

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Indigenous and Cultural Folklore Informed Family Therapy Practices

Co-Creating a Fifth Province: A Spiritual, Indigenous and Systemic Space of Practices in an Irish Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows the journey of the author through her engagements with her own Indigenous traditions, literature and systemic practices within Ireland. Initially, this journey was undertaken to deconstruct the hold of an Anglo–American–European orientation within the family therapy field in the early 1980s. Given the country’s long 800-year history of colonisation by the English, the work of the author and her early colleagues was (a) to insert an Irish way of ‘seeing’ and ‘speaking’ in order to (b) deconstruct colonial traces in our culture and to (c) de-pathologise the offerings of clients who sought therapeutic help or indeed were mandated to attend. Eventually, the metaphor of the fifth province will also be shown to open itself to the author’s spiritual practices and to a way of Being in therapeutic conversations.

It seems to me that it is only in commonage consciousness that the earth can be saved. We have to take down the fences between us and animals. We have to take down the fences between us and stars. We have to acknowledge the oneness of consciousness that is in the universe. If we don't, we're going to remain in that world of 'us and them' and they are inferior and we are superior. If we could only once break back into 'we feeling', if we could only once break back into 'commonage consciousness' then we have a chance. We would be incredibly enriched. We would be so stupendously enriched, and so would the animals be enriched by the fact that we now could share the one earth with them. When you see something only with an economic eye you are sinning against it.

(John Moriarty in Manchán Magan 2024)

1 | What Is a Fifth Province?

In Ireland, the Irish word for ‘province’ is ‘cuaige’, which means ‘fifth’. However, there are only four extant provinces on the island of Ireland. So, where is this ‘fifth province’? In ancient Ireland, there was a belief that there existed a place called ‘the fifth province’. It is uncertain whether this province truly existed, but legend says it was located at the Hill of the Kings, now known as the Hill of Uisneach, in the centre of the country (Booker 2025). Near the summit of the hill is a large stone that was the hypothesised burial site of Goddess Eriú, who gave her name to the modern Irish name for Ireland, Éire. Folklore has it that it was from Uisneach that the Celtic Druids, the priests and priestesses, counselled kings and chieftains from the four existing geographical provinces of the island. Some say that these meetings took place under hawthorn trees, the trees of the Sí (fairy people). *The Crane Bag: Book of Irish Studies* relates that these leaders left their arms aside to co-create a space for diverse (counterposing) views to be held, met with and

Summary

- This paper attempts to show the journey of the author through her engagements with her own Indigenous traditions to deconstruct a potentially colonising Anglo-American–European orientation.
- Given an 800-year history of colonisation, the work of the author and her early colleagues was:
 - a. to explore an Irish way of ‘seeing’ and ‘speaking’ to:
 - a. deconstruct colonial traces in our therapy practices
 - b. de-pathologise the offerings of clients from within this frame
 - c. engage in practices of presence, communion and love.
- Finally, the Indigenous metaphor of the fifth province will be shown to open to the author’s spiritual practices and a way of being in therapy.

accepted in dialogue (Hederman and Kearney 1982). Richard Kearney (1975) claimed that ‘The purpose of The Crane Bag is to promote the excavation of unactualized spaces within the reader, which is the work of constituting the fifth province. From such a place a new understanding and unity might emerge’ (Richard Kearney 1975). This idea is now making its way back to me years after some workshops given during the 1990s. Participants’ feedback has been along the lines that it was our presence, our clinical tales that opened space for a different kind of thinking, ‘activation’ and transformation of practice and living to occur. I was happy to hear such descriptions of a process that was designed to be non-purposive in a Batesonian sense and free of colonial dictates.

Each year, the Bealtaine fire was lit on the Hill of Uisneach around 1 May. This Celtic feast lies between the spring equinox and the summer solstice and is still celebrated in the lighting of a fire on the summit of the hill.



Bealtaine Fire at Uisneach.
Painting by Irish artist, Aidan Dunne¹

In the time of the Druids, embers from this flame were said to be carried to Tara, the site of the High King (Árd Rí) and then to all the hills of the country. As Irish seanchaí (storyteller) Manchán Magan says:

This was done so that within a matter of hours there could be beacon fires on every significant hill in Ireland forming a massive sacred eye staring up into the heavens. Suddenly everything and everyone was visibly united—all seeded from a single spark, lit at Uisneach.

(Magan 2022, 203–204).

2 | The Metaphor of the Fifth Province: Co-Creating an Indigenous Irish Practice

My two work partners at the time, Nollaig Byrne, Philip Kearney and I were attracted by this Indigenous metaphor at the outset of the 1980s.² Like many good things in life, it came to us by way of serendipity from the work of two Irish philosophers, Richard Kearney and Mark Patrick Hederman (Hederman and Kearney 1982, 10–12). The former is one of Ireland’s noted philosophers living in the United States, whereas the latter was an abbot of a Benedictine Monastery in the Southwest of Ireland.

What attracted us to this metaphor was its orientation towards holding together apparent oppositions and contradictions in a non-dualistic, both/and; neither/nor Batesonian and systemic worldview. The space of the fifth province was imagined, to embrace the multiplicity of experiences that constitute what it means to be in a human experience (McCarthy and Byrne 1988, 1995; McCarthy 2002, 2004, McCarthy and Byrne 2019; Byrne and McCarthy 2007; Sri Vasudeva and McCarthy 2001; Hydén and McCarthy 1994; Salamon and McCarthy 2016; McCarthy and Byrne 2019; McCarthy and Duncan 2023).

Filled with curiosity, we also set out to see the site that inspired these ideas, Uisneach. Below are some photos from that visit during the mid-1980s. The Catstone, visioned as the Navel of Ireland, held us while the Grove of Hawthorn trees, also known for their connection to the Sí (fairy folk), beckoned us. We were not to know then that these sites, here photographed at the time, were places of veneration for ancient Druids. They wove their ‘magic’ for me in that the metaphor guides my life, work and spirituality to this day.

The initial context for the use of this metaphor and story was one of systemic family therapy and the practices of social justice. It was also an attempt to evade the greater imprints of colonisation on our Irish psyches. Most of the family and systemic literature of that time was predominantly English and American. So, we wanted to excavate the possibilities of a more Irish sensibility in our work and with our clients. However, later, from 2000, I saw that the metaphor could also refer to both an immanent space in the human domain and a transcendent spiritual space. Therefore, the metaphor now also serves my spiritual life, my meditation group practice and my ecosystemic and environmental reflections (McCarthy 2004, 2021; McCarthy and Byrne 2019; McCarthy and Duncan 2023). However, the focus



Phil Kearney, Nollaig Byrne and me (on the left) in the grove of Hawthorns and cradled within the Catstone circa 1985.

of this paper will be more on the implications for us as spiritual communing beings.

Because the metaphor stands for a space wherein all the views and stories of individuals are voiced, heard, accepted and respected, it was likened to a dis-position of love. To open space for another, we are called on to be present and to let go of our personal prejudices and agendas. So, a particular position is not adhered to; rather, it is one of many possible viewing points that can move and transform as they need to in the flow of the therapeutic conversation. The term ‘dis-position’³ is borrowed from the Irish Nobel poet laureate Seamus Heaney (1975) to connote movement rather than a fixed position. The metaphor is a remembrance of duality transcended and of pragmatic concerns transformed. It might even be said that this was a place where spiritual solutions emerged for pragmatic difficulties.

Writing in this vein about the fifth province in 1985, Hederman said that it was sometimes ‘described as a secret well known only to the druids and fili (poets)’ (Hederman 1985, 110). He went on to say that the ‘constitution of such a place would require that each person discover it for himself within himself’ (p. 110). Previously, when my early colleagues or I have written or spoken about the fifth province, we have referred to it as a sacred space within an interpersonal domain. However, we might also refocus on the fifth province as an interpersonal, intrapersonal and a transpersonal space. Hederman reaffirms that the notion of a fifth province does not have a fixed physical or geographical location. Rather, it is a ‘place beyond or behind the reach of our normal scientific consciousness, (p. 111). As he sees it, it is also a centre or space beyond the psychology of the single individual (the Ego)—a space that gives access to the transcendent. In my own work, given that there is a contextual sensibility, it would also in most cases ‘occupy’ a liminal or in-between space.

The fifth province metaphor, then, not only points towards transcendence but also re-presents a homecoming because the journey taken is one whereby the one journeying comes into their own ground and reaches the ‘first circle of themselves’ (p. 113). Here, we have the juxtaposing or holding together of the apparently paradoxical notions of transcendence and immanence, a going beyond and a going within—all liminal spaces. Hederman frames it in the following way: ‘a conversion towards the innermost region of interiority, where the possibility of transcendence within immanence is unfolded’ (p. 116). It is the prospect of this

process that opens possibilities for one to confront one’s deepest recesses while at the same time opening to another. It is a process of being with one and other (one another!) through our differences and our sameness, a unity in diversity (Sri Vasudeva and McCarthy 2001).

I experienced that it is in this kind of conversational milieu that the sacred can be sensed in the emergent collective wisdom of conversational partners. The metaphor is a remembrance of duality transcended and of pragmatic concerns transformed. It might even be said that this was a place where spiritual solutions emerged for pragmatic difficulties.

I initially called the processes of this conversational space, interviewing, inter-acting and inter-being (McCarthy 2004; Nhat Hanh 1999). It was in this space that we could experience spiritual connections happening and where co-created possibilities emerged. As I proceeded further, I began to see that it was more like intra-viewing, intra-acting and intra-being as we began to commune with each other in a deeper and deeper spiritual way. There seemed to be a deeper seeing, acting and being together in synch. My spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva, used the term for this process, ‘Self as Leader’. By this is meant when one is more ‘located’ in Spirit (Self) then we are led from there rather from our everyday mental or emotional selves (Sri Vasudeva and McCarthy 2001). This is no individualistic framing, as in a deeply spiritual space one is One with the Universe—we become One with all domains of human and non-human existence as it were.

3 | The Politics of Listening

Because much of my teamwork during the 1980s was concerned with those who disclosed physical and sexual abuses in their families and/or suffered situations of poverty and social exclusion, the context from which and into which clients speak became very important.

Why is this? Well, for the most part those we spoke with came from areas of poverty in our city and country. So, when they came to sessions, very often not only were they potentially disadvantaged by virtue of meeting with therapists who might speak a different (middle class) language, But also, very often, many of the families who came were mandated to come because

of abuse within the family. For these reasons, the work was always concerned with power imbalances, not only within the families, such as when an adult abuses a child or a man abuses a woman or child, but also between statutorily appointed professionals and the family and of course between the team and family members. The challenge was always to create a forum where all stories could be heard, even those that were risky, reprehensible and socially unacceptable. Therefore, *listening was never neutral*; context always oriented the hearing of someone's story in terms of the team's and their gender, class, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and so on (McCarthy 1998; also Madigan 2023; Burnham 2012; McGoldrick and Hardy 2019; Reynolds 2025).

Because all of us live in society and are part of the various social discourses on the abuse of women and children, we cannot not be influenced by them. We are constituted by them and we also constitute them every time we participate in them. Therefore, to become open listeners to distressing stories we have had to *constantly reflect on our own prejudices and preferences*. We have had to do this because being present to professionals and family members in the co-creation of solutions which best fit the individual and social situations of the families and professionals is important. It was also important at the time that they did not experience the therapist as a judge or to have pre-judged the situation in advance. Of course, sometimes unfortunately this may not have been the case.

I remember once reading that the etymology of the word 'atmosphere' referred to the idea of a 'sphere around the soul'! I thought then of our responsibility as therapists to create a loving space wherein the Spirit of all of us engaged in therapeutic conversations might be recognised, cherished and deferred to regardless of what has happened. The Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana (1985) defined love as making space for another in co-ordination with oneself in a specific domain of interactions. Also of note are the following words of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire on love and dialogue,

love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.

(Freire 2017 ch 3)

In this way, one may catch a glimpse of the deepest implications of our work as therapists in today's and tomorrow's world—the creation of a sacred space of spiritual intra-connection or 'communion' (McCarthy 2004).

Emphasising love in my work was not some romantic notion but a stance that embraced an ethic of relatedness. If we look with love on those we converse with, then we will see beyond the problems to the *resources and strengths* they bring with them. That is not to say that problems that clients complain of or those which professionals and other social agents say are present are not acknowledged. However, the emphasis is on the resources clients bring, in connection with each other and from within their relational, communal and social contexts. As one young woman so wisely and spontaneously put it to me in the process of dealing with her friend's murder. 'I guess you always have what you most need, no matter how bad things are.'

In considering how we might listen with awareness to the stories that matter most to our clients, I was again very influenced by a stance Mary Robinson took up as president of Ireland back in 1990. When she was elected president, she was no longer in a position to speak out on political issues as she had regularly done as one of Ireland's most prominent constitutional lawyers and activists. A lesser person might have accepted such a situation but not Mary Robinson. She may have been silenced but those who would come to cover her activities were not. She knew that she had the benefit of being in the media spotlight and began to use it in a very creative way. Wherever she went they followed. Whoever or whatever she listened to they listened to. So, while silenced herself she created a platform for the expression of marginalised voices through the journalists who travelled with her. Here, the politics of listening was brought home very dramatically to me.

However, in opening ourselves to the other, to the concerns of the other, we also simultaneously, automatically and constantly put ourselves, our ideas and our positions at risk. Everything we hear has the potential to challenge our own strongly held premises. As another of our early team clients has so starkly put it in relation to poverty:

Educated political awareness of the intricacies of poverty and the overwhelming burdens endured are the tools needed by counsellors to reach those most in need of counselling and support and gentleness, as society and the system bashes them up pretty good.

(Hill 1998, 20–21)

This gentleness that Deirdre speaks of has the possibility of emerging when we are not only careful about how we listen but also about how we speak as therapists.

A politics of listening would also take into consideration that there may be implications for the speaker in telling of their lives on the margins. Their speaking out, their giving account could open possibilities for their further marginalisation in certain contexts (McCarthy 2001). Such a possibility came home to me strongly when I was working with colleagues in a socially marginalised and impoverished area of Dublin. In the area, some of the women were coordinating in a very creative and communally supportive way. My local colleagues and I thought we would interview them about their ways of being and doing in the community, but in exploring the socio-political context surrounding these women, we came to see that we might be exposing them. In this exposing, they might run the risk of losing some of their social welfare benefits at that time. Needless to say, we did not continue with our research. Our speaking out might have led to unintended consequences and thus have been unethical in the contexts of these amazing local women.

4 | The Ethics of Speaking

The sister-challenge and invitation of a politics of listening is an *ethics of speaking*. For all of us in therapy we are challenged to speak in a way that opens up possibilities rather than closing them down. As one student said during my social work teaching years—in conversing with clients we must try not to

put a full stop *before* the conversation! When one is in the role of asking questions and making comments one is constantly in a potential position of power in the conversation. In our role as therapists it is we who choose the direction and the topic of the question and what we respond to. Sometimes our clients have arenas of choice—oftentimes, for many reasons, they do not. So, how can we address the concerns of our clients or the statutory professionals who serve them and still create a *respectful* space for them to address THEIR concerns in their own words?

If we speak for another we take their voices, even when they ask us to do so. In this instance, the speaking for another is a precious gift they bestow on us. When we speak for another without their permission but with the mandate of society, for another's protection, we take measures against that person albeit for a good reason (Salamon and McCarthy 2016). When we speak for another without their permission and without a social mandate, we engage in potential oppressive acts of control and colonisation (McCarthy and Byrne 1995; McCarthy 2001).

In the light of these words, our ongoing challenge then is to continuously strive to create a forum for clients to speak their own words and voice their own concerns in their own ways. Let me again recall Deirdre's words on the process of question posing in dialogue. Her words capture better than we can what is meant here by an ethical disposition or an *ethics of speaking*:

Yeh, I'd be leading but sometimes the questions were leading, because they hinted at or suggested, maybe a problem, maybe an unresolved situation, and I'd given a hint of that. And the questions were giving me the idea that the power was in me to answer. And I suppose in that way you were asking a question, and your question was leading as well, you know what I mean. But, I probably, obviously I'd have to give you some idea how to ask that question. ... I suppose it's a two-way thing, like between a counsellor and a client. Because ... unless the counsellor has an ear ... it is not often easy to decipher your own life.

(Hill 1998, 20–21)

Here, Deirdre describes beautifully the process of experiencing empowerment through questions that are tuned to the 'hints' she has given. It is this close tracking that I feel helps us as therapists to attune to those we encounter in our practice. In this close tracking we experience curiosity as love (Salamon and McCarthy 2016). If this process of curiosity is not in the interests of or at the service of our clients, then in our view it is neither of pragmatic use nor ethical. Clients' experiences are primary. In such practices, professional expertise is in the service of the people who come to see us. On our little island in the North Atlantic we are not far removed from the colonial experiences of constant invalidations and silencings.

To imagine the life of another is to embrace an ethical stance towards the other. It is about occupying a borderline territory between our own world and that of those we are in conversation with. Richard Richard Kearney (1996) outlines an ethics of

imagination, which is underpinned by three main principles. The first is the acceptance of the other. The second principle is the right of all to be heard and to have the testimony to their experiences witnessed. The final principle is the imagining of future possibilities. As a province of possibilities in language and imagination, the fifth province also becomes a province or domain of ethics. However, we need always to add a notion of caution to ourselves as therapists. That is, when we listen to stories that embody values or experiences so different from our own, then we also have the potential to silence the speaker and cut the communication cord (Byrne and McCarthy 1995). We can then become disconnected from the life and spirit of the other.

5 | Communing

Alienation is one of the many faces of modernity. The cure is communication and community—a new sense of togetherness.

(Somé 1995, 13)

Connectedness is such an important concept in systemic thinking: how we are connected within ourselves holistically and spiritually and how we are connected with each other. In systemic thinking, everything I do is connected to everything you do within our relationship. We are richly connected to our social and physical environments as we participate within them. As Bateson has said time and again, what is important is 'the pattern which connects' us all to each other and to nature. This deep sense of reciprocity, as the Just Therapy Team from New Zealand have said, is to be spiritually whole and enriched (Waldegrave 2003; Waldegrave et al. 2003). There is little place in this scheme of things for a pathologising language that describes people in terms of their deficits and deficiencies instead of their wonderful resourcefulness even in the face of desperate and tragic circumstances (Wade 2007, 2002, 1997a, 1997b).

A language of strengths opens us to the indomitable nature of the human spirit. We have seen this in our own country both leading up to the end of British rule here and after it in the explosion of cultural expressions so long silenced. We had been used to a language of deficit about ourselves and known how we were closed to our resources and cultural expressions. I have found that when therapeutic conversations connect at a spiritual level, new possibilities arise and guidance seems to emerge from within the relationship itself. The 'miracle' of therapy occurs in these moments of Communion (McCarthy 2002, 2004).

Therefore, let us take care of our spirits. Let us as therapists truly become 'a fair people' committed to the human rights of all those we encounter professionally and personally. Let us always speak well of each other. We are so intimately connected that it will be good for us also. James Stephens, the Irish author known for his mystical storytelling at the turn of the 20th century, states:

Is there actually a wolf in our neighbour. We see that which we are and our eyes project on every side an image of ourselves: If we look with fear, that which we behold is frightful; if we look with love, then the

colours of heaven are repeated to us from the ditch and the dungeon. We invent eternally upon one another; we scatter our sins broadcast and call them our neighbours'. Let us scatter our virtues abroad and build us a city to live in.

(Stephens 1982, 50)

6 | A Portal to the Spiritual and the Emergence of a Fifth Province Sangha

Now I want to share with you how I have been including this kind of fifth province approach within the meditation group, or what we now call our 'Fifth Province Sangha', which I have been facilitating over the past 25 years.

So how did the metaphor of the fifth province move from a therapeutic orientation to a spiritual one? In 1999, I met my spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva, when he first visited Ireland. His background is East Indian Trinidadian, but he was educated by Irish religious men and women in Trinidad. Early in my relationship with him, I was presenting on my work on sexualised abuse and he said to me, 'the frame is too small'. I was thrown initially and then I saw that he was correct; the frame WAS too small. It was a problem-led frame even though it included possibilities. I knew then that I had to move instead from a space in therapy that while it held all the dualities and dilemmas of clients, and myself, it also needed to jump beyond them to a space of all possibilities, a space where all is perfect. In this latter statement, I am re-membering what Boscolo and Cecchin often said, 'The system is perfect'! We just need to understand it and co-create an observing system which, when enacted, recalibrates itself.

Early in my relationship it appeared that the metaphor of the fifth province struck a chord within Sri Vasudeva and it was not long before I began to do some workshops on therapy and spirituality with him in Trinidad, Ireland, England and Scandinavia. Alongside these workshops and my travelling with him, I began to see more and more how the fifth province was also a portal to the spiritual. Working with the processes of spiritual co-creation and Self as Leader, I became aware over time that we were tapping into a greater field of consciousness. What I mean by this is that during conversations it was as if a kind of collective wisdom emerged in the intra-actions between those in conversation. What emerged was often surprising and unforeseen. Through each 'surprise', minds were expanded to encompass other possibilities. I remember once at a workshop in London participants being very curious as to what was happening between Sri Vasudeva and myself as we facilitated an exercise with the group. They said that we appeared to be communicating in synch but that it was difficult to find outward signs. It was more that they appeared to intuit it or feel it subtly. It was precisely these kinds of communications that had always intrigued me in my fifth province therapy work and I was attempting to find some way to articulate it or at least point to what may be happening on these subtle levels of communication and relationship. It seemed to be an expansion in the communication. Yet, this expansion was not achieved through individual effort alone but as part of a collective intra-being in communion. One visitor to our

meditation group reported her experience of participating with us as one wherein it was like 'the group was tapping into a larger wisdom, something bigger' (Nafeesa Suraya-Naz Nizami 2016). It was this kind of spiritual and Celtic liminal space that was impossible ever to pin down into the concreteness of a textual reality that I am trying to point to in this paper!

Shortly after I met Sri Vasudeva, in late 1999 I also had the 'impulse' to invite some friends to meditate together in my home. Until the arrival of the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020, this group, with different members, still met weekly and mostly in my home before migrating to our now weekly Zoom gatherings. Over time, I developed some key principles and practices that brought together the teachings of Sri Vasudeva and the practices of my fifth province orientation. Today, those are central practices within our Fifth Province Sangha both for meditations and for what we call our sacred conversations.

The following are some of the key principles and practices for sacred conversations within our Sangha group:

1. We talk of a dis-position¹ of openness, acceptance, curiosity, enquiry and love.
2. We talk of the co-creation of a still-point, a 'space' for reflection where we can witness and be present with each other.
3. We talk of the co-creative process where outcome is emergent from collective wisdom.
4. We talk of a goal-less process.
5. We talk of a both/and process in the transcendence of dualisms.

Over time, we moved from our principles of practice to a more expanded experience of our meditation practice together. So, what had been a principle became a lived reality in each of us and in the group. Our constant check-ins within the group became important signposts in our practice together. Through these, we confirmed the coherence between our principles and our conversational and meditative co-creative process was indeed a lived reality for us all. In these processes, we also discovered very powerfully that there was no individual 'doer' as such. Rather, actions, questions and transformations came from the 'collective we' of what we began to refer to as a larger wisdom operating in our lives. This wisdom was experienced as an increasing awareness of the function of our conditionings on our behaviours, thoughts and emotions together with an ability to witness them and then not to fall into a reactive state in relation to them. Participants spoke of a growing calmness and peace in their lives. There was also a sense of more ease or flow in our lives with less struggle and a greater awareness of synchronous happenings and moments in our daily lives. Another experience was one where we were being lived through rather than being an individual who lived their life according to some kind of personal plan. It was as if we all became instruments of life and what we referred to as a collective or field wisdom. It was the experience of this 'field' process that we had imagined as a 'fifth province' and it is that which led me to proposing metaphor as a portal into the domain of spirituality and liminality.

7 | Setting the Scene—Environment and Atmosphere

In Ireland, like many ancient cultures, an encounter of depth and spirit was prepared for in advance. When we have reverence in our approach, when we are respectful and sensitive or tender, then the gifts of healing, challenge and creativity open to us. I remember once reading that the etymology of the word ‘atmosphere’ referred to the idea of a ‘sphere around the soul’! As the Irish writer and poet John O’Donohue says:

‘a gracious encounter is what unlocks the treasure of encounter’.

(2004, 34)

When we enter without due reverence, we can blunder in or be more concerned with connection rather than communion (p. 34). Reverence, ‘a respect before mystery’, on the other hand, enables resonance and presence where great things can decide to approach us. This is because prejudice and judgement have no place. When hubris or a sense of certainty intrudes on or manipulates the sacred, humiliation often results (O’Donohue 2004, 41).

7.1 | Seeing With Clear Eyes or Looking Through the Heart

Seeing is not merely a physical act, the heart of vision is shaped by the state of the soul.

(O’Donohue 2004, 28–29).

He says that the phrase ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ has a more subtle meaning than a merely subjective one. It means if we beautify our lens—he calls it the graced eye—then beauty will become visible and shine forth. This is akin to Stephens’ quote about looking with love—if we look with love, then beauty shines forth from the ditches and the dungeons. Whereas if we look with hate, we cast our sins ‘broadcast’ and call them our neighbours (1910).

The style of gaze determines what we see Each one of us is responsible for *how* we see and how we see determines *what* we see.

(O’Donohue 2004, 28)

7.2 | Listening With the Heart

We could also say that our style of listening determines what we will hear. Here is echoed the politics of speaking and the ethics of listening mentioned earlier in the paper. Listening, or generous listening as Lynn Hoffman calls it, is a kind of surrender of oneself in the process of opening to another (Hoffman 1999). When I listen with openness to the story of another, then any of my own preconceptions, theories, prejudices can get in the way and become external to the co-creative possibilities. They distract me from the person or persons in front of me. In this sense, we cannot let ourselves (our egos) intrude when we are listening to another. If we do, we get distracted and we cannot and do not

give our full attention to the other. Therefore, our knowledge from within the situation can be diluted. This knowing from within the relationship and the larger spiritual and contextual fields can orient us to a knowing from within the contexts that hold all of us together. These knowings can emerge from familial, social, cultural, spiritual, environmental and beyond human contexts. If we can give ourselves over to this process, if we can surrender to this process, then there is a kind of emptying of personal ego going on. As John O’Donohue (2004, 30) says,

‘a clearance opens in the heart for something new.

You no longer exist at centre stage within the relationship; you become a co-creator. In a way, you no longer exist as a doer in the sense of being the primary doer. Here, a new wisdom is possible. Here, in the absence of rejection and in the embrace of acceptance, hearts and minds meet in a new discernment. It is as if we can listen a soul into existence—our own and our client’s. The problem shared is lessened and no longer dominates; rather, a relationship of acceptance and love predominates while the answer reaches out to us from the depths of our unified Spirit. Here, our intellects and minds are in service and not in the lead. The deeper wisdom of the collective, of Life of our Earth, has a chance to make itself known or discernible within our bodies, hearts, minds and intellects. The ingenuity of the answers that arise either in the session or between sessions never ceases to amaze. Solutions you could not dream of manifest. What is magical is that they belong to no one!

7.3 | Inspirations

In much of this thinking I have also been inspired by the works of Gregory Bateson (1980), Humberto Maturana (1985), Ilya Prigogine and Stengers (1984) and the Milan team (Palazzoli et al. 1980) together with our Irish philosophers, poets, writers and artists.

Because we are self-evolving beings—I believe and have experienced that—we can therefore possibly be a self-evolving ‘cause’ of our own co-evolutionary changes and the co-evolutionary changes that our world needs at the current time of multiple crises. We have the ability to create and co-create with others towards new possibilities. Nora Bateson coined a new word for this process of mutual co-learning, *Symmathy*, which ‘highlights the expression and communication of interdependency and, particularly, mutual learning’ (Bateson 2015) <https://norabateson.wordpress.com/2015/11/03/symmathy-a-word-in-progress/>.

This kind of co-creation and mutual learning is a learning that emerges spontaneously and uniquely from within the transcontextual process of our relational talking, listening, dancing and moving together. I have been calling this process, of an emergent and evolving consciousness, *Systemic Communion* for many years. What I mean by Communion is that collective field of love, relationship, consciousness and wisdom that is co-created and set in motion when two or more meet in an open-hearted resonant process. So, it refers to an emergent sense of Presence and wisdom that is greater than the sum of our individual presences and yet enfolds them—a ‘Unity’. In my own experience,

this Presence/Unity, with its emergent wisdoms, arises spontaneously and always magically from a deep resonant connection among diverse participants (McCarthy 2002, 2004).

So, when I talk of spontaneous emergences, systemic communion and Presence I am also very much bringing to mind the notion of Gregory Bateson's, 'collective wisdom'. I see this in his constant evocation of an *ecology of mind* where many participate within co-created, co-evolving fields of mutual learning, *Symmathy* (Bateson 2024). Therefore, when I talk of a 'system', I am in no way talking about any kind of mechanical entity but about living, vibrant, breathing and juicy unpredictable co-evolutionary patterns of interaction where all participants within the complex ecology live and learn—including ourselves as therapists.

As I love these principles, I have been asking and exploring for some years now, 'how we can "use" this kind of thinking, practice and consciousness more in our lives and work today'? If we think of our world, our Universe, as trying to struggle and wiggle its way to more evolved and harmonious conditions in the face of social and environmental calamities (Kearney 2013, 2021; McCarthy and Duncan 2023), then we need to look for and co-create movements that are allied to those struggling attempts towards evolutionary harmony even in our own field (Bateson and McCarthy 2013; McCarthy and Duncan 2023).

As I have said, large systems thinkers are saying that we also need an evolution of our consciousness for this to happen. Following Gregory Bateson, we would look for 'patterns that connect' to those relational possibilities that connect us all rather than divide and separate us in linear and individualised words and worlds.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹This painting of the Bealtaine Fire at the Hill of Uisneach painted by Aidan Dunne was presented to me by dear friends, Fergus Hogan and Irena Loveikaite, on the occasion of the Festschrift celebrating my work in Luton on 8 December 2018. This wonderful celebration was organised by Dr Gail Simon, director of the Doctoral Programme on Systemic Practices at the University of Bedfordshire and Kiri Summers and the Friends of KCC (Kensington Consultation Centre) London.

²The Fifth Province Associates team of Nollaig Byrne, Phil Kearney and myself stopped working together during the mid-1990s apart from some co-written papers with Nollaig Byrne up until the early part of the new millennium. During that time, we had moved into different professional arenas. In my case I took up a full-time position as a lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy (as it was then) at University College Dublin. I became interested there in the intersection of social policy with systemic practices in my own work and later in 2000, embraced a systemic practice premised on spirituality. Today, my work attempts to integrate all these experiences

along with an ecosystemic sensibility (McCarthy 2021; McCarthy and Duncan 2023; Duncan and McCarthy 2025 in press).

³Dis-position/dis-positioning: dis-positioning embodies a living, moving process rather than the more fixed activity implicit in holding a position. It does not refer to a psychological notion of 'disposition'. Dis-positioning refers to the ability to move between positions in recognition of contradiction.

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