

Our Conversations - Where are we now in our lives?

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This article is about a series of conversations between three colleagues, previously significantly involved in community education practice and is the influences of their experiences, values and beliefs when encountering leaving full-time employment. The paper, which has been developed from transcripts of these dialogue sessions, contains some extracts and views from each of the participants about life and work, and suggests a re-visioning of retirement.

Introduction

The idea for the series of conversations and this paper was initiated by one of the authors, Bernadette, who wished to explore and retain the value of her professional life by engaging with others in conversation about ideas and experiences, which might have an added value of passing on wisdom about both the process and the content. An influence for her had been the style of Presence (Senge et al, 2005), which was the result of these authors getting together over a number of years posing questions to each other. In that text, four people met to have conversations, and convey experiences about their work and its results. They appear in the book 'as "characters" talking with one another, telling stories, and exploring our different points of view, woven together with ideas and perspectives from the interviews ...' (16). Her hope was that these experiences of ours would lend themselves to a similar process and illustrate a deepening of collective learning and an opening up of a new awareness.

Bernadette approached Fraser and Sheila as former supportive colleagues who were no longer working full-time and were now on the periphery of their former professional roles. As the constrictions of our previous roles were now removed, we thought that in our own time and in our own way we could tell a story with the intention of sharing its findings with others. This paper is about that process and threaded through are our thoughts and extracts of our conversations; we consider

dialogue as a concept and process, and the impact this had on our ideas, the expression of these and the sharing of emotions. The paper begins with a comment from each of us, continues with extracts of our conversations, and a conclusion completes the paper.

Bernadette:

I have been influenced, especially in the last ten years of my life, by the work of James Hillman (1999), who has made an important contribution to our thinking about ageing. This is what he has to say about retirement:

Resignation," defined in the dictionary as "uncomplaining endurance of adversity", often accompanies retirement and may be an early indicator of decrepitude. Before we resign from positions of control, we should ask ourselves what might come after. Sheer collapse into uncomplaining (or complaining) endurance? Perhaps "re-signation" needs to mean – rather than literal stepping down – resignification, rethinking the significance of one's position, re-visioning the idea of control so that it serves values that we have come to know are important. (p17)

I have avoided using the term retirement myself as I have a negative reaction to it. Therefore I appreciate Hillman's notion of a rethinking of one's position with a re-visioning about one's place in society.

Hollis (2005), someone also significant for me, writes about finding meaning in the second half of our lives, especially in relation to the crisis of identity that occurs when we encounter and go through a personal life changing situation in the absence of support. He writes about experiences when individuals undergo passages for which their 'conscious life was unprepared, leaving them confused, frustrated, disoriented' (p28) and suggests that in our era 'such rites of passage, are generally missing, or weakened, and these periods leave the individual adrift, disoriented, alone' (p29). When the three of us began the conversations, I was not conscious of this thought but,

returning to the process and our discussions as I write now, I wonder if our conversations have served for us a rite of passage – a deconstruction of a previous self, a reconstruction into a new identity, in other words, by participating in this dialogue we were experiencing a deeper meaning of our life's journey, and that we could in Hollis's words 'learn that something transcendent to the old way of being always comes when one has the courage to continue this journey through the dark wood' (p29).

Meaning and purpose have been a constant, accompanying me throughout my life; Hollis suggests that it is only in the second half of our lives that clarity emerges, that we know who we are and that we can create a life of meaning. Perhaps that did happen in the second half of my life but now in this era I feel the loss of the 'stable state' (Schön 1973) and I experience an uncertainty and an ambiguity.

The thought to hold comes from Hillman when he asks 'how can we remain a force of character?' Even though he is discussing leaving in the sense of departing from this world, he suggests that:

'Long before you have left, you already comprise a tangle of images that compress your complexity into a "character," affecting others as an imaginative vital force. Because we do not imagine the image others perceive, we hardly know the impact of our own character. Images of this character enter the dreams and thoughts of others, sparking a response, awakening a feeling, raising a question, as if trying to call them to something.' (Hillman 1999: 157)

Fraser:

Should I be concerned about how others perceive me? Probably not, otherwise I might spend the rest of my life being or not being, doing or not doing that which I think others would want of me. To succumb to such a concern would be a recipe for inauthenticity; and a denial of my individuality. And my individuality is important because it is unique, like everyone else's.

Yet nowadays I do wonder how others might remember me, particularly my daughters and grandchildren. They will, in a real sense, determine how I live on. They will, subconsciously, assess the nature and impact of the character that is me, and in the future beyond my physical presence. Such thinking does demand me to be positive and, challengingly thoughtful and funny. I want to demonstrate serious fun. I want to feed their curiosity and passions and compassion.

In turn I feel that the energy and innocence and wonder that the grandchildren exude challenges me. As I look back at my life, they walk on into their future. Will what they take from me and my experience help them in their journey onwards? In a sense that should not be my concern, although it will be, understandably, my hope. But I must complete my own life and they must live theirs. Any worries that I might have that I will be remembered with a smile, with gratitude, with love, are not only a demonstration of our wanting to be liked but also a realisation of our historicity - that we are part, all of us, of everything that has been and everything that will ever be.

I believe therefore that it is natural, a part of the human condition, to reflect on our ontological predicament as we move to, and maybe even past, our three score and ten years. For me, however, the focus needs to be on how I am now, as a contributing person in community and not on how others, no matter how close they may be, might see me.

I suppose I have created the character that I now am. I have no control, however, over the nature of the character that others perceive me to be. That is for them to determine and for me to accept.

Sheila:

I came into my work because of a sense of injustice and inequality I noticed around me the vulnerability of others, how children were being sidelined, labelled for not fitting in – according to the views of others. I could see that some children were not reaching their potential and I recognised the range of influences which can cause this. My later roles in practice and academia have allowed me to support staff to consider

the broader picture, and the significance of working together with families and communities. For me the concepts of confidence and self-esteem are vital and my work has been about promoting and encouraging people to develop these in themselves and others. I realise and re-affirm that these principles are vital again now at this stage of our lives, based on what I see as values which can be common and fields of work with people and communities – these are respect, support and valuing individuality.

Coming into this process has made me consider the question about the impact we have made on people we may have worked alongside, and I hope that a small part of my work in people's lives has made a difference. I have completely retired now from practice and academia and the process of our conversations and undertaking this discussion paper has been interesting and sometimes painful but has attuned me to clarify my decisions for the future.

Our Process

A number of key questions guided our conversations. These were:

- What are the core beliefs and values of our work that remain with us still?
- In what way did our work give and continue to provide meaning for our lives, and how did it become integrated within our being?
- What about a stewardship of our work and new possibilities arising from it?

We began each meeting focusing on these questions. We allowed time for the ideas to evolve and become expressed and gave the person speaking time, without any interruptions or limitations, to fully respond to the thoughts contained within the questions. The conversations were recorded and then transcribed by Bernadette who circulated the results and made revisions when ideas needed further clarification. We recognised similarities in our experiences and how we embedded these in our lives and in how we were expressing them now. As we began to consider that others in our situation might have feelings and experiences similar to ours, we thought that it would be important to share, in Fraser's words, 'our predicament', even though this would be

demanding because of self-exposure. But, as Sheila suggested, our process and the experience could perhaps provide a structure for peer support beyond ourselves.

A Word about Dialogue

The content of this paper has emerged out of our interactions with one another, and each of us has been surprised by the transcript of the conversations, thinking that this would not have been what we would have said had the questions been posed in an e-mail seeking a written response. We were influenced by the work of a number of authors in the field of dialogue, including especially Paulo Freire, David Bohm and Peter Senge. Bohm (2004) says dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which attention to notice can be given. This provides an opportunity to mirror back to the participants both the content of the ideas and also the way these are presented.

Our conversations contained all the elements suggested by Bohm: suspending judgement, paying attention, listening, and enabling the free play of thought. By engaging in this process, deeper and more subtle meanings began to emerge and new understandings came about. Fraser was interested in the work of Isaacs (1999) and especially the emphasis on dialogue being something you do with people, where you seek to reach new understandings, uncover shared meanings and form a new basis for thinking and action. We think we were engaged in a mix of dialogue and conversation as we considered new ways of thinking about a future after full-time employment, about the notion of retirement and our process, which has had an end result in this paper, has brought about some resolution.

A Medley of Similarities

It wasn't long into our first conversation before we discovered common ground in our professional lives. Sheila and Fraser have spent considerable time working in Glasgow, Fraser in the voluntary sector and in the former Jordanhill College, Sheila in childcare, and both share core values about making a contribution and a difference to people's lives. Our backgrounds have been in education, social work, training, informal and community education and the university/academy. We have all in different ways also been involved in projects in Dundee and its surrounding areas and

this is where Bernadette first met Fraser and then Sheila in 1988. It seemed strange to us as we were meeting about our work that more and more of the former regional council headquarters Tayside House was being removed layer by layer in 2012/2013 as part of the regeneration of the waterfront in Dundee, and that all three of us worked in that building, each of us in different roles but connected around topics, issues and projects in Dundee.

Sheila remarked on the significance of gaining empowerment in her own life and on the difference it can make to others when groups and communities are empowered by providing them with the knowledge and skilled facilitation to enable a release of their own potential. She said that Freire switched on a light for her, the ideas about letting change emerge slowly of its own momentum with little pushes on the way, opening up a path. Fraser informed us about his involvement with organising youth clubs and how this led to his youth and community work course which opened up another dimension about recognising the strength of folk coming together and influencing change. For Bernadette, the catalyst was her awakening of political consciousness when she was a student in 1968, and then her subsequent work in a housing department where she was exposed to seeing conditions that she had first read about in Charles Booth's classic studies of poverty. Her values were about seeing that justice would be done.

In our first conversation we discovered that there were common experiences between us in the paths we had taken and in our ideas about respect, empowerment and justice. Although each of us has been involved in the learning environment for a significant part of our professional lives we were not sure that learning was something that drove us in our early stages. For Sheila empowerment was an important concept. Fraser said that for him early on, it was more about social contact between people, Bernadette thought for her it was about fairness.

Our Work - Our Lives!

Each of us spoke about how much our work was our lives and how we were having difficulty with the current concern of a work-life balance and, especially for each of us, with the notion of retirement.

One of our conversations was almost entirely about work-life balance and whether or not this had any meaning for us. Sheila said that once she became involved in voluntary work and community initiatives, for example her work with the housing association where she wanted to improve conditions, in effect 'I became a community activist and that became my work'. She went on to say that this 'was about my own beliefs, and work became about my beliefs, and you can't change your beliefs at 5 o'clock at night'. She wasn't sure about the concept of work-life balance in relation to herself, saying 'at times my work has been my life, it has been about living my beliefs'. She concluded with the thought that being retired made it difficult to find that sense of balance once again. Even though Fraser expressed his ideas on this slightly differently from Sheila, there was a similarity as he said that the notion of work-life balance was a false dichotomy and that for him it was more about work and leisure having a balance in your life; but he was not sure that he could say this is the way it happened for him as work was so much of a passion, so enjoyable that he did not consider it as work. Bernadette suggested that the idea of work and life in balance indicated that these were two distinct features of a person's life and she did not think this was the case in reality. For her, work-life balance was more about harmonious relationships which could then contribute to an overall emotional well-being leading her to feel well in her life.

We explored the purpose and meaning of our work and addressed a question about stewardship and minding: 'who is going to be taking care of what we have been doing and who is taking care of the values, ideas and pieces of work?' Fraser suggested that we must identify what it is that we need to take care of. Bernadette suggested that it is hard to pin down what this might be, as all of our work is so much connected with our own characteristics, our own approach. She said that 'we need to put in the missing pieces, the rhythm of our work, the set pieces of the work emerge when we

are talking, but we are not capturing the story'; and she did not mean this in a chronological way, but 'how our work was held together, how we made it happen, nurtured it, the ethos, the little bits that pulled it together to make it a whole in relation to each of us – how can that element feature, so that it is not about the stewardship of a piece of work, but rather how can the spirit of the person who had developed the work, still continue?'. Sheila asked 'what are the essences that we would like to have carried forward?' and 'what are the ones that we have carried forward?' She continued by saying that to a large extent and even though we have left institutions, people there are carrying out pieces of our work, so we have left something behind, 'like a perfume whose scent lingers after you have gone'.

Fraser provided a concept from the rethinking in religious groupings and the 'ressourcement movement' of twentieth century theology. He said this means 'spring, the source of water and a returning to the sources and thus renewal'. He suggested this was used to signify meaning and purpose, and this movement considered where is this all coming from, why are we doing what we do, who are we part of in history? This influenced his thinking and ideas about finishing the work, with people who followed in our footsteps shouting 'finish the work' and then crying to the next generation 'finish our work' and we are all part of a long historical movement'. Later on Fraser clarified that the work is the greater challenge for us as human beings in this society and that our work hopefully contributes to creating a better place, taking society forward in the face of significant challenges and with people who share a similar view cooperating together.

Returning to that conversation we considered that this era for us now is about 'pausing and considering what is the work we want to finish, how might we hand it over to others, how could it continue to be nurtured with each generation keeping the story alive bringing it into the next age, thus enabling the cycle to continue. Fraser said, 'our job is to keep remembering it and telling its story, making it stronger and then cry "finish our work" hoping that this will be taken up. It is an existential force in history, you cannot take it any further, this is what you are stewarding and you believe, rather than hope, that it will happen'.

Conclusion

We return to the beginning in our conclusion and the inspiration provided by Senge and his co-authors – also the practice of dialogue embedded in our process. Our conversations were meaningful, provided insights about the power of listening, hearing and providing space for thoughts to emerge as words – yet, we felt we could have gone further, taken our process in a new direction, even perhaps emerging with a renewed concept of retirement. But for now, it might be sufficient for the emotions to have been stirred and given time to settle, then a further phase either in our own small group or with others could happen to move things on – to develop a new vision for retirement. We are reminded of the ideas of one of the interviewees in Presence in discussion with others raising the suggestion about a type of learning in which the future becomes more active: ‘Learning based on the past suffices when the past is a good guide to the future. But it leaves us blind to profound shifts when whole new forces shaping change arise’ (2010 (reprint): 86). With that we conclude, for now.

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Note

Bernadette dedicates her part in writing this to Ian McGowan, wonderful mentor.