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Relational Inquiry: Seven-Years Practicing Seven Relationships

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Greetings from Byron Bay—what follows is a postcard version of a seven-year cycle of relational inquiry retrospectively nicknamed *The Rainbow of Desire*. I outline our practices, explore five basic fields in our approach to new paradigm research, and present an updated version of my seven relationships model as a heuristic for understanding and participating in relational inquiry. As a contemporary spiritual expression, with roots in the Greek-Socratic tradition of research, and informed by Gestalt practice (not psychotherapy), this account may also be of value for persons interested in further Gestalt-transpersonal inquiry, research, and learning.

Keywords: ***relational inquiry and spirituality, cooperative inquiry, new paradigm research, gestalt practice***

I/we report on a long-term, independent, relational inquiry in Byron Bay, Australia, that we have called *The Rainbow of Desire*.[2] In the account that follows, I first introduce and ground our relational inquiry in a place, explore a few precursors, and give a potted version of a working cosmology. In the second section, I offer an account of the person's place in that cosmos (the cosmopolitan) and describe the group's weekly attunement practices. Then, I outline our longer inquiry immersions with an account of "the five-directions" we have rowed our inquiry boat in (with statements from other boat rowers). Our highly informal seven-year research project has been distilled into a heuristic account[3] of seven-relationships with which to complete the postcard. This "harvest" may act as a sort of practical wisdom and guide for the would-be initiator of relational inquiry groups and those interested in cultivating relationship-based spirituality.

The inquiry operates from our home, which has a large lounge-room permanently dedicated to the practice. We are only five minutes' walk to long, beautiful beach where we often end up talking to the sea, kissing the sky, hugging the dunes, and caressing the horizons (of eternity at times). Comfortable and colorful, with cushions, futons and couches, yoga-seats, there is no heavy-handed religious imagery (the artwork depicts birds and bees) and with an evolving altar at the centre (adorned with jars of honey), the space is well suited to the work of co-creative transpersonal research.

The term "re-search" is used somewhat loosely here and refers to the experiential study of "what is" (as in phenomenology). It is a noticing of self, other, and group climates while remaining open to things sacred and at times the intentional sacralization of the present moment and each other. Relational inquiry has a root in the ancient Greek world where research *(zetesis)*; investigation and inquiry *(skepsis)*; awareness, presence of mind and attention (*prosoche*) to what we do and say at every moment fostered *acting in full awareness*. These cultivated a meditational or therapeutic[2] attitude which harnessed the dangerous passions, remembranced the good things, developed self-mastery, a virtuous character, and finally *Wisdom*—an elusive transpersonal quality (Hadot, 1995).

Precursors to sacred research include venerable Buddhism with its "science of mind," which teaches that beneath our passions, aversions, and attachments we have access to an inner wellspring of compassion and kindness. Another forerunner would

be Sufi mystical orders with their "science of the heart," *nafs* (egoic self), and search for *compresence* or *withness*. For the Sufis the "Heart" refers to the deepest realm of human awareness. Aware and conscious prior to our more thinking mind, the Heart is the seat of intelligence and intentionality (Chittick, 2000). Thus, to speak of heart-centred research is to allude to our innermost awareness and the process of freeing attention from ingrained psychic habits.

We re-search ourselves in relation to others in an exploration of the phenomenology of *authentic meeting*, or what happens to the climate when we take coordinated action together, usually in ritual or dramatic form. It is by no means formal research and the best I can do regarding "findings" is to include some statements from participants who share their experience of the group and what they have found. I asked current participants to write whatever they wanted to. All were rather celebratory, which is also how I feel about what we do.

Generally, people include or exclude themselves based on personal preference and motivation (i.e., hidden, calculated, opportunistic, narcissistic, or predatory use of the group inevitably has led to impasse; whereas openness, curiosity, fascination, authenticity, or humility seem to unfold a more generous experience). Invitations generally come through friends, word of mouth, or are sometimes made through email or social media. A current invitation claimed that we were "an open-hearted gathering exploring the contours of relational spirituality and relational awareness." In our world of practice, *awareness is the primary research method*—for without awareness, action research would be impossible. That is, action cycles must be undertaken with heedful, mindful open awareness, and therefore, cultivating awareness is the meta-method from which action cycles emerge (cf. Heron 1996). Our Heart-centred meeting is for those who:

- Have a strong interest in the spiritual dimensions of everyday life
- Have done significant emotional-therapeutic work on our early wounding
- Have insight and are willing to examine projections
- Are willing to learn the method with a "beginners mind"
- Are into embodied, relational, and person-to-person spiritualty
- Are, more or less, free from guru worship and other spiritual projections
- Can manage a dialogical relationship with others
- Are willing to make decisions together as a spiritual practice

Relational inquiry is, by no means, psychotherapy,[3] nor does it have much to do with Eastern religion and the path of no-self where "desire" is linked to suffering and existence (i.e., the idea that doing away with desire ceases suffering and relational vulnerability; see Mathews, 2003). Rather it has more to do with self-other-world regeneration (see section on seven relations below). I do not call myself a psychotherapist, although I have 8 years of formal psychotherapy training, 30 years of facilitating assorted transpersonal workshops, and I do offer a reflective and helping inquiry relationship to persons (in or out of the group) who want one. While the many subjects-at-hand deserve a book-sized account, I will limit this account to a basic outline, a postcard or snapshot, if you will, of our collaborative *therapeia*.[4]

Divergence from Cooperative Inquiry

Relational inquiry is a Gestalt-informed[5] variant of John Heron's (1996) and Peter Reason's (2003) cooperative inquiry (Lahood, 2013), and it differs from cooperative inquiry because of this relational-Gestalt-practice influence.[6] Moreover, our weekly meeting is, by no means, a full-blown or formal cooperative inquiry although it does get nearer to this on longer immersions as we enact and reflect on several planned action-cycles. These immersions, naturally, nourish the ground of the weekly group. Wednesday evening is more of a relaxed inquiry, a creative encounter-process, and support for an ongoing exploration into primary personhood (see below) through attunement and engagement: personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal.

I learned the method of *cooperative inquiry* while exploring "charisma" (defined here as

"embodied, responsible, aware presence-in-action") by participating with John Heron in the "Wavy group" (as it was called) from 1996 to 2007, and especially in several 5-day charismatic inquiries with him as facilitator-participant (see Heron & Lahood, 2008). There were also yearly 3-day interpersonal house-cleaning meetings, collaboratively run. I have also learned a great deal by initiating and facilitating inquiry groups. In the Byron (Rainbow) group, which was originally modelled on the Wavy group, there has been innovation and divergence as we have adapted to the New Age culture here. Nevertheless, I believe—in terms of a dogma-free culture of human research and a locally-grown organic spiritual practice geared toward human and non-human flourishing—that the apple has not fallen too far from the tree.

However, I want to point out a significant difference between the Rainbow and the Wavy groups, as it speaks to my own learning and the group's evolution. The New Zealand group was *largely* populated with experienced co-counsellors, psychotherapists, or facilitators. In my experience as a participant-observer during that time, there was a working understanding that repressed emotion could distort participant's awareness, and therefore the inquiry, whereas attention, freed from projection (among other defences) could augment it.[7] According to Heron, co-counselling (a non-professional self-help community) could be a helpful prelude to cooperative inquiry because participants were, perhaps, aware of and could manage "research counter-transference" and work with projective material arising from unfinished business.[8] This was an important strength of the Wavy group when I was in it.

Our group, on the other hand, has no such shared ground. Its population (ever-changing) was made up of some professionals such as counsellors, a school teacher, a midwife, town-planner; but also stay-at-home mothers (three pregnancies carried in the group so far), estate managers, massage therapists, yoga teachers, three carpenters at one stage, a DJ, "all walks of life" (to quote a group member) many of whom have been involved in other psychospiritual practices (e.g., play-back-theatre, yoga, Buddhist meditation, Adviata, New-Age Christianity, various forms of neo-shamanism, self-appointed wizards, aikido, surfing, men's work, Tai Chi, sweat-lodgers, Chinese medicine, equine-therapy, astrology). The point being, there was no common research orientation or therapeutic culture in the "ground" of our group that had skill in managing unfinished business and projective material. We have had to create some kind of common ground, and hence, the Gestalt influence; which is based on cultivating, purposefully, a more relational awareness.

That being said, all of our members, present and past, have been creative, intelligent, and courageous human beings, and those who have "stayed the course" (and been willing to assimilate something new) have collectively helped shape, in my experience, a "good enough" culture of *self-regeneration*—meaning a place where our more real, primary, or authentic self can, with support, overcome its hiddenness, come out, and flourish in relationship with others (optimistically speaking) (e.g., Naranjo 1993). I/we remain committed to this as a valid inquiry and transformative outcome of our work. Here is a statement from Riana, a participant for several years who has retired presently from the Bee Hive (a nick-name for the gathering) after having a baby—it was a great gift to be able to carry her and Chloe-Sage, ritually-speaking, to term:

> I love the vulnerable state of openness where my inner self is encouraged to emerge. I love the vulnerability of everyone in our group contributing to a feeling of individual-oneness. I value the acceptance of myself which leads to the spiritual experiences that come with collective presence. I appreciate seeing-through my responses to others openness and the places where I am stuck, where distress is hiding or acting out. I thank all for their non-judgement of my hurt self and its acting out and the support and understanding in walking with my pain but not being defined or shamed by it.

Good enough, therapeutically speaking, yet it is not for therapy that we gather. Furthermore, and to be candid, we have seen our fair-share of defensive behaviors, power struggles and "spiritual" competitiveness—some of which ended in *relation drift* (Gergen, 2009), or what in psychotherapy

would be termed, "rupture." We have also seen the happy repair of most of those research fall-outs.[9] And, to paint a balanced picture, we have also enjoyed long and dependably harmonious, intuitive, empathetic, spontaneous, creatively supportive and contagiously hilarious times, where co-ordinated affect and co-active participation has led to a rather wondrous sense of *relational flow* (Gergen, 2009).

In the reflective year following the end of our first formal 7-year cycle, it became clear to us that I/we had been remiss in not creating a clear and simple document outlining the style of "the work," it's interpersonal-neo-encounter practices and spiritual orientation (e.g., its validation of personhood-as-divine-extension cultivating a relational attitude with nature or eco-eroticism), my role *in* the research (as a practitioner-participant), and the psychological territory participants might have to traverse en route to collaborative-relationality. For example, the perception of me as a thematized (pigeon-holed) rigidly-empathetic "therapist" is gradually subverted in the context of the inquiry group as I manage being both an authentic person with political and expressive needs and the faciliatory person with super-visionary or coaching input. I refer to the teaching role as transitory "the cross we bear" (see also the *initiator relationship* in the *Seven Sacred Relations* section below) until it becomes redundant or diffuse. I tend to favor experiential work over theory, but with the gift of hindsight, it is clear that a handbook would have been invaluable in terms of cognitive preparation for our spiritual orientation—that would, most likely, have also served as screening and inclusion-exclusion process.[10] Reading such a book would be the first point of entrance into the inquiry, inviting prospective inquirers into the primary question "is this orientation for me?" Without such an orientation I have observed participants attempting to force the inquiry dogmatically into their previous learning frame.

* * *

In summation: we are an avowed *relational inquiry group,* in which the art and ethic of creative, aware and supportive human and non-human encounter take pride of place in terms of theory and practice. While acknowledging their intrinsic worth, wisdom and value, we do not idealize Vedantic or Buddhist religion; simply because mindfulness practices are not geared toward dialogue or co-action (e.g., Cortright, 1994; Gergen, 2010; Rothberg, 2008) and there is a perceived history of spiritual-bypassing where Eastern spirituality meets the Western mind (Hillman, 1975; Jung, 1963; Trungpa, 1974; Wellwood, 1984).

Also, Western nondual perennialism (Ferrer, 2002, Lahood 2010), tends to lump Buddhism together with *Advaita Vedanta* (Cortright, 1994) and can also foster "spiritual narcissism" (Lahood, 2010a, 2010b), as believers imagine their "inner higher nondual consciousness" to be the superior spiritual orientation (Ferrer 2002). The human needs of the relative-personal embodied divinity can be met with derision, defence, and subtle shaming (cf. Welwood 1984). Our work, on the other hand, and with its inherent limitations, is engaged in a long-term lived practice, wherein we celebrate the cosmic principle's "coming into Being as human and nonhuman beings." As we awaken to the world we celebrate that encounter and examine what gets in the way of sipping on, tasting, savouring, and appreciating its nectar as a participatory spiritual practice.

Relational Spirituality: Precursors and Prophets

Before addressing some of our inquiry threads more specifically, I offer here a nutshell version of relational or horizontal spirituality to provide a semi-humanistic context and validation for our endeavours.

Recently, it has been supposed that a new relational archetype is on the rise (De Quincey, 2005). To quote Peter Reason (2001), a principle developer of co-operative inquiry, this emerging worldview has been described, "as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author" (p. 6). Reason's statement can also suggest that the emerging worldview is as much *relational* as it *participatory*—the two are sometimes interchangeable.

A "relational-turn" has been an important wave in Gestalt therapy since the early 1980s, (while always there theoretically) and in object-

relations (Greenburg & Mitchell, 1983). There has been a relational-turn more recently in Christian theology (Shults, 2003), a participatory-turn in anthropology (Tambiah, 1990). There is also a traditional stream of "relational feminism" in which care and nurturing are a defining characteristics (developed in the important work of feminist Carol Gilligan [1982]). In the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1927) "care" was key for the being in time (existentialism is also key concept of Gestalt therapy). A recent revisioning of the early Maslow-Zen-Wilber-Grof transpersonal worldview into a participatory one (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 1998; Tarnas, 1991), is also a turn toward a more relational cosmos (Lahood, 2007), and therefore, toward more relational *practices* such as Heron and Lahood's (2008) account of charismatic inquiry in concert. Indeed, the whole collaborative inquiry process can be construed as a path of relational spirituality, which enables a profound kind of spiritual rebirth:

> This rebirthing is relational—consequent upon the co-creative resonance among us all. And it empowers us to come into the presence between. In short: immanent spirit becomes manifest, through collaborative action, as relational and situational sacred presence. Participation in this presence engenders a liberating wholeness, a personal regeneration—which is given expression amidst the practicalities of everyday life and work, empowering whole relations with others. (Heron & Lahood, 2008, p. 448)

Stepping back a bit further, the famous humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) championed relationship as the central instrument in fostering self-actualization, the upshot of which was to become *more of a person*. Another outcome was that the person would become "basically more cooperative" (Rogers, 1961, p. 37). He wrote that the quality of human relationship was the primary force in moving toward authenticity, self-directedness, and maturity. For Rogers, this evolutionary or developmental tendency, "the mainspring of life" (p. 35), the "tendency on which all psychotherapy depends" (p. 35), was brought about through intentional relationship. Let me make the equation: right relationship = authentic maturation = cooperation.

Rogers (1961) also foresaw, somewhat prophetically, the emergence of a new field of relational attitudes in psychotherapy. As mentioned, there has indeed come to pass a shift in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and transpersonal psychology toward a more relational ethos.

There was another relational pioneer making waves around the same time as Rogers who had an equally profound influence on the human potential movement and the consciousness revolution that prefigured the transpersonal psychology movement, the charismatic iconoclast Fritz Perls (see Lahood, 2010b). The co-founder of Gestalt therapy has been described as both the "prophet of contact" (Naranjo, 1993, p. 279) and the "prophet of the here and now" (Naranjo, 1993, p. 300) and his embodiment of these ways of being has had a huge effect on many people's everyday lives. Perls cultivated a presence that was meditational, or phenomenological, by paying moment by moment attention to the here and now, attention to self, to the other and to a more authentic interpersonal human encounter. Thus, a *relational meditation* was developed in which interpersonal dynamics were brought into awareness in the immediate present experience and voiced (Naranjo, 1993). This contacting process is central to the therapeutic meeting Gestalt therapy fosters. As Perls wrote: "Let us understand contacting in the broadest sense to include every kind of living relation that occurs at the boundary in the interaction of the organism and environment" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, pp. 5–6). The following statement from Sally, a participant for a few years, touches on the intentional way the group interacts:

> The inquiry group has been a wonderful opportunity for deep connection with myself and others. It's a place where interactions slow-down; and I feel supported to notice how I am in the moment—in a way that doesn't ordinarily happen in everyday life. I'm also super grateful for the support offered to take risks in expressing my experience in a respectful, responsible, authentic way and to feel into that sometimes-edgy place of being received by another in their authentic experience. It's a space for

> experimentation, play, bravery, beauty, opening to what's inside, what's between and what's beyond. It's very satisfying.

Stepping further back—and influencing both existential-humanistic luminaries (Rogers and Perls)—was another prophet of relationality, the Jewish mystic Martin Buber (1970), in whose work we find the beginnings, perhaps, of a *transpersonal or spirit-infused relationality*. This stemmed, perhaps, from his theistic background in Hassidic mysticism and the Prophetic faith (unlike the more secular Rogers). Buber created something of a psychological revolution when he explicated the "I-Thou" and the "I-It" relationships. There was an inherent spiritual dimension to this because he also believed that every relationship ultimately led to God as the Eternal Thou. He also considered there to be a *thou* to be found in nature, among the rocks and stones, the trees, birds, and bees.

Buber was critical of Carl Jung for his psychologizing of God, for making "God's existence contingent upon the unconscious working of the human soul" (Brownell, 2012, p. 98) and Jung's work played a powerful role in early transpersonalism (influencing seminal theorists Grof, Washburn, and Wilber). Buber, however, understood, "the meeting of God to be one of mutual contact—the reciprocal meeting in life between one existence and another" (Brownell, 2012, p. 98). Whereas for Jung, God's very existence was dependent on his version of a collective psyche—there is no transcendent Other, no Eternal Thou—only projection drawn from the personal or collective unconscious (Daniels, 2005, p. 222).

Indeed, Buber had ceased to be interested in any experience of the divine through inward mystical seeking and "any religiosity divorced from human contact" (Naranjo, 1993, p. 279). Importantly, Buber's understanding of relationship and the ontological reality of the "between" as an important locus of spiritual reality is foundational in the current participatory (relational) turn in transpersonal psychology (See Heron, 1996; Ferrer, 2002; Lahood, 2008). As Ferrer (2002) wrote:

> We are indebted to Martin Buber (1970) for having offered one of the most compelling expositions of a relational understanding of spirituality. In his shift from a mystical conception of spirituality—centered on individual experiences (*Erlebnis*)—Buber (1970) proposes that the true place of spiritual realization is not the individual experience, but the community (*Gemeinschaft*), the Between. In Buber's (1970) words: "spirit is not in the I but between you and I." (p. 119)

A Joyous Cosmology

It seems fitting to follow the contextualization of relational spirituality with a nutshell version of a *relational cosmos* being our participation in a One-Many reality. In this cosmology, the primordial or cosmic self is a self-generating, self-perpetuating, and self-actualizing system, and the original or primary locus of a subjectivity (Mathews, 2003, p. 9). It is what I think of as God, a power that is constantly becoming or continuously manifesting and coming into being. This Original locus of subjectivity, then, is a "self-realizing system" (Mathews, 2003, p. 9), manifesting through self-differentiation, becoming the Many because of a cosmic inclination—a desire to do so—and thus, cosmic desire becomes us. Our contender for a primordial cosmic being is creating from and within itself sub-systems, multiplicity, diversity, and therefore, relations, within an ever-expanding Oneness—a sacred dualitude or non-dual dualism. By following its own perfect nature and desire toward increase, it expands and extends into the equally Real Many. Or to put it into a story-telling refrain:

> The Sun longs to feel
> And so here we are!
> Amen!

The Many, then, evolve and emerge with their own embryonic perfect nature, their own growth project and formative potential to fully flower as one of the self-realizing Many (Heron, 1992). By following their own primary nature into their own form of self-actualization (in the same way bees are ordained to make honey [Quran 16.68–69]), they simultaneously perpetuate the self-actualization of the One. By following our perfect nature, which we propose develops through more authentic and a truer reaching out and contacting, it

is as if we contact the subjectivity or the interiority of the Cosmic Other, and thus, participate in divine relational congress or compresence. Eventually, according to Mathews (2003), to follow our true *conatus* (after Spinoza) we are required to reach-out dialogically, relationally, communicatively to the subjectivity of the world of nature … who wants to reach back. This is not the way of world denial, cauterizing desire, or the path of no-self—it is rather, the way of self-regeneration and of meeting the personhood of the world.

> Why forever ask "who am I?"
> Better you ask "who are you Bird?"
> And "How are you Sky?"
> (Lahood, 2003)

Steps Toward Primary Personhood

A brief account of personhood as a human operative within the cosmic environment provides context for our inquiry, which I believe has been a continual affirmation of the human presence as existing in a state of essential unity. At the same time, each formal or distinct person and her unique embodiment is a divine manifestation, a transpersonal Gestalt, without which our cosmic original would not be complete. Yet, without an original cosmic intelligence our personhood would not *be*—so it seems like a complementarity system.

As the great Sufi Master Ibn Arabi has it: "God created perception so as to become the object of that perception" (as cited in Corbin, 1973). God says "be" (*kun* [Arabic]) and so here we are (Quran 36:77–83). In a more contemporary idiom Heron (1996) wrote, "Where the infinitude within, the void, first breaks into the manifest, it appears as a finite locus (of subjectivity), the centre of reference that is a distinct person … the perceiving process emerges out of the perceiver who emerges out of the void" (p. 188). Or, from the Sufic point of view the person proceeds from God; and Beholds none other than God; through God given powers of perception in a seamless bi-unity. From a certain gaze, your hand becomes the Hand of God.

Our current inquiry throughout the years is/was into the possibility of a primary-self (after Heron, 1998) or authentic-self (in Gestalt) or perfect nature (Sufism) and what we call our *second-nature* (a wounded and compulsively-wounding ego) sometimes referred to as "character" (Gestalt), or the lower *nafs* (Sufism). In Gestalt terms:

> To express (and thus actualize) ourselves would be as natural a process as the germinating of seeds or blooming of flowers, were it not for the fact that early in our lives we experienced friction, anxiety and pain, and we learned to manipulate through "strategies" rather than risk being open to the world; and this has served us—to a point. The sum of these strategies, however, in the form of "character" became to a greater and lesser extent, an end for itself, an "identity" to which we cling, which we justify, which we promote, while we alienate ourselves from what we truly are, and fail to express our [primary] nature. (Naranjo, 1993, p. 78)

Further on Naranjo (1993) wrote what could easily be an affirmation of our current inquiry's soulful quest for anchoring ourselves in primary-personhood:

> In Perls' view, our awareness is constricted because we have not accepted our suffering, and thus the therapeutic process necessarily involves (like spiritual traditions, we might add) an element of austerity. The basic austerity, we can say, is the non-indulgence in what spiritual traditions call the ego, and Perls called "character" and equated with a system of obsolete fixed responses that interfere with the organismic function. To him (and this was an unpopular view at the time) the ideal human being would be beyond character—a statement that we can translate into "would function at a transpersonal level." (1993, p. 201)

By "transpersonal" he means behaviors, modes and gestures that lie beyond the socialized conditioned self (or character), in other words, a personality re-Sourced with spirit—or what we refer to as our primary self. Our weekly meetings are a reminder of our primary selves and an opportunity for a lived experience of reparative primary collaborative living.

Relational Inquiry in Practice: Three Practices

The rhythm of our inquiry life is a weekly meeting coupled with occasional inquiry immersions, usually between three or four days in duration. Our weekly meeting, while incredibly freewheeling, also has a deliberate structure—which takes the shape of three simple practices.[11] We have adapted a style of weekly meeting which does not depend on numbers or continuity. Thus, anywhere between 4 and 18 persons can work in this way. We have workshopped each part until the three practices constitute one seamless practice.

The practice of attunement. It has been our custom over the years to begin the meeting with a moment of silent attunement accompanied by the tones of a Tibetan singing bowl. To paraphrase Heron and Reason (2008): the bedrock practice of an inquiry group is to become present with, open to, and feel the quality of the dynamic shared field. We can only describe the meeting metaphorically (e.g., golden translucent honey) but we can feel, sense and intuit the quality of the meeting as this dynamic event unfolds. The quality of the shared field—whether excited, harmonious, tense, delighted, tender, anxious, calm, wounded or defensive—is a living key to the appropriate action for us to take (whether this be silence, intervention, ritual-drama, charismatic ceremony, contemplation, a walk on the beach, physical contact, a feeling-round) and is a vital component of our experience of interpersonal reality and relating. This also includes open hearted engagement, person-to-person meeting, mutual resonance, and engaged or silent responsiveness to the situation as it unfolds.

Attunement then, is a profoundly relational spiritual practice and it can bring us into *immediacy*. Here is an account from Susanna, a 50-something woman who joined recently:

> I find that I drop into a deep relaxation when we attune at the start of our meetings. This has been a thread of rejuvenation throughout the year and has also led me to have more awareness of how much I am holding tension throughout my daily life. I find myself often noticing what a fellow collaborator is expressing, with a sense of "me too, that is something that I too would like to have more choice or flexibility around," and that self-awareness inspires me to grow too. So, there is a real sense of growth and awareness being contagious within the group. Our weekly collaborations have increased my ability to be present to both myself and others and to know and express what is in the present moment.

The practice of immediacy. In many traditional cultures not tarnished by Western rationality and rapaciousness, there was/is the cultivation of "point-blank sensory awareness" and a flowering of a kind of collective consciousness that was characterised by immediacy, honesty, openness, simplicity and delight (Sorenson, 1998). This was depicted as a spirited, "individualistic unified at-oneness" (Sorenson, 1998, p. 4), in which the maximization of joy was at the heart of the matter. Harvard anthropologist, Richard Sorenson (1998) discovered (only recently) this form of awareness that he found to be foreign to the Western mind. Sorenson (1998) called this awareness *liminal*, as in "threshold awareness," which allows non-verbal *intuitive empathetic rapport* with others and the natural surroundings. This non-verbal rapport is founded upon a deeply empathetic, uninhibited, and spontaneous presence:

> In the real life of these preconquest people, feeling and awareness are focused on at-the-moment, point-blank sensory experience—as if the nub of life lay within that complex flux of collective sentient immediacy. Into that flux individuals thrust their inner thoughts and aspirations for all to see, appreciate and relate to. This unabashed open honesty is the foundation on which their highly honed integrative empathy and rapport became possible. When that openness gives way, empathy and rapport shrivel. Where deceit becomes common practice, they disintegrate. (Sorenson, 1998, p. 2)

These cultural flowerings of intuitive support, empathy, and rapport grew from an understanding of, and a care for, what made people feel good (no emphasis on being right, rational, or proper).

One important ongoing and revisited theme in our inquiry group circles around the (attempted) co-creation and maintenance of such a liminal flower—or what we rather poetically call, "co-nurturing the flower of the between." We do not pose as an indigenous culture, rather we intentionally explore our flower's possible depths and obstructions to that depth in an attempt at recovering the kind of poetic-participatory mind attributed to traditional societies.[12]

We have found that when people come to the group with dominating, dishonest, or rapacious motivations they cause the flower to wilt, shrivel, and close. As Sorenson (1998) reported:

> Though durable and self-repairing in isolation, the unconditional open trust this way of life requires shrivels with alarming speed when faced with harsh emotions or coercion. Deceit, hostility and selfishness when only episodic temporarily benumb intuitive rapport. When such conditions come to stay, and no escape is possible, intuitive rapport disintegrates. (p. 1)

This means, at least in our group's life, there may well be an living, subtle flower "between" us—a form of collective-and-individual consciousness (in potentia) that is animated by the open, honest, loving quality of our relations. Thus, we have come to understand that we share the mutual care and responsibility for its opening and flourishing or its wilting and closing and we have observed that our blossom does both.

A guideline, in terms of creating a *research environment* (and taking a leaf from Gestalt practice), would be to voluntarily supress the activity of the socializing self (cf. Narango 1993), especially *manipulating* the group or anyone on it. Covert attempts to sway others out of self-centred self-interest can be disastrous. As is the aggrandizing of such calculating hiddenness into some-kind of "shamanic" virtue. A second guideline is to voluntarily inhibit what Gestalt practice called "aboutism" or endlessly talking *about* things (e.g., amazing healers, the end of the world, the cat, a group I had fun on years ago). These deflections create a deadened, lack-lustre affect by avoiding the immediacy of the present experience. These two culture-setting experiments promote a more open atmosphere where real conflict, emptiness, and excitement and can emerge (e.g., Naranjo, 1993).

It seems to me we Westernized people are heir to many cultural dysfunctions in dealing with our embedding in nature; for example, objectivism, subjectivism, scientism, materialism, capitalism, opportunism, consumerism, narcissism, and sexism. We have also inherited a repressive, controlling, highly individualistic and competitive ego. In the movement toward true collaborative relationality, the challenge for each person (including the initiator/s) is to modify the demands of the ego in service of collaboration (Heron & Reason, 2008), the flourishing of others, and the openness of the "between."

As Zana, a 7-year participant, reported:

> The gifts of participating in the regular meeting of the inquiry group are many. I have witnessed people changing their world-view and regularly feel in awe of the openness and trust in the group. My participation has changed my participation in the world. I have become more aware of my own contact challenges, more aware of my language and what I want to say and how to speak/write with more honesty and clarity owning my reactivity and taking more responsibility for my words and actions. My relationships with my work colleagues, friends and family are all impacted positively by my learning at the inquiry group and I feel I am able to be more open and honest in being who I am. My general everyday participatory awareness has also been heightened and enlivened. I am regularly filled with joy, delight and wonder at the communion, openness and creative activities of the inquiry and my co-inquirers.

The practice of sounding. Our group usually ends the evening with "charismatic disinhibition," (save for some handholding in a circle, silent eye contact, and a goodnight hug), previously described by Heron and Lahood (2008):

> At a certain point there is a distinct, spontaneous qualitative shift in the group energy field. One

> or two people are moved, and gradually and idiosyncratically each one is moved, to open their bodily, incarnate energy to the living presence within and between us, and between us and presences in other realms, by posture and gesture, by movement, by vocal toning, by rhythmic sounding of a diversity of rattles, drums, bells, tambourines, etc. This is both an opening of the heart and an exercise of alert discrimination. The posture, gesture, movement, toning and sounding are improvised in the moment out of a heart-communion with, and an aware inquiry into the nature and credentials of, this living presence—a marriage of appreciation and inquiry. (p. 441)

As a variant of the above; what we have come to call the Sha'heed[13] is a focused version of the group's person-as-divine worldview, a ritual in which we approach a self-selected person, purposefully, as a theophanic Other, a participatory presence, a revelation-at-hand, a touchable, kissable Face of the Divine. Since initiating the group into the Sha'heed it has swiftly become an important, if not key, ritual of our gatherings. The Sha'heed is a dramaturgical enactment of the main characteristics of *fana* (Lahood, 2015) a mystical or contemplative charism, or, becoming experientially aware of one's Perfect Nature (Corbin, 1973). The role of Sha'heed is rotated among us and is more often initiated by others than myself. It is an unusual mystical practice in its affirmation of extreme sensual receptiveness, awareness and the imaginal mind tending toward the experience of Immanence and the sacralization of the social space.

Launching the Formal Inquiry Boat

Our more formal three- to six-day inquiries begin with a "launching statement" (Heron 1998), which is a question or sentence that helps to shape the direction of the inquiry and organize the action taken to immerse ourselves in the field of research. Our immersions tend to begin with some basic awareness and perception experiments (e.g., awareness continuum, free attention, perceiving beauty), reflective check-in rounds, increased interpersonal contacting, noticing excitement, and risk-taking. This is largely self-initiated, although at times I or others help facilitate depending on the situation. Then, from someone or somewhere will come a prompt to move into an action-cycle and the inquiry proper. In this way, I/we try to weave an overtly democratic and dialogical atmosphere from the beginning.

"Launching the boat," in bee-speak, has become an evolving ritual process in itself. It is a movement toward a personal agreement to "get on board" a specific realm of exploration and to examine "what comes up" for participants (e.g., fears, excitement, anticipations, distaste, unfinished business) as they consider their engagement with the research question.[14] The statement often begins with an idea written on a white-board, played with, words changed and rearranged until we get a statement that we are all comfortable with. Quite a bit of personal insight can occur here. We understand that words are weighted with semantic baggage, provoking divergent meanings and feelings for participants (e.g., political, emotional, gendered, historical; see Lahood, 2010b).

This ritual-process is also our first port-of-call in terms of collaborative decision-making, and a simple enactment/rehearsal of therapeutic democracy (Lahood, 2013). It is where participants are first invited to recognize what they want, or what their actual experience is—and then, as they become more visible with their needs, they can start to think on behalf of the group's needs. We have to be careful here because some of us are organized to deflect away from our own needs by the over-caring of others or attempting to merge with others as a safety measure. Some examples follow of inquiry topics and immersion workshop titles which have served as launching statements:

- What is it to bathe in the well of our ancestors? (workshop: see Lahood, 2010b)
- Coming into Being as Cosmic Citizens (inspired by Heron's work)
- Sipping from the cup of divinity embosomed in the world (inspired by *fana* see Lahood, 2015)
- The Bird Inquiry: can we get some feedback from the bird-world? (see Lahood, 2013)

- Does co-creating charismatic honey create a healthy hive? (ongoing inspired by bees and flowers)
- Singing our embedding in nature (inspired by De Quincey's [2002] panpsychism)
- Co-creating a liminal flower (workshop: inspired by Sorenson's anthropology)
- How do we co-nurture the flower of the "between"? (post-workshop weekly inquiry)
- Bearing Beauty, Beholding Beauty, Breathing Beauty (following the teachings of Diotima)
- The Rainbow of Desire (workshop: inspired by the past seven years)
- Living our Perfect Nature (ongoing inquiry inspired by Corbin's Gnosticism)
- Seeking the Nectar (and notice what gets in the way) (inspired by a tee-shirt logo)
- Sha'heed (inspired by *fana* see Lahood, 2015)

Suzy, a working mother of three, offered a report on a five-day inquiry:

> Rainbow of desire: Entering a deep, comfortable relational field. For me, the real essence of our co-inquiry work takes place in these longer retreats. When the outside world recedes, and I enter into a co-created field with who is there. Together we blossom into a relationship with life, ourselves and each other. My experience is that we meet the essence of relationship and set sail into ever deepening oceans of possibility in closeness and humble humanity.
>
> The uniqueness of this group was that many of us were already long-term weekly members and participants in these longer retreats. There was an ease and an upfront depth because of this. Those who were newer [to the work] were held and encouraged by this already fertile ground.
>
> Ever meeting myself through simply and honestly relating with others. A magic happened as we revealed ourselves and each other with both loving curiosity and self-possessed clarity and flare. A special mention of the after-lunch swooning; sharing rest and lounging together, in which for me many a vast dream space opened-up and deep inner repair and understanding took place, not necessarily in the open but in between the layers and in coloured hues.[15] Connecting through shared rest, silence and afternoon breezes.
>
> Mine was also a deeply personal journey. I sought understanding and my boundary with another beloved friend there. Through allowing what was there to be spoken and what was there to be felt, I found clear self-possession within that meeting as we disengaged from the depths of a relationship past. The group gave generously to hold and witness us through this transition. "I like who I am and I trust myself."

Another report from Dean (who sadly for us all passed-away a soon after this workshop) highlights some of the peak experiences he participated in. He was with the group for year and loved to "fountain" or hold forth in unrestricted exuberance.

> Hello dear people, "The Rainbows of Desire"[15]
>
> A five-day journey upon a rainbow path that invited and lead me into rich and colourful worlds alongside a group of courageous, sentient company, and it was in their company that I, as a more upright and desiring person, began to truly appear, "I need you ALL in order to appear," I declared at one point, following a deeply felt new and relational inward moment.
>
> As each of us unveiled and showed our perfect-natured selves and I felt the group's boundary expand into a willingness to experiment, enact, perform and accomplish a sacred quality to the atmosphere. I witnessed the group openly remove obstacles and in doing so lead me to a more available place to meet, be met and to feel less bashful about a mature communion with God.
>
> To be part of Riana's birth ritual "upon the clouds of Eros" was an honourable and supreme moment. With the mother blessing each of us in saying, "Bee Yourself" is a memory that shall stand against the pillars of time. So Beautiful.
>
> And what to say of the story telling..! God Lord! in G's portrayal of characters and energies

that more than once transported me to mystical worlds with reflections and contemplations to last a lifetime.[16]

To have support from this group, and the understanding from my past lover, whilst I opened to my deep personal need for moving out of a relationship with her, was raw and unbelievably difficult to speak out and I thank you for the ground that you offered us both.

A period of time spent with a venturous collection of beautiful people dwelling upon "holy matters" whilst a super-moon twirled across the sky. Thank you all. Brother Dean.

The Five Directions

These are the five basic directions or currents we sail our little boat in. They are wide streams of intention that both deepen our relation to the world and develop our primary personhood. In Gestalt terms, they represent five "creative adjustments" to the environment. To be clear: I did not sit down and say, "here are the five-directions … as in handed down to Moses, from on high"; rather, they emerged through the aperture of our group experience over the past seven years. While we are certainly open to sixth or seventh direction, five adjustments seem plenty (for the next seven years, which starts one week from the time of writing this). We tend to start the year with the wellness thread intending to build a cohesive community as a practical base-camp for further artistic and avant garde forays into the possible.

Wellness is related to the shared care for the health of the group and the individuals who make it up. We strive for authenticity and presence, honesty, and openness. Wellness here is associated with healing, wholeness, physical, emotional, spiritual—intrapsychic, interpersonal, and transpersonal—attunement to the well of good memory, liberating the secret childhood: laughter, silliness, and engaging in the kind of spine-tingling encounter that enables us to eat from the Tree of Life (cf. Mathews, 2003) by contacting in the spirit of kindness.

Wisdom alludes to all things to do with autonomous, collaborative, and hierarchical decision-making. We learn to risk being guided by our own inner lights and authority, we are becoming self-directed, sometimes following, sometimes leading, joining or not, guided by our emotional intelligence, feelings, prompts, intuitions and critical reflection in an environment of creative, supportive, and corrective feedback. Toward the end of his life, Carl Rogers, the famous humanist who developed the "basic encounter group," had also developed a spiritual dimension into his personal and therapeutic practice, one that also included the wisdom of "unknowing":

> I find that when I am closest to my inner intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me then whatever I do seems full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other [see the teachings of Diotima below]. When I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. (Rogers. 1980, p. 129)

Eros, for us, is the desire to commune with the subjectivity of the world by cultivating an "erotic attitude to life" (see Mathews, 2003) with Eros being that which desires to, "unify or reunify: this is Eros in action" (Brown, 1966, p. 80). This is the realm of polymorphous eco-eroticism, an adoration and communion with the presences of nature. It cultivates an I-thou encounter with the being/s in nature and the subjectivity of the world. We inquire into our ongoing and tacit conversation with the local natural surroundings making it figural (Lahood 2013). Here is Alex on a three-day inquiry we called "How to co-create a liminal flower":

> I can remember going to the beach during the liminal flower group experiment and having this weirdly beautiful feeling of nurturing nature while I was swimming in the sea. I would usually want to be, you know, nurtured by nature, sort of selfishly—I think now, but to co-nurture the water and sand around me, to sing to the sun light and the sea breezes, to nurture the gulls and terns and shells, to praise the white frothing waves and nourish the sea and sky with my being was just something else. And then it was

like the whole beach came alive and there were fish jumping right in close and people were talking to us (as a group) it was like everything got turned up a notch—it was like magic.

Charisma is the celebration of living the life divine through ritual, theatre, action, spontaneity, creativity, embodied spirit—mostly as a form of relaxed, easy, open dynamic power, and presence (Heron, 1992, 1998). When in my charisma, I am motivated to empower others through an active, dynamizing, and animating presence. We refer often to "co-creating charismatic honey" together and the whole gathering has, in one frame, become a sort of celebratory honey-bee cult. Charisma is a relatively distress-free enaction of the way of the Many in and with the One. It takes what available light we have and potentizes it. It is to take one's primary nature for an expressive twirl on the dance floor. We "come into being" in full self-esteem and abundant open-hearted awareness and meet each other in a theatre of joy.

Beauty: there are two ancient traditions we borrow from for this stream. First "Bearing Beauty" came to us through Plato's (1994) symposium where, in a conversation on love Socrates' teacher, the fabled Diotima, taught that in their prime, both women and men could be "pregnant" in the mind and body and would need to seek a way to give birth to these potentials. What would catalyse this psychospiritual rebirth was anything that was compatible with Beauty—for the presence of Beauty would inspire forgiveness, generosity, happiness, openness, and relaxation. Without Beauty, says Diotima, we screw up our faces, shrink away, back off, withdraw, and our spiritually procreative powers dam-up and become painfully swollen—while the Bearer of Beauty offers release from this agony.

I find, in this ancient Platonic dialogue, a wonderful template for group-work, facilitation, and spiritual activism. I also find a resonance in Washburn's (1995) important account of repression and derepression, of giving birth to non-egoic transpersonal potentials, which emerge from the dynamic ground of being. Washburn supports meditation as the way to "drill" for this good oil (1995, p. 153) and the way to release spiritual potentials, whereas for Diotima (if we may speculatively compare) the releasement of potentials seems to be more relational; through bearing, posture, presence, the carrying of tenderness, beauty, mercy, and grace into the interpersonal situation. [17]

The other ancient tradition we take a leaf from, which has roots in the former, is Persian Sufism where Beholding Beauty was deemed the highest form of prayer (Corbin, 1969) and hence our path of beauty in the footsteps of the prophets (Lahood, 2015).

Relational Spirituality: Seven Sacred Relations in Action

As a participant-practitioner-observer in these gatherings particularly over the past 10 years I observed several recognizable patterns of relationship (Lahood 2010a,b). I started to conceive practicing these operative intentional relations as *relational spirituality*. Having little to do with couple counselling or marriage guidance but ultimately the cultivation of an relation with the subjectivity of the world; that I think of as compresence or Openness to Being.

This model of seven sacred relations presupposes a reasonably healthy self, willing to move toward greater defenceless-ness, emotional ability, responsibility, self-direction and collaboration. Hence, it is best that people joining the work are not in severe crisis, are committed to taking charge of their wounded-selves, are committed to dialogical process, and are able to manage transforming themselves with others—on behalf of the sacred flower between us.

The seven-relationship model is a way of naming the multivalent relationships that emerge during a long-term dynamic process of relationship-based spirituality. Several of the relations could be clearly be called "transpersonal," if we take, as a lived given, the world as a *theophany* (i.e., the revelation of a deity to a human being), including, ultimately, the wounded-self, since nothing can be left outside of the seamless conscious unity (that we tend to refer to as "God" throughout this paper). Since our wounding occurred in relationship, it is in relationship where the wounded-self and wounded relational patterning may find healing, hence, the need for relational inquiry and spirituality.

Clarkson's (2003) well-known five-relationship model in psychotherapy can serve as a useful jumping-off point. I have revised the original model for our collective spiritual purposes. The obvious differences are that our work takes place in a community and peer environment whereas the five-therapeutic relations was written for the psychotherapist-patient contract with its inevitable and legitimate power divide rather than for peer co-creators working to refine and animate interpersonally satisfying spiritual events. Additionally, in my view, Clarkson (2003) had a somewhat narrow culture-specific view of the transpersonal relationship. For her, the transpersonal relationship was "a lack of person to person connectedness" (Clarkson, 1997, p. 66). Thus, Clarkson's transpersonal relationship is revised for our specific purposes as three enactive transpersonal relationships that develop with *greater* person-to-person contacting: (a) the I-thou relationship (always having a spiritual dimension), (b) the eco-erotic relationship (meeting the world-as-person), and (c) the theophanic relationship (persons as divine revelation).

The way of relational-inquiry also differs from psychotherapy as it a research community engaged in a spiritual exercise rather than a clinical practice; there are no patients and there is an ethic of *mutual care* (Lahood, 2010b). Nevertheless, it needs a strong working agreement to deepen our awareness of defensiveness and our egoic impact on the group climate. Essential to the inquiry is the development of trusting relationships, and a safe, empathic, respectful, and supportive practice environment to uncover and make transparent our sometimes conflicted, sometimes hidden inner worlds as we move toward actualizing post-egoic relations.

The seven relationships are not static, not hierarchical in as much as one is not valued over another, nor are they roles taken rigidly. They are shared, they change from one person or subgroup to another, they are mercurial and shifting. Process is valued. We assume everyone in the longer meetings will manifest the relationships (including, at times, the wounded initiator). Furthermore, once participants have been initiated and have integrated the seven relationships they in turn become co-initiators. Many is the time that my voice has been challenged, questioned, or simply lost in the multivocal system we promote. Furthermore, any group member can offer a range of "therapeutic" interventions, from empathetic responses, clarifying questions, dialogical silence, and supportive gestures. Here are the seven relationships as currently formulated:

One. *The initiator/initiate relationship* is moving toward and eventually becoming peers in a power sharing collegiality. This is where a capable person initiates a group into the inquiry method. It can be an educating, animating, facilitating, or charismatic role—and because it is benignly hierarchical (at first out of necessity) the role may attract a fair amount of transferential and projective material, which is all well and good as long as the material can be owned, embodied or worked through.

The initiator relationship can stir up all kinds of unfinished business: fears related to "getting it right" or wounding from past authority figures and all kinds of projections, including idealization (and corollary demonization) and spiritual transference. We ask participants to enter the group with the awareness that the inquiry process will stir up our unfinished business, that it is part and parcel of the inquiry and an opportunity for insight and opening if we are able to be reflexive, showing ourselves to ourselves and others. I also try to impress upon new participants that anxiety in a learning environment, with a group of people, learning a novel process, is a healthy response, and that recognition and ownership of the anxiety and excitement goes a long way to ensuring safety for all.[18]

The initiator(s) must educate and facilitate five basic inquiry threads simultaneously: these are (a) awareness training, (b) the research thread (action-cycles), (c) the thread dealing with the emotional climate, (d) thread dealing with collaboration (how to share power), and (e) charismatic training, ritual work and dramaturgy. To become competent in these interrelated strands the initiator/s must establish an all-important *working alliance*: an agreement between participants for exploring distressed interactions openly. Lucy a counselor (DJ some-bird) and seven-year member, described several important features of our group's life:

> Two very strong positive features of group for me are: the inclusion and holding of painful psychic material in an ongoing relationship with group and its members. This experience of authentic sharing of oneself, over time, with people who come to know and love you. This consistency of relationship and contact over time creates a deeper "family" feeling which is very centring and healing.
>
> But group also goes beyond being a "therapy" or support group. The other important aspect is the celebratory and spiritual one. To get in touch with a sense of divinity in oneself, others and the world on a regular basis, and attend the regular shared awareness of that level of experience keeps it front and centre in one's life which is very enriching. Creating shared ceremony and celebration of divinity is a very bonding and joyful experience. This balances the experience of being really present with one's own and others' more wounded and painful emotional stuff (which can be heavy but also grounds the group in care and love of each person's whole human self, not just the easy light-hearted bits).
>
> Gregg's insight, facilitation and capacity to be present with both the divine tragedy and the divine comedy in the human condition sets a tone of grounded, relationally sensitive, joyful play with immanent divinity.

The initiand (the one being initiated) is asked to carefully assimilate the work and make the inquiry method their own (not swallow it whole). Is a time of learning. The initiand will begin to make contributions to the inquiry that will influence it and they will come to realize that their presence is an influence on the collaborative openness. Resistance is fertile, expected, unavoidable, and must be both sensitively supported and explored.

Two. *The anticipated or resistant relationship* is coloured by the participant's unaware anticipations, desires or fears (sometimes catastrophic ones) projected onto the initiator, other group members, or the group as a whole or the inquiry itself. It can be an unacknowledged and unaware re-creation of a wounded relationship. It might loosely be called a transferential or an unfinished relationship. Because it is rigidly fixed and unfinished, it acts in ways that are not adapting to the situation and can invite more wounding. It displaces what has been in the past into the here and now experience, which is known as "the presenting past" whereby the false-self goes further into aliened individuation. Laura Perls claimed that in terms of healing, "nothing happens without support" (as cited in Wollants, 2012, p. 33). We certainly construe the group as a potential Oasis of support in the hope of more positive individuation.

This anticipated relationship, hopefully, is a transient one, giving way to more wholesome relating as it properly suffers, re-adjusts, and relaxes. Thus, establishing a relation of support in the inquiry situation may be vitally reparative and necessary for the inquirer to take the next step.

Three. *The reparative relationship* is the other side of the resistant relationship—it is one that is developmentally needed. It means there is a hole where something (support, love, empathy, understanding) is missing and requires holding, nursing, supporting, and empowering—first from the outside environment and then from inner and relational resources. Repair can occur through taking on and experimenting with new roles, learning to trust in one's own wisdom and that of others, testing new behaviours, seeking healthy support, seeking greater contact, and re-embedding in new and positive constellations. As Clarkson (2003) described: "The developmentally needed or reparative relationship is an intentional provision by the psychotherapist [initiator and group in our case] to a corrective, reparative, or replenishing relationship or action where the original parenting was deficient, abusive, or over protective" (p. 113). Here is an example from Rachael, who has been with the group for several years, along these lines and her desire to deepen her relationship with "God" by repairing her relations with persons:

> One of the most potent things I've realised is that I am repairing the relationship with my true-self and through this renewed sense of self ... with others and I am repairing my relationship with God. It has so much of a reparative effect on my being that I often feel in a state of disbelief that it is even possible that this is happening… it washes away my doubt and has me feel a renewed faith in individuals and humanity ...

like anything is possible and we can do any task that is set before us ... by GOD!! :)

I thought that God had abandoned me with this alien family (my family of origin) who certainly were not interested in the things I was interested in i.e. the wonder of the world ... the amazingness that exists and is very real ... the way things in nature make perfect sense to that part of me that is like a seed and there to receive that sense and intelligence and longs to grow and learn in a way where everything has meaning … it is a felt intelligence … that transcends just an intellectual knowing and goes to the heart of knowing. And in this group ... I share and feel confident to feel those things ... i.e. wonder/excitement/joy of learning.

It is like I am getting to revisit or go back to that part of myself in a conscious way ... realise what I felt, how I shut down and the emotional decisions I made about life, i.e. I must not deserve love ... and be with that child in such a way ... as I am held by the group in that way (as open and interested is what I perceive mostly) that makes new things possible ... spaciousness around those things that before were constricted in my psyche and had me feel like I was slowly dying inside myself ... a shell in which I was rotting from the inside out with the putrid feelings I had imbibed. A total rewiring if you will!!

One of the most marked experiences I have had and delight in, is a feeling about how easy this is and how simple it is to create a place where our souls can flourish ... it is NOT perfect (maybe it is!) and it is NOT everything (maybe like I'd hoped my family would be) and yet we cultivate a space where real learning and growing and realising of oneself is happening (and it's enough to have my frozen self begin to thaw and poke her head out of her hiding place to see what's around and take delight in the world and feel excited and see possibilities again)

Better than any medication!

Seeking the Nectar ... captures the essence of the state one is in to open to the benefits of the group ... and place that is safe to open to the sweetness of life within and without ... a connection to the goodness that can be taken in with each breathe and is there for those with such a desire to embody and live joy, bliss, harmony, love, openness, truth and humility.

Ps, I know it's not always simple and easy for any of us ... but in those moments when we really do connect in that way ... it feels like the most natural and simple thing in the world. I think that is just something I would like to say to my family back then ... SEE HOW EASY THIS IS! WE CAN DO THIS!

The reparative relationship leans toward the supportive and therapeutic end of the continuum. Once trust is established by providing a safe, empathic and democratic environment (a growing voice in the destiny of the group) the initiand is usually able to join in with a greater level of relaxed participation. We often hear participants referring to "being myself" which is neither confluent (merged), compliant (doing what she is told), avoidant (hidden, underground, deflecting) or coercive (restlessly rebelling or in agitated negation), but in attuned participation. To quote the Persian poet Rumi (1991) from his parable "one-handed basket weaving": "When those anxious self-protecting imaginations leave, the real, cooperative work begins" (p. 14). Indeed, the whole relational inquiry process is perfectly captured in the Sufi sage's line.

Four. *The collaborative relationship* is where we all begin to take shared charge of creating a healthy working-playing community and intentionally build a friendly working foundation through cooperation, and it runs on the ethos of *mutual care* (which again is obviously not the standard therapist-patient relationship). An "operative" is defined as one who has an effect on the situation or the event. *Co-operatives*, genuine conspirators (meaning "to breath together") work together to originate, define, establish, and refine an interpersonal spiritual event. They attune to the emergent situation and co-ordinate the action taken together and the modes of presence that are required to enable a fully cohesive community. Susanna described this possibility (or something like this):

> I love the expansive and reverential quality of our meeting when we engage in ceremony. My

favourite event was a lovely space-time loop that I experienced when my fellow collaborators took some moments to send love and care to my infant self as she (I) was in an incubator. Some years ago, during a bodywork session I experienced my incubator-dwelling infant self and was very happy to see/know that she/I was not alone (as I had previously imagined) but was surrounded by and in loving contact with a "family" who were there for me in spirit. I experienced them as rapidly vibrating colourful forms with great loving presence. Since that "memory" I have felt far more supported and loved in life generally. I used to say I don't know who those people are (my loving spirit family). However, when "the group" sent their love and care to that infant self, I suddenly "grokked" who "they" were/are. It dawned on me that THIS group in THAT moment, impacted my infant-self way back THEN. I saw and benefitted from knowing of that love quite some years-ago and have been positively impacted since. It all gelled and I had a wonderful sense of time being very fluid. Since the inquiry group event, I have an abiding buoyant sense of the power of love and connection, which is not limited by time being linear.

Seemingly a perinatal trans-temporal reparative event. In the collaborative relationship, we enact roles of co-designer, co-decision-maker, co-enactor and co-reflector, co-researcher. Rehearsing the action to be taken, then reflecting and redesigning the action, and then activating/animating it again has the pleasing effect of building community, cohesion, and a strong feeling of social bonding and unity found in ritual. The leadership of the group is becoming distributed, contributory and collectively oriented. Another Persian poet, Hafiz (as cited in Ladinsky, 1999, p. 26), captures the ethos:

A
hunting party
Sometimes has a greater chance
Of flushing Love and God out into the open
Than a warrior
All
Alone

Here is Rachael reporting on the work of our hunting party on the Rainbow group:

I will say that my wonderful time with you all has supported and helped to disinhibit my desire to know and love God of which the benefits I feel are like waves on an ocean of time .... moving outward in all directions to provide an expanding foundation on which I surf satisfaction and joy ... THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU! for your support and encouragement and participation! What a wonderful time of learning and experiencing in such an accepting and supportive environment.

I am still sipping in the Breath of God from the atmosphere we created from our combined Rainbows of Desire ... but just a couple of important things for me was the courage shown to address issues and be honest even when it is uncomfortable ... and the support and willingness for that to happen and the faith it takes to get us through to a deeper state of truth and ultimately love.

My "cosmic-dramaturgy" ... what a spontaneous and lovely event ... thank you to Andre my Angel "remover of obstacles" ... my father/mother God for reaching back towards me and holding me; and all the group for the loving embrace we all shared in the cosmic arms of God; for the post lunch swooning's; for each and every one's Perfect Nature for singing out!

To Rhianna and Chloe-Sage for bee-ing themselves and honouring us; to G for the stories… I felt entranced and feel them still swimming in my soul

THE SUN LONGS TO FEEL…SO HERE I AM!

Five. *The I–Thou relationship* seems to emerge from the process of planned (Apollonian) or freewheeling (Dionysian) co-action, and where the enactment of therapeutic democracy creates a greater sense of peer participation, equality and person-to-person relating. We advocate the Buber's I-thou relationship, as a creative adjustment, with the understanding that such moments come and go. Nevertheless, we strive to get beyond the objectifying I-it relationship, the narcissistic I-I-I, or the subjectivizing I-Only.

The person-to-person relationship is *real* and differs from thematized relationships with other professionals, the postman, or the always-empathetic therapist. If the working contract is robust enough then relational inquirers can meet in real authentic person-to-personhood. The I-thou relationship seems to be "the ground" that leads to the flowering of transpersonal relationships and potentials. There is pleasure and participation in the fattened-abundant immediate present, in open-hearted relationship. The I-Thou is a confirmation of the other's personhood freed from extreme objectivism on the one pillar and extreme subjectivism on the other (our path of human and non-human contacting lies between these two pillars).[19] In Cortright's (1997) account:

> I-it relating is normal, secular [socialized] relating in which the other is a seen as an object, a thing to be used, a means to an end. I-thou relating, on the other hand, brought a person into a sacred relationship in which the other is viewed as an end in itself. I-thou establishes a relation of equality ... It was this appreciation of the authentic, the intersubjective and the call for equality that could potentially push Buber's I-thou intention to "its highest culmination in a transpersonal perspective which truly embraces the sacredness of relationship." (p. 106)

There is healing in simple person-to-person, participatory encounter. And now, we must speak of Love.

Six. *The eco-erotic relationship* is an affectionate relationship with the subjectivity of the world, and an intersubjective communion with the presences in the world (Mathews 2003) such as the birds and bees (Lahood, 2013). My initial version of this relation went like this:

> *The erotic relationship* is where my feeling for the world is erotic, in meeting and encountering the group, presences, the occasion, the location; there is Eros: the world and all that is embraced erotically, in love, union, and communion. Some examples are Washburn's (1995) polymorphous eroticism and the Sufi approach to the Beloved as a Lover. (Lahood 2010b)

However, the (eco) erotic relationship has since been enlarged and now holds a wider premise. We have incorporated Sorenson's (1998) anthropological studies of childrearing in non-Western indigenous cultures in which Eros is not repressed, or truncated through an act of objectification, but fostered and enhanced. We also draw from panpsychist philosophy in which Eros relates intersubjective meeting with worldhood (e.g., Mathews, 2003). A statement from Sally during "singing our embedding in nature" inquiry in which we explored divergent ways of speaking with worldhood:

> That morning on the beach was one experience after another of being reached out to by the divinity of nature—god dancing me on the sand, the ocean caressing my ankle most tenderly, whales waving and an angel in the sky...so heightened...truly amazing!!

Mathews (2003) wrote that the desire for meeting the interior of the world in an "intersubjective congress" can be primarily characterized as an erotic and loving attitude to life rather than a *manipulative* one. Furthermore, such a worldhood deserves to be approached via a dialogical-participatory-relational encounter rather than objectifying or scientific knowledge. If the "world is a communicative, conative subject, or field of subjectivity" then the entire Western knowledge project "of exposing the structure of reality, bringing to the light the inner mechanisms of things, may constitute a moral or spiritual affront to the world." Hence, with Matthews (2003), we hold up an ethic of dialogical-encounter over "knowledge" in its objectifying sense:

> Where knowledge in the traditional sense then seeks to explain, encounter seeks to engage. Knowledge seeks to break open the mystery of another's nature; encounter leaves the mystery intact…And while knowledge enables me to predict the behaviour of the other, encounter does not: the mysterious other retains its capacity to surprise. Knowledge provides closure on the future, hence control and security. Encounter is open-ended, allowing for spontaneity and entailing vulnerability. That is why encounter is erotic. (p. 78)

Seven. *Theophanic Relationship*. If we can come to appreciate the ecological world around us as cosmic presence—as something like God—then we are participating in a revelation; that is, a theophany, a self-world-transfiguring appearance of a deity to and through a human being. Charisma, I believe, originally meant to be touched by God. We can recollect that caress, open to a self-world union in the sensual immediate present experience. Yet, another Persian poet,[20] Omar Khayyam (2009), made the point:

> Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,
> A flask of wine, a book of verse—and thou
> Beside me singing in the wilderness—
> And wilderness is Paradise now. (p. 21)

We participate with fascination and love as the world's invitation and challenge unfolds, attuning to in the local environment as situated spirit, as an embodied aspect of divinity, both distinct and wholly unified. This is a relatively free and autonomous person in relationship with others, in touch with her own unique indigenous relationship with all that is. Mel, who has been with us for about a year, described her experience in a Sha'heed ritual:

> Seeking the nectar, stepping into our charismatic selves. The past year has been the most incredible journey for me. It has been an inquiry into present awareness and the first time that I feel like I have truly met myself. In a way it is a coming home, a safe space that is filled with love to connect, dive deep, and step into the unknown. With bravery, courage and vulnerability I have allowed myself to be seen in all my beauty.
>
> I remember how I was in the beginning, my inability to look around the room, how scared I felt to see others and allow myself to be seen. I was terrified of voicing myself, and when it came to toning (sounding) there were times when I would open my mouth but nothing would come out. I didn't understand what was going on for the most part, I had closed off a big part of myself, but I was curious enough to return. I had touched and felt moments of honey. It is a sweet and soft space of vulnerability.
>
> During a three-day immersion we joined in a beautiful Sha'heed ritual. I never knew the meaning of majesty before. The Sha'heed was so incredibly powerful. I was witnessing Danny in his radiant state of manifested Beauty. I saw god within his eyes, as the golden glow surrounded him, his beautiful aura. His majestic state of being. I knew the meaning of the word, however had never felt it before, one can know the intellectual meaning of a word; and then with a force so strong, sent through the universe during a Sha'heed ceremony, I was so grateful to have fully embodied the meaning of majesty. That single moment opened my heart more, and I felt a deep connection to myself and my knowing.
>
> When I now come to the space of the group inquiry, I am so present and in a state of wonder. I am like a child who can taste the nectar in everything. Even through the pain and challenging moments, even when I still feel like wearing a mask. I can drop in easier, with more grace and less heaviness on my heart. I have found the honey, and I am now not only seeking nectar, I am soaked in nectar.

Experiences of vertical or transcendent spirituality are grounded, horizontalized in the court of charismatic action and inquiry. We are in touch with our "yes," our "no," or our "maybe not-yet" as we "lurch toward delight" (after Sorenson, 1998). We can become conduits for life-loving energies which we channel or transmit to others in thought, word, gesture and deed (cf. Evans, 1997). Here the spirit of *eudaimonia* (Greek for flourishing) or the angel of happiness takes up residence.

Charismatic collaboration at this mature level is to surf a wave of divine becoming. The following account is from Danny after *The Rainbow of Desire* 5-day meeting:

> I noted how the leaving Byron and the group was easy and a beautiful segue into my life in New Zealand. The girl at Gold Coast airport with the upside-down rainbow on her forehead; Monday morning met a friend on the street with a new baby and rainbow flowers; day after, a rainbow hat on the head of a visiting friend and yesterday great rainbows in the sky.

Seems to me some mighty works done! My rainbow of desire revealed lovingly to move with/toward God or any of the Names I have chosen for "all that is." I spoke of "amnesia" it was a naming I gave so I was able to manage for a time till I gave way to a felt space, Lush and Clear, full of Promise … for me something of God rediscovered and a place I can now meet in comfort. So many highlights; being enabled to slumber after lunch. Lying about sleeping with everyone while G told his cosmic stories.

Glorious participants, Bee-Loved, your work made miracles in my life; the Splendid rituals, co-created and co-participated, crumbled my fears and replaced them with wondrous Ease. Beautifully held G and Glory to The Stories. For me, these longer groups are where I blossom grow and Inspire. I hold a deep appreciation and Heart full of Love for you All. Funny to say but I sense myself as very lovely and this body walks and motions with a new freedom. Thank you for the Beauty and Grace of the Place for us to Meet.

Conclusion

This has been an attempt to outline the work of a new paradigm re-search community that holds together through mutual interest, mutual care, and perhaps, the simple need for human congress and an opportunity to make sense of the world and our engagement with her. Figure after figure has emerged from the ground of the group as we have learned how to meaningfully be together, and how to make meaning of the meeting. With Ferrer and Sherman (2008), our inquiry affirms the belief that "contemporary participatory" approaches allow "*a thousand spiritual flowers bloom*" (p. 41).

The work of this group, has been informed by cooperative inquiry, aspects of Sufism, Gestalt, psychodrama, Grof's breathwork, and participatory praxis (Tarnas, 1991). It is a form of locally grown spirituality. While the intention or motivation of the group was for personal growth and collaborative transformation and not formal academic research or psychotherapy, it has been rewarding to report on the inquiry process and provisional outcomes to an academic audience. I am grateful for the contributions my spiritual companions have made in writing and to the group's lived experience and I hope this postcard gives readers something of an impression of what we attempt to bee, how we row our boat, and the spiritual events we have co-created as we continue on our Dionysian voyage of discovery.

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Notes

1. In the writing of this paper I am supported by statements from other participants, for which I am grateful. It is not co-written but there was an opportunity for all to share whatever experience they wanted to. I would like to thank three core-support people and group members who have had immeasurable input into the Rainbow of Desire's ongoing project. First and foremost, my long-time partner and collaborator since 2006, Jacqueline Riordan, for her unwavering support, enthusiasm, her decorative aesthetic, charismatic flare, and many, many hours of walking the beaches in conversation and charismatic practice. To midwife, Zana, for co-creating and supporting the Centre for Relational Spirituality and the work done there (not to mention her floral arts, poetic performances, and supportive presence), and aikido sensei Danny McIntyre for his decades of gentle and wise presence.
2. I borrow the term Rainbow of Desire from the Argentinian drama-ritual therapist Augusto Boal (1995). My first (very) rudimentary cooperative inquiry was into the Boal method of theatre/ therapy. Boal redefined Aristotelian catharsis which he depicted as coercive, "a purging by society of its member's asocial tendencies" (1995, p. xxi) and he differed from Jacob Moreno's psychodramatic catharsis which he saw as the expulsion of a "poison" (1995, p.71). Rather, Boal's aim was to remove the blocks (core introjects in Gestalt terms) that limit, repress or prohibit desires. Thus, Boal's catharsis worked against oppression, "a removal of blocks, not a voiding of desires; desires are clarified and dynamized [animated, amplified], not tamed. Here catharsis releases desires which societal constructions (such as family, school or work) had imprisoned (1995, xxi). Individuals may well be 'neurotic' but 'individuals' are the product of neurotic societies and cultures. The idea of removing the blocks to desire has been a core ethos around which many our inquires have circled. Desire in this context is neither capricious nor promiscuous but addresses a

deep desire to reach-out for connection and communion with others, natural presences, the personhood of the world, and something like God.

3. While Wikipedia (2018) is not always a reliable source, I appreciate their definition of a heuristic as: "any approach to problem solving, learning, or discovery that employs a practical method not guaranteed to be optimal or perfect."
4. *Therapeia* is an ancient Greek word from where we get the terms therapist and therapy. In Greek religion *Asklepios* was the God of Medicine who presided over healing places (usually spas or temples) also known as Therapeia. A person would come and live for several days and nights, awaiting a healing dream that would reveal the spirit of the temple. The therapeia-ist, a priest of Asklepios would sweep the temple, keep it clean, sweeten the air with herbs or incense, and nourish the visitor as form of service to the spirit of the spa. Later, for Plato, therapeia was a liberating pedagogic education and a remedy for a contradiction in the human condition that played out in the political, social and relational spheres.
5. Gestalt practice, as advanced by Dick Price at Esalen community, where I lived for a time studying gestalt practices, is not to be confused with psychotherapy. It took the awareness practice and applied it to spiritual or transpersonal endeavours combining it with yoga, tai chi, dance and breathwork. A client seeking psychotherapy should see a psychotherapist and contract to do so. Attending the inquiry group to 'do therapy' would be a mistake in role definition and would muddy the contract and muddy the water of the inquiry endeavour. Our relational inquiry owes a debt to gestalt practice.
6. The relational-turn in Gestalt therapy emerged as something of a reaction to the confrontational style of the 1960s, which is now seen as shaming. The confrontational style grew from the assumption that clients needed to be frustrated out of their manipulations and neediness - an assumption that is no longer tenable (Yontef, 2002, p. 20). Support for, and understanding of, the client's situation (field) are now key.
7. In Gestalt therapy these were the traditional flexions that we use to bend ourselves out of shape at the contact boundary: desensitization, deflection, introjection, projection, retroflection, egotism, and confluence.
8. Heron (1996) wrote that inquiring into the human condition can stir up fear and defensiveness which could distort or derail the process of psychological research, and which, was not dissimilar to therapist counter-transference. Participants can and do unawarely project onto world (group etc.) the anxiety of their denied or distorted distress. They may attempt to disrupt the inquiry-process because of all kinds of unfinished emotional business (pp. 149–151). The same is true for spiritual inquiry, according LeRon Shults (2003), fear and repression are the major blocks in the transformational learning of seminarians inquiring into their relationship with an uncontrollable God.
9. Rupture, noticed or otherwise, is almost inevitable in the therapeutic process. Therapists are not always able to attune perfectly to every situation or every emerging figure. But misattunement can be followed up with re-attunement and hopefully repair. So, while there will always be the potential for rupture – there is always the potential for the reparative healing of toxic shame (see Mann 2010, p. 200). On this count, screening and selection are also very important, as it takes commitment to stay with the moments of impasse and challenge – having the correct *motivation* for joining "the work" of the group is essential.
10. We have found that followers of Adviata Vedanta do not seem to gel with our approach. Anthropologist of religion Brian Morris, pointed out that for Ramana Maharshi, the nondual enlightenment he is famous for, the attainment of the Big Self, had nothing whatsoever to do with the human body but entailed the absolute identification with an impersonal deity (2006, p.120). A fervent perennialist nondualist may simply not be able to engage in our embodied inquiry with its "feel your way" dialogic, relationship-based approach. That said, any religious doctrine can be used to defend against childhood wounds,

human needs, or developmental tasks, including Buddhism, as Buddhist teachers have observed (e.g., Trungpa 1973; Wellwood, 1984). Spiritual defences are tricky because they are entwined with more primitive defences.

11. We have agreed that if a person is in need of group support then the practices take a back-seat and we offer them time to work, talk, discharge or whatever they need. We have also agreed that people sharing a living situation, share-housing, partnerships need to process their interpersonal stuff outside of the group. We did not want to turn our gathering into a couples-counselling scenario. The idea was to encourage interpersonal contact and clearing before they came to the inquiry group.
12. Freya Mathews (personal communication, December 16, 2016) wrote: The form of panpsychism I have been exploring is highly participatory and ecological (and more) in its normative implications. Indeed, this kind of participatory relationship with a communicative reality may be seen as the very basis of many kinds of traditional societies, and I use the term "ontopoetics" to denote the practice of such communicative engagement with reality. (see also the eco-erotic relationship).
13. This is a minimal outline and deserves a more thorough treatment. I have a sense from watching the ritual form take shape over the years that it carries its own very real transfiguring power or *baraka*.
14. A stated principle is that anyone may "sit out" of a cycle with honor if they don't understand, feel threatened, or are in some way triggered by the research field (or something else). At the same time, we appreciate understanding the nature of the resistance.
15. Post-lunch swooning or post-prandial somnolence has become a ritual in itself. A time perhaps, of safe-collapse (after Winnicott) a letting go of hypervigilance and control of the environment - is what this seems to promote. I have used it to introduce our basic relational cosmology. We have enacted a cosmology and supported it with story-telling. I notice that this spurs others to create their own poetic cosmologies which they sometime bring as a poem or song and read or sing out loud. Once we get the boat out beyond the breakers of the wounded-socialized-ego the inquiry can become a highly creative celebration; a parade of perfect natures.
16. Some of these are theatrical performances of transpersonal myths which involve participants in refrains and chants, musical accompaniment or role taking.
17. Diotima was most likely a wandering healer, or in the words of classicist Walter Burkert, an "itinerant charismatic who provides cures for various needs" (Plato, 1994, p. 85).
18. Another aspect to initiation is when a group member initiates work for themselves by claiming time. They need to be able to recognize their need and be self-directed enough to ask for help from the group.
19. I do a "pillar talk" omitted here because of space. In our therapeia we have two wooden Corinthian plinths used as theatrical props. On the left hand is the world-objectifying pillar; a self-world truncating process that represses, controls and protects itself from vulnerability, eros and openness. On the right-hand pillar is extreme subjectivising a self-world process which abandons the self and the world. In the path of no-self spiritually removing the self-from-the-world is another sophisticated form of protection against the danger, pain and excitement of life and the scariness of the Other (cf. Mathews 2003; Lahood 2015).
20. A thank you is due my grandmother Ilene Tyler for instilling in me an interest Persian poetry. She told me, when I was a child, that she had been told-off by a ticket collector on a train either in Sydney or Wellington for reading such lewd and blasphemous stuff. Here, now, with thou, beneath the bough, and its paradise now—she bought me a copy as a gift many years ago.

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Gregg Lahood, PhD, lives in Byron Bay where he is involved with the new paradigm research. G is also a transpersonal anthropologist, an integrative therapist, a holotropic breathwork facilitator, with

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