

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Following Ariadne's Imaginal Thread Through the Labyrinth: A Systemic Practice in a Time of Ecological Crises

A Conversation Between Imelda McCarthy PhD and Roger Duncan MSc

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ABSTRACT

In this article Roger and Imelda talk with each other around the Meta crisis in our world. This is based on a video presentation of a conversation for the 20th Celebration of the Greek Systemic Journal. Metalogos. They explore ways systemic practitioners and thinkers might address some of the pressing issues of the today using the myth of 'Ariadne's Thread' which led the Greek warrior Theseus out of the maze of uncertainty and certain death by the all-consuming Minotaur. They ask how we might creatively adapt ourselves to situations of impending non-linear collapse, over which we have little control. In this conversation they draw on ideas from the Bateson's and other social and environmental thinkers, as well as deep systems thinking and Indigenous wisdom. They explore how we might draw on work with the imaginal and liminal spaces, including the metaphor of the Fifth Province in Irish Mythology, to illustrate how we might co-create practices for different and emerging world.

When you listen with your soul, you come into rhythm and unity with the music of the universe.

John O'Donohue, Anam Cara 1998

Imelda: Hello everyone and I look forward very much to being in conversation with my colleague from the United Kingdom, Roger Duncan. We recorded an earlier version of this conversation for presentation at the 20th Anniversary Conference of Metalogos: Systemic Therapy Journal, Greece (Duncan and McCarthy 2023). In our conversation, we first introduce the title of our paper, 'Following Ariadne's Imaginal Thread through the Labyrinth: a Systemic Practice in a time of Ecological Crises'. In our paper, we want to explore how re-engaging with the ideas of Gregory Bateson might show us ways forward in the face of our collapsing world. When we talk about the world, we are not just thinking

about our human and social world but also the world of animals and environments, which are sorely threatened at this time.

One of the metaphors or myths, which became important to us in our work in ecosystemic thinking and practices, was *Ariadne's Thread*. This is particularly so in our group of nine colleagues in the Ecosystemic community. The Greek indigenous metaphor was suggested to us all by our group colleague, Frosso Moureli, from her mother country.¹ We saw it connecting us back to an appreciation of the Great Mother and to what a reintroduction of the Divine Feminine might mean in our world today and what it has meant in a lot of indigenous cultures in the past. Roger, you might like to say a little bit about your story behind these stories—the story of the story as you love to say (Haraway 2016; Simon 2021; Simon and Salter 2019).

Summary

- Story and dialogue
 - This paper is a transcript of a dialogue about a story and positions the essence of the emerging ecosystemic psychotherapy in dialogue rather than the conceptual.
- The imaginal
 - The paper explores the power of working with the imaginal as a core systemic practice, which has been described by Gregory Bateson as *creatura* and by Nora Bateson as *warm data*.
- Indigenous celtic animism praxis
 - The narrative in this paper links imaginal work and indigenous Irish wisdom as a path and heart-centred knowing to achieve gnosis through contemporary mediation practice.
- Deep knowing
 - These themes highlight pathways that facilitate encounters with the experience of deep knowing, both in psychotherapy- and nature-based practices.
- Ecosystemic psychotherapy
 - This dialogue privileges the inclusion of working with nature, indigenous wisdom, and work with the imaginal as a pathway for the future of systemic practice at a time of ecological crisis.

1 | Ariadne's Thread

Roger: Yes, the story that inspired us was this idea of Ariadne's Thread, which helped Ariadne's lover, Theseus, to encounter and slay the Minotaur and find his way out of the labyrinth. We were thinking that in many ways in our world today we are facing the Minotaur. We are sacrificing nature, animals of all sorts, young men and young women to some beast, and there does not seem to be any way out of this. In the story of the Minotaur, anyone who goes into the labyrinth gets completely lost and disorientated, can't find their way out and ends up being eaten by the beast. This is a kind of metaphor really for the situation we find ourselves in today's world, and we both resonated with it very strongly. In the story of Ariadne's Thread, the situation is resolved when Theseus is given the spool of thread by his lover, Ariadne. He takes this spool of thread with him into the labyrinth, kills the Minotaur and manages to find his way out by following the thread. One of the details in the story is that we see Theseus feeling certain that the thread is leading him the wrong way, yet he follows the thread and that eventually leads him out of the labyrinth. So, the thread is a kind of *super-rational* trail left by his lover who has a strong heart connection, and which is what leads him out of this labyrinth. That was the motif of the heart connection that really got us excited, wasn't it?

Imelda: I think very much so and seeing the times we are in: the incredible times we are in as a kind of labyrinth with a neoliberal bullish beast in the middle of it ...

Roger: a maze that we can't get out of.

2 | Ecosystemic Thinking

Imelda: We need to build heart connection across our world ... and we have started to think matters like:

How are we working with climate and the environmental destructions within the systemic field and in the family therapy field?

Are we addressing a lot of the major issues of our time from climate change to the now ubiquitous sense of societal collapse?

If we think of the enormous numbers of war and climate refugees across Europe and in the Mediterranean Sea in our context, and how Europe is trying to keep itself 'safe', and then the arrival of the Minotaur in the spectre of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. So, we now have war in our midst in Europe with huge numbers of people fleeing for safety to other countries.

So, I think in our conversations, both in our Ariadne's Thread Ecosystemic group¹ and between the two of us, that we are sensing there is a need to have a stronger emphasis in addressing all these issues within systemic family therapy thinking, practice and training. We need to address the impending death of species including ourselves, societal collapse and environmental destruction that we are facing. For example, with the growing lack of sustainability of medical and social services due to neoliberal-type policies across the world, we have to ask: *How long more will we have work as therapists at all in these crises?* Alongside all of this, there is the growing potential of AI to take over many work contexts. As a foresighted movement, there is now fairly robust (if still sparse) conversations about working outside clinics (Santin 2021, 2023; Duncan 2018). So, we are asking, what might this mean as we imagine our way forward and what legacies, lineages do we draw upon.

3 | Narrative Collapse

Roger: Since I wrote my book a few years ago, 'Nature in Mind' (Duncan 2018), I have continued writing and thinking quite a lot about the issue of what I call *narrative collapse*: The idea that we do not have adequate semantic narratives to think about the systems changes we now face (Schmachtenberger 2020). Instead, there is a lot of discussion around whether our culture and many of the stories that we work with in family therapy are beginning to collapse or the prediction that it is very likely that they will collapse.

Imelda: Do you have an example of that Roger?

Roger: Well, I think about the research on climate change, it seems that we don't really have an adequate narrative of the significance of what that means. For example, large areas of the Earth will be uninhabitable, creating huge numbers of refugees, as well as collapse in the food systems, collapse in the economic systems, collapse in the security systems. It is pretty much everywhere, and it is quite desperate when we think about that. It is kind of impossible to imagine hope in those scenarios. I suppose what I have done in my research is explore what Gregory Bateson was really talking about and what he was bringing to family therapy. What stands out for me was his work with *liminal space*, which he calls '*creatural space*'. In creatural space, there are no 'things only differences

and relationships' as described in Bateson's book *Angels Fear* that he co-authored with his daughter, Mary Catherine (Bateson and Bateson 2005). In my explorations, this imaginal realm is described as a space that has no sensory qualities or qualities of the intellect (Cheetham 2003). It is a kind of forgotten space of possibilities between thinking and sensory perception. So, that is really where we came to this idea of the spool of thread, because, if we can understand what Bateson is talking about as 'creatura', then it could become the thread as it were, through the chaos as everything else is collapsing. I suppose the notions of liminal and imaginal or creatural spaces is where we connect with the ecosystemic group and where we often explore these ways of thinking. We also imagine that it is from this space that indigenous cultures across our world have been exploring and describing our world for millennia. It seems it has also been a way that some indigenous cultures have been able to survive ecological change, colonialism and all these other catastrophes. They have been able to do this because they have their hand on something, a non-physical reality, that the Western world has forgotten, an imaginal or creatural narrative of the world.

4 | Celtic Animist Epistemology

Imelda: I was thinking as you were speaking that what you were saying is what has attracted me to the possibility of this conversation and paper because I suppose the Irish have always maintained a strong link to their Celtic past. This was a kind of mystical cosmological past of in-between spaces, liminal spaces, marginal spaces, spaces of the imagination. We also had a great love of language and story ...

Roger: ... and nature as well.

Imelda: ... and nature was always imbued with life and in most cases across the land of Ireland it was imbued with femininity. So, the Divine Feminine or the Great Mother has been venerated in one of its forms in Ireland as the three goddesses: Eiriú (whom Éire or Ireland was called after), Banbha and Fódlagh. Generally, they are often seen as relating to the three stages of womanhood: youth, middle age and old age. I suppose where I am now, having practised as a family therapist and systemic practitioner for the bones of 50 years and in a retirement stage of my life, what has become important is mentoring colleagues and friends forward in an age of potential collapse. So, how do we, in some sense, prepare ourselves for the demise and devastation of that and with the knowledge that we as human beings and animals may not survive.

As many previously colonised and still colonised people know, many do survive through the trials and devastation of environmental collapse, colonisation and genocide (Jamail and Rushworth 2022). The Irish culture and its people have survived. Many of the native populations and peoples of our planet have survived, very often with their native indigenous cultures marginalised. However, now they seem to be moving more to greater prominence and with a greater appreciation of the wisdoms that they bring. So, I suppose that, in a way, is also the trajectory of my life through my work where an important question is: How do we begin to have conversations of the heart? Where we can draw on our own indigenous culture in Ireland?

This would especially be so in conversations that address what those who have been involved with murder, violence, suicide, drugs and poverty bring to the table in their lives in our communities, especially marginalised communities. There is a beautiful book in the Irish tradition called the *Book of Kells*, an eighth-ninth century manuscript from the monasteries of that time. In this manuscript, most of the illuminations are in the margins. In our early work, my team and I took this as an emblem for being illuminated from the margins (Kearney et al. 1989; McCarthy and Byrne 2019). This is also a great Batesonian ecologic concept in his saying that if you want to find really complex life, go to the edges of swamps, the sea and the forests. This notion of edges also pertains very much in the Irish culture. The space between is always at the water's edge, at the edge of the forest, on the banks of a river and also at the edge between waking and sleeping, life and death, so holding both sides of the story together rather than separating them. The old Celtic words for meditation and contemplation were, *Rinn Feitheamh*, which means at the edge of waiting in the Irish language. So, for me, one of the big questions is: How do our practices, coming into these potentially devastating times ahead, offer access to these *imaginal threads* that we are talking about?

5 | Aphanipoiesis

Roger: That description of meditation makes me think of Nora Bateson's paper, 'Aphanipoiesis' (Bateson 2021). She describes aphanipoiesis as a sense of being attentive to what is emerging from the unknown—the not knowing. But it is more than the usual clinical sense; it is really a sense of embracing the unknown within the world. Again, it is a very ecological idea, because animals and birds don't have a plan for their day; they just work with what is emerging from the unknown.

I remember one day, some years ago in springtime, I went into the garden and found a blue tit's nest to which the mother had been going backwards and forwards to feed her young. They had fledged on that day. Three little blue tits came out and within minutes a magpie came down and swept off with one of them; another one of them got lost in the hedge, and the next day, the third one was dead from the cold. So, there was a sense of all that work that the mother blue tit had put in was hopeless. But she wasn't 'hoping' that the babies would fledge. Rather, she was just doing the work. Actually, she had fed the magpie and, in a bigger sense, she was doing the 'right' thing.

Nature is attending towards the emerging from the unknown and being okay with it, accepting it, whereas our Western culture has forgotten this approach to life in favour of problem-solving and teleologic thinking. I have been reading a lot of Indigenous scholars recently, which is a fantastic counterbalance to this Western narrative (Akomolafe 2020; Jamail and Rushworth 2022; Yunkaporta 2020). Western culture has collapsed nature into the rational and the teleological, the certainty, cause and effect, and the visual. So, either we are reading about something and knowing something or we are looking at pictures on our phone or TV of images. The space we are exploring here, this imaginal space, the creatural space, is in between the two—between the rational and sensorial. We have to separate the rational to one side, not to lose it but to just move it to one

side, then we move the visual and the sensorial to the other side; we are left with something, almost like a blank screen, a kind of meditative empty mind that we can begin to learn and read this emerging imaginal narrative with the heart. That is really where I think the importance of the work is, but it is a slow process. It takes a long time to learn to read with your heart, particularly if you are holding any trauma, as your heart closes down. This has certainly been my experience.

6 | Nature and Systems Thinking

Imelda: But I think those kind of readings ... and I think Bateson was right on this. He talked about going into nature, moving into nature and forming a relationship with the aesthetic, with what was going to open us up to connection, to community and to the systemic as he saw it: that one can't be in these spaces without being relational or without being systemic. So, what does this bigger eye look like? I suppose it is also, what would this bigger 'heart' look like? (Kearney 2021; McCarthy 2017; Palmer and Edwards 2024; Santin 2021, 2004).

Roger: Yes, great question.

6.1 | Slowing Down the Mind

Imelda: And how do we make those heart connections in our work because I am always reminded---and it has been in our work and in my papers---were the words of James Stephens who was a wonderful storyteller at the turn of the 20th century and who said, 'the heart knows today what the mind will know tomorrow'. I think that is very true and we need to go back to 'at the edge of waiting' ...

Roger: Exactly.

Imelda: And that takes time. It is slow work like meditation ...

Roger: It is slow work.

Imelda: It is not fast food, it's not fast work.

6.2 | Deep Listening

Roger: It reminds of something I wrote in my paper, 'Deep donkey and Dadirri: Asking Creatura Out to Play' (Duncan 2021) that comes from the Australian Aboriginal lineage, which Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, an Aboriginal woman, wrote about, the *Dadirri* (Ungunmerr 2021). Dadirri is a deep listening, not a listening for information or learning about species or learning a bird call which we normally think about in terms of nature programmes. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr describes it as a listening to the aesthetic, to the beauty. So, she is describing really the same thing that Gregory Bateson was describing. What we know, what the Aboriginal culture tells us from their oral tradition, is that they have been doing this for between 60,000 and 100,000 years and that this practice has been passed on orally over this time. This is old work and slow work.

6.3 | Ancient Praxis

Imelda: It is old work and slow work and just as you were speaking, I am thinking of the Irish writers, O'Donohue (2004) and Moriarty (1997), who both talk about listening to rivers, listening to lakes, listening to mountains, listening to the animals and particularly to the animals that are gone. *What is their story to us in today's world?* I have a wonderful person that I supervise, and she is from a part of Ireland where a lot of these traditions are still very much alive. When she wants an answer to some dilemma or puzzlement, she will go out into the mountains and to the lakes in the area around her home and she will listen to what the lakes whisper to her and she will listen to what the mountains speak. So, I think that wisdom, while we are losing it, is still there in parts of Ireland ... (see also Magan 2022).

Roger: Exactly, exactly.

6.4 | The Inevitability of Social Change

Imelda: And maybe that is some of what we need to return to, because one of the things I am imagining is that we are not going to have our clinics for too much longer. I think our social and medical services are fast becoming unsustainable. We have already had situations in Ireland where people cannot get hold of antibiotics. People are not getting routine blood tests done at this time also.

So, what we became used to may not be around for much longer? And in systemic family therapy, what are we going to do moving ahead in our training courses about these big ideas? What ways can we move forward?

I am thinking as I speak of some of the ideas of Bateson in particular, Humberto Maturana and the physicist Ilya Prigogine. I think maybe we might have a lot of pointers in their works for our field. These pointers have to do with systems that are far from stability or equilibrium, non-linear systems, so the work for which Prigogine got the Nobel Prize for which was about these systems, which were far from equilibrium. He had this idea of 'order out of chaos' (Prigogine and Stengers 2018), where the more that the system goes out of its linear trajectory and is unpredictable, the more resources come to bear to bring some creativity forward. That is also in Bateson (1973, 1980) where he says that everything is *mental*. Mentality is in all our interconnections and relationships and that is his definition of the 'sacred' (Bateson 2023). I am also thinking of our systemic colleagues who are already experimenting with notions of 're-wilding' our work and working outdoors—outside clinics and hospitals (Laszloffy and Twist 2019; Duncan 2018, 2021; Santin 2021, 2023). This may not be new, but it is once again returning in our practices.

Roger: I think it is not in an intellectual 'mental' sense, it is much more like your supervisee listening to the systemic intelligence of the lake and being able to tune into it.

So, Imelda I was wondering, have you got some examples of your practice and how you touch into this and then we could perhaps think about what the systemic field might need?

Imelda: Well, you know, I think it is about waiting, sitting with people and waiting. I am more interested in who they are and what is the impulse that brought them into therapeutic conversations or even supervision conversations.

So, who is it that they want to be and how do they want to express that and themselves in their world? I suppose this is a more modern interpretation of ‘what is their mission in the world’?

Roger: And what does that look like in practice? How do you position yourself in relation to those conversations?

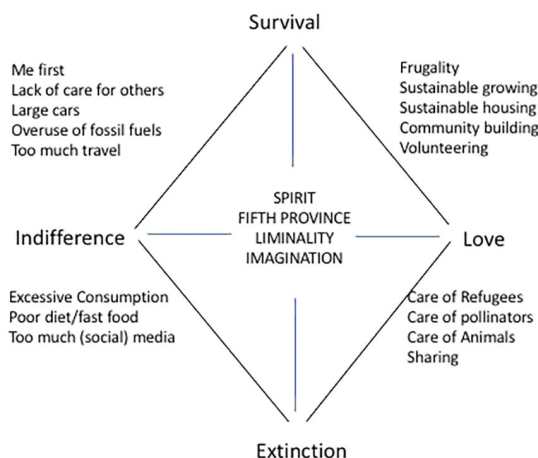
7 | Clinical Example

Imelda: Well, it is very much an explanation of how they see themselves in today’s world. So, if it is a particular relationship which it normally is and that could be in relation to anything or anybody in their context, in their world around them and their families:

How do they want to see themselves? I usually use the word, ‘their best self’.

How would you want your best self to show up in this situation rather than what is happening now?

It is a slow-moving re-introduction of them to themselves and to what their core values are. That is where the stories come in and the stories then feed metaphors, and in my Fifth Province practice, I would look for a key word that the client uses and then look for what might be a juxtaposing other word that might be used. So, with a particular male client, whom I will call ‘John’,² his key word was around building a sustainable world for him and his extended family based on both the family’s and world’s ‘survival’. Another key word he used was, ‘love’ and how to live with much less in his life. So, I constructed a Rough Diamond³-shaped diagram and looked with him at what might be other words he would use, if he thought of apparent opposite ideas to survival and love. He came up with extinction and indifference. From juxtaposing these opposites on a diamond, we could also generate related connecting themes. With this image before us, we could see what they might look like from the centre of the diamond—the Fifth Province! Through drawing some diamonds, we settled with the following one for some of our conversations.



7.1 | Survival—Extinction Diamond

I have inserted some of the information that the drawing of this diamond with John unfolded in our conversations. (McCarthy 2002). This information helped him clarify for himself who he wanted to be and how he wanted to live. Subsequently, John found a small plot of land to build a sustainable house on and to cultivate for food. He felt there would be less consumption of environmentally and socially damaging activities in this place.

I hope that gives a little snapshot of using a liminal and imaginal space beyond dualisms to begin to elaborate a larger systems view of one’s life and work?

Roger: So, you are opening up those polarities, those intellectual polarities to let some kind of other landscape in the middle?

What about your own meditative practice? How do you feel that connects with this?

8 | Meditative Practice, Nature and Systems

Imelda: Well one of the things, when I met my spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva, in 1999, what struck me was how alike the meditative and systemic processes were. It was the waiting in stillness, no rushing, valuing silence and listening to what was being spoken verbally and in the silence. The tradition I am in is the Siddha tradition, which is an energy, or Tantric yoga, which is also a goddess tradition. So, it looks at the chakra system and one of the beautiful things about the chakra system is that five of the seven chakras actually directly relate us to nature. At the base chakra, you have the element of earth; at the sacral chakra, you have the element of water; at the navel chakra, you have the element of fire; at the heart chakra, you have the element of air; and at the throat chakra, you have the element of space/ether. That then tied me back into the circularity of Bateson’s ecosystemic and ecological ideas—that we ARE Nature, we are not apart from Nature and when we move into the domain of Nature and aesthetics it opens us to the systemics. So, I found that there was such connection there in the way my teacher taught and where the practices took me so much so, that a few systemic institutes invited both of us to present around Europe at the time, which was interesting. But that energetic piece that I was introduced to was what really stood out for me. This was because I had come from not being interested in meditation to experiencing spiritual teaching at a distance and this brought me into my understanding of the quantum field and non-local fields. I feel it was because I was able to pick up the teachings and practices of my teacher in the silence and stillness of meditation, particularly when I was very heart-centred. It was amazing to me in the beginning that I was able to pick up the wisdoms without my teacher ever articulating them verbally to me (McCarthy and Minogue 2019).

9 | Heart Knowing, Gnosis and Systemic Therapy

Roger: Right so, are you kind of describing this heart space that Bateson talked about—where we can gain access to a kind of

systemic intelligence if we make space for it? This used to be much more well known in preindustrial cultures and European gnosticism and was a well-recognised path to encountering the natural world and was called heart knowing or gnosis, knowledge that changed the knowing subject (Hoeller 1982).

But I think a lot of the time, particularly in mental health services, we are trying to fix things, trying to measure things that there isn't much room for heart spaces where actually this is where potential healing comes from.

Imelda: Or silence.

Roger: Or silence, exactly.

9.1 | Deep Communication

Imelda: Or waiting, it is: How many cases did you see today?, as well as crunching numbers. So, that brought me into exciting and deeply meaningful practices and being able to make a difference at a distance. So, I started exploring literature around non-local experiences, around what Masaru Emoto was talking about in his 2005 book *Messages in Water* and how we can, by the power of intention with a strong heart connection, change the pH balance of water. There are now enough scientific tests to know that it does happen and also with plants in helping them grow (McTaggart 2019). We know that talking to flowers, plants and trees does help.

An example from my own life: when we were building at the back of our house and we removed a lot of bushes and two trees from our garden, the remaining pear tree went into shock with all its leaves drooping so I talked with it for 3 days assuring it that it would not be touched and apologising for taking away its friends. On the third day, the leaves were all perky again and it produced its best crop of pears that year. I hadn't read Merlin Sheldrake's (2020) work on mycelial networks at that stage, but when we were building a wall near the tree, we left a hole around one of the branches so that we didn't have to cut it and break my promise. So, it was all those experiences of the heart and intentional spaces that we can make a difference.

Then in our meditation group, we have a healing sanctuary, and we found that when we send healing intentions to people who are struggling with health or life issues, the feedback we got particularly from family members has been quite extraordinary. It also feeds back on the members themselves, so it has this kind of systemic sense of reflexivity. *It's like seeing systems 'seeing' themselves*, and people in the group began to deal with serious life issues such as an only son going missing and the fear of losing a home. But the whole healing aspect of it and the kind of non-local aspect remind me of liminal space 'work'. Now, we use that healing space as a means of sending healing into the world. One of the images for that is an indigenous image, which is a bit like Indra's net. Our image is of the cloak of St Brigid who is the patron saint and Goddess of Ireland. The old story is that she spread her cloak across lands, animals and peoples that were in trouble so there could be healing. In our group, we visualise that we spread her cloak over the Ukraine and Russia, for example, and over Syria and Turkey following the earthquakes. We

also visually spread it over areas in our world where there are floods or fires. As I said, we have no way of knowing whether it makes a difference although there have been some studies that show that these kinds of intentional experiments are making a difference (Maharishi 2019; McTaggart 2001, 2008, 2019). Based on my own experience from our meditation group and other experiences, I am strong on the trust of all that. *What you would say about that Roger?*

9.2 | Indigenous Praxis

Roger: Well, I think these are things that Indigenous peoples (Jamail and Rushworth 2022) have been doing for a really long time, and it is not about success and failure—that is why we struggled with the idea of putting the word 'hope' in the title of this article, because it keeps us in a kind of positive, imperialist, colonialist view of making it through to the end, rather than staying in the presence of the heart space and allowing 'hope' or healing to emerge from the unknown: rather than tracking it down like a kind of hunter.

10 | Relational Trauma: Identity and Relationship, from Objects to Inter-Subjectivities

Imelda: Is there anything you feel that we should be saying about all the 'diversities' and inclusions because I feel in some way this fits here in talking about liminal spaces and the potential of liminal spaces for the slow work that we are talking about. *Have you had any ideas about that that you would like to share on that?*

Roger: Yes, I have written a little bit about this, and I have been influenced by this trauma therapist from America, Resmaa Menakem (2020). When he talks about inclusion and diversity, he is saying well 'diversity from what?' One of the issues of trying to include diversity that we see a lot of and which is very admirable, is that there is an implicit 'centring' in it, which is usually around whiteness and maleness and how we include diversity into that group.

Imelda: Interesting to me because that is the hidden referent—whiteness, maleness and patriarchy.

Roger: Yes, exactly, and there is also an objectification that is structured in those conversations that actually whiteness, sex/gender, sexuality, orientation is important, whereas in a relational sense what is important is not the value of objects, but the relationships between subjects. I feel when we move into that heart space it is about the *in-between spaces* rather than objectification. There is a fantastic quote from Yunkaporta (2020, 149), the Australian Aboriginal academic and writer who describes this so well:

In our world nothing can be known or even exist unless it is relation to other things. Critically, those things that are connected are less important than the forces of connection between them. We exist to form these relationships which make up the energy that holds creation together. When knowledge is patterned

within these forces of connection, it is sustainable over deep time.

This indigenous idea resonates strongly with systemics, about the relationship between things or people or objects being much stronger than the objects themselves and that by building that network, that Indra's Net, that *relationship between*, we are creating knowledge systems that are sustainable. So, that is what we see in indigenous cultures; they are not so focused on objects, they are not so focused on categorising people, animals, birds but on the relationship between them, and that is the 'gaze' or the focus. And again, I am thinking about Donna Haraway's story of the Navajo blanket weavers (Haraway 2016). She describes the Navajo women blanket weavers, and how their blankets became desirable commercial products during the 1930s. Everyone wanted to buy these blankets, and they bought them by weight, as if they were wool or animal or skins and disregarded the whole relationality of the weaving culture of the women. So, it began to degrade the Navajo weaving culture. She goes on to describe how the Navajo women were focused not on the blankets themselves but actually on the *relationship* between the women, the *relationship* between the patterns, family lineages, the sheep—the ecology. Their gaze was on this creatural space—the weaving ... and I think that is something, looking back, that I have been engaged with in my ecosystemic work for quite a long time—*How do we weave this relationship between ourselves and Nature?* What happens, for instance, when adolescents work in nature and they are exposed to nature by doing meaningful work? Something is woven, which is not about getting a job or getting qualifications. It is a relationship 'between'. I saw this over and over again when I worked with adolescents with complex attachment issues doing woodland management showing me how meaningful land work and any traditional craft work in nature is deeply therapeutic.

10.1 | Identity Politics and Fragility

Imelda: I suppose what worries me about some of the diversity discourses, including the trauma discourse, is how easy it is to become a 'sitting duck' for commodification, for commercialisation—the selling of drugs, diagnoses, the selling of products or whatever it is. It takes us out and away from that space of weaving and relationship with the 'whole'. It was interesting as I was thinking about Ariadne's Thread, I was also thinking about Arachne the Greek goddess of weaving and who has given her name to spiders. But how do we know it in the English language? We know it by its corruption as *arachnophobia*—the fear of spiders. That is the only way we know of *Her*. We have lost the sense of the connection to weaving, ecology and to the systemic aspects of relationality, community, communion and to the Divine Feminine. I am aware as we talk about the Divine Feminine and the Great Mother whether it is *Mary*, *Pachamama*, *Lakshmi*, *Eiriu*, *Gaia* or however we call *Her* that there is a danger in that too.

That is that we can move too far away from holding the Divine Feminine and the Divine Masculine in balance and maybe that is also part of you and I having this conversation?

Roger: Yes.

10.2 | Weaving the Imaginal Into the Real

Imelda: Together in a space of Oneness or Unity but not in a categorical oneness.

Roger: Yes, and I suppose when we talked about doing this article, we thought we would have a conversation because of how we had experienced in our online ecosystemic group Ariadne's Thread having a real vibrancy. We were cocreating something. We were literally weaving a web as we had those conversations, and I think that is what we found really exciting. I suppose the question is, what do you think we need to be thinking about as systemic therapists in terms of practice skills we need going forward, training, positioning in terms of the ecological crises. What are the things we need to be included? I think it is important that training include experiential work with the imaginal as well as nature-based and ecosystemic practice (Duncan 2018).

11 | Evolving Ecotherapy and Nature into Systemic Practice

Imelda: Well, I think something that has kind of died away a bit, in my experience and it may not be others' experience is first, the sense of *voluntarism*, of doing exciting things outside office hours for a start. I am also aware of a lot of community enterprises going on with people coming together to take care of other people where they see a breakdown of services. One of the movements that really inspired me was the work of Frosso Mourelis and Fany Triantafilou with their Greek colleagues following the financial collapse in 2008 (Triantafillou et al. 2016). They set up this incredible community medical and social service where they flattened the hierarchy. The professionals gave their time freely and I think we are heading into that kind of future scenario. I think we need to be thinking a little more about that. Secondly, and thinking about working in more 'subtle' ways like using this notion of co-creating 'fields' or 'non-local' fields; Rupert Sheldrake (2009) talks about 'morphogenetic fields' as a way forward because if we don't have our clinic walls then we may not even have platforms like Zoom. We don't know even whether we can rely on technology or electricity. Within morphogenetic fields, when a significant number of a species learn a new behaviour, that behaviour seems to be replicated at great distances without contact of any physical kind. Thus thirdly:

How can we forge communities, not 'a community' to do a certain thing but like the metaphor of weaving? How can we weave people together to create the 'best lives' in whatever situations we find ourselves in?

In this way, we would hope that as a significant number of people begin acting into their best lives, selves and communities it could spread out across our globe.

I would see that these conversations might need to take place, because I don't think you or I know how to do it on our own. We have certain glimpses of how we would like to think about how we would do some of it; or we have some of those experiences from our pasts like your extensive experiences of wilderness work and nature-based rites of passage work and my meditation

group work. So, I think it will be bringing all that together and I know that some of our people in Europe in family therapy are also into shamanistic practices, so a lot of that wisdom needs to come to bear and bringing in the teaching of some of this to the training programs and the consequences of climate and societal breakdown.

Roger: Yeah, I think so and what attracted me to family therapy originally was Bateson's ideas of connection with nature. I feel like that is really important that this now comes strongly back into our systemic field to support practitioners to be able to experience what nature is really about, rather than a sort of commodified version of nature which we have been taught.

Imelda: And listening to the heart.

Roger: Listening to the heart.

Imelda: So, thank you for this Roger and I would like to wish everybody well or as well as they can be in these times.

Roger: And thank you Imelda. It was great talking with you.

Data Availability Statement

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

Endnotes

¹ Ariadne's Thread Ecosystemic Group consists of Chiara Santin (Italy/England), Lorna Edwards (Wales), Hugh Palmer (England), Andreas Bredin (Norway), Frosso Moureli (Greece), Gail Simon (England), Leah Salter (Wales), Roger Duncan (England) and Imelda McCarthy (Ireland). Most of the group meet monthly on Zoom for non-purposive conversations on naturing and wilding our work, nature, the environment, ecology, climate tipping points, working systemically during these times of massive change and challenge. Interestingly, a feature of the conversations is that they are vibrant, lively, generative, supportive and fun.

² At the outset of all my sessions with those who come to me, I tell them that I am also a clinical writer and sometimes use stories of my anonymised clients to show the practices I am discussing. Then, I ask their permission to use their stories and whether they would like a particular 'nom de plume'.

³ For an explanation of 'Diamonds', see the following link: <https://imeldamccarthynet.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/5th-province-diamonds-in-supervision-2002.pdf>.

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