

Chapter Four: Deepening Professional Understanding II

Introduction

In this chapter my understandings of my living theory of responsibility, movement, engagement, withdrawal and self care deepen. I include, as part of this thesis, a paper I wrote in early 2003 on the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Jones, 2003a; Lord Laming, 2003), because it represents an ‘epiphany’ in my thinking about key issues concerning ‘distance’ and ‘relation’ with children who might be abused: I emphasise the importance of emotions in hypothesis formulation and pose the crucial empathic question, which acts as a potential bridge to the Other, such as an abused child: “If I feel like this, what is it like for this child living here?” I adopt a participatory world-view in which the immediate environment is sensed using both mind and body.

I link feelings to responsibility, and the imperative to act. Competence, conceived of in this way, builds on the dynamism of ‘whole person in action’ competence used in an earlier paper on ‘professional artistry’, referred to in Chapter One (Jones, 1995b). This requires an attentive, 100% focused practice when engaging with the family, and the child in particular; reflection in and on action (Schön 1987, 1991); and awareness of the right response or responses, both in the moment and afterwards.

However writing these words on the page does not quite convey the sense of priority, and complexity of decision making that might be necessary to respond appropriately. I reflect again on self care, this time the process of writing the Climbié paper itself; and I use story to show the *feeling* of entering the home of an abused child as I leave the comparative safety of my car. This was Graham’s home, the child whose chronology of neglect and isolation I included in Chapter One. Finally I discuss the difficulty I had in relating to one particularly traumatic narrative of Graham’s at a time when I least wanted to hear it, and what I learnt about the nature of my response.

The second half of the chapter focuses on a different type of work in children’s services – assessing potential applicants to foster and adopt. In contrast to child protection, this work is seen by some as “a bit cushy” and done by members of the “Laura Ashley Brigade” or the “Cardigan Squad”! The stereotype relates to upper/middle class social workers working with upper/middle class childless couples who want to adopt working class children. However, the assessment issues are every bit as challenging and can raise complex emotional issues, around attachment, grief, loss and change for all the different parties – adopters, children, birth parents and social workers.

I use my framing of and practice on the study to show how I begin working with emergence as an action researcher. As part of this emergence, the study invites me to consider my father’s influence on my life, which I discuss in Chapters Five and Six entitled ‘Of love and loss II’ and ‘Of love and loss III’. I also raise concerns about the dissemination and implementation of the study’s findings.

The Climbié Inquiry: what being ‘mindful’ in child protection really means in practice ⁹

The long-awaited report of the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié was published on 28th January 2003. Lord Laming’s report comes thirty years after the death of Maria Colwell, another child ‘tortured to death by her carers’; and follows 70 previous public inquiries into ‘child protection tragedies’.¹ It runs to over 400 pages and contains 108 recommendations. This article begins by looking at the focus of criticism in the report and Lord Laming’s proposals for structural change. It then considers the implications for practice, in particular what being ‘mindful’ in child protection actually means in practice for the staff themselves and for the organisations that employ them.

Victoria’s Brief History

Victoria Climbié came to England with her great-aunt, Marie Therese Kouao in April 1999. Within a year, she was dead. On 25th February 2000, Victoria died of hypothermia at St Mary’s Hospital, Paddington. She was just eight years old and had 128 separate injuries to her body. On 12th January 2001, her great-aunt Kouao and her boyfriend, Carl Manning, were convicted of her murder. The level of cruelty experienced by Victoria was truly horrific, with daily beatings using several different implements. Her final days were spent living and sleeping in an unheated bathroom in the middle of winter, where she was bound hand and foot, lying in her own urine and faeces in a bin bag in the bath. The Independent Statutory Inquiry into her death, under the Chairmanship of Lord Laming, was set up by the Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary in April 2001.

Whilst the appalling abuse she suffered was hidden from view, what makes the case quite remarkable was that Victoria was known to three housing authorities, four social services departments, two police child protection teams, an NSPCC family centre, and two hospitals. As Lord Laming’s report says:

‘The dreadful reality was that these services knew little or nothing more about Victoria at the end of the process than they did when she was first referred to Ealing Social Services by the Homeless Persons’ Unit in April 1999. The final irony was that Haringey Social Services formally closed Victoria’s case on the very day she died.’

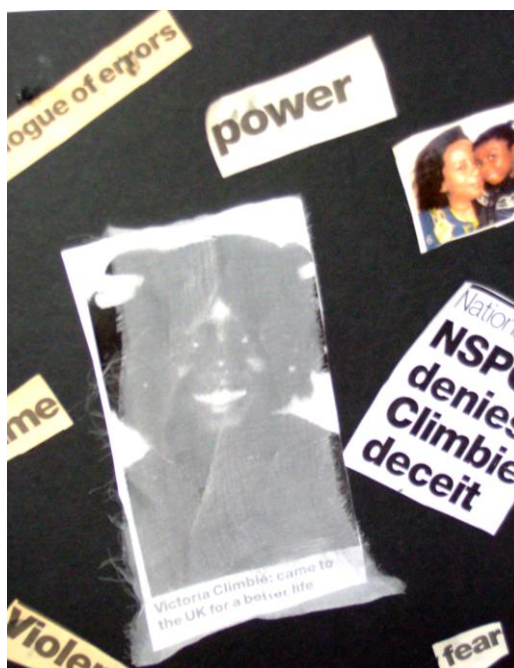
There were at least 12 key opportunities for the different agencies to intervene to prevent her maltreatment and death.

The Focus of Criticism and Key Structural Recommendations

Several of the report’s findings, especially around the lamentable way in which agencies failed to share their concerns about Victoria, and the recommendations are depressingly familiar. In chapter after chapter of the report, one gains an overwhelming sense of a vulnerable, isolated child, free-falling through professional system after professional system, all of which should have been able to assess her needs, and record and monitor them in order to protect her. Lord Laming attributes this failure to ‘widespread organisational malaise’, and departs from the usual practice of child abuse inquiry reports that normally reserve their blame for the front-line workers and their individual failings.

⁹ This paper is set out in the thesis font rather than in the quote or writings style. The image on the next page did not form part of the original paper.

In contrast, he directs his main criticism at the managers and senior members of the authorities who should have ensured that the services for children, like Victoria, were able to operate effectively. He describes the agencies in which the staff operated as 'under-funded, inadequately staffed and poorly led.'



Section on the organisational context of child protection practice in the collage with Victoria's face masked by a thin veil of cotton muslin to denote the child as object– see Figure One

In Lord Laming's opinion, the answer lies in:

'...a clear line of accountability from top to bottom, without doubt or ambiguity about who is responsible at every level for the well-being of vulnerable children...[and] managers with a clear set of values about the role of public services, particularly in addressing the needs of vulnerable people, combined with an ability to 'lead from the front'.'

At the highest level, he proposes a Children and Families Board chaired by a Cabinet minister and serviced by a national children and families agency, which will operate through a regional structure and be headed by a Children's Commissioner for England. Local authority chief executives will chair new management boards for services to children and families, which will comprise senior officers from social services, probation, the police, health and housing. These boards will:

- replace area child protection committees;
- appoint a director to oversee the development of effective inter-agency practice;
- advise on the development of services to meet local need; and
- identify the budget, contributed by each of the key agencies, to support vulnerable children and their families so that staff and resources can be used flexibly and effectively.

Boards will report to a Local Member Committee for Children and Families with lay members drawn from the management committees of each of the key services. These committees must ensure the effective inter-agency co-ordination of services for children and families. These recommendations will be given careful consideration as the Government prepares its response to the report in the form of the forthcoming green paper *Children at risk*.

What Being 'Mindful' Really Means In Practice

Whilst clear accountability from top to bottom should go some way to tackling the 'organisational malaise' referred to by Lord Laming, there are other comments on practice in the report which merit closer scrutiny. Although the absence of a 'presence of mind' to follow straightforward procedures and the need for professionals to keep an 'open mind' in assessment are mentioned, the report fails to grasp the sheer complexity of practice: what it takes to demonstrate 'respectful uncertainty' with families, and, more importantly, to be inquisitive each and every day when dealing with chronic human suffering, grief and loss. Lord Laming's somewhat simplistic answer lies in 'doing the relatively straightforward things well.' The report gets closer to the key issues when witnesses indicate their instinctive reactions to Kouao as 'forceful' and 'manipulative' and their observations of the relationship between Kouao and Victoria as lacking parental warmth. Intuitively, they were on the right lines and yet their feelings were rarely committed to paper, and, more crucially, were not tested out and followed through to a clear conclusion.

A more positive and interesting question to focus on is: faced with potentially devious and/or intimidating carers, what motivates staff to undertake skilled child-centred assessments, to liaise appropriately with other professionals, to record them fully and promptly, to follow up recommendations and monitor inconsistencies? The answer lies in using both sides of the brain and in having a clear appreciation of the influence of our feelings on reason.² This starts with reading through the file at the office, when the purpose of the visit is planned, and continues as you turn up smartly and on time so as not to be on the defensive. It remains with you as you park your car between two abandoned, wrecked vehicles; as you look at the boarded up windows of the flat you are about to visit; as the door is not answered on the first occasion and the light goes out in the stairwell, as it did to Victoria's social worker; and it ensures that you stay there and knock louder in order to gain access or pursue the referral back at the office with dogged determination. The point is that these feelings, perhaps of fear and/or intimidation, let you know that you have to fight your normal response to stressful, unpleasant situations every inch of the way. When you finally gain access to the child in the home, if you feel intimidated, then the key question to ask is, 'If I feel like this, what is it like for this child living here?'

The unequivocal focus on the child leads on to the next point, which is having a clear and enduring understanding of the seriousness of the job you and your agency are employed to do. This means ensuring that your recording is always up-to-date, and before you go home each night asking yourself the question of each and every child on your caseload, 'how would my practice be judged if X or Y or Z were to die tonight?'

What was frightening about the majority of professionals who were involved in Victoria's case was that they simply did not appreciate the seriousness and responsibility of their jobs, whether they were senior managers or front-line staff. They went through the motions of responding to a referral, in several instances failing to make an adequate record or, indeed, any record at all. The over-stretched, stressful, and sometimes unhappy working conditions may explain why they chose to engage at such a superficial level or interpret the allegations of child maltreatment as a child in need referral. If staff feel unsupported and undervalued, they are much less likely to pursue a case in the rigorous and challenging manner that is necessary.

The next area to consider is that people lie and this capacity is not restricted to service users; some lies have very serious consequences. Indeed, during the Inquiry significant inconsistencies developed in the course of some professionals giving their evidence. With regard to Kouao's deception, Victoria's social worker, did not believe she would harm Victoria: 'I am not a detective. I had no reason to question what I saw and what I was being told at that point.'

This is to miss the point of what assessment is all about. There is a growing literature on reflection, reflexivity, and the generation of multiple hypotheses around a particular case³, where a careful chronology is constructed and data are collected along different lines of inquiry, checked and corroborated if necessary, until one or two particular hypotheses win out. Research skills need to be learned or re-learned, but with the added 'feelings' dimension given careful consideration. All staff employed in child welfare/protection work need to understand the processes through which their brain, their reason and emotions acting together, have led them to a particular hypothesis and perhaps, more importantly, why others have been discounted. This is the meaning of 'mindful' practice.

Conclusion

Finally, as both carers and staff can lie, so can they under-perform, which was so tragically evident in Kouao and Manning's care of Victoria and the inability of several managers to deal with conflict and the under-performance of their staff. The workplace dynamics that Victoria's social worker experienced should not have been allowed:

'The basis of the split was the headmistress and the head girls against the social workers...It was very difficult to rebel among the schoolgirls because we were regarded as children who should be seen and not heard.'

It is small wonder then that Victoria's lowly status and silencing mirrored that of her social worker.

Whilst Lord Laming's proposals for structural change can go so far, they will not achieve the desired changes for vulnerable children unless and until all staff appreciate the serious nature of the role that they are asked to fulfil on behalf of society. In this regard, one particular finding from the Phase Two seminars deserves closer attention: a healthy workplace culture where managers listen to the concerns facing front-line staff and staff are encouraged to learn from their mistakes. What is needed is a much greater focus on the emotional health of organisations and the people within them such that people can learn from practice, and where conflict can be resolved constructively in the interests of better co-ordinated services for children and families. A healthy workplace will lead to staff feeling valued and supported so that they are able to work effectively, and, if necessary, assertively with other professionals. They will be able to demonstrate the 'inquisitiveness' and 'mindful' child-centred practice so lacking in Victoria's case.

The report identifies that:

'The future lies with those managers who can work effectively across organisational boundaries.'

However, working in the new structures will be a considerable challenge to Committee and Board members as they deal with sharing budgets, conflict and change, and other senior managers and elected members who may be as self-interested and impervious to taking responsibility as those identified in the Inquiry report itself. These senior management teams, in the words of the Inquiry report, will need to 'walk the talk' and be in touch with the issues facing front-line staff. Their leadership and emotional health will be crucial to the development of positive workplace cultures which support staff in providing quality services for vulnerable children and their families.

The report of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry is available from www.victoria-climbie-inquiry.org.uk/finreport/finreport.htm.

FOOTNOTES

1 Ferguson H., The sixth sense, *The Guardian*, 31st January (2003a)

2 See Damasio, A., *Descartes' error: emotion, reason and the human brain* (1994).

3 Sheppard, M., Social work, social science and practice wisdom. *British Journal of Social Work*, 25, pp.265-293 (1995);

Sheppard, M., Newstead, S., DiCaccavo, A., and Ryan, K., Reflexivity, and the development of process knowledge in social work: a classification and empirical study. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, pp. 465-488 (2000);

Sheppard, M., Newstead, S., DiCaccavo, A., and Ryan, K., Comparative hypothesis assessment and quasi triangulation as process knowledge in social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, pp. 863-885 (2001);

Reder, P., and Duncan, S., *Lost innocents: a follow-up of fatal child abuse* (1999).

Self care surfaces for the second time

The paper represents the foundation of my inquiry into relation with 'Otherness'; the early development of a living theory of responsibility, movement, engagement, withdrawal and self care. So far I have shown that working in the field of child abuse, and engaging with children who might be being abused is not at all easy; neither is reading or writing about it straightforward. When I read children's files as a social worker and some of the major child death inquiries (London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Greenwich, 1987; London Borough of Lambeth, 1987), I noticed that if I read late at night I could not sleep. Over and over I would replay the chronology of events and wish that the clock would stop just before the fateful incident. I found myself becoming angry with the practitioners, and yet I knew that their workplaces, like that of Victoria Climbié's social worker, were frequently unsupportive and that the professionals principally involved carried high caseloads.

When I was asked to write the 'Mindful Practice' article for *childRIGHT* in early 2003 (Jones, 2003a), the request coincided with writing my CARPP Diploma paper, a first person inquiry into a research proposal I had written on hypothesis formulation in family placement assessment (Jones, 2003b). I was aware that self care was an important issue for me so when I was approached by the journal to write the paper, I was assertive about what interested me about the Inquiry Report (Lord Laming, 2003). I indicated that I was not interested in writing a more mainstream, conventional review of the Inquiry based on propositional knowledge. Rather I wished to use an extended epistemology incorporating experiential and practical knowledge (Heron and Reason, 2001; Reason and Heron, 2001). The Editor gave me her full support and we negotiated a three week period to write the paper.

The first change I made to the way I read the Inquiry Report was to have a designated, comfortable place in my house to read it. This overlooked my garden so I was able to see nature when I wanted time out. Each evening at around 6.00pm I would put the report and my notes away in another room that I was not using at the time. This helped me manage the flow of engagement and withdrawal with the unfolding scenarios in Victoria's life. Wherever possible I tried to think myself into the positions of the main people involved, and also read many of the witness statements to the Inquiry.

At the time a neighbour who had just had a baby invited me to join her on some visits to a sensory baby room set up by local health visitors. One of the difficulties of working in the field of child abuse is that you can easily become saturated with pathology. This time I wanted to balance the brutality to Victoria by her great-aunt and her great-aunt's boyfriend, who were convicted of her murder, with seeing babies and toddlers who were

thriving in their parents' care. Visiting the sensory baby room and being with the parents and their babies in that magical space provided the normalising experience I needed to read the Inquiry and write the article. When it was published I received a lot of positive feedback.

The section of the paper on a home visit engendering feelings of fear and/or intimidation was based on the first time I encountered the home of Graham, the child whose story I introduced in Chapter One. That visit had a profound effect on me and I used it with students to discuss the importance of feelings on home visits. It was in this context that I also used the documentary of the West children.

After the CARPP Diploma paper, I started to experiment with story, which followed a long period of writing mainly for academic publication. I realised that presentational form offered a potentially more powerful way of accessing the experiential knowledge derived from feelings. Heron and Reason (1997, p. 281) describe presentational knowing as both emerging from and being grounded in experiential knowing:

It is evident in an intuitive grasp of the significance of our resonance with and imaging of our world as this grasp is symbolized in graphic, plastic, musical, vocal and verbal art forms. It clothes our experiential knowing of the world in the metaphors of aesthetic creation, in expressive spatiotemporal forms of imagery.

When I was asked to do a key note address at a safeguarding children conference in 2005, this was the essence of the story I told to access the feeling of that home visit.

Entering the Child's World¹⁰

Now it's time to join me in my boring little car on a depressingly grey and wet afternoon, where you really don't quite know what you will face:

It was damp, dull October afternoon with a veil of fine rain. As I turned off the main road onto the housing estate, I entered a labyrinth of ever smaller and rougher roads which led to deep 'pockets of deprivation', discreetly hidden from the smart cars that sped up and down the highway.

I was getting closer to the address, and as I turned the corner, my heartbeat quickened: I saw the block of flats that had '225-245' above the front door. There were three windows on the ground floor to the right of the entrance that caught my eye: one was boarded up and two had rags for curtains, which looked like they had been carefully coated in dirty chip fat. I prayed it would not be that flat.

My mouth seemed strangely dry. I needed somewhere to park. The car in front was a burnt out wreck and the one behind was abandoned. What would happen to my car, carefully chosen to be boring for this very reason? Would it still be here when I came out? I carefully parked it between the two and hoped that somehow it would dissolve into the misty greyness of the afternoon.

I gathered my recording book and other details of the case, which I had been allocated to me by the Court as the child's Guardian ad litem. A quick glance at my watch told me I had a minute or two to go until the appointed time: it was essential not to be late. Lateness can put you on 'the back foot' as you start by

¹⁰ Some factual details have been changed to match the anonymised chronology in Chapter One and protect the identity of Graham. The learning from the home visit is unchanged.

apologising to the carer(s); it also signifies a lack of respect. Deep breath out. A further glance at the watch and it's time to go. Another deep breath out.

A brisk walk down the concrete path with worn patches of grass on either side, dotted with discarded cigarette ends; I enter the hall of the flats. In that moment I catch the number of the flat on the battered door. It is that flat. A quick glance around the grey concrete stairwell and I scan the graffiti on the wall to the left of the door, "Harold is a wanker".

So why is Harold a wanker according to the author of the scrawl?

He is the child's father and the person I have come to see.

The battered door has what looks like dog shit smeared over it; and I have to knock on it. A feeling of revulsion and dread wells up in the pit of my stomach.

My lips and mouth are now completely dry and taste like cardboard. I brace myself. Somewhat gingerly, I knock the door going for the cracked dirty cream paintwork between the brown crescent-shaped smears. The lesser of two evils, perhaps?

Darkness as the light in the stairwell goes out. Silence from the flat inside.

A sigh of relief, albeit temporary; my shoulders drop slightly. A temporary thought flashes across my brain: "Thank goodness there's nobody in; I could leave right now and wouldn't have to do the visit." It's tempting but I've been here before: "Jocelyn, you need to stick it out."

So there is no easy escape into the relative safety of my boring little car.

I press the switch in the hall again. The light comes on. I sense that there is somebody in. Are they pretending to be out?

I knock louder. A shuffling sound from inside. Some muffled voices. The door opens slowly an inch or two and I introduce myself. Identification is demanded of me. Strange? This is the first time I've ever been asked for ID and I had sent a letter on headed stationery in advance and I'm exactly on time. Anyhow, it's no problem and I am permitted a view down the corridor to the room where the voices are coming from.

There is no light bulb in the corridor and a thick, yellow smoky haze is all that can be seen at the end. I panic. As an asthma sufferer, the thought of sitting in a smoke-filled room with those strangers brings still more dread. Will I be able to breathe? Why are they there?

The short walk down the dark corridor feels like a descent into another, as yet unknown world. All my natural instincts are telling me to get the hell out of here. And yet I have to fight them every inch of the way, whilst not directly exposing myself to overt danger. I ask Harold to lead the way so that my exit is clear.

The sitting room, if that's what you would call it, is overwhelmingly a dirty yellow brown and smoke-filled. The wallpaper is torn and there are brown smears which look like shit all over it at a child's height. The once beige synthetic carpet is matted together into a dirty blackness: years of ingrained filth have found their niche and give a sticky matt black charcoal finish in the most worn areas. Between Harold's armchair and the fire and in the fire there is a light dusting of cigarette ash. Hasn't anybody pointed out that the fire is electric coal effect, not the real thing?

So I am directed to the brown plastic sofa next to a woman with false teeth and shrunken gums, probably in her late thirties. The sofa plastic has been shredded and sticks into the back of my thighs. I am beginning to feel sore after

only a few minutes. How long can I endure this? I want to leave, but I cannot and will not: I have a job to do.

And so the verbal assault on me starts, perhaps even intimidation. A concerted effort from the pair of them to get me to back off and to force my gaze towards the adult agenda: "How dreadful of them police and social services to take my Graham away to that children's home."

Well, I think to myself, he is only eight, has learning difficulties and a history of neglect and was found at the home of a convicted paedophile, a near neighbour.

Eventually, the woman gets bored and leaves after saying her piece. She lives just down the road with another convicted sex offender.

Now it's just the two of us.

I notice the way Harold wheezes and hobbles every time I move to the child's agenda. He's in his sixties and makes sure I am fully aware of his seemingly endless list of health problems. When I start focusing on him and his problems, the wheezing, spluttering and staggering miraculously stop. Interesting. There is some stage-managing going on here.

Yes, Graham did smear on the walls, but predictably it's all the child's fault: "He's a bugger, you know."

I force myself to look around the rest of the flat. The kitchen has plates piled up to shoulder height in the sink. Scraps of mouldy food wedged to white plastic. A frying pan with a cooked egg immortalised in a solid white fat speckled with black flecks of burnt food from a prior age.

The bath is filled with soiled clothes. The white of pyjama stripes barely discernable in a brown putrid soup. The edge of the toilet is cracked. I dare not even look.

The beds have no sheets or pillows on them, just dirty eiderdowns.

The first visit almost done. I linger a moment longer. I feel dreadful. If I feel like this, what do I think it was like for Graham living here for eight years of his life? Graham, whose mother died of pneumonia on that very bed when he was just five.

Remember this.

As I leave, my mind is full. Of intimidation, of manipulation, of poverty and deprivation, of child neglect, of possible child sexual abuse and just who is this man who says he's Graham's father?

There is darkness outside now, but I can breathe again. The cool of the rain and the freshness of the damp air hit my face. My exit is clear: nobody seems to have tampered with my boring little car.

The backs of my sore thighs sink with relief into the synthetic smoothness of the driver's seat. The engine starts and I speed away onto the main road. So for a few days, I leave behind what was Graham's home for a world that is more familiar. I return to the giggles and capers of my two daughters in their nightclothes, fresh from their bath. An early evening disco in front of the open fire in a 'normal' front room, soft shadows dancing on the walls in the warm glow of the flickering heat.

After story and bedtime, I record more details of the visit. The question uppermost in my mind, the question I need to answer is: What was it like for

Graham to live in that flat in that neighbourhood with sex offenders as his near neighbours? Other questions surface and buzz around my brain: Why was this child not removed earlier? What did the various professionals involved think they were doing? What does Graham understand about his mother and her death . . . at home? Why didn't his alleged father seek medical help for his mother when she was seriously ill? Is this man really his father or did he seek to exploit the vulnerability of Graham's mother, a woman with learning difficulties who had already lost her twin daughters to social services because the children's father was a Schedule one offender?

Reflection

Whenever I tell this story to a professional audience, there is always a giggle right round the room when I describe my internal dialogue around the first knock on the door, and the temptation to disappear as fast as I could 'into the safety of my boring little car'. Virtually all practitioners have been there, perhaps slightly 'off-colour' that day or pressed for time or just plain scared. And yet, it is very difficult to reveal vulnerability, the effects of stress, or plain disgust about a family home within a 'caring' profession such as social work. This point is well made by Tony Morrison (Morrison, 1990, p.255): 'Many of the fundamental survival messages have been along the lines of 'don't feel, be strong, don't admit mistakes and coping is professional' . . . It is precisely these messages that create added stress to staff.' More recently, Harry Ferguson reflects on the dynamics in the Climbié case, and argues that the psychological and emotional aspects of child protection work require organisational climates that support workers 'to take care of body and soul' (Ferguson, 2005, p.794).

Presentational form, as this story shows, can take us much deeper into experiential knowledge of the type that is rarely found in text books on social work or child protection practice. Winter et al. (1999, p.180) discuss the importance of the creative imagination within professional education: 'We possess a general capacity for representing our experience in artistic form; we suggest that in order to realise our capacity for reflection we can (and should) draw upon our intuitive grasp of aesthetic processes as well as our capacity for conceptual and logical analysis'.

It was talking about this home visit and then the process of writing a story about it over 10 years later that made me more consciously aware of how I used my emotions and senses in an assessment of a child's circumstances. How the rational part of my mind was influenced, frequently for the better, by really 'feeling' a child's circumstances (see Figure One for the visual representation of this learning).

My heightened level of consciousness, fuelled by what I had seen, smelt, tasted, heard and felt, propelled me into a deep concern for Graham, as a vulnerable and neglected child who had been largely invisible to previous professionals: 'Consciousness is, in effect, the key to a life examined . . . at its most complex and elaborate level, consciousness helps us develop a concern for other selves and improve the art of life' (Damasio, 2000, p.5).

At the end of the visit I came away with a determination to 'get to the bottom' of Graham's circumstances and to understand why none of the professionals had intervened earlier. You may recall in Chapter One how I asked the key practitioners how they each felt about visiting his home. They replied that they hated going there, more so than any other house.

I formed a close relationship with Graham, where he started to reveal some of the experiences he had witnessed. I now see this relationship as based on Martin Buber's twofold attitude to being. An attitude to relation that comes from a fragmented sense of self Buber calls I-It. This is where a person, for whatever reasons, distances her/himself

from the other. The interpersonal is characterised by a stress on difference. In the I-You mode of existence the interpersonal is permeated: 'This constitutes a movement to relation and establishes in the interpersonal space a quality Buber refers to as "the between". "The between" then, belongs to the I-You relation' (Avnon, 1993, p.57). Buber also develops the notion of the "basic word"; "basic words" project into the external world the state of a person's inner being. As such they reflect the underlying attitude or inner state of a person as they enunciate rather than merely the words s/he utters (Avnon, 1993).

However the I-You attitude to relation cannot be kept up indefinitely. People move between states of being, between fragmentation and inner unity. Buber draws a distinction between two different attitudes to being: the "ego oriented I" and the "person oriented I":

For an ego oriented I, self-knowledge is knowledge of a limited, partial aspect of one's existence yet considering it the whole; for the person-oriented I, self-knowledge is knowledge of self as being. The person-oriented I is one who can shift from an erroneous perception of him- or herself as the center of being, to a recognition of relation as the center of being. (Avnon 1993, p.58)

During one session with Graham, which happened to be on my birthday, he started to describe and draw a violent scene which he had witnessed. As he talked and drew vigorously using mainly a thick red pen, I was aware of the energy between us and in the room as I helped him tell me what had happened. After what seemed a long time to me, although perhaps not longer than an hour or so, I began wishing that Graham would become tired thus bringing the session to a natural close. I had reached saturation point: it was my birthday after all and a celebration awaited. I wanted to go home.

I motioned to Graham that perhaps it was time to start putting things away, but he said "You're not going. Want you to play." ¹¹ I realised that birthday or no birthday I had to stay to help ease him out of the traumatic experience he had described. I regretted upon that occasion holding the session in his bedroom at the Children's Home, because he had to sleep in that space after I left him, alone with the memories of what he had told me. This was one of the first times when I really appreciated the importance of the right physical space to promote relation and yet provide safe boundaries for me and the other person.

For various reasons prior to the Care Order being granted, Graham was not placed with foster parents, and yet finding, assessing and supporting foster carers and adopters is vital: looked after children (or children in care), like Graham, often have complex needs due to earlier child abuse and neglect and deserve the very best subsequent start in life.

Towards the end of 2002, as a result of a student on the post qualifying programme enthusing about the teaching session on hypothesis formulation using the West children documentary (BBC 1, 1995) and Graham's story, I was asked to put together a proposal to improve the quality of family placement (foster carer and adopter) assessments in a council's social services department. This was written about three months prior to the Mindful Practice paper (Jones, 2003a). The proposal was based on my interest in the use of qualitative research methods and hypothesis formulation in assessing children and families, and formed part of the Diploma transfer paper 'What lies beneath a research proposal' (Jones, 2003b). It brought together my desire to be facilitate a Cooperative

¹¹ Quote taken from my contemporaneous notes of the interview.

Inquiry group with first person reflection on the text highlighted in bold within the proposal (see Appendix Two).

Looking at the proposal again now some four years later, it seems conservatively expressed, for example, I did not make reference to the sensory nature of social work assessments, to intuition or to the extended epistemology of action research. At the time I was still working as an academic and I perhaps took refuge in more familiar, and as I saw it then, 'respectable' territory to argue the case for the study. However, I note how I ensured the care of participants in the study, and included ethical guidelines for data collection and storage.

The project took a long time to be approved and I had lost attachment to it after the Diploma paper, because the process of first person inquiry around the proposal had significantly increased my awareness of epistemological and ontological questions; my ethical orientation in the world; and matters which required deeper inquiry and which I address in later 'Of love and loss' chapters (see Chapters Five and Six). Although I still wanted to do the project I was accepting of a 'No' decision, because I was grateful to have had the opportunity to write the Diploma paper around the key issues within the proposal.

In the middle of 2003 the project was approved for an autumn start. However, this coincided with the beginning of a period of substantial transition for me when my job came under threat of redundancy, something I had never imagined could or would ever happen to me. For the seven or so months of uncertainty until I left academic life, my confidence was very low; I used two different mentors to support me during the early stages of the project. It was when I left the regulated world of academia in 2004 that I began to open up to emergence more fully within a participatory worldview.

During January 2004, part way through the project, I made one key change to promote increased ownership of findings; this was to co-facilitate the two focus groups, one with approved foster carers and the other with approved adopters. Two members of the action research group, both of whom had no previous involvement with those in the focus groups, put themselves forward, and we arranged to meet at the end of February. This coincided with a long awaited break just after I had left academia.

First steps in embracing emergence

It was just three weeks after I had been made redundant. Within 24 hours of the settlement I went down with flu after months of holding myself together, feeling the tension of bracing myself every day as I faced the unknown. My body was crying out to be taken care of. But more than that I was beginning to reclaim my self from 15 years working as a university academic, where I had fitted my experiential knowledge into an accepted theoretical discourse for peer review journals.

Given the unprecedented stress I had been under and the financial insecurity I was facing as a single parent, I am only too well aware that my story at that time could have easily degenerated into a chaos narrative where I became more unwell. Through a process of what Frank (1995, p. 65) calls 'reflexive monitoring', where the past and the present are continually readjusted to create a coherent self story, I started to sew the seeds of a healing quest narrative referred to earlier (Frank, 1995). So towards the end of February 2004 I took myself off for a few days. The journey did not start well: I was already late

leaving home and had not bought the right map of the route. Now I was travelling in the darkness of early evening across unfamiliar terrain.

25th February 2004, written 27th February.

I got lost on a tiny single carriageway lane as a crescent moon darkness descended on the landscape, and then took at least three other wrong turns before I found the tiny lane leading to the house. I was cross with myself for being so disorganised: arriving in the dark is not a good idea when you've never been in the area before. And then something amazing happened. A grey shape flew low over my car: an owl. But this time it stopped and then flew even lower over the hedgerow to my right, just two to three metres from my car; stationery from time to time, hovering over some petrified mammal or bird below, and perfectly illuminated in the full beam of my headlights. After a couple of minutes it disappeared and then returned even closer into the bright light of the headlamps . . .

If I hadn't been so disorganised, I might never have seen that owl. Perhaps I was meant to experience the chaos of that beautiful early evening, of taking risks and it not quite turning out as I had planned. And then in the end experiencing something very special, which I would not have seen if I had left on time and, with a good map, arrived in daylight.

Is this a metaphor for facilitation in cooperative inquiry?

As ever I had planned to do too much that night by way of preparation for the meeting with Helen and Kate, the two family placement workers: we were due to meet the next morning to discuss how we would facilitate the sessions with the foster carers and adopters. I had not had enough time to read the three research reviews on adoption and foster care thoroughly, and then Helen arrived half an hour early.

26th February 2004, written 27th February

I didn't have time to see if there should be any questions arising from them [the research reviews] that we should be asking foster carers and adopters. Again things hadn't quite gone according to plan so I had to think carefully how we, rather than I, could glean information from the research reviews. Helen and I chatted and I gave her the review on adoption to flick through while I read the draft foster care review. Kate arrived. She was tense and apologised for having to keep her mobile on for a while to receive an important call. Two or three phone calls later the phones were switched off and we started to talk. Stories about cases and how they recorded their thoughts and feelings emerged. I gradually stopped feeling so responsible (and guilty) and realised that this task could be shared with Helen and Kate. They were pleased to have the reviews and suggested copying them for the three [geographical] areas [represented in the group]. And then we discussed the co-facilitation; the conversation moved around a bit, but there was a flow, with the energy of chaos at times, [and yet it was effortless]. As we meandered in dialogue, we covered all the areas we needed to cover. Was this another sign that I should trust in the process of dialogue and exchange? That out of what seems like chaos and being out of control, good things emerge: ideas, plans and owls hunting in the darkness.

That meeting with Helen and Kate in that place was a turning point in my understanding of process, dialogue and ownership: I had started the process of loosening tightly held beliefs about having a defined agenda and maintaining control; a new way seeing, inquiring and acting was beginning to emerge (Rudolph, Taylor and Goody, 2001).

That afternoon I slept, and in the evening I quietly observed my surroundings:

26th February 2004

It's a long time since I've experienced a sunset; really experienced it. To watch the beauty unfolding and the light and landscape changing minute by minute is a meditation on the beauty of the universe. So I sat and watched for half an hour, an hour, I don't know, as the light gradually left this patch of the world to be shared with others. And then I did half an hour of yoga, stretching and relaxing my body at the end of the day.

And so to bed . . . the delight of leaving the blinds open so that I could see the stars twinkling in the dark, clear sky . . . and in the morning waking to horizontal blizzards along the river . . .

The next morning I put on my boots, fleece and anorak to walk in the snow: my body pushing against the power of the wind in one direction, the snow flakes icy and sharp as they pressed into my cheeks; and then as I returned along the river bank, the wind gripping round my back like a vice and propelling me forward. Once again in a special wild place, I sensed the importance of my connection with nature, being blown about by the wind, and embracing the unexpected:

As we return to our senses, we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies – supported, that is, not just by ourselves, but by icy streams tumbling down granite slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind. (Abram 1996, p. 65)

I returned from that short break with a new found sense of confidence in my ability to be receptive to emergence and the natural world around me. I resumed practising yoga regularly again, incorporating additional breathing exercises to support and focus my facilitation practice in the second half of the project (Agombar, 1999).

During the co-facilitation of the focus groups with foster carers and adopters, Helen, Kate and I began to discover how workers deal with their emotions when placing looked after children in permanent placements.

Mapping the emotional terrain of family placement assessment

One of the key findings of the family placement assessment study was the way social workers negotiate the object/ subject divide in relation to the children they are seeking to place. In order to distance themselves from the child as a person and their particular life history and pain, they objectify him/her.

This objectification of the children was summed up in a conversation between the adopters in their focus group:

It's just about the way the children . . . are discussed.

Yes. As if they're cars or they're objects. I mean social workers . . . can't get emotionally tied to children because it would destroy them . . .

It's like a second hand car really. You know "If this child isn't the one for you, you can say no and we won't hold it against you."

Yes . . . it was a bit of a shock really . . . how the children were almost described . . . I mean foster carers were absolutely brilliant, but it's as if they weren't personalities. But I suppose they're not, I suppose they're not to the social workers, they can't be.

When we think of children, we think of little children you know, not objects. It's possibly like being a doctor or surgeon. (Jones, 2004, p. 16)

As I have mentioned previously, many looked after children have had troubled or abusive childhoods which can create particularly challenging or disturbed behaviour. There is also the question of reading about the childhoods of these children as they unfold in their files, (see, for example, Graham's chronology in Chapter One). These factors, taken together, can erect defensive barriers in which practitioners simply go 'through the motions' rather than really engage with the child and her/his circumstances.

Conducting the adult attachment interview (George, Kaplan and Main, 1985) with applicants similarly impacted on the personal lives of some of the family placement workers; these interviews assessed the applicants' attachment style to generate a better fit between them and the child (Howe et al, 1999; Bifulco, 2002). As applicants' childhood memories of their relationships with their own parents were probed, workers struggled to maintain their own professional boundaries: the subject-object divide was crossed as the act of the asking the questions pierced the normal defences each worker had in place. One practitioner put it this way:

I said to my husband I just feel like I've been eaten alive, I need some space, so just gave myself space doing the chores and other things I needed to do. And just space out, like I sat in the car park here, I arrived early to at least dictate half of that visit . . . But that's not recognised in our work that we need space after a home visit and space to offload. (Jones, 2004, p. 26)

The consequences of mismatching a child with adopters, referred to as a disruption or placement breakdown, were agreed as potentially devastating and had the power to numb a worker's emotions. Several practitioners spoke about their concerns when a placement broke down:

. . . For the first time I've had this breakdown of the introduction of an eight month old baby with a childless couple. And I'm just absolutely gob-smacked. I couldn't have foreseen this coming . . . any way . . . which way . . . I couldn't believe it could happen. (Jones, 2004, p. 22)

Could I just say about disruptions generally that the impact on you as a worker if you have them or if you have more than one quickly because . . . it's a time when you need . . . an awful lot of support because you do look to yourself, you do blame yourself, you do feel a lot of guilt and it's a very difficult position to be in, to support people. And actually you might be quite angry with them and upset with them. And if they haven't been honest with you or truthful with you that hurts as well.

How I've coped with it is I've spent less time in the office . . . I'm doing that extra bit at home so I'm just away from the pressure and the hassle. And I'm working slower there's no doubt about it, I've got people I should've contacted yonks ago and I haven't . . . So you actually have to . . . take the time yourself, don't you?

Another person said they "crawled into a corner". (Jones, 2004, p. 32)

Their words reinforce the earlier point I have made about the importance of self care in this kind of work and support to manage professional engagement where the 'Other' is reached but not at personal expense. Where a person is unsupported, work can become psychologically consuming. Fineman (2003, p. 145) refers to this condition as a state of burnout: 'a condition of physical and emotional exhaustion combined with feelings of hopelessness and futility about work'. In my experience, this reaction to stress is common in social work. It explains why workers often have higher sickness records than other local authority staff, and go 'through the motions' of home visits: to engage with chronic human pain and suffering on a daily basis would challenge any one of us.

Ethical issues

Within the proposal I had addressed the main ethical issues relating to group members (see Appendix Two), but I had perhaps underestimated how applicants might view their family relationships, defined by social workers and in the public domain. Prior to publication of the report I took particular care, through the family placement workers, to ensure that the two male applicants, whose relationships with their mothers came under scrutiny by the practitioners, were content for their relationships to be described in this way. The relevant sections of the report are included below:

One member of the group had received training on the AAI [Adult Attachment Interview]; and she reported back on how she had used the five memories exercise with a couple: each person was asked to give five adjectives to describe their relationship with each parent. The male applicant struggled with this task and the FPW [Family Placement Worker] was given vague words to describe his mother; this was in sharp contrast to the female applicant's memory of her childhood relationships with her parents. The FPW decided to conclude the AAI interview at that point and take it up again on the next visit. On this visit she moved onto other areas: significant previous relationships and present relationship. She then moved back into the AAI on a subsequent visit starting with, "How has childhood influenced the kind of person you are today?" and then asked, "Why do you think your parents behaved the way that they did?" This generated valuable information from the female applicant, where she reflected on her parents' marriage and family relationships. The male applicant became much more engaged and, just as the FPW was leaving, "dropped in" that his mother had had a breakdown, which had not been mentioned during the individual history gathering. The FPW returned two days later to probe more deeply. The information she gained offered an insight into family relationships around the time he was eleven years old, and generated different hypotheses to explain the relationship between him and his mother, her breakdown, his behaviour at the time and if it was a problem now. Her view was that the issue was now irrelevant, but had the couple shared this information and should she include the information in the report? If so, how might it be viewed by others reading it? Could it be wrongly construed and therefore potentially stigmatising?

The FPW used her supervision sessions to address these questions. The detail of the male applicant's early history was not included in the final report as it was not felt to be of relevance now; in addition the FPW was able to confirm that his partner was well aware of his early and subsequent history. She confirmed that she had known about this beforehand.

The FPW thought that the AAI had helped her understand the male applicant's avoidant attachment; she found that sometimes it was more difficult to access the emotional, reflective side of men, who frequently remembered activities with a parent such as fishing, but not a lot else . . . Following this feedback others have been encouraged to experiment with this tool. One FPW used it very effectively with another male applicant to find out about his relationship with his mother:

'I tried the five adjectives and it was quite interesting because the male partner had a very sort of closed off view of his mother because of his experiences as a child. She was quite distant and . . . they lived on a sheep station . . . [on another continent] and they moved back to England. But his mother was originally from [the other continent] and I think by the sounds of it was culturally isolated. She'd gone from like a . . . rural, in the middle of nowhere space to . . . a country that . . . operates differently. And she had mental health problems and she was so, therefore . . . distanced and flat in her emotion towards the children . . . His parents . . . divorced and the children chose to go and live with their father until the time they went to boarding school . . . Unfortunately his mother died last year and . . . he was disappointed in his relationship with his mother, he, you know it was more he went to see her out of a duty and not out of a love or a compassion for her as she got older and . . . more ill. And it opened all of that up, those five adjectives, it was just really useful.'

But the FPW urged caution in where to place the tool in the interview:

' . . . I didn't do it as a first off, I did their individual history gathering, then I did that. So I'd actually got lots of information about childhood, mum, dad, granny, granddad, all the other stuff you gather and then I did the questions. And that actually gave me a mental map of where they were to start with and it gave them sufficient time to be in the frame of mind to be thinking on that area. So although the questions themselves came as a bit of "Oh," because they need to be, it's supposed to be a surprise to the unconscious, the questions. They were actually mentally in that space in time and thinking about their past, their childhoods, their family experiences . . .' (Jones 2004, pp. 25-27)

Although I had the informed consent of all the applicants whose assessments were discussed in the group, I was aware that the report was going to be in the public domain and the men would recognise the discussions about their relationships even though they had been anonymised and other key identifying characteristics changed. I asked the two practitioners to check the draft extracts of the report with the men prior to publication. In both instances they were content with how their relationships with their mothers had been described. For something personally as important this, I, as the person responsible for the well-being of all participants in the study, even those I had not met, needed to act in their interests. As Reason and Torbert (2001, p.6) remind us: ' . . . We would argue that the most significant question any human being faces is not how to construct and deconstruct formal research projects and texts, but rather how to act in daily life, whether or not the questions or the

evidence is clear'. This theme of 'right' action in the moment is one which I will return to in the remaining chapters of the thesis when I consider meanings of response and responsibility [response-ability] within my living theory.

Reflection on response to findings

As an action researcher I was disappointed with the response of the commissioning council to the family placement study's findings. There was a one-off dissemination event built into the study design, which was co-hosted with members of the inquiry group. A number of the key messages indicated the need for a more child-centred and co-ordinated inter-agency & intra-agency effort to meet the needs of the council's most vulnerable children & young people, and yet after the dissemination event the impetus at middle and senior management levels seemed to tail off despite ongoing enthusiasm and commitment from members of the action research group. The manager who had commissioned the study left to go to another position towards the end of the project and the person who took over from her as Chair of the Advisory Group retired around the time the report was published. I knew, from a previous piece of research, that the departure of key personnel part way through a project could jeopardise confidence in the study and how the findings were responded to. Despite phone conversations and email correspondence with the new manager, I was unable to influence how the findings from the study were responded to and most importantly *acted* upon to improve services to looked after children & young people who are fostered and/or adopted. The concluding paragraph of the report indicates some of my frustration at this lack of action:

Implementation and Dissemination

The Advisory group has operated at the interface between the Project and the Department. Thus far it has played a pivotal role in discussing and acknowledging the messages contained in this study at the interim stage. It is now timely for an Implementation group, involving senior management, to perhaps replace the Advisory Group, in order to prioritise, endorse and progress the recommendations contained in the report and agree a dissemination strategy. As part of the dissemination strategy it is recommended that those members of the Inquiry group who have expressed an interest in dissemination are given the opportunity to take the project out to those who have not been directly involved with it. This is commensurate with the methodology of the project, which promotes participation and ownership of findings at local level. (Jones, 2004, p.51)

Some key learning for me was to build wider ownership at the outset of a project, and to be more assertive about what I expected from a commissioning council at the end. Why did I do participative research? There was a clear sense of accountability to the people who contributed to any project: in this case many had shared their professional and personal vulnerabilities and disappointments in narrative form. This was rich qualitative data which went beyond surface issues and had the potential to transform services for looked after children and young people. At the very least all contributors deserved to know the council's response to the study's findings.

To end

This chapter has tracked my evolving living theory of responsibility, movement, engagement, withdrawal and self care through the writing of the paper on the Victoria Climbié Inquiry; addressing the learning from Graham's story at a deeper level using presentational form; and working on the Family Placement Assessment Study. I have explored ways of approaching and thinking about assessment. I have also shown a more conscious practice as an action researcher in care of the self; how I began to work with emergence and awareness of relation with the natural environment; and how I was beginning to think about dissemination and implementation of research findings as being fundamentally about respecting participants' contributions, followed by a swift response and action on the part of the commissioning council. What were they going to do differently, why and by when?

Through the narratives of the family placement workers, I began to appreciate the power of the Adult Attachment Interview to access childhood memories. The project caused me to reflect on my father's war narratives; their influence on me at different stages of my life; and to revisit the sense I had made of his life at his funeral in May 1999. Over and over in mind turned the question, "Why do you think your father behaved the way he did?" This also coincided with the 60th Anniversary of the end of World War II, which offered an unparalleled opportunity to engage with surviving soldiers' stories from that time. This extended first person inquiry is the subject of the next chapter, which returns to the Russian landscape, 200 km south east of Moscow.

