reflecting the client’s un-specialness?

What does it mean to be special? Is there a danger associated?

Can both the therapist and the client be special?

The catalyst for change may be the client’s story, the therapist’s interest and the client’s response, etc. Perhaps by connecting the concept of specialness transforms into something else…

Diversity – finding connection through diversity

Integration “Not Knowing”

As a therapist, I am wondering, how do I know when I am “doing it”? And what is “doing it”?

Being collaborative, being a collaborative therapist.

Can I “know” it/experience it from this viewpoint or must I suspend my view? How do I suspend this view and maintain my role?

Like a pebble in a stream, my thoughts went out…

_July 5, 2005._

I am thinking of the concept of diversity and how diversity relates to being a collaborative therapist. As I see it now, part of collaboration is the coming together of differences, hence, diversity. Diversity of the client population, diversity of contexts where collaboration (therapy, business practices, family other areas of interest—organizations, family business, volunteer and community activities). It seems to me that if I can work collaboratively with clients of different backgrounds, races, cultures, financial income/status, then I can translate my skills into other areas of my personal life. The challenge, of course, is developing a community that transcends differences, collaboratively of course.

While some talk about the enthusiasm with which we encounter our work, I am often left bewildered and confused when others close to me do not respond to my “collaborative efforts.”
Sometimes I am concerned that others see me as so different that they do not trust me and do not know how to respond. So they respond with distrust or hostility, or do not respond at all. I don’t think this is resistance in the traditional sense, but more of a distancing through differences, like a dance, for instance.

I have had to develop, and continue to develop, a respect for the power of this approach, just as a respect for the other person(s) involved and for their empowerment process. When I think about these challenges the work is more interesting and engaging. When I think too much about this stuff I experience temporary cognitive disconnect. And sometimes I have difficulty regaining balance. When I don’t think, sometimes my work runs smoothly, simply. At other times of non-thinking I find myself distracted along a different path—perhaps parallel along a different path—such as some artistic endeavor or a playful adventure with a friend.

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_Difference between doing, being and teaching, July 6, 2005._

Today was an interesting day! The new client I scheduled for 4 never showed up, even after a phone call when she was already 30 minutes late. And the client I had scheduled for 5 tomorrow came at 5 today. What is going on here??? As for the new client, I had already thought to myself that I did not plant enough seeds in our brief telephone conversation. Nor did I give the seeds I did plant time to grow by having her wait a few more days between the telephone conversation and her appointment. I wonder if we will ever meet in person after all.

Now, for my 5 o’clock. Our conversation today revealed that our meetings had evolved into more than he expected in the beginning. I could not tell if this was a compliment or a complaint, as he is also running tandem conversations with his minister. I am acutely aware that advice and recommendations are sacred ground for this man. The challenge for me is to remain
neutral, blame-less, and unknowing. I slip and fall over and over, reflecting the “sticky gooey” inner workings of his embattled relationship with this wife. I attempt to reflect to him some of my inner thoughts in a way that hopefully invokes the presence of his absent partner. What treacherous round this is…. My comments seem to be both a warning and an affirmation, with some other message that escapes my conscious intent. He says things are getting better and looks for hope in every conversation with friends, strangers and family members. I call on my reflecting team in my head but fear both he and I will be overwhelmed by the reflections.

I do not know what is to come—next—or of the couple’s fragile relationship. I only hope that we can stay with it until they are comfortable moving on—and, that we can all agree on when, or that, that time arrives.


The way I work is definitely different than, say, a neurosurgeon, or even a psychiatrist. For some, therapy may seem more akin to fortune telling or the ministry, in that therapy often involves the mystical, unexplained side of life. Yet, we are none of the above. We have our own brand of accountability.

I find it difficult to explain what I do or how I, or therapy in general, works. Hopefully, the results will stand for themselves. However, what about those cases that do not turn out so well—or who drop out without saying “goodbye,” leaving a sense of an unknown fate. I can look back and see where I might have listened in a slightly different way. But, hey, sometimes when I have these dreadful feelings of insecurity a follow-up call finds the client doing just fine! It is that uncertainty that perhaps keeps me honing and refining my skills. I think it will be that uncertainty that encourages me to go on to something else when the time comes. I find it helpful
to participate in a group of supportive colleagues who are willing to share their uncertainties in the mean time.

While I have clients sign a consent for treatment form I am reluctant to tell them all the things that might happen as the result of therapy, which would be considered “informed consent.” Do I tell them specifics about my work, like how many people I have treated for what and the outcome(s)? How can I describe my work to my clients in the beginning in a way that would make sense? How much is necessary when attempting to engender hope? And at what point does the collaborative therapist make a decision to refer to someone who is more of an expert?

What kind of expertise do our clients expect? And what can we really give. It has been my experience that… (I fell asleep….)

_Just wondering, July 11, 2005._

Tonight I will attend a meeting of people interested in forming a drop-in/recreational center for people with mental disabilities. The mother of one of my clients wants me to come see what they are doing. She has told me in the past that I am “different” from therapists she has seen for her own difficulties. My thought is that her view has to do with the collaborative approach I have taken to her daughter’s therapy process.

The boundaries are slightly different in this case. I struggle with the “Who is the client” issue—the daughter, the family, the relationship(s)…. I find myself more at ease when I keep focused on the goal of treatment. Somehow my “volunteering” to help with this project is consistent with the goals we have set and perhaps an extension of those goals. My presence is certainly an affirmation of the mom as a woman. My presence does, however raise the question of “where does the therapy end and life begin?” Or are they one?
**July 12, 2005.**

The meeting was interesting. It was a small group of four women wanting to make a difference in the community. I continue to wonder how I will fit into this project. It appears that services for the disadvantaged are decreasing and this program could help. I think that they think I will be in a mentoring role, whatever that is. I find myself curious as to how my role and my presence will evolve….

**A dream about my cousin Peter, July 13, 2005.**

I was awakened this morning from a dream where I was with my cousin Peter, who died a few years back of pancreatic cancer. The dream began—or shall I say, when I stepped into the dream I was at a beach town, with several people. I am in a room, with several women, I think may be my colleagues, but I don’t seem to know them. Maybe they’re friends of my colleagues. There are children and some of the women are out looking after the children—at the beach. Then we are quickly leaving this house. At first I don’t know why. Later it seems we are going to an event—a parade. The children are excited. My husband is there. It is quite a distance to the event. We are hurrying.

I remember I forgot something, maybe my key. So I must go back. I agree to meet them later. I take a cab. I remember getting out of the taxi. It seems I’m not sure I got out at the right place. So I hurry on a block or so on foot. I come to a building, I think. It is more like a ship—I get the sense that it is a ship.

It is there I encounter Peter. I am surprised to see him. He looks good—he is young, slim and healthy and smiling. He is in a uniform—military—like maybe Navy, although I don’t remember him ever being in the military in real life. I am eager to visit with him but tell him we must hurry to catch up with the group.
It is then I wake up. I am disappointed we did not talk. I am wondering what we would have said. I remember the softness in his face and eyes. As I came to my awakened state I was thinking I could not go with him, not now, that he was dead. But he didn’t seem to be going anywhere. He was just there.

Other thoughts.

I am thinking about this journaling—for the research project. Is it about my work, or me, or both? Is this an intervention of some sort? What change will come through this practice? Will it be reflected in me as a person, the way I work or both? Or some other way? And what does my dream have to do with anything?

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Today I saw several clients. As I attempt to look at what I am doing I get more detached as the day goes on. And I wonder if this detachment is more or less helpful to my client(s)? The connection feels more playful, yet a bit risky. Is our “play” creative or helpful? To whom? The detachment feels, well it does not feel—it thinks risky—risk of losing the client and fearful of entering his craziness, fear of being consumed. But what do I do with these feelings?

A conversation through the mirror, July 14, 2005.

Today I had my hair “done.” My hairdresser recently moved to a new location. In the moving he lost his “infinite mirrors”—mirrors placed opposite each other so that one reflected the other and so on. I commented on the loss. As our conversation of the day evolved I noticed that he was not looking at me when he talked, but at my reflection in the mirror. I, too, was looking at his reflection in the mirror. When I became aware that we were each talking with reflections I asked him what it was like to have conversations with people through their reflections in the mirror, and to see himself having the conversation as well. He said he was used
to it, as he talked to reflections all the time. We both paused a moment. And my hair seemed to have a new and different look.

*Another experience with reflection-headlights in the mirror, Saturday, July 16, 2005.*

Tonight I was riding in our car in the front seat as a passenger while my husband drove. I was looking into the rear view mirror outside the car on the passenger side and noticed a reflection of headlights of a car behind us. While looking at the reflection I noticed that the reflection of the rays of the car’s headlights extended beyond the edge of the rear view mirror. For several moments I blinked my eyes and thought about how odd that was, that perhaps my contact lenses were out of whack. I tried to make the reflections go back within the boundaries of the mirror. Only then did I realize that the reflection I was seeing was reflected both by the rear view mirror and by the glass of the car window between the mirror and me. I wondered then whether the beam of light that seemed to be from the headlights was reflected from the mirror or the window, or both. I was pretty sure it wasn’t my contacts. Ha!

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*About the process…*

My process—I am hand writing my entries, editing as I enter into electronic means (computadora). My fear is of over editing after reflection. I am wondering if Janice has any idea the intensity/extent of/effect of her research project (as an intervention) is for us participants. I have not journaled for years! How difficult it is to do the work as a therapist sometimes, let alone look back at it? And the effect of looking at my work while I am doing it—on me and on my clients?

What about the meshing of several processes I am involved with—ISI, coaching workshop, this research project, another workshop I attended recently?
I feel like I have been picked up and put back in a different place.

I am wanting to be quiet.

I am wanting a vacation, but have no where to go.

I am aware of jumping around on this project—recording my dreams—wondering what does this have to do with my work, although I believe the, for me, my dreams are a different kind of reflection.

Why did my friend Joan come back into my life now?

I am wanting Janice to be more concrete. Ask more specific questions, set time limits, increase structure, but thinking at the same time that too much structure will inhibit creativity, yet too little structure may result in chaos, difficulty making sense of anything (comments, notes, etc.). Does the same thing happen in collaborative therapy? How about in real life, whatever that is?

*Language, language, language.*

And the language—I am sooo frustrated at feeling compelled to watch my language. Nothing is the way I intended it! Or is it? Or can I have multiple layers of intent?

How in the world will Janice make any sense out of this? Will there be a flow? Will the participants flow along parallel rivers (paths)? Will the questions and the “answers” emerge at the same time from multiple sources?

To whom does this project belong?

My pen is running out of ink. What does the computadora run out of?

*Tuesday, July 19, 2005.*

Furniture—I am wondering what kind of furniture a collaborative therapist has is their office. Some like the minimalist look, others the expressive…
Reflection on Monday.

I had a “connecting” experience with a client and asked myself what made it so, especially since I was very tired and sleepy during the therapy session. Perhaps I had attained and alpha state, or is it beta? Or a trance state? Anyway, I seemed to be falling asleep as he talked about his very important issue. Yet, I was able to make some timely responses to his story. We connected in some unusual way today. It felt different somehow. Perhaps it had to do with this particular client being open and interested, regarding his dilemma, especially since he is on the verge of making an important decision. Or perhaps he is experienced with the value of therapy. I wonder if he noticed that I was about to fall asleep. He sometimes takes notes during sessions. He took notes today—something I said in response to what he said. He shakes my hand as he leaves. What does this say? More and more of my male clients are shaking my hand. What are they telling me?

What I like about the collaborative approach is that it is open and honest, meets people where they are, in a language they and the therapist (hopefully) can understand, without gimmicks, and with what “appears” to be a minimal amount of effort. The person is challenged in a gentle way while being affirmed and validated at the same time. Where I get goofy is when I meet with my colleagues who use other approaches with enthusiasm and zeal. I sometimes feel “less than” because my approach is so simple and lacks the fireworks set off by others. I often do not know how to affirm myself and may resort to feigned incompetence as a way of bonding with my collaborative peers. Seldom do we look at what makes us successful. And, in my experience, if I somehow figure “it” out and try to do more of “it,” I come off fake and miss the (new) moment. Every intervention, interaction is unique. Yet letting go and moving into the moment is sometimes difficult.
This seems to be rambling…. What will I send Janice???

*July 20, 2005.*

Well, it happened again—the alpha/beta state! It was a rainy day. My client came in late, saying she got stuck on the freeway in traffic and that she was very tired from driving around for her work all day. This time my client, a different one from yesterday, commented that I looked like I was falling asleep. I told her I had been very tired lately, that it was not her, that the same thing happened to me yesterday with another client, that I saw it as an opportunity for the client to make the connections and that I could still connect and make comments, that she might do better work if I was sleepy and talked less, she could talk more. In other words, I did not know what to say, and she started yawning. After we yawned together a few times the session ended and she went home.

I remembered one time when I was a student, watching Harry Goolishian appear to take a nap during a therapy session. The client didn’t seem to notice.

Whoops, I fell asleep while writing this….

*Saturday, July 23, 2005.*

Yesterday I had another of those “artist” experiences. My friend and colleague paints to relax and express her creative side. Yet, she is reluctant to hang any of her paintings in her office. As we explored the subject she said one client had looked oddly at one of her works in the past and she was concerned about clients seeing that side of her. What would they think? Of her? She described her works as “realist,” even the impressionistic ones. I have not seen her work and am wondering what she is really saying to me.

All of this exploration of art began when the practice issues group I facilitate started to move from office to office a couple of months back. The two therapist’s offices we have visited
so far have personal works of the therapist/artist on the walls. Each work is abstract and introspective.

I reflect on my own office walls and décor and wonder, “What do my walls say about me?” And what is reflected back to, and from, the client. I am wanting to make better use of this subtle kind of language, but don’t quite know where to start.

Earlier this evening while monitoring a print job (I am a woman who multi-tasks!), I picked up a journal and started reading an article on social constructionism, and language… I suddenly felt overwhelmed by how complicated wording an intervention statement often is. And I wondered which is more important, effective—the words I choose or the connections I make? Of course, the language influences the nature of the connections, and perhaps the connection, or desire for connection, influences the language as well.

I find myself not wanting to go too deep and wondering why?

*Monday, July 25.*

I seem to be “stuck” in my journaling. I think I need to put some of this “out there” and listen to other’s responses. I am wondering what the others are thinking—if they have similar thoughts, a similar process, if we are connected in our disconnection. And where is Janice? Did I miss a deadline and get dropped from the project? Is this similar to what clients experience when we therapists do not follow up or encourage them in the middle of the work?

As an aside—I am challenging myself to be more thoughtful and careful in committee work, apart from therapy. I am curious about how I handle disagreement(s). I am monitoring my behavior, taking charge of my part in a more tentative and also assertive way, and practicing keeping my mouth shut. I am a little less frustrated by lack of movement, less attached to the final outcome, and still trusting that our group goals will be accomplished. I am giving up my
quest for perfection, for being the best, having an outcome I desire, with sadness and
disappointment. In one group, I will be glad our long-term project is finally over. With the other,
the project will be a success. I just don’t think it will be as good as it could have been and will
not top the last time we did a similar project. But, hey, we’re having fun! And, at our age, fun
“trumps” mega-success.

August, 16, 2005.

Yesterday and the day before I have been wondering why I stopped writing—if I am
finished, or discouraged, or what? What is “positive” about my work?

On addiction.

Today I met with colleagues to discuss practice issues. The topic of interest was
“addiction.” Our group struggled with the managed care, or mangled care, approach that once
addiction (drugs, alcohol, sex, work, etc.) appears in therapy we are to refer immediately to
someone (not me???) who can help. Someone other that one’s self, as a therapist. Of course,
most clients drop out at this point. What is our moral/ethical/legal obligation to these clients?

I suggested that perhaps we could approach these clients without using the concept of
“addiction,” or the word “addiction.” How might conversations be different? One of my
colleagues said immediately, “How can you do that? What do you do with them?” I felt a little
stunned and muttered something about developing a new context within which to work. I began
to question myself, and my colleague. I was, and still am, acutely aware of the subtle shifts of
language going through my brain… OVERLOAD → → →

On this topic—of addiction—I am also aware that I do my best when I go slow with the
client(s) and maintain a connection. What is it about the connection? What makes it so
important? The connection seems to be the heart of the work. How does the connection make for
change? It seems to me, at this moment, that both the therapist and the client must change through connection. But I cannot seem to explain why or how. It is like a jolt of electricity going from one to the other and back and forth until it dissipates, leaving each different than before.

*Encounters with artists over the weekend past.*

The Watercolor Artist: I was mesmerized by her “layering” technique where she painted one layer of watercolor over another to produce shadows and subtleties. I asked how she did it? She demonstrated. Then she asked me if I was a painter too? She had noticed my extraordinary interest in her technique. I told her I was not a painter, but that I was very interested in the medium she was using and how she used it. Then she showed me one of her paintings where in the process of her “layering” that a figure emerged, like a ghost—the unexplained, the unexpected, the mysterious.

The Potter: She took me to her workroom where she had clay pieces prepared, drying, almost ready to fire. One terra cotta colored piece was layered with pink globs. She explained that this was a black glaze. Once in the kiln, the pink would turn black when heated. And a wonderful transformation and hardness would occur. Other colored glazes were similarly dull and unexciting before firing (adding heat).

The Potter showed me her latest bowl. I said, “I want it—I will buy it” immediately when I saw the figures holding hands and dancing around the sides of the bowl. She hadn’t seen them before I spoke. She took a photo of her creation before selling it to me, in anticipation of perfecting her technique. We hope to see more dancing figures in the future.

*Sunday, August 28, 2005.*

I was pleased today to see a message from Janice. I have been looking forward to the next stage of our research project, wondering how we might communicate in languages other than our
own. How would we understand each other, and ourselves?

Over the past two months or so I have found myself taking a closer look at my work and
my relationship with that work. I am finding myself sliding in and out of my own definition of
“work,” “collaborative work,” and the boundaries of our focus in this project.

I have found myself writing very little during August. I guess I have been ready to move
to the next stage for some time. Perhaps it is that only so much can happen in isolation, although
I do not think I have been isolated. Perhaps a better way to think of this position, is “separation,”
rather than “isolation.” But separated from what, from whom? From my work? From the
research group? From Janice?

I guess I am limited as to who I feel comfortable talking with about our project. I am not
sure how to make sense of it to others and am respectful of the boundaries of confidentiality of
the group.

I am looking forward to the blog, wondering what others have to say. What is a blog
anyway? Participating in a blog will be a new process for me. Thank you Janice for inviting me
to the edge!!!

So let the blog begin….

Janice Responds, July 2006.

Dear Olivia,

I have had the privilege reading your reflections at various points throughout this past
year. If you check in with the project blog, you will see that I have been ‘in conversation with’
various voices in the last months—the voices present in the reflective writing sent to me by our
project colleagues, and published textual voices—researchers, social thinkers and practitioners.
Before too long I will have written in response to each reflection offered in this process of shared inquiry.

The following is an open-ended, first response to your reflecting. Writing *in response to* is my way of listening to my project colleagues. It is my way of entering their reflecting, taking it up, so to speak, allowing myself to ‘touch’ and to ‘be touched’. Writing responsively helps me to get a beginning ‘sense of,’ or ‘feel for’. It helps me, as Wittgenstein says, “to find my way about…” within the reflecting processes of my project peers.

Before I continue, I want to pause first, to thank you again for the journaling you offered our project conversation. I find it delightful to read. In our first dialogue together in Playa del Carmen I invited you to take me by the hand into your collaborative practices. I invited you and the others to “open a window” that I could never access through textbook discussions of our central question. And I hoped each of you would courageously offer your own unique sound in this polyphonic interchange. As a fellow participant in this project, I aspired to the same achievement.

Towards the end of your reflecting, you note: “… *I cannot seem to explain why or how*”—and I find too that explanation is impossible, perhaps not even desirable, if we are to follow Wittgenstein’s lead. Perhaps you did not “explain,” but your reflecting process is so valuable to us, in part, because it creates a multi-faceted, tentative, ‘in motion,’ detailed *description* of the everyday mutually “generative and transforming” aspects of your work. I am deeply grateful for your trust, your persistence, and your generosity in this process.

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You speak early in your writing of two distinctives in our way of working. You first note the absence of the laborious diagnostic process that is usually a major part of beginning of a
therapeutic relationship. You write: “... history seems to come out of the interview....” And I agree, we trust people to tell us what they sense we need to know of their history. We do not ‘go after’ their history as though it is some kind of singular, concrete fact. I relish the diverse variation of process and structure inherent in this approach.

I am curious if would you say, too, that much of the generativity in collaborative work “... seems to come “out of”—it seems to spontaneously emerge from within the conversation without us having to import it there from professional sources. Both parties, in a sense, trust the abundance within the conversation to provide what its participants need.

I wonder if this idea connects with the word “flow,” a word you use several times in your reflecting. You write about the flow that comes through connection with others, the flow within this particular project, and the flow you sensed within a particular conversation as you reflected back on it.

This word takes me back to an image from the time of my life when my daughters were toddlers. The oldest used to love pushing the youngest in the swing. To “improve” the motion, the one pushing held the vertical chains in her little fists without letting go, an approach that required her to awkwardly run back and forth with each movement. It was nearly impossible for her to keep up with the pace she produced, and of course, the ride was quite unsatisfying for the little one in the swing.

I have often thought of “pushing,” “letting go,” and “touching” within the context of this child-swing metaphor. How satisfying it is to participate in a conversation that is not under one participant’s direction, conversation that is given the space to develop a fluid character, rhythm, vitality, and structure of its own. I know you understand this from your own experience.
I sense from your writing that simplicity is also part of conversational flow for you. On July 19 you describe the collaborative approach as “open and honest,” an approach that “meets people where they are…” without gimmicks, and “… with what “appears” to be a minimal amount of effort.” You add, “… my approach is so simple.”

Second, you write of “… the way we listen…. ” You refer to a client who has been diagnosed with a chronic mental illness, and you note that she describes your approach as “different” in comparison with the other therapists she has encountered. “By this I think she means that I listen in a different way and she feels like she has been heard.” I have a great curiosity about the listening you describe, listening that helps her to feel heard. I wonder if this comment relates to the first “difference” you mention. Do we listen differently because our process is different with each client? Perhaps we listen differently within conversations where the conversation itself, not the practitioner, is presumed to be the agent of change. A finely tuned inter-dependence characterizes ensemble improvisation—does this same influence affect the quality of our listening? Regardless of our influences, we know the conversation moves swiftly and can never be repeated, and so we must listen well.

I am inspired to learn of the Practice Issues Group you facilitate. I would love to participate. You write that you are trying to increase your awareness of the postmodern collaborative approach within this group, and I find it noteworthy that “the group is made up of several therapists who each practice differently. We meet monthly to share the varied ways in which we practice.” What a wonderful way to explore a particular approach—within a context of contrast and diversity. You write, “Sharing our different views and approaches expands the group and leaves us energized.”
You also write of the value in “not thinking.” “When I don’t think, sometimes my work runs smoothly, simply.” This seems to extend the theme of flow. You continue: “At other times of non-thinking I find myself distracted along a different path—perhaps parallel along a different path—such as some artistic endeavour or a playful adventure with a friend.” I wonder, Olivia, in these times of non-thinking, what other force moves into the foreground for you? Do you move further into a mode that is more intuitive,” where your sensitivity and responsivity is heightened, a more sensuous, creative way of being? I return to your words again: “When I don’t think, sometimes my work runs smoothly, simply.” Would you say we think too much at times? Perhaps intellectual or analytical processes can get in the way of flow and simplicity? Have we somehow learned to separate thought from feeling, sensing, looking, hearing and from spontaneous response?

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On July 6 you write of the practical surprises that are, at times, part of our work—clients showing up late or not at all. I smiled at your question, “What is going on here???” You continue speaking of “the unexpected” as you describe the conversational process you have jointly created with the person you met with at 5 o’clock: “Our conversation today revealed that our meetings had evolved into more than he expected in the beginning.” You note too that along with “warning” and “affirmation,” “… some other message that escapes (your) conscious intent” seems to be at work in your conversation with him.

Referring to the “… more than expected” comment, you write: “I could not tell if this was a compliment or a complaint….” You speak of being “acutely aware,” “challenged,” “slip(ping) and fall(ing) all over, reflecting the “sticky gooey” inner workings of his embattled relationship with this wife.” You “… attempt…” “… hopefully…” but you write, “What
treacherous round this is…” “I call on my reflecting team in my head but fear both he and I will be overwhelmed by the reflections.” You add that you “… do not know what is to come—next—or of the couple’s fragile relationship. I only hope that we can stay with it until….”

Your writing speaks of the difficulty of accounting for the effectiveness of what you do and you add “… what about those cases that do not turn out so well—or who drop out without saying “goodbye,” leaving a sense of an unknown fate.” And you raise several questions relating to the challenge of “informed consent” and “expertise.” “What kind of expertise do our clients expect?” you write. “And what can we really give?”

And you remind yourself that, at times when “… dreadful feelings of insecurity persist, a follow-up call finds the client doing just fine!” You speak of the uncertainty as useful in motivating you to hone and refine your skills—I find this too. Does the uncertainty require us to develop a greater level of curiosity and agility in our work? Does it deepen our involvement with our clients and the dilemmas of their lives? I imagine it does. On July 13 you speak of entering your client’s “craziness.” You write of the “risk of losing the client” and also of your “… fear of being consumed.” You also speak of the value of sharing uncertainties with a group of supportive colleagues who reciprocate the same feelings. How fortunate you are to be able to talk openly and supportively with fellow practitioners.

I want to stay longer with some of the “uncertainty” words you use in this fragment of your writing: “unknown fate,” “overwhelmed,” “fear,” “challenge,” “treacherous,” … and your words “I could not tell…” “I do not know…” “dreadful feelings of insecurity….” In contrast, you also speak of expertise, expertise that “… our clients expect” and expertise that seemingly exists elsewhere. You write, “… at what point does the collaborative therapist make a decision to refer to someone who is more of an expert?” I find your earlier statements useful at this
juncture. You write, “The way I work is definitely different than, say, a neurosurgeon, or even a psychiatrist.” And a little later, you add, “… therapy often involves the mystical, unexplained side of life.”

At this point I pause to wonder what we are meaning in our use of the word “expert.” Recently I met with Family Therapy students at the Kanankil Institute in Merida, Mexico. When I spoke of moving from a “content-oriented” expertise to a “process” expertise, one student challenged my use of the word “expert.” She asked me how “expert” fits with living life “dialogically”—openly, and from a “not-knowing” stance. In her view, and now in mine (ours!), we can live without the word “expert” because for many of us, the word implies the end of doubting. It is synonymous with a surplus of knowing. She suggested we are not even process experts: “How can we be?” she asked. And which one of us is an “expert” in his or her own life? At best, we “know” only tentatively, or as Aiden said in our first dialogue in Playa—we “know provisionally”—a relational, situated knowing that is just enough for us to carry on with the next steps in our lives. And so in this respect, neither practitioner nor client is “expert” in the challenges of life.

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I am intrigued your reflection dated July 11th. Here you describe your participation in “… a meeting of people interested in forming a drop-in/recreational centre for people with mental disabilities.” The invitation to “… come see what they are doing” comes, not from your client, but from her mother. You note again the description of your way of being as “different” according to your client’s mother, as she compares you with other therapists her daughter has seen. And you write, “My thought is that her view has to do with the collaborative approach I have taken to her daughter’s therapy process.”
You point to the blurred boundaries in these relationships, noting it is not easy to identify the client. "Is it the daughter, the family, the relationship(s)?" you ask. Your presence in the meeting of people raises an interesting question for us all: "Where does the therapy end and life begin? Or are they one?" You express curiosity about what your role will be within this group, and I notice your conviction that your "… role and presence will evolve...." Is this something we learn from our way of practicing therapy? At the outset it is not clear how we will fit but we trust that we will be able to develop into a conversational process usefully…?

When therapy conversation resembles the spontaneity and generativity of ‘ordinary conversation’, the lines between professional practice and the rest of life become more difficult to see. For postmodern, collaborative practitioners, these ‘boundaries’ are fluid and porous—life rushes into practice, and in turn, practice infuses our lives. Each enriches the other to the point where collaborative practice is simply an aspect of life. So I appreciate your question and want to repeat it: "Where does the therapy end and life begin? Or are they one?"

At this year’s ISI, Emelie spoke favourably of “complicating” our therapy relationships with the sharing of food, tears, laughter, music, art. Meeting clients, as you did, within the bustle of their own familial and community contexts invites complication. Situating our conversations within the “stuff of life” rather than within treatment contexts seems to take away the “clientness” of the people we meet with. When this way of relating with people becomes “our way of being” in our work, we find, surprisingly, that we are no longer meeting with clients. We are meeting with friends, neighbours, fellow citizens.

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On July 13 you write so vividly about the dream of your cousin Peter. You share various details: your eagerness to visit with him, the disappointment that you did not talk, your wondering what the two of you would have said, and your realization that “… I could not go
with him, not now, that he was dead. But he didn’t seem to be go-ing anywhere. He was just there.”

I have had dreams like this of my mother who passed away when I was 25 years old. I have been grateful for each one, because, even though she was still ‘out of reach’ in the dream, it was a gift to be with her again, even in this way, to have an extension of her time with me, so to speak.

Immediately following you ask questions of your reflecting process for this project. “Is it about my work, or me, or both? Is this an intervention of some sort? What change will come through this practice? Will it be reflected in me as a person, the way I work or both? Or some other way? And what does my dream have to do with anything?” And you make no connections for me to help me understand how the dream connects with this project. You leave all of this open-ended.

At this point I find myself ‘moved’ by the seeming openness with which you undertook my invitation to participate in a reflecting process after the ISI. Here again I see something of your appreciation for uncertainty, and your ‘not-knowing’ philosophy of life. You do not know how your dream connects before you share it—perhaps you still do not know ‘how it connects.” Yet you must have sensed that it might. And since it was significant for you, since you were immersed in it, you took the risk of ‘putting it out there’, just in case.

I am joining you in your wondering. I am touched by your dream story, and am grateful that you did not rush to close in on its meaning(s). I want to approach your dream in the same way, noticing it and asking how this connects to our project, and to your contribution within it. Later on July 16 you speak of dreams as “… a different kind of reflection.” For me, the dream is for now, a metaphor for longing, connection and constraint.
The conversation through the mirror at the hairdresser is delightful and intriguing for me. You write: “As our conversation of the day evolved I noticed that he was not looking at me when he talked, but at my reflection in the mirror. I too was looking at his reflection in the mirror. I asked him what it was like to have conversations with people through their reflections... and to see himself having the conversation as well. He said he was used to it, as he talked to reflections all the time. We both paused a moment.”

And I had to laugh with you as you described “another experience with reflection” on Saturday, July 16. You describe your experience of looking into the rear view mirror outside the car on the passenger side and the reflection of a car’s headlights in the mirror, nothing extraordinary in itself, except the reflection of the car lights in the mirror extended strangely beyond the rim of the mirror. You blinked, trying to make the reflections go back within bounds of the mirror, but you could not. And after some thought, you noticed there was still another consideration—your car window, and you wondered then “… whether the beam of light that seemed to be from the headlights was reflected from the mirror or the window, or both. I was pretty sure it wasn’t my contacts. Ha!”

I pause here to think about perspective and vantage point and the impossibility of seeing things “as they really are,” the complexity of sight and the mystery of understanding: more influences ‘at play’ than we are aware of. I cannot help but wonder, “Is it the same for us? Do we meet with “reflections” only?” Are we also forced to view the people we meet with from the limitations of our own vantage points? We cannot acquire a meta-view of them or their lives. We can never see them completely.
You stop for a moment, again to write about our project process of inquiry, and you write several separate statements, instead of writing in paragraphs as you do elsewhere. I am glad you worried about being overly editorial—this was also my worry, so I am glad for your openness. You write: “I am wondering if Janice has any idea of the intensity/extent of/effect of her research project (as an intervention) is for us participants.” No Olivia, I do not have any idea—well, not any certain ideas, and I would love to hear more about people’s ideas in response to your question. Geavonna has begun to speak to me of the influence of this project in her work and Tapio, one of the ‘consultants’ in this project, has written in some (wonderful) detail articulating his sense of the influence of this project in his network of colleagues, but I do not know much of the extent of the influence of our project, not at all.

And you note that this shared inquiry is difficult. It is difficult to do the work, and even more so to look back on it. Again you speak of “… jumping around in this project wondering as you write, “… what does this have to do with my work…?” Olivia, I empathize! It is difficult to articulate ‘our own’ experience of the generative and transforming influence of dialogue in our work. You will probably recall that others in our research collective voiced similar sentiments when we first talked face to face in Playa del Carmen.

I am especially curious about your statement: “I feel like I have been picked up and put back in a different place.” I believe you write this in response to the accumulating affect of “several processes” you are involved with: “… ISI, coaching workshop, this research project, another workshop I attended recently.”

I love the way you put this idea: “… picked up and put back in a different place.” Lately I have been thinking about the aspects of the dialogical realm that are beyond our choosing, beyond our motivations, intentions and careful planning! I wonder about the meaning of your
words for you “… put back in a different place.” How can we further articulate that kind of difference? Is it a matter of changing places, an immigration process or exile of sorts? Are you thinking here primarily of a change of perspective, a change of ‘position,’ changes in our understanding or insight? Or is more involved? Along with our “different place” do we find ourselves trying on different ways of being and becoming, different customs, thoughts, feelings, different priorities and ideals, attitudes and beliefs, different ways of speaking and relating to one another? What is involved in this experience of being “picked up and put back in a different place?” It sounds somewhat involuntary, and this intrigues me.

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June 29, 2006 explores the idea of collaboration. You describe collaboration as connection with others, with each other, and with you, being “in flow,” inter-dependence. Looking at “collaboration” from the context of the high school reunion committee work, you note the challenge of finding a balance—between a lack of control—“sloppy management” and too much control.

***

Your reflection from July 3, 2005 explores an “accidental conversation” with an artist. I find this immediately delightful because in my experience, each day is filled with seemingly accidental conversations, brief and fleeting, and often full of “treasure” as characters in children’s storybooks might say. I have made a habit of ‘looking twice’ within these conversations where many others might hardly look at all. You do the same.

You seem to empathize, as I do, with the artist you found in the process of “… removing his work, taking it home from the gallery because it had not sold over a very long time. He had spent more than a year working on the piece…” and you noted the tremendous detail and
cultural/political depth in the work. A conversation between you and others emerged about the
tension between producing work that does not sell, and “… giving up the depth of my calling in
favor of quick fixes for timely rewards—cash.” You noticed the “flow” of this conversation, and
you took time to wonder if you “… could have said (your part in) it differently….” Yet you note,
“He seemed to enjoy the appreciation and recognition from me and from his peers.”

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I think you pose a great question as you reflect on this conversation: “How is
collaborative therapy different from or similar to a collaborative conversation such as this one,
where connection seemed to be key?” You suggest, “Perhaps it is the creative connections that
are most meaningful in collaborative work.”

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The July 4th conversation with a different artist—a photographer—extends your dialogue
into this idea of connection, as you note that this photographer “… has a very significant
connection with his subject matter.” You speak of his “… deep connection between himself, the
subject matter and the viewer.” And you write: ” For me this is an example of how connecting
with self and others (even objects) is a key to mastery.” You also note he describes himself as
“self-taught” and that he found it “laborious and confining” to read the instructions for his
camera. His effectiveness as an artist seems to come, in your view, from the depth of his
connections, and it sounds like he is not drawn to following prescribed, pre-figured methods. In
your question, “What does this have to do with collaborative work?” you play with two clusters
of three words, and with the images of triangle and spiral: “Therapist, Client, Story” and
“Source/Creativity/Change.”
You ask how this relates to collaborative practice. I am struck by similarities in his
approach and ours. You believe his effectiveness “comes from…” his profound connections with
“subject matter… self and others (even objects)….” It is not imposed from the outside; it is not
comprised of superficial tricks and techniques. He is not interested in doing what is “laborious
and confining.”

You move from these reflections into speaking of specialness, which reminds me of the
word “acknowledgement.” You wonder about the “… catalyst for change…” in our way of
working and you raise the question of how you “know” when you are doing collaborative
therapy.

***

In your July 5 reflecting you return to the idea of diversity, and you write: “As I see it
now, part of collaboration is the coming together of differences, hence, diversity. Diversity of the
client population, diversity of contexts….” You speak of the value of translating the skill
required to collaborate with a diverse range of clients into other areas of your personal life. You
notice that at times you are concerned that you are perceived as too different. And that your
position of “not-knowing” can be perceived as “incompetence.” What you do, comparing to
other therapists, “… is more of a conversation.” You also consult with a “reflecting team”
regularly in your private practice, which sounds like an inner dialogue you invite as part of the
larger spoken conversation with your client.

***

Again you pause to reflect on the process of this project. You voice your wish for more
structure in this project, more concreteness, noting too much will “inhibit creativity, yet too little
structure may result in chaos….” You continue: “How in the world will Janice make any sense
out of this? Will there be a flow? Will the participants flow along parallel rivers (paths)? Will the questions and the ‘answers’ emerge at the same time from multiple sources? To whom does this project belong?"

I find your questions compelling. I imagine my work will be less about “making sense” or offering interpretations or representations of the dialogue we are having, and more about responding to it and keeping it ‘in play,’ thereby extending it, towards the goal of understanding more fully, seeing things differently. But just as I do not know if my therapeutic conversations will be highly generative and transforming, I do not know how our research dialogue will emerge in useful ways. I am not working from a research template that guarantees a particular destination point. My process, or ‘method’ as we usually say, is not specified ahead of time. Although I am continually immersed in a larger literature base exploring research, practice and premises, I want to be careful to proceed dialogically, ‘in the moment,’ just as we do within the shared inquiry comprising our practices.

You note too, in a nearby paragraph, the frustration of language: “Nothing is the way I intended it! Or is it? Or can I have multiple layers of intent?” The challenge of communication! If only it were more straightforward. The impact and meaning of language so often exceeds our intentions, sometimes favourably, other times, in ways we regret. It seems to me lately, words are, at best, only metaphors, each one more like a poem than a sharp instrument of precision. We are never completely free to choose the meaning of the words we use: those listening must make meaning with us; we are forever talking with. What little control we have within this complex ambiguity. At the same time, is this not also the beauty of language? Does the creativity, generativity and transformative power of language also derive from this dilemma?

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Again you return to the idea of *conversation as connection* as you describe “… a connecting experience” with a client. You describe the features of the collaborative approach that you appreciate: “What I like about the collaborative approach is that it is open and honest, meets people where they are, in a language they and the therapist (hopefully) can understand, without gimmicks, and with what “appears” to be a minimal amount of effort.” You speak about the simplicity of the approach and the seeming illusiveness of figuring out what makes it successful.

You consider several questions in your reflections from July 23. As your practice issues group began to move from office to office a couple of months earlier, you noticed the presence of personal, original art on the walls, the creations of the hosting therapists. You write, “Each work is abstract and introspective.” And you wonder, thinking of your own office walls: “What do my walls say about me? And what is reflected back to, and from, the client. I am wanting to make better use of this subtle kind of language….”

***

And you play with a second question as you make use of a few free moments “while monitoring a print job….” You begin reading an article on social constructionism and language and are suddenly “overwhelmed by how complicated wording an intervention statement often is.” You wonder what is more important and effective, “… the words I choose or the connections I make?” And you notice immediately the interconnectedness of connection and language, but you ‘conclude’ perhaps tentatively, “I find myself not wanting to go too deep and wondering why?”

Perhaps the words we choose and the connections we co-create are part of the same interaction? I think your point is more important, however, because your question seems to imply (for
me) that the connection we make, ultimately, is more important than the language we “make.”
Connection includes words, but goes well beyond the realm of the spoken word into other
dimensions. Is this similar to what you are saying?

You offer more questions about process in this project—and your questions make me
wonder if somehow my email notes with details about timelines and other practicalities have not
reached you. I have been meticulous about re-sending returned email messages and I have had no
notice of any difficulty of sending mail to you, Olivia. So, I would like to hear more about what
participation in this process was like for you. It sounds like, from your vantage point, it was a
little unclear at times?

You then write a paragraph that seems to describe a reflective process of ‘letting go’
within a number of the projects you are currently part of. You note you are now “more
tentative… assertive… practicing keeping my mouth shut.” And you are “less frustrated… less
attached... still trusting… having fun.” “I am giving up my quest for perfection, for being the
best, having an outcome I desire, with sadness and disappointment.” (I am now thinking again of
the swing metaphor I mentioned earlier). And on the 16th of August, you notice you are stopping
writing for this present project, and you ask yourself “why?”

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I am grateful for your reflecting with your practice issues group and your innovative,
courageous response to the challenge of “addiction” within “managed care” contexts. You
suggested that “… perhaps we could approach these clients without using the concept of
“addiction,” or the word “addiction”—how might the conversations be different?” This idea
seemed to create a small earthquake in the group! “How can you do that?” one of your
colleagues questioned!
You return to the importance of connection again within “addictions work.” You write

*I am also aware that I do my best when I go slow with the client(s) and maintain a connection. What is it about the connection? What makes it so important? The connection seems to be at the heart of the work. How does the connection make for change? It seems to me, at this moment, that both the therapist and the client must change through connection. But I cannot seem to explain why or how. It is like a jolt of electricity going from one to the other and back and forth until it dissipates, leaving each different than before.*

And in the margin of your page, I have drawn a big fancy exclamation mark, and written again a word that seems immense in your writing and way of working: connection.

***

You speak of your interactions with artists over the weekend—with a watercolor artist, and with a potter. I notice that you notice her noticing your “extraordinary interest in her technique.” So interesting to learn of the figure that emerged in the process of her layering technique—a technique where “… she painted one layer of water color over another to produce shadows and subtleties.” And you seemed to take pleasure in the process of “transformation” which you learned of with the potter’s explanations. You were able to move through her workroom among the clay pieces drying, nearly ready to move on to the next stage.

You end your reflecting with attention to process—noting it was good to hear from me at the end of summer, and noticing that in the last while you “have found (yourself) taking a closer look at (your) work and (your) relationship with that work.” And it sounds as though your definitions of “work” and “collaborative work” were shifting? Kindly, you say you are looking forward to the blog, feeling finished with this phase of the project.
I find myself now at a pause in my letter to you. Your writing is a gift to our research group. I deeply appreciate your sensitivity to detail, your continual questioning, your responsivity and openness to the seemingly ordinary events of life, your appreciation of differences, and your orientation to art. I am also admiring of your gracefulness in moving so easily and ‘naturally’ between your professional practice and your life beyond practice as you reflect. You seem to have dismantled the border-crossings between life and practice that we often expect to find within the therapy profession.

I had the chance to listen to Tom Andersen describe one of the aspects of his listening process this past January. Gesturing as though he had a basket on his arm, he spoke of collecting words as he listened to people speak, words that seemed to move the speaker in some way, and also words that were, in some way, ‘arresting’ or meaningful for him. He spoke of his wonder of the worlds of lived experience within these words, and of the potentiality and generativity ‘within’ a single word.

I am drawn to the idea of ‘gathering together’ the words that are still seemingly calling me, long after I put your reflecting pages aside. So here, for now, are some that stay with me still. They have become “ours.” Many of these connect with my own ‘experience’ in practice and in life:

… flow, the way we listen, the coming together of differences, ‘out of’, not thinking, more than expected, entering, intention and that “which escapes” intention, accidental, conversation, uncertain, “where does the therapy end and life begin? Or are they one?” I feel like I have been picked up and put back in a different place,” connection, creative connections, artist, different, diverse, “both the therapist and the client must change through connection,” “leaving each (conversational partner) different.”
In drawing further attention to some portions of your reflecting, I am in no way wishing to diminish other aspects. It is all valuable within our dialogical context. In later writing I will explore more thoroughly the idea of “response” and the process “taking up” and “taking in” another person’s ‘utterance’ and the element of ‘non-choice’ and irrationality that is at the heart of this process for me.

I end, for now, at your spacious beginning, “My Journal—A Work without a Title.”

Thank you, Olivia. I am indebted to you.

Your friend and colleague,

Janice

Written Dialogues With Abelinda

Abelinda Responds, January 1, 2006

Original Spanish Journaling: Reflexiones

Idea 1.

Hace un par de meses terminó la terapia con una muchacha con la que había estado trabajando por lo menos un año... estaba pensando en la forma como ella me percibió a lo largo de la terapia a partir de la relación que tenemos, esta es una relación yo diría... múltiple, fui su maestra en la licenciatura, ahora ella esta estudiando la maestría, soy su maestra nuevamente, también soy la coordinaAbelinda académica del Instituto, cuando le preguntaba cómo me visualizaba como terapeuta, ella hablaba de la imagen que tenía de mi como una experta; y reflexionando acerca de esto, creo que en este momento lo más importante reside en saber que el proceso terapéutico le fue útil, que el tipo de relación que pudimos establecer le ayudó, le permitió tomar decisiones, le permitió visualizarse como una persona capaz, le permitió
desligarse de algunas relaciones que no le eran útiles para su desarrollo profesional y personal sobre todo, y en cuanto a mi, me permitió disfrutar de esa sensación breve y pasajera de éxito y de descubrirme como una mujer dispuesta y accesible.

Idea 2.

Esta es la primera vez que “escribo” mis reflexiones, aunque desde hace mucho tiempo son una constante en mi vida personal y como terapeuta. De alguna manera empecé a interesarme mucho en “conocer” qué es lo que pasa con “los clientes” durante el proceso de terapia y fue conversando con algunos de ellos que empezamos a tratar de descifrar lo que ha pasado con nosotros en terapia, creo que a través de esta interacción con ellos y de la forma como pueden hablar acerca de la psicoterapia me ha dado pautas para poder hablar acerca de mi trabajo.

Algo que ha sido común con algunas de las personas que he trabajado es que, cuando les he preguntado qué ha pasado en el proceso terapéutico, la respuesta ha sido que “no saben que ha pasado.”

Tratar de dar una explicación al proceso terapéutico, construir juntos qué fue lo que pasó o qué es lo que está ocurriendo, ha sido un proceso adicional en la terapia. De alguna manera sabemos que van pasando cosas entre nosotros, pero, no es hasta el momento en que nos preguntamos qué es lo que está pasando, cuando se pone en evidencia que algo está cambiando.

Aunque en el momento de tratar de explicar qué está pasando y qué está generando el cambio no existen ideas muy claras, es interesante que podemos saber que el proceso de terapia nos está permitiendo encontrar lo que buscamos: soluciones, ideas nuevas, tener visiones más amplias de su situación de vida.
Además muchos de ellos no han necesitado saber que es lo que exactamente lo que pasó, a fin de cuentas la gente, queda contenta, satisfecha y en un momento dado saben cuando ya es buen momento de terminar la terapia.

**Idea 3.**

Qué ha pasado conmigo como terapeuta, últimamente me ha tocado trabajar con muchas parejas, un tema importante abordado por ellos ha sido la infidelidad, ha sido un bombardeo impresionante. Ha sido cada vez mayor la cantidad de personas que hablan de la infidelidad y también la diversidad de posturas frente a ella. Hay quienes la han descrito como “lo que esta generando un caos en nuestra vida de pareja…” “de pronto descubrir que mi relación no es lo que había pensado que era, y que la satisfacción que había tenido con mi pareja, ahora resulta que tampoco era real, que el no estaba igualmente satisfecho”; se plantea como que de pronto descubren que muchos años invertidos en una vida no están siendo lo que uno esta percibiendo como esposo o esposa. Hay otros que están hablando de la infidelidad como algo que pasó, es algo que fue un punto más en la vida de las personas, que puede o no tener ninguna trascendencia, que es una experiencia más, que tanto hombres como mujeres es tan dispuestos a asumir este evento de la vida, como uno más. Otros la están tomando como una línea que divide entre una etapa de vida y otra en la historia de la pareja y que va a cambiar drásticamente la vida de ambos.

Estas ideas sobre la infidelidad, a mi me hace pensar en muchas cosas acerca de “la vida,” y de la vida como una cuestión a veces muy incierta, no sabemos que va a pasar, la importancia que le podemos dar a ciertos eventos va a depender mucho de la visión que tengamos de las cosas, y puede marcar que tan trascendente o no puede ser para alguien. Estos
diálogos con las parejas han hecho que “se muevan muchas de mis ideas” acerca de lo que es la vida en general y la vida de pareja.

Las edades de estas parejas también le da un sentido y significado distinto al tema de la infidelidad, por ejemplo una de las parejas tiene 36 años de casados (el esposo tiene 65 años de edad y la esposa tiene 55) para la esposa la infidelidad esta significando un cambio radical para su vida, por que ella dice que esto debió haber ocurrido cuando eran jóvenes, que en este momento de su vida esta fuera de lugar. En otra pareja mucho más joven (el señor 40 años y la señora de 38) la situación está siendo distinta, ya que la infidelidad fue por parte de la mujer y esto plantea otra perspectiva muy diferente. Si piensa en esto en el contexto de la terapia, y la concibo como una forma de hablar acerca de la vida de las personas, acerca de lo que nos ocurre de cómo la vida es, esto me pone como terapeuta-persona en una posición “tan sensible” como la de mi cliente para el cambio y la apertura puesto que al ser ambos (mi cliente y yo) parte de este diálogo yo también estoy continuamente preguntándome acerca de lo que soy y lo que tengo, acerca de lo que vivo, del significado que tienen las cosas para mi, y creo que esto me hace cada vez más conciente de que no se que es lo correcto para las personas que como individuos estamos todos en búsqueda de lo que pueda sernos bueno para un determinado momento de nuestra vidas, a fin de cuentas vamos construyendo nuestras vida al mismo momento que la vamos viviendo y como terapeuta tengo el gran privilegio de que las personas confíen en mí para hacerme parte de su proceso de construcción de vida….

Idea 4.

Ayer en la escuela con unos colegas terapeutas, tuvimos una discusión acerca de los conocimientos previos que debía tener un psicólogo para poder “dar terapia,” fue muy interesante pues la mayoría de ellos parten de la idea de que los conocimientos que se deben
poseer están relacionados con psicopatología, técnicas de entrevista, desarrollo humano. Este planteamiento trajo a mi cabeza la idea de la psicoterapia como una forma de “curar,” como un proceso donde tengo que intervenir de cierta forma, donde hay maneras estructuradas para intervenir en psicoterapia; si lo veo así, es lógico que tenga que tener un antecedente de psicopatología y entrevista para poderlas realizar. Si parto de un planteamiento distinto, en donde veo a la terapia como un proceso de conversación y de diálogo acerca de nuestra vidas, acerca de lo que nosotros como personas estamos vivenciando, cobra un sentido distinto el “tipo o nivel” de capacitación que necesitamos acerca de teoría psicológica, creo que más bien reside en una formación acerca de cómo quiero conversar y relacionarme con los demás.

Estas ideas cobran sentido para mí a partir de la formación que he tenido, las ideas consideradas como posmodernas me han permitido descubrir que me siento más cómoda como terapeuta, viendo que la terapia es un proceso a través de cual nosotros hablamos acerca de nuestra vidas y donde el significado puede transformarse, traducirse a cosas distintas en donde no necesariamente tengo que ser la experta en teoría psicológica para poder trabajar como terapeuta. Por supuesto que esto no es una idea muy compartida en mi equipo de compañeros, donde la mayoría de ellos, sino es que todos, parten de la idea de que primero es necesario establecer un diagnóstico, metas terapéuticas, definir las técnicas que voy a utilizar antes de poder intervenir, esto transforma por completo la visión y el trabajo que se hace en psicoterapia.

Después de esta conversación creo que me quedan algunas ideas claras sobre la psicoterapia, para mí, llegar a ser una terapeuta implica tener una visión más cercana a lo que yo quiero ser y hacer como persona, creo que no necesariamente se requiere un bagaje teórico exclusivo sobre psicología, también creo necesario enfatizar la experiencia de vida y nuestra visión acerca del mundo; si pienso hacia dónde iría la formación del terapeuta creo que habría
que incluir aquello que lo enriqueciera como un ser humano dispuesto a escuchar, dispuesto a cuestionar sus ideas, una formación de la persona del terapeuta que le permitiera tener claro sus creencias, sus valores; no necesariamente con la intención de ser objetivo y neutral, sino más bien con la idea de un conocimiento personal y sobre todo de aprendizaje sobre que “el mundo no gira alrededor mío” además de poder ir construyendo que “clase de terapeuta quiere ser,” por lo menos por cierto momento, ya que puede cambiar. Creo que leer mucho y viajar son dos elementos que pueden contribuir a darnos cuenta de la riqueza y diversidad que hay en el mundo y que “con la atención suficiente las cosas son maravillosas”. ¿Cómo formar personas con oficio de terapeuta que nunca pierdan la capacidad de sorpresa y que puedan continuamente decir ¡¡¡Uau!!! cada vez que algo los sorprenda?

**Idea 5.**

Ultimamente me he dado cuenta que el trabajo en terapia me hace reflexionar más sobre la vida; sobre cómo vivir, cómo resolver problemas, cómo sentirse satisfecho, y cada vez menos en si soy una buena terapeuta o no. Lo que la gente trae son como rayos de luz que disparan en mí una serie de pensamientos pero, más relacionados con la vida, que con el oficio de la terapia.

**Idea 6.**

El autonombrarme una terapeuta con preferencias posmodernas me ha cambiado la vida, ya que puedo verme de diversas maneras dependiendo del tipo de relación que establezco con la persona, me siento libre y relajada, ya no me preocupa tanto sentirme evaluada y cada vez más mi propios clientes y yo misma somos la medida de nuestros éxitos juntos.

**Idea 7.**

Me sorprendo de descubrir que todas las personas (mis clientes) son maravillosas, cada una con sus inteligencias, habilidades y creatividad para tomar decisiones en la vida, cómo le
Idea 1.

A couple of months ago therapy with a girl I had been working with for at least a year was completed… I was thinking about her perception of me throughout the therapy based on the relationship we have, a relationship that I would say is… multi-faceted, I was her teacher during her undergraduate work, and now she is studying for her master’s; I am once again her teacher. I am also the academic coordinator of the Institute, when I asked her how she sees me as a therapist, she spoke of an image she had of me as an expert; and now reflecting on this, I believe that at this moment the most important aspect rests in knowing that the therapeutic process was useful for her, that the type of relationship we were able to establish helped her, it allowed her to make decisions, it allowed her to see herself as a capable person, it allowed her to separate herself from some relationships which were not helpful in her professional development and most importantly her personal development, and for my part, it allowed me to enjoy a brief and fleeting sensation of success and to discover that I am an available and accessible person.

Idea 2.

This is the first time that I “write” my reflections, although for some time they have been a constant in my personal life and as a therapist. In some way I began to become very interested in “knowing” what happens with “clients” during the therapy process and it was in conversations with some of them that we began to decipher what has happened to us in therapy, I believe that this interaction with them and in the way they are able to speak about psychotherapy has given me guidelines to speak about my work.
A common occurrence with some of the people I have worked with is that, when I have asked what has happened in the therapeutic process, the answer has been that “they don’t know what has happened.”

To try to give an explanation of the therapeutic process, to build together what has happened or what is happening, has been an additional process of the therapy. In some way we know that things are happening between us, but it’s not until we ask ourselves what is happening, that it becomes evident that something is changing.

Although there are no clear ideas in the moment when we try to explain what is happening and what is causing the change, it’s interesting that we can know that the process of therapy is allowing us to find what we are searching for: solutions, new ideas, to have a fuller insight of one’s life experience.

As well, many of them have not needed to know exactly what happened, in the end, people are content, satisfied and at some given moment, know when it’s the right time to end the therapy.

Idea 3.

What has happened to me as a therapist, recently in working with many couples, an important theme that they have dealt with is infidelity, an explosive subject. There are ever increasing numbers of people who speak of infidelity and also their various attitudes about it. There are some who have described it as “what is causing chaos in their relationship as a couple…” “suddenly discovering that my relationship is not what I thought it was, and that the satisfaction that I had with my partner, now appears not to have been real either, that he was not equally satisfied”; they explain that all at once they discover that the many years invested in a life is not what they had perceived as husband or wife. There are others that speak of infidelity as
something that happened, another occurrence in the life of a person that may or may not be of
any importance, that it’s one more experience, that both men and women are able to accept this
occurrence in life, as any other. Others see it as a line that divides the life of the couple’s
relationship into before and after and that it will drastically change the lives of both.

These ideas about infidelity cause me to think about many things about “life,” about life
as a very uncertain thing, we don’t know what will happen; the importance that we assign to
certain events depends greatly on our perspective of things, and can determine how significant or
not any event may be to someone. These dialogues with couples have caused “many of my ideas
to shift” regarding what life in general is and also about the couple relationship.

The ages of these couples has also given a distinct feeling and importance to the theme of
infidelity, for example one of the couples has been married for 36 years (the husband is 65 and
the wife is 55) for the wife the infidelity signifies a radical change in her life, because she says
that this should have happened when they were young, that at this point in their lives it’s out of
place. In another much younger couple (he is 40 and she is 38) the situation is different, given
that the infidelity was on the part of the woman and this presents a very different perspective.
Thinking about this in the context of therapy, and I conceive of it as a way of talking about the
lives of people, about what happens to us in what life is, as a therapist-person it puts me in an “as
sensitive” position as my client for change and opening up given that both (my client and I) are
part of this dialogue, I also am continually asking myself about what I am and what I have, about
the life I live, the importance of things to me, and I believe that this makes me increasingly
conscious that I do not know what is correct for people who as individuals we are all in search of
what is good for us at any determined point in our lives, in the end we are building our lives
while living life and as a therapist I have the great privilege that people trust in me to make me part of their process in building life….

Idea 4.

Yesterday at the school with some therapist colleagues, we had a discussion about what prior knowledge a psychologist should have in order to “give therapy,” it was very interesting in that the majority of them believe that the knowledge they should have is related to psychotherapy, interview techniques, and human development. This rationale brought to my mind the idea that psychotherapy is a way “to cure,” as a process where I have to intervene in some way, where there are structured ways in which to intervene in psychotherapy; if I look at it that way, it’s logical that I should have some experience in psychopathology and interview in order to do the work. If I use a different rationale, where I see therapy as a process of conversation and dialogue about our lives, about what we as people are experiencing, it suggests a different “type or level” of training needed related to psychological theory, I believe it has more to do with determining how I want to converse with and relate to others.

These ideas come to mind based on the training that I have had, ideas that are considered postmodern have allowed me to discover that I feel more comfortable as a therapist, seeing that therapy is a process through which we talk about our lives and where meaning can change and be applied to various things and where I don’t necessarily have to be the expert in psychological theory in order to work as a therapist. Of course this idea is not shared by many of my colleagues, the majority of whom, if not all, believe in the idea that it’s necessary to first establish a diagnosis and therapeutic guidelines, to define the techniques that I will use before being able to intervene, this completely changes the vision and the work that is done in psychotherapy.
After this conversation I believe that I have some clear ideas about psychotherapy, for me, in order to become a therapist implies having a clearer vision about what I want to be and do as a person, I don’t believe that it’s necessarily a requirement to have a wealth of exclusive theoretical knowledge of psychology, I also believe it’s necessary to call attention to life experience and our worldview; if I think about the direction in which therapist training should go, I would have to include that which would develop one as a human being that is able to listen, able to question their own ideas, training that allows the therapist to be clear about their beliefs, values; not necessarily with the intention of being objective and neutral, but rather with the idea of personal knowledge and moreover of learning that “the world does not revolve around me” as well as being able to build on “what kind of therapist do I want to be;” at least for a time, as it may change.

I believe that reading a lot and traveling are two elements that can contribute in helping us realize how rich and diverse the world is and that “with sufficient awareness see that things are wonderful.” How can we train people as therapists that will never lose their ability to be surprised and that can continually say Wow!!! Each time something surprises them?

**Idea 5.**

Recently I have realized that working as a therapist causes me to reflect more and more about life; about how to live, how to resolve problems, how to feel satisfied, and less and less about whether I am a good therapist or not. What people bring is like rays of light that trigger a series of thoughts in me, but more related to life than to the work of therapy.

**Idea 6.**

Labelling myself as a therapist with postmodern preferences has changed my life, given that I can see myself in various ways depending on the type of relationship that I establish with
someone, I feel free and relaxed, I’m no longer so preoccupied with feeling evaluated and more and more my own clients and I myself are the measurement of our shared successes.

Idea 7.

I am surprised to discover that all people (my clients) are wonderful, each with their own intellect, ability and creativity to make decisions in life, as people possess wisdom in order to confront the challenges that life presents to all of us.

Janice Responds, October 2006

Hello Abelinda,

Thank you again for sharing your reflecting process within this inquiry into postmodern, collaborative therapy practice.

Idea 1.

In a paragraph you call “Idea 1” you speak of a therapeutic relationship you had with a girl you had been working with for approximately a year. This relationship had come to an end a couple of months before you wrote of it in our project. Because of the multiple roles you had in her life, you describe the relationship as “multi-faceted.” You asked her about her perspectives regarding your role as a therapist, and you write, “… she spoke of an image she had of me as an expert….” You imagine what she might have meant by this; you write, “… the therapeutic process was useful for her… the type of relationship we were able to establish helped her, it allowed her to make decisions, it allowed her to see herself as a capable person, it allowed her to separate herself from some relationships which were not helpful in her professional development and most importantly her personal development….”

Near the beginning of this paragraph you write, “I was thinking about her perception of me throughout the therapy based on the relationship we have…. “ Relationship is a word you
mention multiple times in these first sentences. In addition to your description of your relationship with her as “multi-faceted” you note that the “type” of relationship you were both able to establish, seemed to be helpful to her. Here I also notice another word you repeat several times: the word *allowed*. You describe your sense that the relationship allowed her to make decisions, allowed her to understand herself as “capable,” allowed her to “separate herself” from some relationships that seemed “not helpful in her professional development and most importantly in her personal development.” It is as though the relationship you both developed gave her permission to know herself in significant ways, as some one who makes constructive decisions, and as a person who can adjust her orientation to others as required.

And you consider also the “usefulness” of the relationship for yourself: “… *for my part, it allowed me to enjoy a brief and fleeting sensation of success and to discover that I am an available and accessible person.*” Abelinda, what a fine feeling—that “brief and fleeting sensation of success…!” And what a wonderful discovery—and you do not speak of ‘re-discovering’, you speak of discovering as though it is ‘a first’—the discovery that you are an *available* and *accessible* person. Your writing reminds me that we come to know who we are, who we have been, and who we might be becoming through our relationships with others. Perhaps you also, like me, used to think of ‘identity’ as autonomous, individual traits. The relationship you describe seemingly allowed you to know your ‘selves’ in particular ways—to make new and ‘re-newed’ discoveries about your selves.

I notice that you do not credit your approach for the “usefulness” of ‘therapy’—you do not credit some kind of quality in your client, or in yourself, you do not credit a theory, a framework, a model…. But you speak of the “*relationship allowing*….” It is not an abstract
‘thing’ that makes the difference in your view; it is the living, developing relationship between you and her.

I want to stay longer with your word allowed. For me, to suggest that the “relationship allowed” is different then the relationship mechanically building something, intellectually constructing it according to plan. Allowing differs also from directing. Allowing seems to imply the recognition of some kind of movement already in play—it seems to be a responsive word to me. It is about ‘not getting in the way of….’ It seems to acknowledge the possibility of ‘dis-allowing.’

From your writing I gather the relationship allowed for various possibilities to emerge, possibilities relating to changes in identity, changes in action, relational changes involving convergences and divergences, even separation; it allowed her to “make decisions” instead of getting stuck in them; it allowed you to enjoy “… a … sensation of success” and it allowed you to discover something about yourself—to know yourself, perhaps for some kind of ‘first time’ as “… an available and accessible person.”

**Idea 2.**

You tell us, “This is the first time that I “write” my reflections” but you also say ‘reflecting on your work’ has been “a constant,” both in your personal life, as well as in your life as a therapist. You say, “In some way I began to become very interested in “knowing” what happens with “clients” during the therapy process….” You began to “… decipher what has happened…” in therapy through conversation with some of your clients. You write, “I believe that this interaction with them… has given me guidelines to speak about my work.” You claim it is through conversation with your clients you have learned about “what happens… during the therapy process….”
And I smile at your comment that often people declare, “they don’t know what has happened” in therapy! You suggest that constructing what has happened in the therapeutic process “together” “… has been an additional process of the therapy.” And you write, “In some way we know that things are happening between us, but, it’s not until we ask ourselves what is happening, that it becomes evident that something is changing.”

Yes, Abelinda! Your writing reminds me of Augustine’s famous quote about “time.” We feel we know it and understand it—we are so familiar with it—but when we are required to articulate it using language, we struggle; we discover how little we know. And yet, if we ask ourselves, our ‘knowing,’ or our sense of what ‘that’ might be can develop and grow. You write, and I repeat, “In some way we know that things are happening between us, but, it’s not until we ask ourselves what is happening, that it becomes evident that something is changing.”

Again I notice your relational orientation. You write of “things happening between us.” And I notice your conversational approach. You write, “… if we ask ourselves…” The question here is posed to you both… you are not ‘interviewing’ your client about the process of therapy but you join with him or her, sharing the tasks of raising questions and responding. You are a full participant in this linguistic process.

I am also curious about this claim, “In some way we know that things are happening between us…” I am listening to that word “know,” wondering what kind of ‘knowing’ you might have had in mind. Your reflecting continues. You write, “Although there are no clear ideas in the moment when we try to explain what is happening and what is causing the change, it is interesting that we can know that the process of therapy is allowing us to find what we are searching for: solutions, new ideas, to have fuller insight of one’s life experience.” And I appreciate your next statement as well: “… many of them have not needed to know exactly what
happened… in the end, people are content, satisfied and at some given moment, know when it is the right time to end the therapy.”

So it seems this “knowing” you write of is relational, it is a shared achievement between you and your client. It is also mysterious, somewhat ambiguous, limited, and perhaps ‘under-determined.’ You write “… in some way we know that things are happening….” It seems this “knowing” is more like sensing; sometimes we ‘know’ in the absence of explanations. At the same time you speak of this knowledge as practical. You write, “… the process of therapy is allowing us to find what we are searching for: solutions, new ideas, to have fuller insight of one’s life experience.”

Idea 3.

Abelinda, you notice the theme of infidelity in your work with many couples lately, and you describe this focus as “important” and “explosive.” You note the meaning and significance of this kind of dilemma varies profoundly from person to person; some seem to approach it as “… one more experience…” while “others see it as a line that divides the life of the couple’s relationship into before and after and… it will drastically change the lives of both.”

You write about the influence of this work for yourself. You say, “These ideas about infidelity cause me to think about many things… about life as a very uncertain thing, we don’t know what will happen….” And you note, these dialogues with couples have caused “many of my ideas to shift,” ideas about “life in general” and ideas about “the couple relationship.” You add, “I also am continually asking myself about what I am and what I have, about the life I live, the importance of things to me, and I believe this makes me increasingly conscious that I do not know what is correct for people….”
I wonder if your profession heightens your ‘consciousness’ in every dimension of your life. As you write earlier, “it’s not until we ask ourselves what is happening, that it becomes evident that something is changing.” I agree—we are continually asking questions of others and ourselves. Our shared inquiries help us to notice the fleeting and lingering details in their lives and our lives too. When I read your writing in this section I am reminded of how penetrating a process therapy is, how far-reaching for us as practitioners. You describe the subject of infidelity as explosive, and I am now thinking of the entire therapeutic interchange as potentially explosive, regardless of topic!

You then write of the privilege of people trusting in you, making you part of their process of building their lives, and I think your earlier comments in this section suggest a reciprocal influence. “They” become part of our process of building our lives too… and we trust them with this. Their questions become ours too. When we pay attention to the detail of their lives, we are also, inadvertently, noticing and caring for our own; we notice the abundant richness, the difficulty, the fluidity, the uncertainty, and the possibility.

**Idea 4.**

Here you describe your interaction with therapist colleagues at the school where you teach. They speak of the “… prior knowledge a psychologist should have in order to “give therapy.” I like your noticing of the idea of “giving therapy,” which in our view, differs so importantly from the kind of reciprocity Harlene and other postmodern practitioners describe.

You find yourself interested in a very different way of knowing; you describe therapy “… as a process of conversation and dialogue about our lives, about what we as people are experiencing…. ” You suggest the approach to therapy you describe calls for a different “type or level” of training, a preparation that has “… more to do with determining how I want to converse
with and relate to others.” You speak of the importance of having a clear vision about what you want to be and do as a person, of being attentive to life experience and worldview. You write you would love to see therapist training include “… that which would develop one as a human being that is able to listen, able to question their own ideas…” and training that allows the therapist to be clear about their beliefs and values…” not for the purpose of achieving some kind of neutrality, but rather to allow the therapist to learn “the world does not revolve around me” and to be able to build and develop as a therapist.

You share your view that “… reading a lot and traveling are two elements that can contribute in helping us realize how rich, wonderful and diverse the world is.” Yes, I think so too, Abelinda, and I have often thought of conversation as similar to travel. And you close with a question:

“How can we train people as therapists that will never lose their ability to be surprised… people who… can continually say Wow!!! Each time something surprises them?” Didn’t Albert Einstein, the great physicist, say, “he” who can no longer stand rapt in awe is “as good as dead…?”

Idea 5.

Abelinda, you write, “Recently I have realized that working as a therapist causes me to reflect more and more about life; about how to live, how to resolve problems, how to feel satisfied, and less about whether I am a good therapist or not.” You describe what people bring to the conversations with you as “… rays of light that trigger a series of thoughts in me…” and again, you suggest these thoughts are “… more related to life than to the work of therapy.”

How interesting… the longer you practice therapy, the less you are interested in “therapy.” Similarly you do not concern yourself with questions about your skill as a therapist.
Rather you are interested in life... and it seems your work causes you to reflect “more and more” about life, so that your interest in life seems to grow.

As I read this, I think of how far we have moved from the idea of administering treatment to people. I think too of my own experience in joining a local ‘Post-Trauma’ Counseling program, having come from a therapy practice that was not specific to any particular human circumstance. I recall my reluctance to move, fearing that I would be speaking too exclusively of trauma; I was afraid I would find it tiresome. But I learned very quickly that the conversations were as diverse in this program as they were elsewhere. In fact, I have often told others who asked, that the people meeting with our “post-trauma” practitioners, seem to want more than anything to speak about life, and living… and not necessarily about traumatic events. They wish to speak about a present dilemma and the contextual detail relevant to it—for the purpose of moving on with their lives once again. And so I think it is wonderful that as your interest in the therapy profession wanes, your interest in life only expands. I can see now that the same process has happened to me throughout my years of practice.

I also note your phrase “… what people bring.” How important it is to notice, honor, receive and respond to what people bring! We seem to find dignity and belonging in the act of contributing, especially when our gifts are acknowledged, accepted and appreciated. I notice too the relational dimension of this interaction. Their gift triggers something in you—a series of thoughts, as you say. A similar phenomenon is happening to me in my project, Abelinda. What you and our other colleagues bring through your participation in spoken and written dialogue, is like rays of light… and these trigger a series of thoughts, feelings, questions, agreements, disagreements, tensions, ideas…. In short, these trigger an embodied spontaneous response in me (using John Shotter’s vocabulary). I suppose this kind of interchange happens everywhere, every
day, and yet, there is something so extraordinary about participating in it and feeling the force of it.

**Idea 6.**

Here you speak of the label of “postmodern” as changing your life. You suggest you can see yourself in various ways “… depending on the type of relationship that I establish with someone.” You write of feeling “… free and relaxed… no longer so preoccupied with feeling evaluated…” “… More and more my own clients and I myself are the measurement of our shared successes.”

I am so pleased to hear this, particularly after my recent encounter with two large hardcover books containing standardized pre and post-test measures for therapists and their clients. To say you and your clients are the measurement of your shared successes is to honor the space between you, to acknowledge its importance. It seems to also point to the indeterminacy, fullness and complexity of ‘success’ in therapy. Sadly, it seems many people would rather read a mathematical test score then listen to you and your conversational partners words.

**Idea 7.**

You come to a conclusion, at least for now, with a single sentence. Here you share a surprise that has emerged from years of practice—the discovery that people meet with us from places of abundance—abundant “… intellect, ability and creativity… wisdom.” You write, “… as all people possess wisdom in order to confront the challenges that life presents to all of us.” Perhaps you would agree with me that this “possessing” is active, shared, improvised… and that we do not need a “therapy class” of experts to share from their presumed surpluses for the benefit of those who seem to have less. From the perspective you articulate, the challenge to the
therapist is not so much to do with making up for a ‘shortfall’, but rather to notice and respond to what is already available.

My deepest thanks to you, Abelinda, for your contribution to this project. I find your words not only thoughtful, but also full of wisdom and passion; they seem to emerge directly from your experience as a practitioner, and as a fellow traveler and explorer. Your writing connects richly to the other pieces shared by our colleagues in this project, and it will be a major influence in my dissertation.

I will see you in June 2007!

Warm best wishes to you and your family,

Janice

_English to Spanish translation_

Hola Abelinda:

Te agradezco nuevamente por compartir tu proceso reflexivo dentro del marco posmodernista, practica terapéutica colaborativa.

_Idea 1._

En uno de los párrafos el cual tu nombras “Idea 1” hablas de la relación terapeuta que tuviste con una muchacha con la que has trabajado por cerca de una año. Esta relación terminó un par de meses antes que la mencionaras en nuestro proyecto. Debido a la variedad de papeles que jugaste en su vida, tú describes esta relación como “múltiple.” Le preguntas con respecto a tu papel en el desempeño como terapeuta, y escribes, “… hablo de una imagen mía como expert…” Tu te imaginas que quiso decir con esto; y continúas escribiendo “… el proceso terapéutico fue muy útil para ella… que el tipo de relación que pudimos establecer le ayudó, le permitió tomar decisiones, le permitió visualizarse como una persona capaz, le permitió
desligarse de algunas relaciones que no le eran útiles para su desarrollo profesional y personal….”

Al comienzo de este párrafo tucribes “… estaba pensando en la forma como ella me percibió a lo largo de la terapia a partir de la relación que tenemos…” Relación, es una palabra que mencionas frecuentemente en estas primeras líneas. En adición a la descripción que haces acerca de esta relación múltiple tú indicas que este “tipo” de relación en la cual ambas lograron establecer, parece haber sido beneficiosa para ella. Aquí, también, noto otra palabra que usas frecuentemente: la palabra permitir. Describes lo que percibes, que esta relación le ha permitido tomar decisiones, le ha permitido comprenderse a sí misma como “capaz,” le ha permitido “desligarse” de ciertas relaciones que “no le eran útiles para su desarrollo profesional y personal.” Parece que la relación que ambas han desarrollado, le ha permitido conocerse a sí misma de una manera significativa, como alguien quien toma una dedición constructiva, y como un individuo que puede ajustar su orientación hacia otros cuando sea necesario.

Además tu consideras lo “útil” que esta relación ha sido para ti. “… me permitió disfrutar de esa sensación breve y pasajera de éxito y de descubrirme como una mujer dispuesta y accesible.” Abelinda, que sentimiento más hermoso—la “¡… sensación breve y pasajera de éxito…! Que descubrimiento mas maravilloso—no hablas de un redescubrimiento, hablas de un descubrimiento como si fuera “por primera” vez—el descubrir que eres una persona disponible y accesible. Tus reflexiones escritas me recuerdan que nosotros llegamos a saber quienes somos, quienes hemos sidas y quienes podríamos llegar a ser, es justamente a través de la relación con otros. Quizás tu también, como yo, pensabas de la « identidad » autónoma, como un rasgo individual. La relación que describes te permite conocerte a ti misma de una manera muy especial—a descubrir y redescubrirnos constantemente.
Me di cuenta que no das mérito a tu enfoque para la “utilidad” de la ‘terapia’—no das mérito a ningún tipo de calidad tanto en tu cliente como en ti misma, no das mérito a la teoría, al esquema, o a un modelo. Sin embargo, hablas de la “relación que permite….” No es una “cosa” abstracta lo que hace tu punto de vista diferente, es la convivencia, es la relación que se desarrolla entre tú y ella.

Quiero continuar la exploración de la palabra “permitir”. Para mí, la simple sugerencia que “la relación ha permitido…” es muy diferente a la relación mecánica, la cual implica la construcción de algo, construcción intelectual es de acuerdo a lo planeado. Permitir es también diferente de dirigir. Permitir, da la impresión que existe cierto reconocimiento de algo que ya esta en movimiento y activo—me da la impresión que es una palabra de respuesta. Es mas que nada, a la manera ‘de no interferir en….’ Parece reconocer la posibilidad de ‘no-permitir.’

De tus escritos, creo que esta relación a permitido que surgan varias posibilidades, posibilidades que se relacionan con cambios de identidad, cambios de acciones, cambios relacionales que involucran una convergencia y una divergencia, incluso una separación; y en vez de quedar estancada le ha permitido “tomar decisiones”; te ha permitido disfrutar de “… una…sensación de éxito” y te ha permitido descubrir algo acerca de ti misma – conocerte, talvez por ‘primera vez’ como “… un individuo disponible y accesible.”

Idea 2.

Nos dices: “Esta es la primera vez que “escribo” mis reflexiones” pero también nos dices que ‘reflexionando acerca de tu trabajo’ ha sido una “constante,” tanto en tu vida personal como en tu vida como terapeuta. Dices “De alguna manera empecé a interesarme mucho en “conocer” qué es lo que pasa con “los clientes” durante el proceso de terapia…..” Comienzas a “… descifrar lo que ha pasado…” en terapia a través de conversaciones con alguno de tus clientes. Continuas,
“… creo que a través de esta interacción con ellos… me ha dado pautas para poder hablar acerca de mi trabajo.” Afirma que a través de las conversaciones con tus clientes has aprendido acerca “de lo que sucede… durante el proceso terapéutico….”

Y me sonrió a tu comentario referente a la frecuencia con que la gente declara “¡no saben que ha pasado” en terapia! Sugieres que “juntos,” construyendo lo que ha pasado en el proceso terapéutico “… ha sido un proceso adicional en la terapia.” Y escribes, “De alguna manera sabemos que van pasando cosas entre nosotros, pero, no es hasta el momento en que nos preguntamos qué es lo que está pasando, cuando se pone en evidencia que algo está cambiando.”

¡Sí, Abelinda! Tu escritura me recuerda de la famosa frase de Augustine acerca del “tiempo”. Sentimos que lo sabemos y comprendemos—es algo tan familiar—pero cuando necesitamos articularlo de una manera hablada batallamos; nos damos cuenta de lo poco que sabemos. Aun así, si nos preguntamos, nuestro “conocer” o nuestro sentido de lo que es “eso” puede desarrollarse y crecer. Escribe, y copio, “De alguna manera sabemos que van pasando cosas entre nosotros, pero, no es hasta el momento en que nos preguntamos qué es lo que está pasando, cuando se pone en evidencia que algo está cambiando.”

De nuevo me doy cuenta de tu orientación relacional – ‘escribes de las cosas que están ocurriendo entre nosotros.’ Y noto tu enfoque locuaz: escribes “… el momento en que nos preguntamos….” La pregunta aquí es para Uds. dos…no estas ‘entrevistando’ a tu cliente acerca del proceso terapéutico pero junto con el o ella, comparten la tarea de preguntar y responder. Eres un participante total en este proceso locuaz.

Estoy curiosa de tu afirmación, “De alguna manera sabemos que van pasando cosas entre nosotros….” Estoy escuchando la palabra “saber.” y me pregunto que tipo de ‘saber’ tendrías en mente. Tu reflexión continúa. Escribe, “Aunque en el momento de tratar de explicar qué está
pasando y qué está generando el cambio no existen ideas muy claras, es interesante que podamos saber que el proceso de terapia nos está permitiendo encontrar lo que buscamos: soluciones, ideas nuevas, tener visiones más amplias de su situación de vida.”

También agradezco tu siguiente afirmación. “… muchos de ellos no han necesitado saber que es lo que exactamente pasó, a fin de cuentas la gente, queda contenta, satisfecha y en un momento dado saben cuando ya es buen momento de terminar la terapia.”

Bueno, me parece que este “saber” del cual tú escribes es relacional, es un logro conjunto entre tú y tu cliente. Es también algo misterioso, algo ambiguo, limitado y tal vez “no determinado completamente.” Escribe “… de alguna manera sabemos que van pasando cosas…” Me da la impresión que este “saber” es algo como un sentido; a veces ‘sabemos’ en la ausencia de una explicación. Al mismo tiempo tú hablas de este conocimiento como algo practico. Escribe, “… el proceso de terapia nos está permitiendo encontrar lo que buscamos: soluciones, ideas nuevas, tener visiones más amplias de su situación de vida.”

Idea 3.

Abelinda, últimamente has notado el tema de la infidelidad en muchas de las parejas con las que trabajas, y describe este enfoque como algo “importante” y un “bombardeo impresionante.” Tú notas que el sentido y el significado de este tipo de dilema cambian profundamente de una persona a otra; algunos enfrentan esto como “…un punto más en la vida…” mientras que “Otros la están tomando como una línea que divide entre una etapa de vida y… que va a cambiar drásticamente la vida de ambos.”

Hablas de cómo este trabajo te ha influenciado. Dices, “Estas ideas sobre la infidelidad, a mi me hace pensar en muchas cosas acerca de “la vida,” y de la vida como una cuestión a veces muy incierta, no sabemos que va a pasar….” Indicas también, este dialogo con las parejas
me ha hecho “se muevan muchas de mis ideas,” ideas acerca de la “vida en general” y acerca de la “vida de pareja.” Además, agresas, “… estoy continuamente preguntándome acerca de lo que soy y lo que tengo, acerca de lo que vivo, del significado que tienen las cosas para mí, y creo que esto me hace cada vez más consciente de que no se que es lo correcto para las personas.”

Pienso si tu profesión acentúa tu nivel de ‘conciencia’ en cada dimensión de tu vida. Como escribiste con anterioridad, “… no es hasta el momento en que nos preguntamos qué es lo que está pasando, cuando se pone en evidencia que algo está cambiando.” Estoy totalmente de acuerdo – estamos constantemente preguntando acerca de otros y de nosotros mismos. Nuestra investigación conjunta nos permite darnos cuenta de los breves y continuos detalles de nuestras vidas y de la de otros. Cuando leo lo escrito por ti en esta sección, me recuerda de la profundidad del proceso terapéutico, y de lo inmenso que es para nosotros como profesionales. Describes el tópico de la infidelidad como algo explosivo, y me hace pensar que el intercambio terapéutico es potencialmente explosivo, ¡cualquiera que sea el tópico!

Tu escritura continua indicando el privilegio que tienes cuando las personas confían en ti, en la cual te hacen ser parte del proceso en reconstruir sus vidas, y pienso en tus comentarios anteriores, que sugieren una influencia recíproca. “Ellos” forman parte de nuestro proceso en construir nuestras vidas también… y los confiamos con esto. Sus preguntas pasan a ser una parte nuestra. Cuando nos fijamos en los detalles de sus vidas, estamos, sin notarlo, dándonos cuenta y cuidando nuestra propia vida; nos damos cuenta de la abundante riqueza, de las dificultad, de la fluidez, de la incertidumbre y de la posibilidad.

Idea 4.

En esta describes tu interacción con tus colegas terapeutas en la escuela donde enseñas. Ellos hablan de “… conocimientos previos que debe tener un psicólogo para poder “dar
terapia.” Me gusta como reconoces la idea de “dar terapia,” lo cual, desde nuestro punto de vista, es tan diferente, y por lo tanto importante, con respecto a la reciprocidad que Harlene y otros practicantes posmodernos describen.

Te encuentras interesada en una manera muy diferente de saber; describes la terapia “… un proceso de conversación y de diálogo acerca de nuestra vidas, acerca de lo que nosotros como personas estamos vivenciando….” Sugieres que este enfoque a la terapia que tu describes, requiere un “tipo o nivel” diferente de preparación, una preparación que “… más bien reside en una formación acerca de cómo quiero conversar y relacionarme con los demás.” Hablas de la importancia de tener una visión clara acerca de lo que quieres ser y hacer como persona, de estar a tono con la experiencia de la vida y de una visión mundial. Escribe que te encantaría que la preparación de los terapeutas incluya “… aquello que lo enriqueciera como un ser humano dispuesto a escuchar, dispuesto a cuestionar sus ideas…” una preparación que le permitiera al terapeuta “tener claro sus creencias, sus valores…” no solamente con el objetivo de obtener una especia de neutralidad, sino que le permitiera aprender “que el mundo no da vueltas alrededor mío” y que le de la capacidad de desarrollarse y crecer como terapeuta.

Tú compartes el punto de vista que “… leer mucho y viajar son dos elementos que pueden contribuir a darnos cuenta de la riqueza y diversidad que hay en el mundo.” Si, yo también pienso lo mismo, Abelinda, y con bastante frecuencia he pensado que la conversación es muy parecida a viajar. Terminas con una pregunta:

“¿Cómo formar personas con oficio de terapeuta que nunca pierdan la capacidad de sorpresa…?” y que “… puedan continuamente decir ¡¡¡Uau!!! cada vez que algo los sorprenda?” ¿No fue Albert Einstein, el gran físico, quien dijo, “aquel” que no pueda estar ensimismado en sobrecogimiento “mas vale que este muerto…?”
**Idea 5.**

Abelinda tu erescribes, “Últimamente me he dado cuenta que el trabajo en terapia me hace reflexionar más sobre la vida; sobre cómo vivir, cómo resolver problemas, cómo sentirme satisfecho, y cada vez pienso menos en si soy una buena terapeuta o no.” Describes lo que la gente trae a las conversaciones contigo “… como rayos de luz que disparan en mí una serie de pensamientos…” y de nuevo, sugieres que estos pensamientos son “… más relacionados con la vida, que con el oficio de la terapia.”

Que interesante… contra más tiempo pasas practicando terapia, tienes menos interés en la “terapia.” Igualmente no te preocupas acerca de la pregunta relacionada con tu habilidad como terapeuta. Por el contrario, estas interesada en la vida… y me parece que tu trabajo te hace reflexionar cada vez “mas y mas” acerca de la vida, y de esta manera, parece que tu interés en la vida estaría aumentando.

A medida que leo esto, pienso en la idea acerca de proveer tratamiento a la gente, cuanto nos hemos alejado de esto. Pienso también en mi propia experiencia, cuando fui parte de un programa de consejos “postraumático,” llegué con una práctica terapéutica que no era específica a ningún tipo de circunstancias humanas. Recuerdo mi resistencia en proseguir, temiendo que hablaría únicamente acerca de trauma; tenía temor que sería cansador. Sin embargo, rápidamente aprendí que las conversaciones en este programa eran tan diversas como lo eran en cuales quiere otro programa. De hecho, constantemente le he dicho a otros que preguntan, que los individuos que ven a nuestros practicantes de “postrama,” parece que lo que mas desean hablar es acerca de la vida y de vivir… y no necesariamente de hechos traumáticos. Desean hablar acerca del dilema existente, de los detalles relevantes y contextuales de este—con el objetivo de proseguir adelante con sus vidas de nuevo. De esta manera, pienso que es maravilloso que, tal como tu interés en la
terapia disminuye, tu interés en la vida aumenta. Hoy veo que el mismo proceso ha ocurrido a través de mis años de práctica.

Me doy cuenta de tu frase “… lo que la gente trae.” ¡Es tan importante darse cuenta, honrar, vivir y responder a lo que la gente aporta! Me parece que encontramos dignidad y seguridad en el hecho de contribuir, particularmente cuando nuestro talento es reconocido, apreciado y aceptado. Me doy cuenta de la dimensión relacional de esta interacción. El talento de ellos desencadena algo en ti—una serie de pensamientos, tal como tú lo indicas. Abelinda, un fenómeno muy similar me está ocurriendo durante el transcurso de mi proyecto. Lo que tu y el resto de nuestros colegas brindan a través de la participación y el diálogo, sea hablado o escrito, es como un rayo de luz… y esto desencadena una serie de pensamientos, emociones, preguntas, acuerdos, desacuerdos, tensiones, ideas…. En fin, desencadenan y personifican respuestas espontáneas en mi (uso el vocabulario de John Shotter). Me imagino que este tipo de intercambio se lleva a efecto en todas partes, cada día, y pese a todo, hay algo tan extraordinario en esta participación y en la fuerza que te hace sentir.

Idea 6.

Hablas del rollo de “posmoderno” cambiando tu vida. Sugieres que te ves a ti misma de diferentes maneras “… dependiendo del tipo de relación que establezco con la persona.” Hablas de sentimientos “… libre y relajada… ya no me preocupa tanto sentirme evaluada… cada vez más mi propios clientes y yo misma somos la medida de nuestros éxitos juntos.”

Me da un gran placer escuchar esto, especialmente después de mi encuentro con dos enormes libros encuadernados que contienen medidas estandarizadas de pre y pos evaluaciones dirigidas a los terapeutas y sus clientes. Decir que tu y tus clientes son la medida de vuestros logros conjuntos es honrar el espacio entre Uds., y reconocer su importancia. Parece indicar
hacia el carácter indeterminado, la plenitud y la complejidad del ‘éxito’ en la terapia.

Lamentablemente, parece que muchos individuos preferirían primero leer los resultados matemáticos de una evaluación y recién escucharte a ti y la conversación con tus compañeros de palabras.

Idea 7.

Por el momento, llegas a la conclusión con una simple frase. Compartes una sorpresa que ha surgido con los años de practica—el descubrimiento que individuos se reúnen con nosotros de lugares de plenitud—abundante “… inteligencias, habilidades y creatividad… sabiduría.” 

Escribes, “… cómo le gente posee sabiduría para enfrentarse a los retos que la vida nos presenta a todos como personas.” Tal vez estarás de acuerdo conmigo que este “poseer” es activo, compartido e improvisado… y que no necesitamos una “clase de terapia” de los expertos que comparten los excedentes de su sabiduría con aquellos que parecen poseer menos. De esta perspectiva tu artículas, el desafío del terapeuta no es tanto que hacer con esta ‘escasez,’ sino que darse cuenta y responder a lo que esta a su disposición.

Abelinda, recibe mi más profundo agradecimiento por tu contribución a este proyecto. No solo encuentro tus palabras muy consideradas, sino que llenas de sabiduría y pasión; parecen salir directamente de tu experiencia como practicante, como un amigo de viaje y explorador. Tu escritura se conecta ricamente con lo compartido con nuestros colegas en este proyecto, y será una gran influencia en mi presentación final.

¡Nos veremos en Junio del 2007!

Cariñosos saludos para ti y tu familia.

Janice
Written Dialogues With Geavonna

Geavonna Responds, August 2007

Diary, August 7, 2005.

I have not seen clients in a whole month and I am anticipating going back to work, slowly this week and finally back to a full load by next week. This coming week I will incorporate to work with two professional exams at the University, that although it is not strictly doing therapy a big part of my definition as a professional and as a person comes from teaching, consultation, supervision. It is a part of my work that I really enjoy.

I will also have some meetings about writing two pending articles one in English and one in Spanish. Both articles will be written with colleagues and in both I will talk about my work and my philosophy of life and therapy.

In fact I am very excited about the writing. One is on ethics and I have been doing research about the work of Emmanuelle Levinas and the way we can apply his ideas about the “otherness” in my idea of ethics in therapy. I would also like to talk about ethics from a postmodern and social-constructionist perspective and add the idea of relational responsibility.

The other is an article on ways of teaching postmodern ideas where I am interested in addressing the issue of postmodern teaching in traditional institutions and the dilemmas of reading assignments and grades. I am excited about offering the ways in which I have been solving these dilemmas in a private university in Mexico.

All this is part of my definition of a Postmodern Therapist. I like to tell my students that “I am able to teach because I do therapy and that I can do therapy because I teach,” both activities complement each other and complement my work. When I teach I like to share my recent cases and invite my students as consultants in the dilemmas I am having with my clients.
Their questions and curiosities keep me on my toes and constantly thinking and reflecting on my work and on ways to language it so it can be shared with them. I find my students ideas enriching and intriguing and I like their questions on the therapeutic process and the relationships I develop with my clients. My clients are usually aware that on top of being a clinician I am a teacher and I invite them to participate if they want to share some of their descriptions of therapy with my students or they want to be in a reflecting team session or attend the Summer Institute. When it seems relevant I might bring a question from the class to a particular client as we explore their process of being in therapy.

I took the summer off and I am getting a bit anxious about reconnecting with my clients and find out from them what went on in their lives that makes sense for them to share with me. Some clients chose not to have session this month, some others were forced by my own lifestyle. I believe that life is fuller and larger than therapy and whatever came up during this month they had the capacity to deal with without meeting with me.

August 10, 2005.

I would like to reflect on the way I feel about myself or who I am drawing from the way I felt with the three clients I met today. It is really amazing how different I felt with each one of the clients. Coming from the idea of the nature of the relationship and how each person you meet with “constructs” or “creates” or “highlights” “brings forward” a different you, or a different part of you.

This morning I met with the man where I feel the conversation we have together runs in circles and although we have been able to talk in many different ways about the issues he deals with, it feels in a way that we go back to the same descriptions and he has a very difficult time adopting new descriptions for his problems, although he has been able to take many different
actions. His ideas about what he needs to do to address the issues he needs to address go back to
the same place. In turn, the sense I have about myself as a conversational partner are frustrating
at times because I do not feel our conversation together has been able to evolve to a place where
I feel it is useful, although he says they are. Given the relationship I can deal with the frustration
and I try very hard to help him develop different descriptions. I do not feel I am very productive
in the process and think about alternative ways to be helpful that include other therapists, other
types of healing processes.

In the afternoon I saw a ten-year-old boy with his mother for a very particular
consultation regarding anxiety the boy was feeling regarding entering a new school. I met him
for the first time and we were able to connect and develop a common language instantly. The
conversation had a wonderful flow and we were able to explore the issues and come up with
specific ways to deal with them. We were able to playfully develop a plan. During the meeting I
was playful, silly, present, confident and I was able to see myself as a therapist capable,
empathic, close and able to help him deal with his anxiety. We saw it disappear before our eyes.
It was a wonderful feeling of bringing forward my creativity and sense of humor in a warm and
caring way. Even now when I write the experience I feel the warmth in my heart as I see the
changes in the boy’s face and the relief in his mother. The three of us finish our session laughing
and joking.

Then, I saw a woman I had not seen in a year, a person that has been in therapy—
consultation on and off with me for a number of years. I was looking forward to seeing her since
I usually enjoy our meetings and she challenges to bring out a very sophisticated and creative
part of myself. While she was updating me I was reliving in a way our history together and the
multiple conversations we had had. I had a sense of competence and pleasure about my work and
the ways our conversations had been useful and helpful to her throughout the years. During the conversation I had a question in my head that had to do with “Why are you here today?” that I was able to hold as she looked comfortable and relaxed talking freely as if she had never left my office. I was happy to be able to do that and to let myself flow with her story and her ideas until she arrived to the reason she was coming and what she wanted from our conversation today and during the weeks and months to come. I was glad I was able to hold my own questions and stay with her rhythm and pace. I felt that during the years I have been doing therapy I have learnt to slow down and tune into the client’s style…. I felt like in my relationship with her she brings out parts of me that I like and enjoy, maybe because she keeps me thinking and connecting in a way that I care about her. I really respect her knowledge and her intelligence and this brings out again a part of me that I value. I like the challenge of working with her; she challenges my thought process as well as m emotional process.

*August 28, 2005.*

Although I have not written in two weeks, I am thinking about this process the whole time, in fact I have been reflecting about the construction of my identity as a therapist on a daily basis, even when I am sitting with clients I ask myself what does this client bring out in me, what happens to me when I am speaking about specific issues or speaking in a particular way. This has been so fascinating that I am thinking about doing a two part workshop with some of my students where we meet to talk about identity, they go and write an journal for a month and them we meet once again and share the journal (when appropriate) and the process. Looking at the transformation in their language and the feelings attached to them, also the change in the relationship with clients.
Therapy has been a challenging and interesting arena this month. I have faced issues regarding ethics and confidentiality, where a client called me on the phone to “liberate me from my confidentiality oath” so I can talk with her husband about our conversations. This was an incredible experience, that forced me to ask myself about the way clients see us, and her need to protect me, protect herself and the relationship with me and with her husband. She was coming from the idea that I could be better able to explain to her husband the reasons behind her actions. She asked if I needed a document in writing. We met and talked about what she wanted and needed and came up with a document that was acceptable for both of us. Then we met with her husband (a marathon 3 hours session) where we talked about their couple’s issues and addressed this issue of confidentiality and her ideas about the way I could express her ideas for her.

We thought about the ways we could do it: Interview her and have him sitting there on a silent position, or behind the one way mirror, or tape the interview, or maybe do it in two parts. Have the interview first and then have a session where I talk to him about her and she listens, or I meet with him and she is not present. We still have not agreed on a format that we all feel comfortable and safe.

This request brings me back to my definition of therapist as “interpreter” or “translator” and invites me to the multiple ways in which I am a translator in my life, in roles that are not defined as being a therapist. Clients have expressed this idea in the past “You are a very good translator… you choose words that represent my ideas, actions feelings that make sense for me but I cannot access or think about by myself.”

I spent the weekend in an intensive course teaching 15 hours in two days. I brought these projects in my head and kept on thinking about and idea of “I can teach because I do therapy and I can do therapy because I teach: They go hand in hand in the way I reflect upon myself as a
Teaching forces me to put in words and examples my ideas about my work and my definition of myself as a therapist. Actually it is through the teaching that I process my role as a therapist, pretty much the same way I am doing while I am writing this journal.

I have already talked about this in a more theoretical sense in the first entry (this time I am drawing directly from the experience and the setting). During the class I kept on trying to think and feel how I was feeling in the classroom with the students. For me teaching is very exciting, I am very passionate about what I teach and about the teaching/learning process itself. I am constantly thinking about teaching/learning exercises and experiences that will help students connect and understand theory through a “felt experience” beyond word and concepts…or translated to very ordinary language and every day life experience.

I was very excited in the process and it included different ways of being excited:

1. When I was presenting material (using Power Point presentations and mostly language.) I knew people were listening and I was doing my best to make things easy and clear.

2. Therapy (live interview) where I bring into the classroom my teacher and therapist selves at the same time and I am demonstrating the ideas and skills just talked about.

3. Exercises and the deconstruction of the exercises where I was able to see the learning in action.

Teaching makes me feel very confident and makes me think in a way that is constantly challenging my ideas… that is fascinating.

Going back to the therapy room when I am with clients the feelings are different sometimes very challenging and exciting and other times even slow and boring, when a particular story does not catch my attention and I am feeling like I am somewhere else for a few minutes—other times very challenging emotionally or intellectually…
I guess my goal should be to make my therapy session as exciting and passionate for me as my teaching, without sacrificing the quality of the work and the relationship, and without making my own agenda interfere with the client’s agenda.

I am wondering the type of questions I need to ask myself in order to achieve that:

- It might be related to the type of clients (some are more interesting for me that others)
- The parts of myself that are present in the process
- The relationship
- The time of day
- The amount of work
- The financial responsibilities when therapy is something I do to make a living and sometimes I see more clients than I should?

I will think about it and try to come up with more questions.

August 29, 2005.

Today I had a very interesting question with a woman. She was reviewing some patterns of behaviors she had had since she was a teenager and how she goes back to them, even though they look different they are the same or come from the same place in her personal history. I was struggling to stay with the story and at the same time to help her develop alternative ways of describing or connecting the events. I was afraid that the story was so convincing that she could be trapped by it and make it an excuse “or the real reason for her actions.” I kept on trying to come up with “questions for alternative descriptions” that will leave some openings to negotiate meaning…. Eventually we were able to jump into a different conversation where I felt and then she told me that we were arriving to different descriptions or ideas she had not thought about…
she became very creative in the way she started to use this material to enlarge or “thicken” a description that was not stale anymore.

In describing my work with her today I was being very cautious not to fall to deep or too fast in her discourse that was fascinating and help her be able to stay with open questions that might help her describe this in a different (alternative) way. This is the same woman that had “liberated me from the confidentiality oath” and we talked about it and the implications this has in her, in me in the relationship and with her husband. I told her I did not feel I was ready to have the meeting with her husband yet, because I did not feel capable yet of representing her ideas and her story. We had a conversation once again about it and how we were going to do it if we decide to make it happen.

It is interesting how this relational process is always full of surprises for everybody.

Janice Responds, July 2006

Dear Geavonna,

Thank you for sharing portions of your journalled dialogues with me. From reading your writing, and from knowing you, I can see that our project invitation to journal reflectively in response to our central question is in some ways an extension of your usual ‘way of being’ as a therapist. I admire the way you are continually building dialogical reflecting processes into your work through your teaching and inter-involvement with your students and clients—teaching and therapy practice are ‘hand-in-hand’ processes for you. You write, “When I teach, I like to share my recent cases and invite my students as consultants in the dilemmas I am having with my clients. Their questions and curiosities keep me on my toes and constantly thinking and reflecting on my work and on ways to language it so it can be shared with them.” Similarly, you invite
your clients to participate in the ‘classroom’ in reflecting processes or in live consultations at the International Summer Institute. What a generative interchange between clients, students, and an international group of practitioners. I can see the lines between these three categories dissolving in the process.

***

In your August 10 reflecting you elaborate on the idea that our clients actively participate in creating us, “… each person you meet with ‘constructs’ or ‘creates’ or ‘highlights’ or ‘brings forward’ a different you, or a different part of you.” Reflecting on three different sessions with three different clients, you write: “It is really amazing how different I felt with each one...”

In your first example, you acknowledge that you and your client were “able to talk in many different ways about the issues he deals with...” but “… it feels in a way that we go back to the same descriptions and he has a very difficult time adopting new descriptions for his problems, although he has been able to take many different actions. His ideas... go back to the same place.” And although he says he finds the conversations useful, you find the conversation frustrating at times! You do not feel you are “… very productive in the process” and you sense the conversation you have with him has not been able to “… evolve to a place where (you) feel it is useful.” You speak of trying very hard to help him develop different descriptions, and are now thinking about alternative ways to be helpful that involve including other therapists or different kinds of healing processes.

In your second example, you write of a very different relationship, and consequently, a very different sense of yourself. You describe a conversation with “a wonderful flow...” We were able to explore the issues and come up with specific ways to deal with them. We were able to playfully develop a plan.” And in contrast to feeling unproductive and frustrated as you did in
your first example, here you describe yourself very differently. “During the meeting I was playful, silly, present, confident and I was able to see myself as a therapist capable, empathic, close and able to help him deal with his anxiety.” About the anxiousness, you write: “We saw it disappear before our eyes.”

Further, you add, “It was a wonderful feeling of bringing forward my creativity and sense of humor in a warm and caring way. Even now when I write the experience I feel the warmth in my heart as I see the changes in the boy’s face and the relief in his mother. The three of us finished our session with laughing and joking.”

You move on to describe your third session in the same day. Here you speak of a client that brings out “… a very sophisticated and creative part of [you].” You describe your sense of “competence” and “pleasure” as you reflected on your conversations with her over the years. And in this session you describe your decision to put aside the question that usually provides direction for a therapy session: “Why are you here today?”—in order to “… let (yourself) flow with her story and her ideas until she arrived to the reason she was coming and what she wanted…."

You write that you were glad for the decision you made to “… hold [your] own questions and stay with her rhythm and pace,” noting that over the years, you have learned to “… slow down and tune into the client’s style.” You write that she brings out “parts of me that I like and enjoy, maybe because she keeps me thinking and connecting…. “I like the challenge of working with her, she challenges my thought process as well as emotional process…."

As I respond to your reflecting on three very different experiences of yourself as a practitioner and as a person, I am drawn again to your earlier mention of Emmanuel Levinas’ idea of “otherness” (August 7). I think of how we do not choose the people who come to meet
with us; life introduces us to each other. You seem to suggest that as we relate intimately with a
diverse range of ‘others’, forming generative and transforming relationships with each one, we
find ourselves acting, feeling, and thinking in very different ways. We come to know the
fullness, the multiplicity and the diversity of the ‘selves’ we inhabit and we experience our
‘selves’ as relational, social beings, intricately influenced and intertwined with others and with
the otherness that is part of our everyday work.

Having returned to your reflecting many times, I am coming to think of our
conversational partners in practice, as elicitors. Each dialogue we enter offers a compelling
invitation—not just to be again who we have been, and not just to be who we seem to be
presently, but also to be the person we are on the way to becoming, perhaps someone whom we
did not know we could be. Or to put it still another way, our clients inadvertently invite us to be
who ever we might be together with them. Again, you write: “It is amazing how different I felt
with each one...” and so perhaps the invitation is, in part, to difference and togetherness?

Surely part of the novelty in our emerging identities comes from the influence of the
other’s voice(s). Set in a specific relational context where the unique nuances of the conversation
context are jointly created moment to moment, each voice correspondingly seems to take on a
new fluid but discernable character. Geavonna, you speak about how you have learned to stay
with your client’s rhythm and pace, to slow down, and “tune into” the client’s style. And I love
this idea of “tuning into”—I love the way you put this. You “let (yourself) flow with her story
and her ideas...” and you write: “I felt like in my relationship with her she brings out parts of
me that I like and enjoy.” You suggest she “challenges your thought processes as well as
emotional process....” You write: “I really respect her knowledge and her intelligence and this
brings out again a part of me that I value.”
Of course, in music we also speak of tuning; symphony musicians speak of “tuning up…” and as we know, every instrument in an orchestra tunes, section by section to one single violin’s “A 440 Hz” pitch. But your words “tuning into” seem to suggest something actively ongoing, just as many musicians must recalibrate their tuning continually as they perform. ”Tuning into” suggests an attached and involved positioning and re-positioning. “Tuning up” or “tuning to”—even to be “in tune with,” is for me, different from “tuning into” the being of an other, or tuning into a particular conversational context.

Today I also cannot help but notice the word “bringing” which you refer to several times in your reflecting. As I write to you now, my oldest daughter is with her younger sister at an art and writing summer camp. Yesterday they were invited to choose five words from their poem that were very important to them for some reason. One of her words was “bringing”—an ordinary action word in my opinion. I asked to hear more about this particular choice. “Is “bringing” about anticipation or expectation?” I asked. “No,” came the reply. She did not know why she chose the word.

I have ideas about why I am drawn to the word “bringing” in the context of my dissertation. I prefer to think of the client as having an abundance of useful ideas, words, feelings, stories and wisdom to bring to the conversation. You are speaking of “bringing out,” however, or “bringing forward” which is a little different than what I am familiar with thinking. You suggest that your clients “bring out” aspects of yourself that you “value.” I have the sense that those ‘ways of being’ brought forward in conversation with your clients are also valuable to the conversation you are co-creating, and that this value extends beyond professional practice into the rest of life. In a sense, our profession offers us plenty of opportunity to live out the old
phrase “stand a head taller than you are.” Before we have the chance to understand our responses intellectually, we live them spontaneously and immediately, within our therapy conversations.

Part of what is striking for me in your portrayal of the conversation and the client as elicitor, is that the client is active. It seems to me that the mainstream of our profession too often assumes only the reverse truth—the practitioner draws newness out of the client. How different to imagine that both are true—we create and re-create each other through conversation. Each party in a living dialogue experiences the dignity of having something to give, and the pleasure of receiving something too, something, in part, that each has played a role in calling forward.

I am also drawn to your mention of “identity” in your August 28 reflecting. I like to believe our clients do not simply “change our minds” as we say, or change our discourse, our positions, narratives, thoughts, feelings, actions or knowledges. They also stir up an irreversible change on more intimate levels, would you agree? I like to imagine that their voices enter us in some way, influencing who we understand ourselves to be, influencing us in our identities. You mention your interest in exploring two questions with your students: “…what does this client bring out in me, and secondly, what happens to me when I am speaking about issues or speaking in a particular way…?” These questions seem to be useful variations on the central question in our project.

I wonder if you are responding to these same two questions when you write that you would be interested in “looking at the transformation in their language, and feelings…. and also the change in the relationship with clients” during their exploration of these questions. This also stokes my curiosity. I wonder how my language is different with each client. How am I continually developing a multilingual approach to practice and to life? And, how do changes in language in turn invite—as you say—changes in “feeling” and “relational” changes?”
In your August 28 reflecting you describe the lengths to which you went to respond to an idea initiated by your client. At the outset, your client called you on the phone to “liberate (you) from (your) confidentiality oath.” You write that this was an incredible experience that forced you to ask yourself about the way clients view us as practitioners. You became aware of her concern about protecting you, and also protecting herself, and her relationship with you—also protecting her relationship with her husband. You describe a process the two of you created together, devoted to satisfying her concerns regarding protection. Together you drew up a document that was “acceptable for both of us.”

I am drawn to the word you used to describe your process of stepping into your client’s request. You say you were “forced” and that this was an “incredible experience.” And I think of our colleague Anaclaudia quoting someone whose name I cannot recall during my recent visit to the Kanankil Institute. She spoke of words as “not innocent” and as “dangerous.” And this reminds me that our clients do not always extend gentle invitations—not that they are hostile or belligerent—but that we find ourselves not infrequently “struck” or “arrested” by their words. Their voices are penetrating, “stopping us in our tracks,” as we say, and at other times, we might say, “starting us!” We seem to experience an aspect of non-choice in our relationships with them, just as this is true of our relationships outside of our professional practices.

Sometimes we hear their voices as uninvited guests in our intimate relationships, in our endeavors to parent, in our strategizing to live our lives well. Is this what Bakhtin meant, in part, when he spoke of us participating in the great dialogue of life “with our fate…?”

Perhaps after decades of individualism in Western psychology, we are learning again, that our lives are, after all, not solo compositions, but rather they are collaborations with others,
improvisations infused with risk, and sometimes even ‘force,’ because we do not always know or get to choose what others will offer us. This must be especially true for those of us practitioners who work from a postmodern collaborative definition of ‘not-knowing’ wherein every effort is made to understand people within their ‘own’ preferred terms, within descriptions and discourses of their own choosing.

Your writing also reminds me that we are not respondents only, and we are certainly not passive recipients in our conversations with our clients. You write (August 29) of how you declined your client’s initial invitation, fearing that her story “was so convincing that she could be trapped by it and make it an excuse….” You seemed pleased when the two of you “… were able to jump into a different conversation” that allowed space for different descriptions and new ideas, a conversation that “… had space for her own creativity.” And in this conversation you also seemed to say “not yet” to an idea she had about meeting with her husband. You explained, “… I did not feel I was ready… yet… I did not feel capable yet of representing her ideas and her story.” And so you and your client continued the conversation about how to move forward collaboratively.

Your final statement draws attention to this “relational process” as “full of surprises for everybody.” Reading again your journalled dialogue, I notice diverse descriptions of feeling, beyond “surprise:” feeling warmth, feeling competence and pleasure, frustration, sophistication, ‘in the flow of…’ feeling challenged, struggling, very interested, feeling very cautious, feeling ‘not yet ready’, feeling a bit anxious, kept on my toes, very excited.

In addition to writing of your practitioner self as both therapist and teacher you add “interpreter” and “translator” to your descriptions of who you are in practice and in life. You note the “multiple ways (you) are a translator in (your) life…” in other non-professional roles.
Your clients have offered this description of you in the past. And I imagine as I read your writing, that you function at times as a ‘creator,’ and as a ‘playmate.’

Thank you again for inviting us into the richness of your practice. I find your contribution extremely useful in our inquiry into the mutually transforming influence of dialogue in practice. Your writing takes me to places I could not go apart from your ‘taking me by the hand’, and showing me so vividly. Throughout this project I will return to this journaling, in different ways, and from different vantage points. For now, please except my deep gratitude… Janice

Afterword

Each practitioner wrote briefly to thank me for my written response. I deeply appreciated each note. One practitioner, Preciosa, expressed appreciation for my attentiveness to the research group, but also gently voiced disappointment in the process when we met informally at a later conference. I understood her to be saying that she felt that my written response to her altered the meaning she intended with her journaling. We talked about this for a few minutes and I listened with concern. Certainly my intentions were not to change anyone’s contribution in any way, even inadvertently.

This conversation with Preciosa reminded me of the influence of active responding and its power to shape the meaning of words already spoken: Response is never neutral. To speak is to become vulnerable to the response of the listener. As a respondent in this project, I am constrained by this same ‘conversational reality’. We can never know how another person will hear our words or interpret our meanings when we speak. Like choristers, we depend on one another in a dialogue; we are not offering a series of stand-alone solo performances. I include my correspondence with Preciosa with her permission, but also with her disappointment in mind.
PART THREE
RESPONDING TO THE PROJECT AS A WHOLE

Chapter 8
Acknowledging its Influence in my Learning Process

“But I hear voices in everything
and dialogic relations among them”
(Bakhtin, 1986, p. 169).

“I wanted to create a legacy out of those situations that had
acted on me most powerfully, that had wretched my thinking and my practice
out of their usual groove…”

From “Then” to “Now”

In August 2004, I began preparing for our shared inquiry project, gathering textual
resources, traveling, talking with friends, family, clients, mentors, academics, and fellow
practitioners, locally and abroad. In May and June 2005, I began inviting collaborative therapists
to participate. All but 1 therapist was able to meet for our face-to-face dialogue in Playa del
Carmen, June 2005, the ‘opening’ dialogue in our project. By September, 2005, 8 of 13
practitioners contributed fragments of their journaled “inner conversation” in response to our
project question: As a collaborative therapist, how could you describe your practice as generative
and transforming for yourself? By January 2006, a total of 9 therapists offered journal writing in
response to our project’s central question.

In August 2007, I sent out an English letter with Spanish translation, describing the place
of our dialogues within this dissertation text: I wanted my practitioner colleagues to know that
the journal writing, in its entirety—along with my responses to each writer—was situated within
the main body of this book. I offered each participant the opportunity to read a complete or partial draft of the dissertation and request revisions. The silence that followed—a first-time silence in this project—seemed to indicate that our time together reached a natural pause. The practitioners participating in this project had seemingly moved on to other involvements.

Throughout February and March, 2008, 11 therapists from our project sent emailed greetings and various expressions of support in response to a brief letter I sent requesting demographic information. I was unable to hear from two participants, but re-connecting with the others filled me with nostalgia and appreciation. Once again I felt extremely grateful to have shared this learning opportunity with such a diverse and wonderful group of practitioners.

Before I also move on to pursue other challenges, I want to attempt to articulate the influence of this project from my present vantage point. Sally St. George and Harlene Anderson voiced five questions when I met with them individually in June 2007, and I am eager respond to them now. I write, aware that I will continue to learn from our collaborative inquiry long after it is officially over.

“What Questions Linger?”

I wonder how our dialogues might have developed had we not had the ongoing challenge of distance and language differences. Relational distance was also an influence in our process as many of us were new to each other at the outset of this project. I met most of the participants for the first time when I mailed out letters of invitation.

I also wonder, along with Olivia, what it was like for people to participate in this shared inquiry. At the beginning I did not know I how I would invite my colleagues’ writing into the dissertation text. All of us knew the journal writing of part 2 would be a component of the
project, but no one—not even me—knew we would present the journal excerpts directly and completely instead of selecting representative portions. Would the practitioners have written differently had they known their writing would appear exactly as they wrote it? Might they have written more, or less, with more or less caution, detail, range of feeling? Would the writing have become more conceptual, more formal, less open? Would their textual voices have retained the ‘around-the-kitchen-table’ tone I hear as I read? Would they have felt pressure to become more ‘clever’ or ‘conclusive’ in writing their ‘inner conversations’? I wonder also if the project dialogues might feel more manageable for participants and readers if participants had been invited to send a limited number of pages to the project, rather than an open-ended amount of writing.

“How Did Your Role in This Project Change?”

Initially my role in the project was under-determined. I turned to qualitative research methodology textbooks to try to discover my role and learn about it, anticipating that, once chosen, our research methodology would automatically determine my place and purpose within the project. In practice, it was not so simple. Before I was able to articulate my role in positive terms, I became clear about what I felt I must avoid doing: I did not feel comfortable functioning as an “analyst” or “interpretant” of our project dialogues (Geertz, 2000, p. 17). I did not want to distill or ‘close’ the dialogues, tidy and organize our utterances into a thematic order of importance, or stand ‘over’ or ‘outside’ the dialogues in any way. I did not want to create a social science representation of them and I did not want to use our dialogues as building material for a theory, representation, model, framework or other static systematization. These possibilities seemed foreign and contrary to the dialogic premises and practices of collaborative therapists.
While I was earnestly studying ‘dialogism’ and searching through qualitative research texts for the right way to proceed, I began to do what I do “in practice;” I began responding spontaneously, in detail, to the written utterances of my project colleagues without a pre-figured methodology to guide and legitimize my action. Because of the linguistic and geographical differences between us—I could not readily speak directly with project participants—my response consisted primarily of acknowledging and interacting with the detail of each practitioner’s journal entries. Initially I assumed this written response would become a stepping-stone to some other more systematic process—one derived from social science qualitative research methodology. As I began to involve myself with the writing of my colleagues, and with the writing of Bakhtin, Shotter, and others, I began to think of understanding dialogically as utterly dependent on spontaneous response. As I turned from my textbooks to the voices in this project, my role became increasingly clear to me. My task has been to acknowledge each utterance, whether written or spoken, to meet it, to open myself to it, willing to be influenced and in-formed by what I hear. My role has been to interact with the words of my colleagues and to respond—not only intellectually, but also with my whole being, my life experience, my skill, my intellect, and my body with its ability to sense and feel. I took Bakhtin’s (1986) lament as a confirmation of my role: “The complex event of encountering and interacting with another’s word has been almost completely ignored by the corresponding human sciences…” (p. 144). It is within the co-motion of “encounter” and “interaction” that my role in this project has been formed and continually reformed as we moved on together. Feeling my way forward into a way of being and doing in the project that seemed appropriate and useful, I began to name my role, “respondent.” This seemed to fit with the literature, practices and premises underpinning dialogic
collaborative therapy practice, but also, it seemed to fit well with the unique circumstances comprising this particular social inquiry project.

“Where Might We Go From Here?”:
Twelve Inter-related Features of Dialogical Inquiry

I want to relate this question to social inquiry methods for now. I do not see the steps of our inquiry as “manualizable” or replicable in some future setting; just as every dialogue is an unrepeatable relational event, dialogical methods of inquiry similarly occur once only, emerging incrementally in response to particular relational and historical circumstances. At the same time, I believe the dialogic premises and priorities informing our inquiry could be useful within a diverse range of social, qualitative research contexts. I identify the following twelve inter-related features of our process as potentially relevant to dialogical inquiry beyond this project.

1. Dialogue as Speech Genre

Dialogue becomes the speech genre of the inquiry as the project author remains in a relational, participatory stance within the interaction of the inquiry from the start of the project to its finish point (Anderson, 1997, pp. 107-131; Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Bakhtin, 1986; Seikkula & Arnil, 2006, p. 94; Shuy, 2003, Strong, 2004, pp. 214-218; Tyler, 1986). Dialogical inquiry, in contrast with interview, is something we create together rather than something a researcher gleans from an ‘other’.

2. Situationally-Driven Inquiry

Method emerges responsively and incrementally throughout the inquiry and cannot be pre-figured: Dialogic process is uncertain, unsystematic, unrepeatable, sensed collectively (Shotter, 1993a, p. 45) and infused with risk (Anderson, 1997, pp. 135-136, 2007a, p. 40).
Informal, intimate social poetic methods shape dialogic inquiry, rather than orderly, systematic methodology (Shotter & Katz, 2004b, p. 71). In other words, the mutual response of participants and the unique dialogic situation produced from their interactions directly shapes method in the project instead of the project author selecting and applying a method formed in advance of the inquiry within a totally different context.

3. Generating Understanding through Spontaneous Response

“Mutual responsivity” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, pp. 71-74) also becomes the primary means to practical dialogical understandings—not scientific or systematic analysis, not representation, nor interpretation. “I try to learn about and understand their story by responding to them: I am curious, I pose questions, I make comments, and I gesture…” (Anderson, 2007, p. 47).

4. Respondent as Role

All project participants, including the dissertation author, function primarily as respondents, responding to each other’s utterances, and responding into a particular conversational context, “furthering talk” (Strong & Pare, 2004a) rather than turning talk into a static object for interpretation and analysis. Understanding and active response are simultaneous actions in Bakhtin’s (1986) dialogism; each depends on the other and makes the other possible.

5. Privileging ‘Striking’ Moments

Respondents, willing ‘to be struck’, listen for “striking moments” within the interplay of dialogue, focusing their attention within these moments when participants seem to be “moved” or “touched” by the expression or being of an ‘other’. Inquiry becomes embodied, feelingful, sensual, and not only intellectual (Andersen & Jensen, 2007, p.166; Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 76).
This resembles the social inquiry process ‘ordinary’ people enact informally in their day-to-day living.

6. Situating Inquiry within the Present Interactive Moment

The inquiry is situated within ‘the present moment’ (Stern, 2004, pp. 75-111). Meaning-making happens ‘on the run’ within the bustle, commotion and movement of a living dialogue (Shotter, 2006a, pp. 29-30). Project authors extend the dialogue, keeping it in play, instead of closing it, stepping out of the dialogue, “de-relating” (Strong, 2004, p. 215) and “doing to” the dialogue using techniques foreign to the conversation.

7. Particularity Instead of Generalization

The inquiry does not attempt to identify a thematic hierarchy (themes, sub-themes, non-themes) nor a classification, categorization or cataloguing of participants’ words or ideas. Respondents listen for novelty, surprise, detail and particularity (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 133; Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 244) rather than pattern and regularities. Dialogic practitioners do not meet people as though they are representatives of categories, but rather “cherish” their uniqueness (Strong & Pare, 2004a, p. 9). They do not depend on the “profession” or “social science” to help them understand their conversational partner, but rather attune as directly as they can, to the client and the client’s story, on the client’s terms, within the client’s familiar ways of knowing.

8. Developing Event Instead of Developing System

Dialogic inquiry yields a developing event, not a system (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 251) or structure: Inquiry becomes a “… collaborative effort with people rather than investigation of them…” (Gustavson, 1996, p. 90). “The important word here is “with”: doing with and within, rather than for or to from the outside” (Anderson, 2007, p. 34).
9. Direct, Open-ended Engagement

Distilling the ‘data’ happens intrinsically and spontaneously as certain threads are dropped or picked-up throughout the inquiry process of interaction. The project dialogues are not “winnowed” through systematic procedures of retrospectively ‘doing to’ the data. Participants, including the primary author, do not attempt to create interpretations of the dialogues.

10. Outcomes Emerge Throughout Instead of “Research Product” Outcome

Rather than developing representative “research products” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1039) or artificial devices (Garfinkel, 2006c, p. 128) such as models, frameworks, theories, or representations, “outcomes” emerge continually and unpredictably throughout the inquiry. Understandings generated are incomplete, fluid, and practical; “… in the process of trying to understand, something different is produced” (Anderson, 1997, p. 116).

11. Shared Authorship

Just as the primary author joins participants fully in dialogue, project participants join the project’s primary author in creating a multi-voiced (polyphonic) and multi-textual (poly-textual) text; authorship is tangibly shared as distinct voices intertwine and intersect, each enriching the other. Each text enters into the project’s central question in a unique way, with a unique voice, from particular ‘in-motion’ vantage points (Emerson, 1997, pp. 127-161).

12. “Capturing” Social Phenomena Re-Defined

“Capture” takes on reversed meanings; the process is less about the researcher capturing social phenomena and more about becoming ‘captured by’:

When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 484).
In most qualitative research, the generativity of the project is ultimately demonstrated through the presentation of a finished, portable, “research product”—a model, a theory, representation or framework. In numerous qualitative traditions of inquiry, these research products signal a successful capture of the study’s central focus. Like trophies, souvenirs, or other proof of contact, the end product in social inquiry offers readers “something to take with them,” something to show for their labor in attempting to understand the research text.

Dialogical, collaborative inquiry is different. “Findings” and “outcomes” emerge incrementally and unpredictably all throughout. Instead of co-constructing a system, this project extends an invitation to participate, as respondents, in an interactive event. Our dialogues function simply as reminders (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 36) of things “which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001, p. 106) in the background of our practices. Each “reminder” offers an “in motion” glimpse at the collaborative practitioner’s experience of practice, one that is always changing, partial, never finalizable. As we noted earlier, Wittgenstein (1980) likens that which is inherently incomplete to “scattered color patches on a screen; if we complete them, he warns, we falsify them” (p. 52). Through our involvement with the collective of practitioners in this project we gain a tangible sense of the collaborative therapist’s experience of therapy practice as “generative and transforming;” we gain a “withness” rather than “aboutness” understanding (Shotter, 1999a; 2005b), a practical, multi-voiced, dialogical understanding of the dialogues at the center of this project. Just as qualitative social inquiry informs therapy practice, the dialogic premises and practices of collaborative therapy can shape and enrich qualitative social inquiry.
“What Did You Let Go of and What Are You Holding On To?”

Responding

For me, the word reflecting was very prominent in the early stages of this shared inquiry project. In many of my initial responses to practitioners, I used it only in its verb form—wanting to shift focus from creating reflections as “things,” to the on-going activity of “reflecting”: reflexive, open-ended conversational engagement carried out over a period of time. As I became more acquainted with the work of Bakhtin, Shotter and Katz, I became deeply drawn instead, to the word responding: “active response” (Bakhtin, 1986), “spontaneous, embodied response,” (Shotter, 2006a, 2006b) and “mutual responsivity” (Katz & Shotter, 2004). I have come to see responding as crucial to understanding dialogue dialogically. Although reflecting, we could argue, is one kind of response, the two words evoke different meanings, traditions and uses for me. The word “reflecting” receded in my writing during this project, and “responding” became central.

Transformation

As relational movement ‘across’.

I notice a shift in my understanding of transformation, a key word in our project’s central question: “As a collaborative therapist, how could you describe your practice as generative and transforming for yourself?” Articulating the generativity of therapy dialogue comes easily for me. Each conversation seems rich with newness: new possibilities, perspectives, and actions emerge unpredictably and abundantly; we find creative ways to ‘go on’. The term “transformation,” though, has been a vague and intangible word for me throughout this project, perhaps because I am influenced by psychology’s longstanding pre-occupation with homeostasis (Gergen, 1982, pp. 148-156): Transformation becomes a ‘strange other’ if, as Gergen (1982)
suggested, “… the overarching theoretical template essentially registers stability and eschews the transitory” (p. 148). I began this project with both curiosity and confusion about transformation. I wondered, “When we say collaborative therapy dialogue is mutually transforming, what specifically might we be saying?” If we said this in other words, what might those words be? Like students in my daughters’ classrooms scanning caterpillar cocoons with flashlights, I wanted to be able to see it happen within this project. I imagined our project dialogues would reveal some profound mystery within the word.

Instead, each practitioner draws us into the realm of the everyday, with all its ‘first time’ happenings, unpredictabilities and surprises, the realm of the ordinary, with all its extraordinariness’, and the realm of the familiar, which—for the collaborative therapist, always holds within it an important measure of unfamiliarity. Our project dialogues demystify transformation for me, inscribing it as everyday action—as “inter-action,” the result of our ongoing responsive involvement with others and otherness. Instead of changing above and beyond ourselves in a hidden, cocoon-like, personal growth process, the dialogues of this project seem to speak of transformation as ‘horizontal’ movement—relational movement ‘across’—implicit in the interactions of encounter, acknowledgement, involvement and response. The collaborative practitioner “is not safely ensconced in knowing,” (Anderson, 1997, p. 135) but rather becomes practiced at meeting and engaging with the knowing of others. Like midwives or country doctors making house calls, it seems we are continually ‘traveling’ to meet people—not to talk “about” the circumstances of people’s lives from an analytical distance, and not to apply professional knowledges and interventions already formulated in advance, but rather we meet with our clients, alongside them, as dialogical partners. Practitioners in this project speak of transformation as something we do together, communally, collaboratively, even in our most
momentary, fleeting encounters and interactions with one another. Preciosa writes about “visiting” the ideas of the person she meets with in therapy. And Abelinda’s words (as translated by Geavonna) in the Playa Dialogue come to my attention once more:

This [invitation to journal the transformative influence of therapy for ourselves] could be very complicated, in terms of the philosophical, or the precise way it should be, or it could be much more relaxed where we share our daily life experience of what we do in our work…. Is there something transcendental that I have to say…. or just description of what I do when I see someone to talk about life?

If we construe transformation as a private and rare experience, perhaps we will encounter it only infrequently in our work, only in the short-lived pinnacles and epiphanies. But if, as Abelinda says, we can ‘relax’ the word and speak of it in everyday terms, then we might notice the transforming influence of dialogue continually. We might see that we are never ‘not becoming’; instead we are always moving, as Pasha suggests, always “on the way,” formed and reformed in each interactive moment as we open ourselves to the influence of others and otherness in our daily practices.

Transformation as relational movement ‘into’.

The dialogues of chapter 7 are brimming with what I am tempted to call entering stories, or stories of entering. Many of these take us into interactive moments of practice that last only seconds. In responding to these stories through my process of writing, I have become ever more attuned to a particular preposition (pre-position) in practice, one that has possibly been familiar to my colleagues, but is still new to me: the preposition, in. I have come to realize I am not only “with,” others and otherness in practice, I am also, as Olaf says, “in with.”
Entering into the life of another being is transforming. Geavonna writes of “tuning into” the style of her client, “letting myself flow with her story and her ideas…”. Ana Claudia says practice has “taught me to be much more curious.” Olivia writes, “… both the therapist and the client must change through connection.” Abigail writes of her clients as becoming “part of her” and Geavonna says, “each person you meet with ‘constructs,’ ‘creates,’ ‘highlights,’ or ‘brings forward’ a different you, or a different part of you.” Abelinda says, “These dialogues with couples have caused “many of my ideas to shift…” and also “the work… allows us to come to know something of ourselves.” Olaf writes of changing his personal view of psychotic behaviour: “This was a shift…. Instead of being afraid of psychotic behavior I became interested, both intellectually and emotionally…. ” Emelie writes, “There are possibilities to learn from whatever the outcome of a session.” And similarly Preciosa writes of “learning, learning from him [her client] and from myself.” Pasha notes,

You realize that you will never again be the same person, rather in each conversation you are different and you are transformed and consequently, you move and each time you can become more inquisitive about life, your own personal life, as well as the life of the person that is working with you.

Of all the prepositions in the English language—with, near, on, around, under—all describing the space between two entities—*in* is perhaps the most intimate. Our project dialogues remind me of how the collaborative practitioner spontaneously plays *into* a conversational situation with “agility and focus,” (see Abigail’s tennis metaphor in her journal dated July 25, 2005) not only “stretching to meet what’s given,” as practitioner Kathy Weingarten (1988) writes, but actively responding *into* “what’s given,” jumping, as Hoffman (2007) says, “into the pool of tears with the other creatures” (p. 66). The client allows the practitioner to enter, but the
practitioner, is similarly open to the influence of the client. “Humans are tuned for relationship,” says Abram (1996), “The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness” (p. ix). Our project dialogues elaborate and celebrate Abram’s claim. I have now come to see my collaborative practice as intimate work, a mutual demonstration of profound trust.

Transformation and risk.

The word transformation—now part of ‘everyday’ life—has not lost all its mystery for me, however; I leave this project holding the idea that transformation is part of the “happenstance” of dialogue, beyond our intentions, our planning, choosing, and careful deliberations (Shotter, 2007). Transformation, it seems, cannot be constructed mechanically or rationally through the application of right truths and methods. We cannot plan it in advance, nor can we predict with certainty how a single encounter and act of engagement with an other will touch our lives, changing us not only in ‘our minds’ but in our identities, our attitudes, desires, actions and priorities. Reading the writing of the practitioners in this project highlights the prominence of the coincidental and accidental in our conversational work.

Again I notice Pasha’s journaling of the involuntary and sometimes forceful dimension of transformation: “In life there are events that cause one to feel deeply moved, as if something violently pushed you to move to another place, ‘growth’ is how it’s sometimes referred to.” Olivia describes one of her therapy dialogues as “treacherous” and at one point, she writes, “I feel like I have been picked up and put back in a different place.” In our dialogue in Playa del Carmen, Olaf spoke of “daring” in collaborative practice—daring “to contribute with myself.” Jillian added,
I am often quite frightened—fearful, better than frightened. Because the path is not so clear. And I am working to find this path. I don’t know what path I’m on, sometimes for quite awhile. So living with that uncertainty—it has all these beautiful things that everyone says and I wouldn’t give it up for anything. And, I have to accept feeling a little bit frightened, fairly often.

Risk, in all its variations, is never far away in the shared inquiry of collaborative therapy practice. Neither, in the experiences of our project practitioners, is wonderment and awe.

Bakhtin’s (1984) words come to mind once more; he speaks of the danger inherent in dialogue: “He participates in it not only with his thoughts, but with his fate and with his entire individuality” (p. 293). An unpredictable and intimate process, the dialogues of collaborative therapy disrupt and unsettle in ways that cannot be foreseen. From my present vantage point I am ever more aware of the power of even the most seemingly ordinary interactions to move and influence us immediately and irrevocably beyond our rational planning or choosing. I want to believe this need not lead to the danger vicarious trauma literature might warn of—the danger of therapy practice depleting and damaging the practitioner—but rather, the danger inherent in being alive and in relationship with other living creatures. As Derrida (2004) says, “Nothing is more frightening, nothing more desirable” (p. 36).

“What Has Touched You Throughout This Project?”

Collaborative Practice as Living, Vibrant Soundscape

Participating in this project has sharpened my awareness of the living and intricate complexity within collaborative therapy dialogue. From a distance, the exchange between collaborative practitioner and client seems ordinary; ordinary people are speaking with one
another, using ordinary ways of speaking. But people directly involved often experience it as extraordinary, charged with novelty, curiosity, and drama. No one knows where the conversation will lead. Just as a person viewing a marsh from a distant vantage point may perceive only a postcard-like sameness from moment to moment, those situated within such a landscape readily hear, sense, feel, smell, and see movement all around them: the buzz of insects, the plop following the frog’s jump, the rustle of leaves, the mournful cry of a loon, the continual shifting of light and shadow.

The dialogues in this project portray collaborative therapy as a vibrant, interpenetrative soundscape, one with multiple, simultaneously speaking voices, each one an ‘elicitor’ inviting and compelling the therapist to become something of the “other” or “otherness” present in every living dialogue. Positioned “up close” in the practitioners’ journaling, I hear a diversity of influences in ‘the therapy room’: voices, words, and silences, spoken dialogue with its accompanying unspoken, ‘inner’ conversations, the topic of conversation, and the situation produced as a result of the interaction, new relational bonds between participants, undoubtedly there are more. Each of these unseen presences speaks, in-forming the practitioner. Having participated in this dialogical inquiry with my colleagues, I hear a greater range of voices within my own professional practice, and within my life outside of my work. My world has come alive with voices that call, sing, coax and whisper, each one inviting my engagement and active response. Bakhtin’s (1986) declaration comes to my attention once more: “I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them” (p. 169).

I return now to the beginning, to Anderson’s (2003b) provocative claim, one of the starting points for our shared inquiry project:
The therapist is not an expert agent of change; that is, a therapist does not change another person. Rather, the therapist’s expertise is in creating a space and facilitating a process for dialogical conversations and collaborative relationships. When involved in this kind of process, both client and therapist are shaped and reshaped—transformed—as they work together (p. 133).

To describe our practices as generative and transforming for ourselves as practitioners is, in part, to make them so. Just as our project dialogues describe and evoke the realities of collaborative therapy practice they also *produce* those realities: “Words and worlds go together” (Law, 2004, p. 33). As my former client said years ago, “We are what we speak.” Andersen (1992) writes, “The language we use makes us who we are in the moment we use it” (p. 64).

**Transformation as Unceasing**

Without ‘explaining’ transformation, and without analyzing its structure and presumed essence—without creating a social science model, theory, interpretation or representation of the transformative influence of practice for collaborative practitioners, therapists in this project create dialogic understanding of Anderson’s claim. Throughout our project dialogues we speak and write of transformation practically and particularly—as ‘what we do’ when we meet one another through dialogue. We take the abstract word—transformation—and translate it into the ‘up-close’ minutiae of everyday interactive scenes and “ordinary micro-practices” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 134). We ‘show’ transformation from multiple diverse vantage points as we write unfinished stories, share unspoken and open-ended conversations, as we try to evoke invisible but impinging forces in our therapy dialogues. We situate the word transforming within historical time—particular days, months and years—and most important, within particular interactive
moments. Initially a general, far-away concept, “transformation” becomes ‘peopled’ with faces, voices, feelings and bodies.

Throughout this collaborative inquiry I have turned to Virginia Woolf’s (1985) autobiographical *Moments of Being* and I find myself again with the words of her character Bernard in this closing moment. Like the practitioners in our inquiry, Bernard, in his own way, speaks reflectively of the constancy of transformation inherent in our engagement with others:

> The tree alone resisted our eternal flux. For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly…. But now let me ask myself the final question, as I sit over this grey fire, with its naked promontories of black coal, which of these people am I? It depends so much upon the room. When I say to myself, ‘Bernard,’ who comes?” A character named Susan echoes Bernard’s words: “For there is nothing to lay hold of. I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me” (p. 14).

Along with different words, different worlds: different attitudes, perspectives, practices, movements, desires, feelings, habits, possibilities, and relationships. The everyday encounters and interactions that comprise our collaborative therapy practices are teeming with unrepeatable, irresistible invitations to transformation: To participate is to be “made and remade continually” without end.
Appendix A

Brief Introduction of Project Practitioners

Please note that, with the exception of myself, the names and home cities of the project practitioners have been changed to conceal their identities. The names of their home countries have been maintained.

Abelinda (Mexico): 18 years in professional practice; academic coordinator for masters degree program in psychotherapy; administrator; university professor; private therapy practice; psychologist.

Abigail (U.S.A.): 19 years practicing as a clinical psychologist; professor in a Marriage and Family Therapy and Psychology Doctorate program; 11 years private and hospital practice; psychoeducational testing for college-age students at several universities; active in local and state psychology organizations; currently co-producing a sociology documentary looking at the role of religion or spirituality in American teenagers lives.

Aiden (Australia): addictions counselling.

Anaclaudia (Mexico): 20 years professional psychotherapy practice; teaches in various masters degree programs; supervisor; teaching consultant; director of a psychotherapy masters degree program, program development.

Danica (Norway): 30 years in practice; psychotherapist; chief psychologist at a child and adolescence university clinic; head of education, postgraduate training and supervision; clinical psychologist at a centre of child and adolescent mental health, a centre for research and postgraduate training.

Emelie (Sweden): 30 years in practice; family therapist in private practice; editor, translator, psychologist, occasional teaching.
Geavonna (Mexico): 20 years in practice as psychologist and family therapist (LMFT); university adjunct faculty; private practitioner; postgraduate institute faculty.

Jillian (U.S.A.): 40 years in practice; trainer, clinician, facilitator; social work background.

Olaf (Sweden): 34 years in practice; psychotherapy with individuals, couples and families; polyvision/supervision; psychotherapy educator; psychologist.

Olivia (U.S.A.): 30 years professional practice; psychotherapist in private practice setting; licensed in professional counselling, marriage and family therapy and chemical dependency counselling; psychotherapy with individuals, couples and families.

Pasha (Mexico): 5 years professional practice; half-time school psychologist; half-time clinical practice at a post-secondary therapy educational institute.

Preciosa (Mexico): 25 years professional practice; director of a mental health community clinic; faculty at family therapy post-secondary educational institution.

Seferino (Mexico): co-founder, masters degree family therapy program; practitioner.

Janice (Canada): 13 years counselling in publicly funded community health centre; teaching/supervision of university social work students; workshop facilitator; social work background.
Appendix B

Inter-related Characteristics of the Collaborative Approach to Therapy

1. The collaborative approach to therapy is a philosophy of life—a dialogical way of being with others and otherness, rather than a theory, model or set of techniques to be applied.

2. Collaborative therapy is a process of shared inquiry taking place within a conversational partnership between client and practitioner.

3. Collaborative therapy is premised on the belief that dialogue is inherently generative, transforming and mutually influencing: Both therapist and client risk transformation through participation in dialogue.

4. Therapeutic process is multi-voiced as both client and practitioner voices intertwine without collapsing into one single voice.

5. Collaborative therapists position themselves with their clients, not guiding, directing or coaxing, but coming alongside.

6. Both practitioner and client actively respond to each other, moment to moment; the interaction is improvised and unsystematic, a one-time-only unfolding occurrence.

7. Collaborative therapists aim to be open—public—about their ‘inner’ conversation throughout the therapy dialogue instead of holding a private monologue apart from the client’s awareness.

8. Collaborative therapists assume a stance of “not-knowing;” they do not presume to know best how people should live their lives.

9. Rather than orienting to expert voices in published literature, within the profession, or within particular academic disciplines, collaborative therapists privilege the local and communal
knowledges of the persons they meet with in therapy, attempting to understand others ‘on
their own terms’ rather than through the preferred frameworks of the therapist.

10. Collaborative therapists view the persons consulting them as unique, valuable persons, not as
representatives of categories or types of persons.

11. Collaborative therapists proceed tentatively with uncertainty; no one knows where the
conversation will go, just as no one can predict the transforming influence or generativity of
a conversation ahead of time.
Appendix C

Introduction to the Project’s Conversational Consulting Circle

As Posted at Project Blog

http://researchdialogues.blogspot.com

Christo de Klerk, PhD, South Africa is an ordained pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and part time minister of the Monumentpark-Wes congregation in Pretoria. He is a pastoral counsellor in private practice specializing in divorce recovery and divorce mediation. His four children and wife, Miems, are his pride and joy. Side interest: cycling.

Duane Lesperance, MSW, Canada is the coordinator of the Men’s Resource Centre (University of Manitoba), a counselling centre that utilizes ideas from postmodernism to resist the constraints of dominant gender discourse. On days when he is not trying to change the world, he loves spending time with his partner and their pre-school children.

Sally St. George, PhD, & Dan Wulff, PhD, Canada, Associate Professors, supervisors, practitioners at the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work and Family Therapy Program. Editors of The Qualitative Report. In their leisure time they can be found practicing their ballroom dancing routines.

Margarita Oliveres-Tarragona, PhD, Mexico, is a therapist, teacher and supervisor in Mexico City, where she co-founded Grupo Campos Eliseos, a centre that offers training, consultation and therapy based on a collaborative approach. She is on the faculty of several universities and training institutes in Mexico and the USA. She is especially interested in postmodern therapies, the therapeutic use of writing and the implications of Positive Psychology for therapy and
consultation. Her research includes clients’ and therapists’ experiences of therapy and the development of psychotherapists.

**Tapio Malinen, MA, Finland**, private practice; teaches psychotherapy at the Brief Therapy Institute in Helsinki Finland. Additional involvements: Tai Chi, Argentinean Tango and the Afternoon Sun.

**Susan E. Swim, PhD, USA**, faculty Houston Galveston Institute & Loma Linda University: Private Practitioner, AAMFT Approved Supervisor; Editor Emeritus, JST; Editorial Board, Qualitative Report. Private practice, Los Angeles County, California.
Appendix D

Introduction to Project Translators Christine Hildebrand and Julio Rivas

As Posted at Project Blog

http://researchdialogues.blogspot.com

Christine Hildebrand

It has been a delight to contribute to Janice’s research project by providing translation services in her communication with the Spanish-speaking participants. Much written translation work necessarily entails working with “dry”, technical, uninspired text. This project has been like a breath of fresh air with the uninhibited freestyle and free-flowing dialogue. It’s been a pleasure and a privilege to participate in this important work.

Education and Qualifications: Bachelor of Arts (Political Studies) from The University of Manitoba, Post-Graduate Translators and Interpreters Program for the Pan Am Games, Winnipeg ’99, Certified English/Spanish Translator with the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Manitoba (ATIM), Accredited by the Government of Canada for English/Spanish translation and interpretation. Committed to life-long learning—currently working on the Human Resources Management Certificate at the U of Manitoba.

Currently my full time work is as the Homestay Coordinator at University of Manitoba where I screen and select host families to match with international students, and then provide cultural orientation and on-going support for Homestay families and students. I really enjoy assisting in effective cross-cultural communication, meeting enthusiastic Homestay families who truly love students and welcome the world into their homes, and helping international students in finding their “home away from home”.

http://researchdialogues.blogspot.com
My Cross-Cultural Experience includes growing up on a farm in rural Manitoba in a bilingual English/German home. As an adult I lived in Mexico for three years where I learned to live, speak, think, and dream in Spanish! I absolutely loved my time in Mexico, and consider it my second home – I travel there as often as possible and hope someday to live there again, permanently or semi-permanently. I lived in Montreal for one year to study French as I felt I should be fluent in both of our official languages. I have worked full time as an interpreter/translator and currently continue in that capacity as a freelancer. Some of the highlights have been as official interpreter at the Pan Am Games, Winnipeg ’99; international conference interpretation in Cuba, U.S.A., and Canada, translating a Cuban doctor’s medical book; training and mentoring interpreters and translators from over 35 ethnic communities in Winnipeg.

Away from work duties, I enjoy spending time with friends and family: my two grown daughters and my 6 year-old granddaughter and my partner in life and love – Julio. Julio and I collaborate on many translation jobs and for fun we occasionally like to pretend at playing golf! Whenever time and funds coincide, we like to travel and/or work on our home in Crescentwood, Winnipeg.

Julio Rivas

Hi Janice:

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be part of your research. Over the years I have been involved in many translation and interpretation projects, solving language barriers and facilitating communication for the Spanish community in Winnipeg, mainly those problems associated with my Chilean compatriots, and later with newcomers and refugee arriving from Central and South America.
Living in Winnipeg for the past 30 years, the life of translation and interpretation has sometimes become as dull and cold as our long and boring winters. I constantly missed the warmth of our culture, the sound of our language and the vivid colors that spice-up our lives under the sun. I have tremendously missed the gentle kiss of the wind that comes from the sea and the touch of the sand. Those are the days of my high school and first year at the University of Chile in the northern city of Iquique, Chile. The impetus of my youth and the vision of a just and equal world landed me in the concentration camp of Pisagua during the military coup of 1973, and by the end of that tumultuous and painful year, I was given 30 days to leave and I went into exile.

So, I left with my life and the illusion of a new beginning, which I found in Winnipeg, and years later this life was enriched to no end with the arrival and the presence of Christine. She is the sound and the air of my land, instilling in my life a sense of belonging lost many years ago in the dark side of Pisagua. Together we saw the fulfillment of my long life dream; the completion of my undergraduate studies at the University of Winnipeg in Urban Studies and International Development Studies, and recently the completion of the academic portion of the Master in City Planning at the University of Manitoba and today, working on the completion of the final phase, the thesis requirement to graduate.

Along with my academic dreams, I completed the graduate level Interpreter/Translator program for the Pan-American Games Society prior to the final games in 1999 held in the city of Winnipeg where I served as the "official Spanish voice" for the Opening & Closing ceremonies and in pre-recorded messages at all the Pan Am venues. I am also accredited by the Government of Canada for English/Spanish translation and interpretation.
I want to thank all of you that have allowed me, through this project, to enter and be part of your unique professional experience. It has been a translator’s dream. The free flow of ideas and thoughts about our complex human nature; has rekindled my spirit and allowed me to re-encounter my roots with my beloved continent. For that I thank all of you, with the hope that our paths will cross some day.

Julio Rivas
June 2005,

Dear [prospective participant’s name],

In conversation with Dr. Harlene Anderson, it is my privilege to invite your participation in a research project that will be occurring in conjunction with the International Summer Institute (ISI, Mexico, 2005). Along with eight to ten therapists from diverse locations around the world, you are being purposefully selected to receive this invitation. Your experience as a postmodern collaborative therapist is thought to be a potentially invaluable resource to this project. The following provides a brief description of this research and the role of therapists within it. I hope you will consider participation in this unique, collaborative learning opportunity.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this collective case study is to co-create a poly-vocal, multi-cultural narrative of postmodern, collaborative therapy as generative and transformative for therapists. This research forms a central part of my PhD program requirements for the Taos Institute-University of Tilburg Doctoral Program.

**Context**

Accounts of therapist experience within mainstream North American therapy culture are commonly situated within a discourse of depletion and disconnection. Numerous therapy traditions position therapist and client at opposite ends of a widely accepted dichotomy: the therapist gives; the client receives. Published discussions of therapist experience of therapy frequently focus on “vicarious trauma” and “burn-out,” two perceived hazards of the occupation.
Using elements foundational to postmodern, collaborative therapy (Anderson, 1997) this project invites a relational re-searching of therapist experience. It spotlights the mutual influence of dialogical partnership, and celebrates the complexity, mystery and far-reaching potential of transformative processes long thought to be the exclusive domain of therapy clients.

**Your Role in the Project**

This project invites your participation in a set of dialogues scheduled to take place during the ISI, and for a brief period following the ISI. The project begins with the following simple question: “As a therapist, how do you describe your experience of postmodern, collaborative therapy?”

**The Beginning Dialogue: Talking Together at the ISI**

The project is launched with an initial dialogue involving research participants at the ISI (2005). This initial conversation offers space for participants to voice practical questions, and to generate additional supportive research questions to expand and enrich the potential of this project. Lines of inquiry that hold personal, local meanings for participants are most welcome. As the essential beginning, this first dialogue forms the genesis of our collective reflecting about therapists’ personal experience of therapy. I will facilitate and record this conversation.

**The Second Dialogue: Reflective Journaling**

The second set of dialogues follows the ISI as participants return to their respective communities. Research questions generated at the ISI will provide additional focus. In this phase, participants will be invited to journal something of their inner dialogue on a near-daily basis, and will eventually decide what portions of their written reflecting will be shared for use in this project. This phase will be two weeks. An endpoint will be negotiated with participants as the study moves forward.
More About the Second Dialogue

In our deliberation using the question(s) raised in this project, participants are invited to write in whatever intelligible style that feels most comfortable for them (i.e. storytelling, prose, poetry, letter writing, linear or non-linear, formal, less formal, travel diary, etc.). Unfinished or “beginning” thoughts are most welcome, as are unanswered questions, contradictions, and multiple perspectives from varied vantage points. Coherence and pre-planning are not necessary. The dialogue generated by this project will be reflective, but not laborious. Improvisation will be more useful than composition (Janesick, 2000). Similarly, participants should feel no obligation to explain or defend their work. Like dialogue ‘on the street,’ in coffee shops or collaborative therapy rooms, the “inner dialogue” recorded through reflective journaling can be allowed the freedom to gallop or “roam over a range of possibilities” (Shotter, 1995). It can be spontaneous, “living, breathing”… “formed in the moment,” (Anderson, 1997; Shotter, 1994).

Participants Rights in this Project

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Participants may withdraw from this study at any point. While it is unlikely that I can protect participant identity from fellow ISI (2005) participants, study participants’ names will not be announced at the ISI, and every possible effort will be made to protect participant identity from the therapy public. The project begins with the strictest confidentiality possible. As the study proceeds, details concerning confidentiality can be revisited with the consent of all participants. While each voice in the project will be recognizable with its own traceable line, this project also recognizes the joint achievement inherent in all conversation (Shotter, 1993). As Michael Bakhtin (1981) says, “The word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293). All personal data will be treated with utmost sensitivity and security.
Participant voices in the co-interpretation of data, and in shared decision-making concerning design and methods, research questions, and evaluation of project outcomes are essential. Participants will not be obligated to the project beyond the two phases of dialogue. I will contact participants by email or phone to ensure that I am representing their contributions as fairly and accurately as possible. Participants are welcomed to contact me at any time with questions, ideas and concerns. Please note email, project website and phone contact information provided at the end of this letter.

**Invitation**

- This project invites a re-visioning of therapist experience of therapy through the generative process of dialogue and reflection.
- It features a two-part set of dialogues, during and following the ISI 2005.
- The simple question, “As a therapist, how do you describe your experience of postmodern, collaborative therapy?” forms one central line of inquiry throughout this project.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to build knowledge through the richness of dialogue and reflection.

Best wishes,

Janice DeFehr, MSW

Taos/Tilburg PhD Program Candidate
References


