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# Is that all there is?

Self compassion and the imperfect life.



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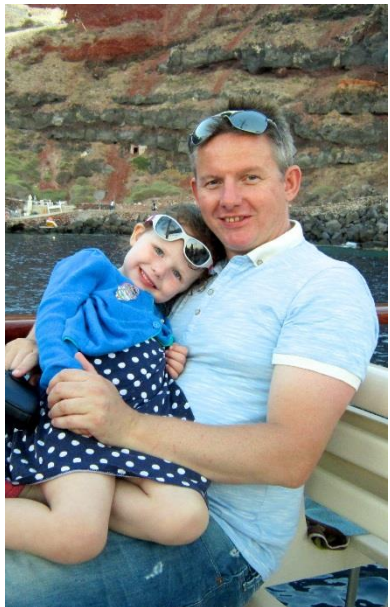
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For my ideal self, with love

And for all of  
you who  
knowingly and  
unknowingly  
supported and  
contributed to  
this work.



## Abstract

This thesis describes my slow journey towards self compassion and how the discovery, nurturing and manifestation of self compassion has informed and enhanced work with clients and my relationships with colleagues, friends and family. Self compassion - the presence, absence, longing for and fear of - is the golden thread that runs throughout my research although I have not always seen it.

My research was motivated by a deep and pervasive 'unease'. Unease about the purpose and impact of my consulting work, unease about the choices I made as a mother, partner and colleague and unease about the *quality* of relationships I was part of. I started this inquiry by trying to make sense of this 'unease' and associating it most strongly with my work. I wondered whether engagement in work that was *truly* fulfilling might lessen the unease. However, as my inquiry progressed I saw how this striving to achieve what I defined as 'good work' (or 'good parenting', or 'good relating') fed and was fuelled by a set of core beliefs about myself and the world that *contributed to* not lessened my problematic patterns of relating and experiencing. I started to call these patterns *vicious idealisation loops* and in its final stages my inquiry became a search to discover how to lift up and out of vicious loops that *seemed* hard wired and permanent.

As I became more interested in vicious loops I started to notice that many of my *clients* were also caught in similar patterns of striving, self criticism, disappointment and more striving. They frequently described themselves as *perfectionists* who never felt entirely satisfied with their achievements or the achievements of others. Thus alongside my story is the story of *James*, a client and a self defined 'perfectionist' caught in vicious loops of his own. James represented for me the voices of many corporate clients with whom I worked. The coaching I offered him over the course of a year illustrated how powerful and essential the qualities of self compassion are for those people whose ideals are beginning to crack and whose loops are losing energy and impact. Furthermore, the work I did with James enabled me to experiment with new compassionate practices for working intentionally and explicitly with this form of vicious looping in other areas of my consulting practice.

My research evolved in distinct phases broadly corresponding to the stages of an action research cycle. The first three years were dominated by an inner inquiry that centred around the *purpose and intent* of my research and I now understand that the consulting 'experiments' I carried out during that time were in the service of clarifying that intent.

My Initial insights in to the phenomenon of vicious idealisation looping emerged from this mostly first person inquiry working with autobiographical material and informed by

clinical/psychotherapeutic, philosophical and spiritual schools of thought. As I worked with this material I paid attention to how the boundaries between disciplines and ways of knowing influence each other, overlap and merge. I also stayed alert to how these disciplines could usefully inform my management consulting practice. For example, I learned about self compassion through exploring the biological, evolutionary, psychological, spiritual, philosophical and neurophysiologic research and practical applications. Then, drawing from my own experience of compassionate practice, I adapted the work to create and integrate a compassionate leadership session in my teaching programmes.

The parameters of postmodern constructivist research (in particular the *imaginal approaches* of an alchemical hermeneutic method) gave me space to experiment with a variety of research methods and encouraged me to integrate 'knowing' from across disciplines.

By the time I entered my fourth year I knew that my original question 'what is good work?' had floated downstream. When, as a result of burnout, I had to let go of what I believed was 'good' research I simultaneously experienced an opening out or surrendering to my work. I didn't know *how* to proceed so I waited and listened and in doing so I encountered further upstream a *different* question concerning the role and nature of self compassion.

The discovery of self compassion enabled me to enter in to the darkest realms of my experience, explore the conflicts between my selves and emerge with new insight and faith. Self compassion also guided me as I started to write this thesis and my criteria for considering both ethics and quality in my work is adapted from the three components of self compassion – kind, mindful and connected. I ask: is this work kind, respectful and tolerant towards my self and others? Is this work mindful – can it lift out of the personal and give voice to what is emerging without judgment? Is this work connected to, relevant and useful to others?

Throughout the four years I wrote, recorded, transcribed and filed my inquiry data. I kept a reflective journal, used free fall writing and dream recording to work with unconscious thoughts and wrote papers for discussion in my doctorate supervision groups to make sense of and invite feedback on my emerging ideas. Added to this were my client notes, write ups from consulting assignments, notes from supervision groups, audio transcripts from my therapy sessions, doctorate supervision, coaching and teaching and thousands of underlined sentences, margin notes and post-it markers in the hundreds of books and articles I read during this period.

In the final year of my research, as I moved out of my own burnout experience with new insights, I was inspired to take my inquiry further afield. I used my own experience of

disintegration and recovery to guide my evolving coaching and consulting practice. I paid close attention to how self compassion might be introduced as a practice to support my clients lift out of their own vicious loops and I sought feedback and wrote about the impact and implications of this work for organisations seeking employee development.

This thesis concludes with a chapter drawing attention to the challenges inherent in working with vicious loops. I consider how a compassionate approach to persistence, relapse and resistance can nurture the courage and patience required to enter in to and stay with the frustrating and often imperceptible process of change and growth.



## Foreword

This thesis tells the story about how I learned to be self compassionate. Not all the time. Not even most of the time. Just sometimes. It is a story about how self compassion changed the way I work as an organisational consultant and coach and how self compassion helped me get through the first stages of a personal crisis.

Over the last four years – and probably for much longer – I have been working at the boundary of management development and psychotherapeutic practice to address and work with the phenomena of behavioural and emotional looping. By this I mean the experience of being stuck in repetitive (cooked in) cycles of behaviour, feeling and thought and the (sometimes) attendant experience of being *aware* of this stuckness but feeling unable to interrupt or change these unhelpful patterns and strategies.

As a consultant I am frequently asked to work with high performing individuals who are driven to succeed, who are rewarded well for succeeding and who simultaneously experience problems such as physical stress, insatiable dissatisfaction, relationship breakdown, disillusion and burn out. Often they are unable to find a way out of this performance loop, even though the negative emotional and life consequences are apparent. Earlier in my career I worked with patients suffering from addiction problems. This group would engage in extremely destructive behaviours for the momentary ‘reward’ of being anaesthetised from their emotional (and sometimes physical) pain.

Problematic looping of both kinds is held in place by a reward – money, pain relief, external approval, amnesia. It is behaviour which still serves a *function* and this is why it is so difficult to interrupt. I have been fascinated and perplexed by such behaviour for many years, probably since I watched my own father loop the loop as he sipped his whiskey, disengaged from life and died too soon. In my work with both addicts and entrepreneurs I can see something of my own story and I can see how invested I was – and probably still am - in healing others to heal myself. Not so long ago I would have seen this as a suspect motive under-pinning my work. Now I am more inclined to accept this as a generative intent that enables me to learn and change *alongside* my clients. This self compassionate re-frame of my intent has helped me to discover the joy of reciprocity in my work. It has supported a shift from seeing myself as ‘helper’ or ‘healer’ to collaborator and co-inquirer.

Up until recently I held a pervasive belief that *psychological* awareness is the pathway to interrupting looping and discovering fulfilment, peace and healing. This belief has influenced the way I navigate my own life and supported others to navigate theirs. Yet running parallel to this belief I have experienced a feeling of unease and confusion, of *incongruence*.

Becoming aware of a memory, a cause, a reason, a desire, a motive or drive has not always or even often resulted in release from pain or suffering or interrupted unhelpful behaviour patterns. Frequently I hear myself and others say, “*I know why I do this but I still can’t seem to stop doing it!*”

In 2011, I began to ask, “Is awareness redemptive?” A rhetorical question whose answer I already knew. No. Awareness *by itself* is not redemptive. Then Bill, my first supervisor, paused me to ask, “*But why the word redemptive? It implies having fallen in a religious sense?*”

Invited to think more carefully about this I discovered that the word redemption used (as it most frequently is) in a religious context expresses absolution from sin and protection from damnation. I have learned over many years that my anxieties arise from a fundamental belief that I have done wrong, am unworthy and am due punishment for my aberrations. I have hosted a feeling, as Rowe describes, of ‘intrinsic badness’.<sup>1</sup>

If I believed in God I might have sought the services of a Priest to understand how to live with and reduce my deep anxiety. I may even have *become* a Priest – for it occurs to me that people might be drawn to that vocation for similar reasons I was drawn to psychotherapy (saving others to save oneself). Yet since I don’t believe in God I chose a more suitable vocation (and treatment?). Psychotherapy and later, coaching, seemed to offer a secular pathway towards absolution. In my work I noticed my clients also talked about strong feelings of unworthiness and fear and I wondered if they too were looking for a remedy akin to the power of a religious experience to liberate them. Redemption remains a useful word that helps me to appreciate the truly powerful shift required to interrupt the looping that threatens to drive me and others crazy or towards irredeemable despair. However, it is a word I use less often now as I start to see my loops as functional and an inevitable consequence and manifestation of nature and nurture combined. I have come to accept that looping is not my *fault* but it has become my *problem* – and so worthy of my attention and compassion.

Throughout my career then I have, in one way or another, been guided by the assumption that a certain kind of awareness (a deep and honest appreciation of one’s motives, desires, drives and behavioural patterns) is a good thing and will enable more effective and satisfying participation in the world. Yet at the same time my clients tell me that despite gaining this kind of awareness (sometimes over many years of therapy, coaching or some other personal

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<sup>1</sup> In (Masson, 1989 p. 22)

practice) they still cannot free themselves from the routines and responses (the loops) that create misery, disappointment and apathy in their lives.

To know or not to know? That might be the question except there is a third possibility which Goleman starts to articulate,

*“Somewhere between the two poles – living a life of vital lies and speaking simple truths – there lies a skilful mean, a path to sanity and survival”* (Goleman, 1998 p. 251)

Goleman does not suggest what this ‘skilful mean’ might look like although his research and interest in emotional intelligence suggests to me that he is in the camp of those who would advocate awareness as an antidote.

During my inquiry I have become increasingly interested in what living ‘in the middle’ might mean – for myself and for those whom I serve. For me it has become the practice of self compassion. A capacity to be aware of what I feel, think and do and simultaneously to tolerate and accept with *warmth and kindness* all the revelations that come with such awareness. No longer am I simply interested in discovering and increasing the content of my awareness (which became for me an aggressive pursuit of self knowledge). Now I am turning towards the quality and tone of my awareness and noticing that by ‘warming up’<sup>2</sup> my internal conversations I find the strength and courage to be different, to walk with my shadow, to respect my multiple selves and how each serves me in different ways. I have an intense feeling of grief when I recall that for such a long time I didn’t like aspects of myself. Loathed them even. As I begin to accept that all these selves are trying to help me in their own way (even my hostile self critic) I can turn to them as I would a dear, misinformed or troubled friend, and discover creative ways to sustain our relationship.

I did not know at the start of this research that this is where I would find myself. My inquiry has taken many turns that I will describe as the narrative progresses. In the final year of my inquiry (2012) I experienced a series of events that shattered my tightly held beliefs about how relationships in my life ‘should be’. It was at this point that I also experienced a visceral shift in my relationship to the research work and the quality and resonance of my questions began to change. They were now butterfly wings that flapped in my stomach or lumps that stuck in my throat. They were the sting of patient tears. In other words my *body* turned towards them and said, ‘yes’. This was also the time when I knew I was ready to show and share my inquiry with others.

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<sup>2</sup> A term my colleague Paul Gilbert frequently uses when talks about the Compassionate Mind.

Since mid 2012 I have been asking myself and others; What is (self)compassion and why is it relevant to me and my clients? Can a compassionate approach interrupt the idealisation loop that is so familiar to me as a personal and client experience? If so (and I use myself as a primary research subject to test this question) how can I bring *compassionate practice and inquiry* in to the centre of my work and my living? In other words: How can I adapt and use the existing and emerging clinical/scientific research in this field to develop my work/practice within an organisational/management context?

My inquiry can be described as a first person inquiry using myself as research subject to explore and practice self compassion as a means of interrupting my own loops. To do this I have attended a variety of workshops and courses to learn about self compassion and practices for developing it, I have worked closely with a personal therapist, recorded those sessions and observed the gradual re-scripting of my story, I have used forms of writing as a method of inquiry (journaling, free fall and fiction writing) and I have applied these practices to the personal and professional loops I find myself in.

When I began to feel the personal impact of self compassion practices – which was not until the fourth year of my research - I gained more confidence to engage in second person inquires to talk about my work. To do so I engaged colleagues, a Peer Spirit Circle<sup>3</sup> and members of the Compassionate Mind foundation<sup>4</sup> in conversations to explore the meaning and function of self compassion in growth and development.

Finally and towards the very end of my research I began to take my work further afield, to clients and a wider audience. This third person research has involved designing, implementing and evaluating Compassionate Leadership workshops, working overtly with compassionate practices in my coaching, facilitating a Compassionate Leadership session at a UK conference and beginning to work on an article about Compassionate Leadership.

I have found Rowan's research cycle (Rowan, 1981) a useful way of framing the unfolding of my research in six distinct moments. Rowan's moments include *experiencing* the need for inquiry, *thinking* about the experience in new ways, involving *others* to develop my thinking, experimenting in order to test my emerging ideas, *making sense* of what happens in those experiments and finally *communicating* what I have learned and discovered to a wider audience. However, in order to move in to the last three moments of this cycle I needed a different frame that could incorporate and hold the darker side of my experiences as they

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<sup>3</sup> A group I formed to support my inquiry based on Christina Baldwin's (Baldwin, 1996) principles of conversation circles

<sup>4</sup> [www.compassionatemind.co.uk](http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk)

unfolded. Romanyshyn's (2007) alchemical hermeneutic method which supports an imaginal approach to research encouraged me to pay attention to and integrate the knowing that came from musings, reveries, dreams and intuitions. This method also helped me understand how to listen to my grief, how to tend to the injured roots of my being and to wait patiently for knowing to emerge. As such it was a method that encouraged the compassionate practice that I was turning towards.

During the course of my Doctorate Inquiry I have noticed my tendency to polarise and split. To attach myself to one idea or belief and to reject its opposite. The development of my compassionate self has involved noticing this tendency and cultivating a more curious stance that invites multiple possibilities to co-exist. Thus in this work I weave together theoretical frameworks that I would previously have kept apart. I revisit psychoanalytic approaches – particularly those concerning repression of the shadow self, I become reinvigorated by cognitive behavioural approaches as I consider scientific findings that support a neurobiological and evolutionary basis to psychological looping, I reconsider existential approaches that foreground anxiety and fear as the basic human condition, I learn about Gestalt therapy and its emphasis on integration of opposites and I re-find family therapy, particularly the use of narrative approaches as a method for working with critical inner voices. These theories inform my research (although not all of them make it in to this thesis) and support my argument for a compassionate approach when working in organisations. At the periphery of my research are other contributions that I am aware influence the centre space. So, for example I will touch upon and honour Eastern – particularly Buddhist - influences but will not cover this ground in depth. Boundaries are drawn primarily due to the scope of this work but in this case also because my current client group tends to be wary of spiritual frameworks. As I will show later, it has been more productive to begin a conversation with my corporate clients that is grounded in the *science* of compassion than it is to start that same conversation from an esoteric perspective. Furthermore, my personal growth during this research has been supported by considering the organic, biological basis of my being – grounding who I am in what I am, the bodily and tangible. I have found this as helpful as the wisdom offered by the spiritual traditions.

Also at the periphery of my research are cultural psychological and sociological theories which offer perspectives on how personal strategies for survival and growth are contingent upon historical and social contexts. I am drawn to this work in an attempt to understand the profound impact my immigrant experience has had in sculpting my emotional and behavioural repertoire. However, I do not have the scope in this inquiry to do this material justice. For the same reason I do not write in any depth about the body of feminist literature that pertains to this work.

As well as theoretical boundaries I have also drawn some personal boundaries about what to include and not include in this work. Some of the events in my life that influence this work are deeply distressing and a few still remain open wounds. It is my intention to offer the reader material which is sufficiently 'composted' to be used in a generative way and in doing so remember Virginia Woolf's advice to her female audience at Girton College,

*"It is fatal for a woman to lay the stress on any grievance; to plead with any just cause....for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised....it cannot grow in the minds of others. Some creation has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man<sup>5</sup> before the art of creation is possible.....The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his [sic] experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace....The writer...once his experience is over, must lie back and celebrate its nuptials in the darkness."* (Woolf, 2000 p. 103)

Later I discuss in more detail how the concept of *sacred intent*, the practice of *critical reflexivity* and the exercise of *judgment within an ethical epistemology* supported me to write about personal experiences with respect and care for others. An ethical epistemology starts with an ethical stance towards the others *in oneself* and extends outwards towards an ethical attitude towards other people. To nurture and sustain the ethical stance both in oneself and towards others the capacity for (self) compassion is essential. Thus my ethical criteria emerges from a self compassionate approach towards my research and my writing. This criteria is adapted from Neff's (2011) definition of self compassion and asks: Is this work kind, respectful and tolerant - towards myself and others? Is this work mindful –can it lift out of the personal and give voice to what is emerging without judgment? Is this work connected to and relevant to others?

The discovery of self compassion during this research has supported me to produce what I believe to be an ethical work of quality because:

- It has enabled me to let go of what I think the work 'should be' (the idealised) and enabled the emergence of what is (the actual)
- It has nurtured an attitude of patience which has tempered the desire for quick and premature 'conclusions' and allowed me to rest in and come to know my experience more fully.
- It has encouraged me to maintain an 'attitude of inquiry' and genuine curiosity which has helped me write about difficult relationships with sensitivity, respect and love.

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<sup>5</sup> Here she is referring to the personal integration or 'marriage' (hence the celebration of nuptials) of opposites – masculine/feminine, light/dark, hate/love etc.

- It had enabled me to recognise and work with the multiple and conflicting other 'voices' that wish to contribute to this process of discovery and in doing so I have caught glimpses of my real self that speak of possibilities beyond this particular research endeavour. (transformational)
- It has helped me to share and give my work with/to others by regulating my threat based fears associated with judgment, criticism and rejection.

The compassionate practice that I learned about and now apply in my consulting practice offers a way of understanding and working with the vicious looping that characterises perfectionist strivings in the workplace. As I have learned to recognise these loops in motion and found ways to bring a compassionate approach in to my work I am better able to support clients to explore and come to terms with what I will shortly go on to describe and name as their 'actual' and 'real' manifestations of self<sup>6</sup>. This exploration – particularly when the actual self is recognised - may well lead a disappointed perfectionist to ask '*Is that all there is?*' It is a question I asked myself as the dust from my own explosive experiences settled around me. In some ways that question marked the start of a different piece of work which involves learning how to listen to and collaborate with my different selves. This work carries on for me and goes beyond the pages of my thesis. Nevertheless, I now recognise the question '*Is that all there is?*' as a response to the emergence and appearance of my actual and real selves. For that reason I can exhale deeply with relief and at last celebrate my answer – '*yes, that is all there is. And, for now, it is enough.*'

## **Presentational Form**

The inquiry is presented in seven chapters that tell the story of how I lived in, fell out of and made new sense about the vicious idealisation loops I had been circling for years. The purpose of telling this story is to show how my subjective experiences of looping, burn out and recovery significantly informed my professional practice. The growth of self compassion has changed the way I work with clients and I will describe that change fully in chapter four.

In chapters one and two I have described how this five year research process has not followed a linear path and neither have I discovered a 'reality' or a 'truth' that was not previously known to me. What I have done is taken all that I know and (eventually) learned how to rest in that knowing until an interpretive meaning emerged. To honour this experience I have chosen to write this research as an unfolding narrative that weaves in the theoretical perspectives that have deepened and informed my inquiry and ultimately

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<sup>6</sup> See page 51 for definitions of actual, ideal and real self.

supported my sense making. These 'other voices' appear throughout the text and contribute to my continually evolving understanding and application of self compassion.

In chapter three, which relates to the period from May 2009 to August 2009, I describe how I constructed my first inquiry question through a perfectionist lens and set my idealisation loop in motion. I show how this same pattern appears in issues clients bring during coaching and also in some of the organisational development work I do. In this chapter I introduce key clinical (Flett, et al., 2002) and Psychoanalytic (Horney, 1950) and developmental (Bowlby, 1997) perspectives on perfectionism – its definition, development and treatment. It is my contention that in order to work with vicious idealisation loops practitioners need to have a thorough understanding of the perfectionist character and the particular challenges inherent in working with clients who manifest these tendencies.

Chapter four covers the period from the September 2009 to March 2012. Having created an idealised image of how my research and consulting work should be I embark upon a period of intense goal directed activity. I am attuned to messages that confirm I am on the right track and disappear evidence to the contrary. This enables me to remain buoyant and motivated and to continue in this mode despite ill health, relationship break down and job loss. By the middle of 2011 I start to notice that my strategies are not working, that people are not appreciating my 'cures' and 'solutions' which I interpret as 'failing to achieve'. People start to give me difficult feedback and withdraw from me. I listen but do not hear. I work harder to overcome these criticisms and to control my environment so that my idealised images remain intact. On retrospect I observe that this familiar strategy would have continued in its usual way (disillusionment followed by a period of withdrawal before a new goal is constructed or the original goal is reinstated and the loop begins again) had it not been for one significant and devastating personal event which forced me to stop in my tracks. This event destroyed the emotional and cognitive resilience and motivation I needed to maintain former strategies. The familiar feelings of disappointment, loss and abandonment were more acute and debilitating than ever.

It is in this chapter that I introduce the literature on burn out. In particular I feature Casserley and Megginson's (2009) management research in to burn out amongst high flyers and the personal account of burnout and recovery offered by Glouberman (2003). I also introduce Romanyshyn's (2007) work which draws upon the myth of Orpheus to draw attention to the role of burnout (or dismemberment) in the transformation process. This review complements and expands the research on perfectionism covered in chapter one. I consider how those caught in idealisation loops have perfectionist tendencies that pre-dispose them to both succeed and burn out at work. The definition of burnout is explored as are individual and



contextual characteristics which create the conditions for this experience. The purpose of introducing this literature is to lay the foundations for a later consideration of how burnout forces *those caught in idealisation loops* to loosen their grip on what *should be* and face in to the reality of *what is*. Practitioners who can support this process confidently and *specifically* can enable a client to experience burnout as a development and transformational experience.

In chapter five I describe in more detail the events leading up to my burnout (March 2012) including autobiographical references which show how my idealisation loop originated and was sustained. This has perhaps been the most difficult chapter to write for it contains very personal and still painful accounts of my own 'dismemberment' – the breaking apart of my core beliefs and the glimpse of other truths both welcome and not. However, these events are central to my learning and movement out of a vicious loop and it was through this experiencing that I discovered a different kind of 'knowing' which informed my practice in a radically different way.

I refer to this dismemberment as an experience of *burnout* and in the previous chapter I have described the relationship between perfectionism, idealisation looping and burnout. In this chapter I explore burnout as an *individual* experience and conclude that burnout cannot, as Casserley and Megginson (2009) suggest, be confined to work related phenomena and also that the experience is strongly mediated (in terms of trigger events, intensity, duration and outcome) by the *particular* vicious loop an individual is trapped within and *quantity* and *quality* of awareness they have about these loops, their origin and the functions they serve.

In this chapter I offer three different examples (my own, my father's and James's) of burnout to illustrate how important both quantity (of insight, perspective, reflexivity) and quality (non judgmental, kind, patient, compassionate) are in characterising the burnout experience and whether one is likely to experience burnout as developmental or not. I also return to Casserley and Megginson's collation of burnout indicators and offer a critique based on my consideration of burnout as it is experienced by those caught in vicious idealisation loops.

In chapter six, covering the period March 2012 to July 2012 I describe the most significant experiences that supported my healing, informed my learning and inspired me to bring compassionate practice more fully and intentionally in to my work. It is in this chapter that I consider in detail the literature relating to self compassion and compassionate practice and contend that compassion is a pivotal feature of working with vicious loops that arise out of perfectionist tendencies. In particular I refer to the work of Paul Gilbert (Gilbert, 2010) whose support and instruction during this time helped me understand the significance of self

compassion to regulate the threat based responses that fuel vicious loops. In this chapter I offer two parallel stories: my own process of recovery and learning and the application of this in my practice.

In the concluding chapter seven I consider why it is so hard to lift out of loops and live more generatively in the *truth of things as they are* – which I see as the optimum relationship between the ideal, actual and real.<sup>7</sup> As I review and make sense of my experience I identify four themes which recur when I work with, experience and reflect on the nature of *persistence*:

- Resilient personal ontologies
- Fear, anxiety and anger
- Cultural imperatives
- Beliefs about change

I draw on thinking from philosophical (Becker, 1970), management (Kegan, et al., 2009); (Block, et al., 2001), psychological/therapeutic (Leahy, 2001); (Neff, 2011); (Watzlawick, et al., 1974) and spiritual disciplines (Germer, 2009) to inform this exploration. To conclude each thematic exploration I consider how these insights might further enrich my emerging compassionate consulting & coaching practice and the *specific* challenges of working with those caught in idealisation looping. In particular, I explore the difficulty of nurturing self compassion when the perfectionist inner critic continues to rage. This chapter concludes on a compassionate note – that our effort to *avoid* suffering and pain *reinforces* the very loops that cause us distress, disappointment and anxiety. Glouberman's (2003) mantra *wait, give up hope and keep the faith* becomes a lifelong practice.

## Introducing James

Throughout the chapters I refer to the work I started in November 2011 with a client who I call James. I focus on James for several reasons. First he represents the characteristics of clients with whom I frequently work and who, like me, are circling an idealisation loop of their own. Second, our work commenced at a time when I was starting to discover how compassionate practices could alleviate my own suffering and when I began to bring a few of these practices in to my client work. Third although the work I did with James came to a premature end in February 2012 it recommenced nine months later in November 2012 by

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<sup>7</sup> Living generatively in the truth of how things are honours the present moment (actual), visions a possible and nourishing future (real) and respects the voices that whisper and warn us to be careful (ideal).

which time my understanding and use of compassionate practice had grown. Thus my later work with James provides a real opportunity to explore the tangible changes in my practice over an 18 month period.

## **Family, Friends and Colleagues**

Throughout this thesis I refer to family members, colleagues, friends and my therapist who have provided insights, encouragement, support and guidance. I have sought and gained their consent to be included in this work. In Chapter one I consider the ethics and justification for including two people who have I have not consulted – namely James and my ex partner. I remain convinced that their inclusion in this work is respectful and necessary.

## **Use of Pictures**

Throughout the text I have included photo images of writers who have most influenced my work. I did this because I wanted to bring more of their embodied presence in to the work. These writers are not just their words and ideas. I hope that by showing you their faces you may feel a little closer to them and enjoy imagining the lives that informed their work.

## **Summary**

These seven chapters illustrate how and why I have taken the concept of compassionate attention to the heart of my professional practice and life. It is my hope that this inquiry offers insights that enable consultants and coaches to recognise and work more effectively with the specific presenting problem of clients caught in vicious idealisation loops. These clients are likely to be perfectionists who are high achievers, driven to continuously succeed and at risk of burnout. It is my contention that compassionate attention and practice can offer these clients a way to survive, learn from and lift out of this loop. I also suggest that compassionate practices can benefit those who are already in burn out enabling recovery and creating post burnout resilience. This resilience is important when clients 'relapse' in to familiar strategies and worn out loops and change feels out of reach.

## Prologue

### July 1975

The end of term Summer Fair. It is hot and the school hall is filled with parents and children shading from the heat. The parquet floor is sticky and smells of sour polish. There are stalls selling knitted rag dolls, glass blown ornaments and old books. There is a Punch and Judy show. Near the coat racks is a raffle table. I don't want to walk home yet. It is too hot. So I wander over and have a look at the prizes – bottles of Cream Soda, Blue Nun and Martini, a cut glass bowl, a large plastic bottle stuffed with sweets, two egg cups that look like frogs. At the end of this trestle table, displayed prominently upon a raised foil green stand, is an enormous cake moulded into the shape of Mickey Mouse. It is intricately crafted with tiny swirls of coloured icing sugar from which Mickey's smiling face miraculously emerges. Instantly I long for that cake. It is a prize above prizes. I cannot believe that something like this can be eaten. It is the Hansel and Gretel house. There is magic in this cake and I need to take it home and show my parents.

Later the raffle is drawn. I wait impatiently for the bottles and sweets to be claimed. Finally they hold up the cake. I am very still, hardly breathing. Number 52! Who has the number 52? I am strangely calm. They have called my ticket. I search for the ticket in my pinafore pocket. It's not there. I look inside my shoes. Sometimes I hide things in them. My heart starts to pound.

An hour later I am alone in the coat rack aisle. I rest against a musty PE bag and wonder what to do. Everyone has gone home, the cleaners are sullenly mopping the floor with disinfectant and the cake – my cake – is still on the stand. I see Mr Evans, our headmaster, place the cake in a box. *"We can give it to charity,"* I hear him say. Then, bolder than I have ever been, I approach him,

*"Sir, I...I....the cake. It's mine. I had ticket number 52."*

My dad comes to pick me up in the car. Mr Evans has called him and explained about the cake and why I am still at school even though it is past five O'clock. Mr Evans believes me. In the car I place the box carefully on my knees and roll down the window. My heart is filled with pride and love for this cake character. I wave happily at Mr Evans as we drive away.

Suddenly my Dad is cross. *"I hope you're not lying about this!"* he threatens, glaring at me through the rear view mirror. I deflate. I want him to share my joy and be impressed with

my win. When we get home my mum is stern. They both think I am lying. I give her the box and she opens it. Look it's a magic cake and I won it for us!

*"It'll go off in this heat."* My mum says. She lifts the cake out and goes to find a knife. Then she cuts it up in to squares and wraps each square in a plastic bag. Mickey's head swiftly carved up and buried in the freezer. My mum keeps one large piece out and divides it in to four. I take my share and try to eat. The lighter than light sponge sticks in my throat. I am afraid. Perhaps they are right. Perhaps I did lie. That night I stay awake. The voice that lives in the far left corner of my ceiling is alive. It doesn't like me. *'You lied!'* It taunts. I listen, pull the covers to my chin and dread the moment when the rightful owner will claim the cake.

## Chapter One. Panning for Gold: method, ethics, and quality.

*I became a scientist because I thought it was a way to address deep and troubling questions about how to live a meaningful, useful and ethical life. Somewhere along the way these questions took a back seat to methodological rigour. (Bochner, et al., 2000 p. 747)*

### Introduction

In this chapter I describe the unfolding of my doctorate research process since February 2009. I say 'since' to emphasise that February 2009 was not a *starting* place. It was a departure point from which my accumulated thoughts, intuitions, sensations and questions took a different direction. My decision to enter a doctorate inquiry set me along a particular path and framed how I would go about expanding, deepening and sharing my knowing. It required commitment to a process defined by the Academy and interpreted by faculty. At the time I wondered if this was the *right* decision. I worried that the 'rules' of the doctorate process might stifle an emerging creativity in my practice that I had discovered on the masters programme.

However, I was caught in an idealisation loop that compelled me to stay, strive and struggle with the process and this struggle eventually became my inquiry. Much later I saw how the doctorate, a symbol of ultimate academic achievement, had become part of my idealised image of what it meant to be an experienced, successful consultant. As my inquiry progressed and I started to articulate and name what I experienced (both personally and professionally) I was able to see the relationship between my decision and the subject I was inquiring in to. *How to unite the competing and conflicting parts of myself* (which I later identified as the real, actual and idealised) and how to lift up and out of the vicious loops of perfectionist behaviours I had circled for years. Although my research was grounded in a first person inquiry my exploration of looping extended to my consulting practice. I began to notice that many of my clients were caught in similar loops and later in my research I used my own experience to inform a compassionate approach to working with these emotional and behavioural patterns.

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify and account for the way I went about my research and how I dealt with the methodological, ethical and epistemological choices along the way. My intention is to stay as close as I can to the truth of what I did and resist the temptation to squeeze or hide my experience in what I might perceive as a legitimate and, for me, *idealised*, methodological mould. However, I pause momentarily to address one of my own ethical criteria which emerged from my consideration of self compassion as the stance that

nurtures and makes possible an ethical epistemology (see page 55) This particular criterion asks, *is the work connected to and relevant to others?* The 'others' I am concerned about within the context of this chapter on method are my fellow community of inquirers who have forged research pathways for me to travel along, making my journey easier. They are the people who have argued for and suffered, sometimes severe criticism and ostracisation, for advocating and using research methods and approaches they believe offer a more liberating and humane way of conducting human inquiry.

Thus, before describing how I engaged personally with the methodological questions and choices that arose throughout my inquiry, I first acknowledge the contribution of a wider community of practitioner-researchers who have argued for, worked with and (to some extent) succeeded in legitimising qualitative research. For it is within this expansive and expanding field that the constructivist, alchemical hermeneutic and auto ethnographic approach I describe later on is supported, legitimised and, I hope, accepted as a serious and valuable contribution to the Academy.

## Other Voices – situating my work within a Qualitative research landscape

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe the emergence of qualitative research through 'eight historical moments' which overlap and influence each other. These eight moments include: the traditional; modernist; blurred genres; crisis of representation; post modern; post experimental; the methodologically contested present and, the future. 'The future' or the eighth moment asks that,

*The social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, national states, globalisation, freedom and community.*  
(Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.3)

I would add that critical conversations also need to take place about our humanity and the ongoing existential questions that terrify, motivate and inspire us. This is one of the conversations I engage in this thesis.

The eighth moment of qualitative research carries within it the moments that have gone before but expands the field by encouraging and legitimising a wide range of *interconnected* interpretive practices (e.g. case studies, personal experience, introspection, cultural texts, interview, conversations, journals, observations) that 'make the world visible'. It is here that mixed methods can find a place and the Positivist traditions are reconsidered (not rejected) as one possible way of interpreting phenomena.

The word *pentimento*<sup>8</sup> is used by Denzin (2014) to describe research that seeks to make visible what was previously covered up. Each interpretive practice makes the world visible in different ways and it is the researcher who must decide which practice or practices will best help her understand the problem, or question or 'world of experience' to be studied. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Thus qualitative research in its eighth moment does not privilege one method over another. The researcher is often described as a 'bricoleur' using whatever strategies, methods, theories or empirical materials are at hand and works between and within competing paradigms. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The willingness to borrow from, integrate and move back and forth between paradigms and disciplines defines the eighth moment of qualitative research and emphasises the socially constructed, partial, contingent nature of reality.

The 'bricoleur' metaphor has helped me navigate my way through an inquiry that has been informed by positivist, post positivist, interpretivist and participatory epistemologies and methodologies (Lincoln, et al., 2011). I have written extensively about my attachment to positivism and the power that propositional knowing gave me throughout my education and early career (Wickremasinghe, September 2010) and described the tension between first *competing* and later *complementing* personal ontologies. These tensions are detailed in a chapter I wrote for my mid doctorate viva entitled, 'The Woven Skein' where I describe the 'evolution of my ways of knowing' from a realist to a relativist ontology (Wickremasinghe, 2012).

During my inquiry then I have consulted a spectrum of research and theory to understand my question. For example, to understand the perfectionist character I have consulted the clinical psychology literature where research in this area is extensive. Many of these studies employ quantitative approaches and use traditional, positivist evaluation criteria such as internal vs external validity and statistical significance. (Flett and Hewitt, 2002). Similarly I have referred to Casserly and Megginson's (2009) research which uses post positivist methods (interviews and case studies) to understand the characteristics and prognosis of burnout amongst high achievers. Karen Horney's (1950) work is an example of research that *straddles* interpretive and positivist paradigms. Horney was influenced by the need to ensure her work had a rigorous, scientific quality for it was within the traditions of positivist, medical science that Psychoanalysis was born. Her theories categorise and typify client 'symptoms' and attempt to establish truths that will help predict and control character 'disorders'. However, increasingly Horney began to understand the contingent nature of

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<sup>8</sup> *Pentimento*: something painted out of a picture that later becomes visible again.



human experience and she was one of the first in her field to call attention to the gendered, cultural and political qualities of both symptoms and cures (Smith, 2007). I return to a broader critique of her work in chapter three. Perhaps the strongest examples of my use of positivist research are the insights I take from the neuroscientific community where 'evidence' pertaining to the relationship between brain activity and emotion have compelled me. Paul Gilbert's (2010) work which inspired me to learn about and practice self compassion draws heavily upon the (positivist) evidence base of brain imaging and evolutionary biology. Furthermore his Compassion Focused Therapy method is grounded and supported by traditional, empirical studies that attempt to show the efficacy and reliability of this method. I continue to find his work and his research of great value although in chapter six I also consider the cautionary warnings and growing critique of 'neuromania' (Legrenzi & Umiltà, 2011)

Alongside my reference to and use of insights from positivist, quantitative research methodologies I have used interpretive methodologies that emerge from a relativist ontology that believes truth and knowledge to be relative and contingent. Truth is constructed subjectively and inter subjectively through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.103). The most significant of these interpretive methodologies was my use of auto ethnography and the practices of an alchemical hermeneutics. I go on to describe both shortly.

Thus, to summarise, my inquiry sits within the expanding field of quantitative research that is informed by a constructionist ontology where truth is multiple, relative and contingent. This constructionist ontology lends itself to a *mixed method* approach where I become a 'bricoleur' searching for and using whatever sources of knowing help me better understand the inquiry question. Whatever claim of knowledge I make as a result of this endeavour is offered as invitation to further dialogue – or critical conversation. Nothing is certain or proved. In some ways this uncertainty takes the two polarities of positivism and constructivism and joins them together – both paradigms value the process of falsification and encourage future researchers to take the baton and inquire further in to the legitimacy of any truth claim. Positivists do this by conducting further empirical experiments and constructivists do this by entering in to deeper, critical dialogues. I resist arguing for a better or worse approach. Both, done well<sup>9</sup>, are in the spirit of understanding and practical knowing.

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<sup>9</sup> I consider what 'done well' might mean later in this chapter when I explore questions of quality and ethics in my research.

The inquiry aim of *practical knowing* is the invitation I recognised and responded to when I chose to continue my doctorate studies at Ashridge. I wanted to engage in an inquiry the outcome of which would be useful to me and also to *others*. I framed my inquiry as a search to discover what ‘good work’ meant for me and others and how I might go about doing good work – in other words work that felt satisfying in mind, body and spirit (Fisher, et al., 2003) . Whilst this frame changed shape over the years I can still see it’s original form in my sustained intention to make practical and lasting changes in my experiencing of self and others.

Lincoln et al. (Lincoln, et al., 2011) offer a fifth paradigm to complement the evolution of paradigms from positivist, post positivist, critical and interpretive. This fifth, participatory or post modern paradigm is grounded in the ontology of social constructionism and epistemologically emphasises a critical subjectivity. We ask how do we know what we know? It is in asking this question, in my early days at Ashridge, that I started to recognise how I had favoured propositional knowing to the detriment of other kinds of knowing (Wickremasinghe, September 2010). In reading Heron (2008) I learned about ‘extended epistemologies’ that suggested *personal experience* and the expression (or presentation) of it were rich ways of knowing that contributed to the emergence of more meaningful and authentic propositions and practical knowledge. I also discovered that through the practice of action research (Reason, et al., 2008 ) I was able to re-enter the realm of my own experience within the helpful frame of an action research cycle. In acknowledging my fellow community of inquirers I draw attention to this field of research as one which has held me through a difficult process of feeling my problem, encountering it at a deeper level, making sense of it and finally through this thesis and my work, communicating new sense to a wider audience (Rowan, 1981). In the next section I describe Rowan’s action research cycle (Rowan, 1981) and how this, along with the methods associated with auto ethnography and hermeneutics helped me to stay within the subjective, often confused, realm of my not knowing.

## **Action Research – cycles of inquiry**

Rowan’s (1981) cycle represents an ‘action research’ approach which,

*brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern....* (Reason, et al., 2008 p. 4)

The action research cycle appealed to me for it emphasised that the *process* of inquiry was as important as the specific outcomes (Reason, et al., 2008 ). At the start of my research I had no idea what the outcome of my work would be yet I knew I was committed to a process

of discovery that would start with myself and extend to involve others. There were many times during the early years of this research that I returned to the action research literature to reassure myself that the frustration of ‘going round in circles’ could also be constructed as a spiralling where the movement in to new forms of knowing and being *are* happening but are often barely perceptible. Furthermore, the support within the action research field for ‘first person inquiry’ (Marshall, et al., 2005) encouraged me to stay with my experience during times when I felt like reaching for the more familiar and recognisable forms of abstract and propositional conclusions that would have enabled me to reach a swifter yet far more detached end.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2012 my inquiry took a significant turn. I completed and submitted my progress paper (Wickremasinghe, February 2012) at a time when problems in my personal life were turning from flurry to blizzard. By the time I attended the Viva for this paper in March 2012 I had entered an emotional abyss which I describe in chapter three. Throughout March 2012 I questioned whether I had the fortitude of mind and spirit to continue with the work. Thankfully during this Viva my two compassionate examiners (one of whom was to become my second and final doctorate supervisor) urged me to stay with the inquiry, explore how I might engage with the research self compassionately and suggested I read Romanyshyn’s book, *The Wounded Researcher* (Romanyshyn, 2007). Self compassion and Romanyshyn’s suggestion that knowing is,

*A backward glance, a way of moving forward with regard for what has fallen in the gap, for what has been left behind, disregarded, neglected, or otherwise forgotten...* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 14)

gave me a way back in to my work. Self compassion enabled me to face my fears and to understand my research as, ‘*re-search, a searching again for what was once known...*’ (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 14)

The way back for me was not to lift *out of* my unease or my loop but to go *deeper* in to it – to self compassionately explore the ‘actual’ – the place where my real and idealised selves entwined – and to mourn the loss or wounds of a ‘leader’ (my idealised self) that had both constrained and supported me. I tell this story in chapter four.

Thus, Romanyshyn’s (2007) *alchemical hermeneutic* method (which I describe later in this chapter) led me in to the ‘imaginal landscapes’ of my soul and following Hillman (Hillman,

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<sup>10</sup> For example in the first few months of my research I considered structuring my work and findings around a series of ‘cooperative inquiries’ (Heron, 1996) where I would engage others, collect ‘data’ and from that form new propositions.

1975), Jung (1961) and others I started to pay attention to the invisible, the whispered and the glimpsed.

*The invisible realm of soul does not imply the absence of the visual. On the contrary, it constitutes an ontological realm in its own right, which is neither the realm of the intellect nor of the senses, an invisible whose traces of the underworld and the otherworld of soul both haunt the visible world and break in to it.* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 264)

Romanyshyn's description of the invisible realm helped me to frame my own inquiry as an exploration of experiences in which the previously 'invisible' becomes glimpsed. I name these experiences **mandorla moments** where there is an intersection, overlap or meeting of *differences*. (e.g. when two deeply held beliefs that are at odds with each other come face to face).<sup>11</sup> Later in this paper I suggest that for people like me this glimpsing is only possible when the dominant, idealised self is broken apart and becomes porous, able to fuse, meet and intersect.

## Good Work

In February 2009 I made the decision to transfer from the Ashridge masters programme in organisational consulting to the doctorate programme. At the time I was enjoying the learning and community of practice at Ashridge and I wanted this experience to continue. As well as the assignments and formal learning I was also part of a 'consulting application group' who both supported and challenged me to reflect more deeply on my practice. As part of these groups I would produce and share audio recordings of my work, client feedback and papers that articulated what I was doing and why. These conversations supported me to think more deeply about my role as a 'change agent' (Critchley, 2009) and explore the deeply rooted, realist epistemology that informed my being. I started to re-examine my constructs of 'helping' and as I did so noticed a conscious shift in my ontology from realist to relativist. I became interested in the complex and contingent nature of truth and how 'change' might be a naturally occurring phenomena as opposed to something I initiated in myself and others. (Stacey, 2002/03)

By the time I came to write my Doctorate acceptance paper (Wickremasinghe, May 2009) I recognised how I had been driven by a *'wild and confused need to change the world for the better'* and hoped the doctorate process might provide an opportunity to reflect more deeply on how it had come to be this way. Now, looking back through my journal notes and assignments I feel a compassionate warmth towards that person (me) who was desperately

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<sup>11</sup> I further define and explore the concept of the mandorla experience on page 50

trying to find a way to understand, live with and avoid an increasing feeling of unease and anxiety as her cherished 'truths' began to crack apart.

## **Auto ethnography as method: Embracing vulnerability with purpose**

Moustakas (1981) describes research which starts from personal experience as 'heuristic' and gives his example of a study in to loneliness to express and illustrate the nature and meaning of such research. He describes how initially his study,

*..had no design or purpose, no object or end and no hypothesis or assumptions.*

Instead, he became immersed in the *experience* of his own loneliness,

*The initial journey was an attempt to discover the one true way to proceed; it involved a process of self inquiry which was not planned but simply happened, which was not carefully sampled but occurred spontaneously at unexpected times and places. (Moustakas, 1981 p. 208)*

Similarly, my inquiry was motivated by a personal feeling of unease and a general experience of being 'at odds' in the world. For a long time I didn't know how to make sense of those experiences yet I had a strong sense they were worthy of exploration. In the first year of the doctorate I was introduced to the notion that *writing* could be a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1994). This inspired me to start a learning journal in May 2009 where I recorded my experiences as I (mostly) struggled with my inquiry. Very quickly this journal also became a place where I started to write more widely about the events in my life – both past and present. Later, during an Ashridge workshop in June 2010, I learned about free fall writing (Goldberg, 2005) and Sarah Moreton, our facilitator, urged us to:

Go with Images

Go fearwards

Go towards the energy

Go down the fork

You don't want to

Go down

*(Words: Sarah Moreton, Form: Nelisha)<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> In (Wickremasinghe, September 2010)

After this workshop I wrote in my learning journal,

*Writing like this has a different quality. First it is fun. Second it is messy, unexpected and surprising. The two pieces I wrote during this exercise had a life of their own. I did not know what I thought or felt until I gave those thoughts and feelings free expression. Go out, play, no one is watching you. Do what you like. So the words cartwheel, knickers showing, whoops of delight. I never knew my words had such agility. My words balancing, swinging, leaping, somersaulting like circus acrobats. My words like trapeze artists. Fearless. No safety net. (LJ: June 2010)*

It was at this point that I started thinking about the form my final thesis might take. Like Richardson I was worried that not enough people were interested in reading academic writing. She admits to being bored by countless 'exemplary qualitative studies' and, like me, has an office piled high with half read papers and books. She asks, "*How do we create texts that are vital? That are attended too? That make a difference?*" (Richardson, 1994 p. 517). This was an important challenge for me because I wanted my writing to be understood by and useful to both my corporate clients and my professional colleagues. According to Nash (2004) 'scholarly personal narratives' liberate researchers from abstract impersonal writings and touch readers' lives by informing their experiences. Similarly, Bochner and Ellis (2000) argue against reinforcing the third person passive voice as the standard which supports and gives weight to conceptual, abstract, categorical knowledge. In naming the fear that researchers and academics have in writing in the first person they could have been talking about me:

*They've been shaped by the norms of the scholarly discourse within which they operate. Once the anonymous essay became the norm, then the personal, autobiographical story became a delinquent form of expression. (Bochner, et al. 2000 p.734).*

In this paper Bochner et al. (2000) list sixty or so definitions and ways of describing auto ethnography as methodologies and forms of writing that have evolved since Hayano (1979) was credited as first using the term in the 1970's. This list draws attention to the extent to

which auto ethnography has become a vital part of qualitative research and goes on to show the equally numerous methodologies that unfold from these particular definitions.

In a more recent publication Denzin (2014) quotes Ellis et. al's (2013) encompassing definition of the method which integrates the intent of these various approaches,

*Autoethnography is the use of personal experience and personal writing to 1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practice. 2) make contributions to existing research, 3) embrace vulnerability with purpose and 4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. (p.20)*

In this inquiry I have used my autobiographical writing in a way which corresponds to Bochner et al.'s (2000) description of *reflexive ethnography* which uses personal experience to understand the phenomena under study. Feminist writers have contributed significantly in legitimising the autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography; (Behar, 1996) (Krieger, 1991); (Richardson, 1994). They have argued that in the process of drawing upon the self as a source of knowing the researcher,

*Ideally uses all their senses, their bodies, movement, feeling and their whole being – they use their 'self' to learn about the other. (Bochner, 2000, p.741)*

This whole self approach to my research evolved and came more fully in to being when I started to incorporate the alchemical hermeneutic method described by Romanyshyn (2007) Integrating these two methods (auto ethnography and alchemical hermeneutics) I can identify with Manen's (1990) view that the 'rich ore' of autobiographical description provides important material for a hermeneutic inquiry:

*As we research the possible meaning structures of our lived experiences we come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be in the world.*

Thus the value of auto ethnography for Manen is,

*That it may be examined as an account of the possible experience of others. (Manen, 1990, p.73)*

For Griffiths (2007) 'critical autobiography' uses experience not simply to tell a personal story but to reflect, re-think and reinterpret the past in order to change the present and the future. Autobiography of this kind is not mere confession, it is agentic and transformational.

Even though auto ethnography has been accepted in to the qualitative research field as a legitimate and powerful research tool (Chang, 2008), Denzin (2014) points out that auto ethnography has also been criticised for being nonanalytic, self indulgent, irreverent, sentimental and non scientific. Often these criticisms arise from a positivist view of research discussed earlier. Later in this chapter I return to the subject of quality in research and offer a criteria for judging this work based on a constructivist paradigm.

## A Perfect Student

I now see that these strong attachments, fed by my ideals of how research should be, sometimes frustrated and distanced my colleagues. Not long in to the process, in August 2009, a faculty member gave me some feedback about how I came across as 'high status' (Johnstone, 2007) and later one of my supervision group peers chose to join another group because he found me difficult to work with. I responded to this kind of feedback and peer frustration by working harder and striving to *make* them understand my good intention and commitment. I did this at Ashridge, at work and at home. I can now see these responses as a fear based reaction to the threat of being found out as unworthy, unlovable, bad. By seeing this I can now trigger a self compassionate reflection that interrupts more looping of this kind and enables a more equanimous exploration of the experience. This is one practical and hugely useful outcome from this inquiry!

At the start of my research I did not have this quality of self awareness. So, to be a 'good' student and for the sake of the doctorate proposal paper I quickly formulated a question to make sense of this unease and to clarify my inquiry. I decided that if I were to engage in 'good work' (Fisher, et al., 2003) I would no longer feel torn or uneasy or anxious about my life choices. So my question became '*what is good work?*' and I set about planning a series of 'cooperative inquires' (Heron, 1996) to find out. All this felt methodologically very sound – a research question, a neat combination of first and second person inquiries culminating in a thesis that would meet the criteria of third person research (Torbert, et al., 2008) . In my first paper (Wickremasinghe, July 2009) I made a tidy table outlining my research process:

May 2009 onwards	Record reflections of good work and other significant thoughts, feelings, responses in learning journal. Remember Bill's note – notice my ideologies, prejudices and assumptions.
July 2009 – onwards	Read, listen to and see a wide range of first person expressions including autobiography, novels, art work, music and theatre. Develop ideas about presentational options for this inquiry.



September 2009	Create compelling and transparent 'invitation' for the conversation group – consider who to include in the invitation list, ethical issues, practical considerations. Explore possibility of using a video. Write about this!
September 2009	New Job begins. Record in learning journal my developmental journey as a new employee – consider am I doing good work here?
September 2009 onwards	Look for opportunities with clients, colleagues and friends to begin conversations about good work. Possibly organise some interviews? Also notice and record how relevant themes relating to good work arise spontaneously in the work I am doing.
October 2009	First meeting of conversation group. Record and present back to the group reflections and invite iteration/contribution from the group
Ongoing	Experiment with different writing styles....use narrative form to represent experience/learning. Speak to Bill about using novel as a form of presentation.  Continue to meet with conversation group as agreed.

Figure 1: My research plan

By October 2009 I had 'achieved' all the milestones in my table. Yet my reflections, literature reviews and conversations with others had not yet alleviated or changed the quality of my day to day experiencing. That month I wrote a paper for my supervision group which I titled, '*Help*' (Wickremasinghe, October 2009). In this paper I described how exhausted and ill I had become (in fact I wrote the paper whilst propped up in bed with a kidney infection). I was working hard, studying hard, doing all the 'right' things yet I was no closer to understanding or experiencing 'good work' or making sense of the feelings of badness, cynicism, anger and disillusionment I felt. I was caught in my loop striving to be the ideal researcher, consultant and mother.

I pause for a moment now to introduce Rowan's research cycle which guided and framed my inquiry for at least the first two years (2009 – 2011). Rowan's conceptualisation of research appealed to me because it offered a way of thinking about my research that challenged the '*standard, alien, academic research project*' (Rowan, 1981 p. 97). Rowan described the standard method as a linear journey travelling in a straight line from problem definition, literature review, research design to data processing and the production of a paper. Rowan's research cycle involves the same activities yet emphasises the experiential, endogenous and participatory quality of research. The dialectical cycles amplify the subjective and personal and interpersonal aspects of inquiry. Researchers are driven by psychological and social urges to engage with themselves and others to produce useful, practical knowledge.

In the next section I describe Rowan's research cycle and show how the stages of my inquiry corresponded to three 'moments' in the cycle - encounter, *think*, *plan/act*. Later I explain how my movement in to *sense making, communicating and being* required a radical shift in the way I engaged with the work – both in relation to involving others and listening to myself.

## Rowan's Research Cycle

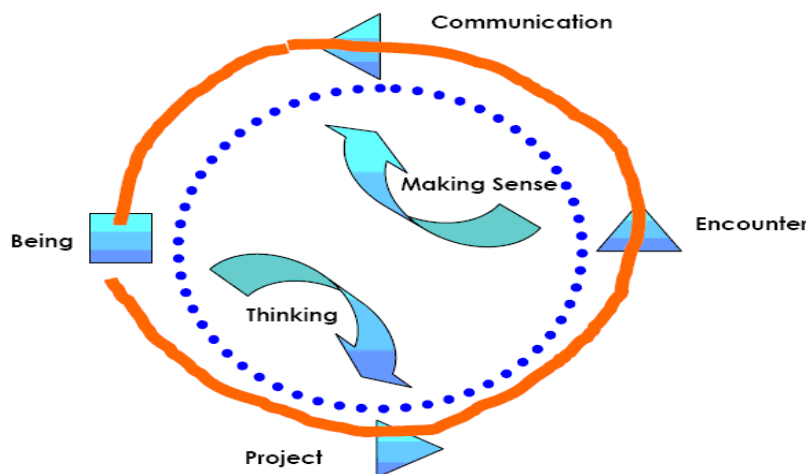


Figure 2: Rowan's Research Cycle (Rowan, 1981)

Rowan (1981) described the research cycle as a 'dialectical' process involving six 'moments' that can start anywhere but usually with having an experience (**being or encounter**) or a realisation (**thought**) of *inadequacy*. The old ways are no longer useful and I am confronted with a 'real problem' which requires me to **think** in new ways. Rowan described this thinking as an *inward* movement, taking in new information and a *processing* movement of,

*adding and combining new information in to unfamiliar relationships and trying it against some kind of template of what would be acceptable.* (Rowan, 1981 p. 98)

My inquiry started with a feeling of unease and led, as Rowan describes, in to a lengthy period of *thinking*. From May 2009 to around about September 2010 I devoted my time to reading, writing practice (Richardson, 1994) and long, quiet meditative sessions. I was trying to understand this feeling of 'unease' (which, as I read back through my journal, feels like an *understatement* of my distress and anxiety) through the lens of my question about good work. Yet as I researched the subject of good work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992); (Fisher, et al., 2003); (Gardner, et al., 1997); (Schumacher, 1979) I also noticed I had little enthusiasm for defining what 'good' meant or engaging in an exploration of the meaning of work in my life.

Whilst writing my inquiry proposal in 2009, Bill Critchley, my first supervisor, suggested I needed to pay much more attention to my motivation. "*If this is your going in question why does it seem important to you now?*" Similarly, Debbie, a DSG colleague and friend asked, "*I am wondering about the real purpose of your inquiry?*"

Both questions provoked me to inquire more deeply in to my feeling of unease and to discover the 'inadequacy' that Rowan suggests stimulates a, '*turn against the old ways of doing things.*' (Rowan, 1981) Thus the *thinking* moment of inquiry dominated the first eighteen months of my inquiry. I was, as Rowan describes,

*gathering...churning...asking 'will this do?'.....adding and combining new information in to unfamiliar relationship.* (Rowan, 1981)

At the same time, because I was caught within an idealisation loop about research and work, I was *also* disappearing information that would later contribute to the movement in to sense making that I so longed for during the first years of study.

Rowan goes on to suggest that at some point in the dialectical research process I stop gathering information and start to involve others in a project that involves taking a risk and forming an intention. My resulting **project or plan** is an *outward* movement that involves,

*"...bridging distance – to another person, to a new field, to a different theory."* (Rowan, 1981 p. 98)

The purpose of this outward move is to introduce thoughts which contradict my present reality and thus have the potential to create novel possibilities for thinking and doing. Yet at this stage in the cycle these thoughts are just that – thoughts or plans. The movement in to action or **encounter** is where I meet *others* to test, experiment and play. However, without an openness to these experiences – *including a willingness to be contradicted, disconfirmed and rejected* – I will not learn. This 'moment' of acting/encountering goes on until I feel that action is not enough because I want to make *sense* of what all this acting and experiencing means.

Rowan recognised that researchers can hold a preference for one or two 'moments' in the cycle and get stuck. This was true for me. In supervision groups Bill Critchley would point out my tendency to get lost in 'philosophical musing'. His comments suggested to me that I was not being the 'ideal' student and my reaction was to become diffident and withdrawn. Nevertheless I collected these moments of emotional reaction ('data') through *writing* about them. Privately, I wrote copiously, angrily and 'in the dark' (Manen, 1990). I wondered what my angels and demons might want of me (Hillman, et al., 1993) yet refused to bring this soul inquiry in to my supervision for fear of being dismissed as 'esoteric and vague' (doctorate learning journal p.53). Thus in supervision groups and with others I politely recognised and understood these tendencies through the lens of Rowan's cycle and admitted I had a preference for the *thinking* stage. I reminded myself, following Marshall

(2001), that self reflective inquiry required '*attentional discipline*' – in other words engaging in cycles of action and reflection and being both active (seeing and speaking out) and receptive (absorbing and integrating). I knew these things at an intellectual and idealised level.

However I was caught in my vicious loop unable to absorb or process information that either contradicted or expanded what I had set out to do – which was to discover the meaning of good work. It took me some time before I was able to open myself to the experiences that would propel me in to inquiry with others, sense making and communicating.

In March 2010 (Wickremasinghe, March 2010) I wrote a paper that began to surface the questions about looping and self compassion which would later become the heart of my inquiry. In that paper I attempted to make sense of a traumatic work encounter in which I was left feeling,

*...as if I were losing myself; that a part of my identity had been severed violently and was floating in a dark place that I could not access.* (Wickremasinghe, March 2010)

Helped by my supervision group I started to pay closer attention to how I moved between the polarities of my attachments, the way I split and defined my experience as 'good' or 'bad' and how these habits or way of interpreting and relating to my experience disturbed and drained me. At the end of this paper I referred to Becker's work (Becker, 1973) to make different sense of this experience and it is here you first see me surface the (compassionate) idea that my so- called 'pathological' anxieties (fuelling my vicious loops) were well intentioned. Becker (whose ideas I return to in chapter five) offered a compassionate approach by understanding so called 'pathologies' such as denial and anxiety as strategies for *survival*. Maturity, he suggested, is the ability to fashion and enact our own 'creative myth'; which is not simply a "*relapse in to a comfortable illusion*" but a bold, courageous attempt to face up to the eternal contradictions of our situation.

Creative myth making, as described by Becker, appealed to me. It offered a way in to my 'unease' which felt less judgmental or categorical. 'Good' work began to feel like a polarised concept necessitating the existence of *bad*. Creative myth making however acknowledged the contingent, constructed and fundamentally *generative* quality of our emotional and behavioural preferences. It felt like a way of making personal and dynamic sense of the world- even though this may feel messy and circular.

That was probably the point in my inquiry where 'thinking' moved in to acting (although the movement was pendulous, swinging in and out of reflective moments.)

The period between March 2010 and June 2011 is characterised by a frantic period of 'projects' and 'encounters' (as Rowan calls them) or 'action experiments'. I started making changes in my practice which centred on another idealised image; that the use of narrative and storytelling (my version of creative myth making) was going to be the consulting intervention that would at last find me doing the good work that I sought. During this period I designed challenging and risky client interventions involving storytelling and free fall writing and ran a Master class at Ashridge (January 2011) exploring narrative methods in consulting practice. I did not realise that it was not so much the *intervention* that turned the clients towards me but the strength of my passion, presence and belief that we could *overcome* whatever problem that particular client was presenting. When Bill Critchley asked me in February 2011,

*What is it about Nelisha that is working for these clients? Find out what it is about you, the unique you, that has leverage here....*

I did not fully understand the nature of his question. It took another year for me to begin to see that he might have been referring to what I began to represent as my 'real' and 'actual' selves which had been dominated and silenced by my powerful idealised self.

During this frantic period I wrote a series of papers describing what I was doing and convincing myself and others that it was through the creative process of re-scripting our personal narratives that change occurred (Freedman, et al., 1996). My research method comprised experimentation in my practice, reflective inquiry through my journaling, written papers<sup>13</sup> and supervision groups and the stimulation, patterning and connecting of my thoughts through vast quantities of reading. However, as Rowan and others (e.g. Kegan, 1982) point out we are always bound by the level of consciousness available. The idealisation loop I was caught in bound my consciousness in a particular way. I absolutely believed that the best consultants are the ones that can create observable, profound and sustainable shifts in thinking and behaving. I also believed that to complete my thesis I had to come up with a new proposition for how such change could be achieved. Thus I remained in the blind, spinning madness of my loop until June 2011 when cracks started to become visible. First, my work place experimenting was cut short when my main client - and then three months later another key client - terminated the leadership programmes I had designed and was delivering. Then my long term partner and father of my children

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<sup>13</sup> The As If Space (June 2010), Charlie and Esther (December 2010), Story Master class (March 2011), The Political Entrepreneur (June 2011)

confessed his attraction to another woman. These horrible events seemed *non* sensical to me and the much yearned for movement in to Rowan's moment of 'sense making' suddenly seemed far away and out of reach. In an effort to lift myself out of this dark place I wrote a paper 'Amor Fati' (August 2011) in which I both expressed disillusionment about some of my consulting experiments and asked myself,

*What would it be like to practice 'amor fati'? How on earth would I begin to detach myself from all that I think should be, could be and must be!* (Wickremasinghe, 2011)

In this paper I reviewed the relevance and meaning of my original question (what is good work?) which was still the question I was working with in the absence of anything else. I also considered my reaction to the recent and abrupt contract terminations and notice how different my reaction was to that of my consulting colleagues who were also involved in the work:

*My desire was to see the thing come alive again in a new format. My colleagues were not so sure. The timing, context and motivation for development of this kind in this organisation is all wrong – that is obvious. (like my dead relationship). Yet still I hold the glass against its face. Breathe god damn it. Breathe.* (Wickremasinghe, 2011)

I wondered whether I had difficulty with 'endings' and making 'authentic choices'.

I notice in this paper the beginning of a turn towards the mandorla experiences – the meeting of different parts of myself - that would, a few months later, come thick and fast culminating in burnout and leading to a profound shift in my sense making and acting. I wrote,

*My life is hovering in a twilight zone waiting for dawn or darkness. It is this hovering, this waiting, this inability to face up to the limits of my existence that I want to explore in therapy.* (Wickremasinghe, 2011)

This paper concludes with me taking the decision to enter in to psychotherapy *to 'explore my own anxiety and paralysis'* which I felt was impacting on my ability to make sense of my personal and professional experience. I knew at this stage that I had to detach from the question of good work and in doing so open a space for something else to potentially emerge.

Up until this point (August 2011) I had been attempting to 'solve' the problem of my unease. I had framed my work as a research *cycle* when in fact I what I wanted (because it supported my ideal achiever self) was a *linear* experience where my question (what is good work?) would trigger consulting experiments (such as the use of narrative techniques) that would

generate data for me to turn in to a new consulting proposition. When I felt, in August 2011, that despite my efforts the 'data' and propositions were still not forthcoming I started to lose interest - not in just in the question but in the doctorate process itself. This withdrawal response is characterised within the vicious loop I was in and which I describe throughout this paper.

I might have withdrawn from the doctorate process completely had it not been for the timely (synchronistic?) scheduling of my March 2012 Viva and the conversation that happened in that session. It was in this moment of giving up that I discovered another possibility for method in my research process. This involved exploring what it might mean to become a *self compassionate* researcher. What would it be like and what might I discover if I let go of how my research 'should' be and instead fully entered in to the mystery of my work – allowing myself to be puzzled, intrigued, surprised and led. In contemplating this invitation back to the work I came to realise that the relationship with my first doctorate supervisor had played a role in creating and sustaining an idealisation loop. I felt I could not go deeper in to my loop within the context of this relationship and so I took a brave and uncertain decision to change supervisors. What this did for me, on reflection, was to move me from a in to what Beebe (1992) describes as a feminine conceptualisation of integrity where '*bearing with*' experience rather than '*finding a way to act upon it*' creates a new heroic ideal that is deeply feminine.

The shift in my research attitude helped me to understand Rowan's action research 'moments' in a different way. I saw how each moment is itself a cycle of inquiry, action and reflection and each moment lasts as long as it needs to – sometimes years. My lingering in the *thinking* phase was not inert or bad – which was how I felt about it when I was caught in my idealisation loop. My thinking was cycling its own loop and needed time to do so. I was not stuck. I was *resting* in the work, day dreaming, doodling and yes, *musings*. Polanyi (1962) might suggest that I was engaging in a conversation with my 'tacit knowing' – the knowing that I know I know but have not found a way (yet) to express.

I can now accept this as a valid and important part of my research and see how self compassion as a 'mode of understanding' (Romanyshyn, 2007) re-situated me not as the dictatorial manager and 'driver' of the work but as a friend and companion. When I made this shift the inquiry opened out to me - no longer afraid, perhaps, of not being good enough or perfect.

Anderson (1998) suggests that 'sympathetic resonance' can be a measure of validity as it offers a test of how one's research harmonises with the experience of *others*. Romanyshyn

adds that sympathetic resonance can *also* be tested by the degree of bond between the researcher and his/her work,

*When there has been a deep and prolonged attunement between the heart of the researcher and the heart of the work, when a researcher has let herself be drawn in to the work through his or her own wounds, the truth of the work for others, if not guaranteed, is at least on the way to being established.* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 289)

The period between August 2011 and March 2012 is dominated by personal life events culminating in the traumatic and abrupt (it seemed to me) ending of a twenty year relationship. Nevertheless I now understand these unplanned and unwelcomed experiences as the live, organic material in which my sense making (or unknown knows) resided and eventually emerged. My method during this very difficult time was to *keep going*. To get up each morning, see the children off to school, pick up a book, write a few notes, meditate in short bursts, shop for food and sleep a lot. I continued to write about my experiences, attended, recorded and transcribed my monthly therapy sessions and managed a steady consulting and coaching workload. It was in this period that I started working with James<sup>14</sup> (November 2011), and felt from our first session and at a deep *intuitive* level that his difficulties paralleled my own and that we might learn from each other.

When my partner left in March 2012 I experienced what I can now describe as a *falling out* of my loop and *in* to my research work. My idealised images of family and relationship were shattered and I was bereft – without a map or a strategy for how to go on. I didn't know at the time that this 'burning out' or, as Glouberman (2003) describes, *coming to the end of a road*, was a beginning and a method of inquiry itself. The writing, dreaming, stopping, gazing, and soul searching was opening a space for a different kind of inquiry which Romanyshyn (2007) describes as an imaginal approach (epistemology) supported by an 'alchemical hermeneutic' method. What I *wanted* was to lift out of my loop, make sense, move on. Yet Romanyshyn encouraged me to descend more deeply. He asked, '*Is reverie a legitimate dimension of a re-search process that would keep soul in mind*' (p.9). As I lay inert on my sofa, this book in hand, I wrote a bold 'Yes!' in the margin.

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<sup>14</sup> A pseudonym



## An Alchemical Hermeneutic Method



Figure 3: Robert Romanyshyn

The alchemical hermeneutic method described by Romanyshyn frames how I went about my research in its final stages (from March 2012 onwards). Alchemical hermeneutics is a method of interpretive human inquiry. It evolves from theological Hermeneutics which was originally a methodology of interpreting religious texts and thus served theological purposes. However, over time, hermeneutics broadened its scope to include history, aesthetics and whatever belonged to the humanities and social sciences generally (Orange, 2011). In particular alchemical hermeneutics draws on the phenomenological and psychological approaches apparent in the works of Schleiermacher (1998); Dilthey (2002); Heidegger (1962); (Gadamer (1975); Ricoeur (1970); (Reik, 1936). In the following section I will highlight aspects from these perspectives that inform alchemical hermeneutics. I will then consider what an alchemical hermeneutic method can add to this tradition.

### Hermeneutics – a method of human inquiry

Hermeneutics began to emerge as a theory and method of human understanding in the late eighteenth century. The German theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1998), drew attention to the complexity of human relations and applied the art of hermeneutics to what he claimed was the impossible task of understanding human psychology. Orange (2011), in her book *The Suffering Stranger*, explores how psychological hermeneutics can facilitate the practice of therapists and clinicians seeking to understand

their clients' difficulties. Her work is relevant to coaches and other human development practitioners. Orange credits Schleiermacher as the forerunner of a *psychology of hermeneutics* and suggests his contribution was to draw attention to just how hard it is to understand another person particularly given that all understanding is partial and fallible. In addition, his willingness to embrace complexity and 'refuse the sirens of reductionism' (Orange, 2011) offers current practitioners a way of thinking about the subjective uncertainties of their interpretive work. In chapter six I pause to notice and critique my own attraction to the 'evidence based' certainties embedded within the neuroscience of compassion.

Following Schleiermacher, hermeneutics continued to develop as a method of human inquiry through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (2002). Dilthey emphasised the importance of 'lived experience' where interpretation and meaning is contextually contingent. Of particular significance were the cultural and historical back stories of the interpreter and the entity to be interpreted. This emphasis supported an early and important shift from a constructivist approach where meaning is located in the mind of the individual to a constructionist approach where meaning is historically, culturally and relationally dependent (Gergen, 1999).

Dilthey described interpretive inquiry through the concept of 'hermeneutic circling' – the back and forth interpreting from part to whole and whole to part and emphasised that parts gain meaning from contextual wholes. I recognise something of this process in the movement between personal experience and proposition. In other words starting from the 'part' that is my experience of looping and through interpretive inquiry considering the connections between my experience and that of others.

This idea is further developed in Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological hermeneutics where interpretation starts in and is an articulation of the interpreter's already established understanding of what is going on (Packer, et al., 1989). The relevance of this concept for practitioners engaged in human inquiry is significant:

*Heidegger's account carries the implication that our traditional training to be detached and disinterested in our study and analysis of people.....provides us only with a distorted kind of understanding. If we are to form psychological theories that do justice to humankind, we must start from our practical understanding of people and practices, the understanding we have by virtue of being members of our society. (Packer and Addison, 1989, p.98)*

Heidegger, informed by Dilthey, argued that interpretive inquiry was a matter of 'uncovering'. It is,

*...a 'letting-something- be-seen...the entities of which one is talking must be taken out of their hiddenness, one must let them be seen as something unhidden...that is they must be discovered. (Heidegger, 1962 p. 56)*

When considering the nature of 'truth' Heidegger refers to Greek word for truth - *aletheia* - which can be translated as unconcealed, unhidden or uncovered. Auto ethnography is a method for bringing the content of one's experience to the surface through reflective writing. Alchemical hermeneutics is a method for making sense of that content through inquiry and interpretation.

Following Heidegger, Packer and Addison (1989) suggest that,

*What is uncovered in the course of a true interpretation is a solution to the problem, the confusion, the question, the concern and the breakdown in understanding that motivated our inquiry in the first place. (Packer and Addison, 1989, p.279)*

Although Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, warned that,

*There is something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation. (Gadamer, 1975 p. 118)*

Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasised the importance the *dialogic process* when seeking to understand people, texts or art. In these hermeneutic dialogues both the inquirer and the 'inquired about' learn from each other and are constantly surprised,

*A genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct....the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led.....noone knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation. (Gadamer, 1975 p.385)*

Like Dilthey, Gadamer recognised that 'truth' was relative and contingent and emphasised the importance of 'tradition' - or the historical grounding of our understanding. We should, he argued,

*Learn to understand ourselves better and recognise that in all understanding , whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work. (Gadamer, 1975, p.300)*

Orange (2011) points out that this emphasis on tradition anticipates psychological methods that accord us all with a history that we may not choose but which we must take in to account if we are to participate in a true inquiry of our life.

*Awareness of our belongingness in tradition resembles the insistence, in most psychoanalytical groups, on thinking developmentally. Furthermore, awareness of my personal and therapeutic traditions as well as of my background of cultural, racial, gender, class and other assumptions keep me alert to the limitations of my own perspectives and interpretations.* (Orange, 2011, p.20)

Orange (2011, p.25) summarises how the contributions of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer can contribute to a 'hermeneutic clinical sensibility' by encouraging:

- A strong sense of one's own situation (assumptions, beliefs, history etc.)
- A sense of multiple experiential worlds and how they interact
- A strong sense of complexity that resists reductionism
- A sensitivity to the languages of personal experience – including non verbal forms of expression
- A strong developmental-historical sense that emphasises both past and future
- A sense that understanding is application or 'practical knowing'

When reading Orange (2011) I have a sense of a deeply compassionate approach to inquiry with others. She calls this method in her practice a 'hermeneutics of trust' and contrasts it to the hermeneutics of suspicion articulated by Paul Ricoeur (1970) as he critiqued the works of Freud, Nietzsche and Marx. A hermeneutics of suspicion will look for the 'gaps' or the underlying motives behind a person's (or theory's) claim to meaning. As Orange (2011) points out,

*The school of suspicion assumes that the interpreter always faces primarily an effort not to reveal but to conceal.* (p.27)

Orange argues that this approach is fundamentally pessimistic – a view also shared by Karen Horney, whose work I turn to in the next chapter. It implies that there is something pathological about a person's self expressions (particularly those which can be labelled as 'symptoms'). In my inquiry I challenge this view as I discover self compassion and a way of practicing that embraces all expression as fundamentally positive (or functional). Orange promotes a *hermeneutics of trust* which assumes,

*A common world, in which both people live, suffer play and search for meaning together. It assumes the good will of both partners in the search for meaning and truth.....the hermeneutics of trust invites less defensiveness as it understands resistance and defence as absolutely needed modes of coping with unbearable traumatic terrors and lonely anxieties.*  
(p.38)

The compassionate practices that I discover within this inquiry echo the aspirations of Orange's hermeneutics of trust.

Paul Ricoeur's work also provides a departure point for Romanyshyn. Romanyshyn (2007) whilst acknowledging Ricoeur's (1970) lead in including the unconscious in hermeneutic interpretation, argues that his inclusion is narrow because his understanding of the unconscious is limited to a Freudian perspective. In other words the unconscious is seen as an ideational representation of the instinct in consciousness. Romanyshyn draws upon Jung to understand the unconscious not just as a representation or outcome of the conflict between instinct and culture but as a reality of the *soul* where collective and archetypal information pertinent to our humanity resides. This archetypal emphasis takes the discussion beyond the dialogue between mind and matter and establishes the unconscious as a reality in its own right and with a consciousness of it's own. Ricoeur, comments Romanyshyn, cannot,

*....follow Jung into those depths where the unconscious is the subject matter of a science of soul rather than the subject matter of psychology as a natural science.* (Romanyshyn, 2007, p.256)

Thus, Like Orange (2011), Romanyshyn moves towards a hermeneutics in which interpretation is about the recollection and restoration of meaning rather than an exercise of suspicion.

Romanyshyn's work helped me to understand my unconscious expressions as a yearning not merely a repression, as a complete source of knowing not just a collection of disparate images waiting for conscious rationalisation.

The alchemical hermeneutic method then is a way of making a place for Jung's understanding of the unconscious. It advocates re-search with soul in mind,

*The researcher who would keep soul in mind cannot drag the work in to the upper world of his ego intentions. He/she has to learn to differentiate his or her projections onto the work*

*from the soul of the work itself, which is not his or her possession. The researcher who would keep soul in mind has to learn to see the work through the eyes that have let go of it.* (Romanyshyn, 2007, p.53)

Romanyshyn emphasises that alchemical hermeneutics is not a 'stand alone' method and, like Heron (1996) is supportive of an extended epistemology that makes room for,

*"...more 'subtle' ways of knowing that are too often marginalised by methods that do not take in to account the unconscious presence of the researcher to his or her work."* (p.260)

Specifically, this method makes a place for symptoms, feelings, intuitions, dreams and synchronicities alongside more traditional methods of thinking, observing and experimenting. In doing so it privileges the *unconscious* as a valid source of knowing.

Romanyshyn argues that alchemical hermeutics both differs and *adds* to traditional conceptions of Hermeneutics in several ways. Below I summarise the seven differences Romanyshyn (2007) offers,

- It deepens the hermeneutic circle by twisting it in to a *spiral* that moves the researcher down in to the *unconscious* aspects of the 'text' or work and adds a depth of psychological awareness and deep subjectivity.
- It encourages the researcher to rest in the work and resist '*irritating the work in to meaning*' (p.223). Dreaming, lingering and *loitering* form part of the alchemical hermeneutic method and challenges the spirit of philosophical hermeneutics which is impatient to get on with the interpretation task.
- The 'symbol' to be interpreted often arises from trauma and loss and therefore introduces an element of *grief* in to the hermeneutic process. Furthermore, unlike traditional hermeneutics there is recognition that whatever interpretation is given to the 'symbol' there will always remain an *absence*, emptiness, unfinished or unknown quality to the work. It is not a hermeneutics that seeks resolution and conclusion but *healing, redemption and reconciliation*.
- '*It is a way of transforming a wound in to a work without reducing the work to the wound of the researcher*'. Through exploration of the transference field between researcher and the work the researcher is able to make sense of and make mutual the full import of the work. The personal becomes the general.
- It begins '*in the ear not the tongue*' – in other words the researcher must listen carefully and patiently to hear how she is being addressed by the work. Thus the relationship between the work and the researcher is qualitatively different. It marks a

shift from the researcher (interpreter) addressing the text to the text addressing the researcher.

- It privileges the feminine, intuitive and feeling *as well as* intelligence and reason. Romanyshyn refers to this as Sophianic wisdom involving,

*..the art of receptivity, the art of allowing oneself to be addressed, impregnated....the art of allowing the critical mind to be virginal for a moment, free of its preconceptions, plans and intentions so that it might be inseminated by the soul of the work.*

(Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 231)

- It gives a central place to the *body* as the starting point of the hermeneutic process. The desires, fears, anxieties, bodily symptoms and reactions are valid and primary sources of knowing

The alchemical hermeneutic method is the process through which I was able to *enter in to* and *leave* Rowan's other three research moments – sense making, communicating and being - which I longed for and wrote about throughout my inquiry,

***Making sense** is another inward movement where I contemplate pattern and connection in the 'data' until I arrive at the stage of wanting (and being able to) **communicate** this new sense to others. This serves my need to be heard and to have my experience understood and it creates engagement with others as I offer new knowledge that may be useful to them. Once I have satisfied this urge to communicate I can return to my original work/life enhanced and expanded by my experience (**Being**)* (Wickremasinge, February 2012)

but which *eluded* me until I began to understand my experience through an alchemical hermeneutic lens. I understood that by 'losing' my work through disillusionment, impatience and ultimately burnout I was *also* able to let go of it. In other words I was able to surrender myself to the experience of *not knowing* – I had no questions, certainly no answers and no plan of how to progress. It is this letting go, Romanyshyn argues, that opens a space for an 'imaginal approach' by creating a shift from an ego perspective on research to a soul's perspective. The 'should be' (idealised) gives way to the actual and the real. In my case the idealised images I clung on to about research and the purpose of my inquiry were shattered and in this shattering glimpses of my other selves – and what they had to say about the work - became possible. Romanyshyn suggests,

*the researcher whose work has collapsed and resists all efforts to restore it enters an abyss. It is a dark night of the work. It is the moment when loss becomes a descent into the as yet undreamed possibilities in the work...* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 68)

My experiences of loss, descent and dismemberment are described in chapters two and three. From a methodological perspective it was the surrendering to burnout that provided me with both the space and time to nurture an 'imaginal approach' to my work and in doing so I was able to enter what Romanyshyn describes as the *transference field* where one starts to ask, '*what is this work really about?*'

Although that question had been with me for some time it was not until my burnout in March 2012 that I was able to put a process in place to explore it. Thus the method or way back in to my work that defined the final year of my research involved,

- Creating space and time for 'reverie' – enabled by a falling out of my loop and the surrendering to the quietness and inertia of burnout
- Waiting – and drawing inspiration through poetry and other peoples stories of burnout
- Personal psychotherapy (attending monthly sessions, audio-recording and transcribing, reflecting and inquiring with my therapist) - acknowledging that '*therapy is a mode of research and research is a mode of therapy*' (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 95)

Then when my energy started to return a few months later,

- Reading back through three years worth of assignments, journals, dream diary and free fall writing to search for patterns, stories, connections that might release insight in to my 'mandorla' experiences
- Discovering/naming the golden thread (self compassion) and starting to explore *with others* the meaning, presence and function of self compassion as a practice for working with perfectionist idealisation looping and learning from burnout
- Designing and delivering a compassionate leadership session to support my evolving consulting practice.
- Starting to write regularly, with discipline and transparency and sharing/discussing this work on a monthly basis with my new supervisor as critical friend (inviting the other in)



The methods described above added to a five year accumulation of written and read material or 'data' and as I began the formal write up in December 2012 I moved in to a new phase of my inquiry – a movement back and forth between sense making and

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be love for the wrong thing; wait without love,

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy

Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony

Of death and birth. East Coker

Four Quartets: East Coker

TS Elliot

communicating. It was in the final months of my research that I started to focus on how I could produce an ethical thesis of good (enough) quality. It is to these subjects I now turn.

## Quality & Ethics

Deciding which material to include and which to exclude is an important methodological choice.

Everything I wrote over the five years of study at

Ashridge felt important and relevant. Added to this were rich descriptions of my experience and reflection contained within diaries dating back over twenty years, free fall writing, dream notes, short stories and poems. There were also client notes, write ups from consulting assignments, notes from supervision groups, transcripts from my therapy sessions, audio recordings from doctorate supervision, coaching and client sessions and thousands of underlined sentences, marked paragraphs, margin notes and post it stickers in the mountainous piles of books I read over this period. My intent when sorting through all this data was to write an ethical thesis of quality. Yet as my supervisor Chris rightly asked, *'Quality and ethics? According to whom and what criteria?'*

In the following section I draw attention to the writer-researchers who have influenced my thinking about quality and ethics - subjects which I see as interrelated and dependent on each other. I then offer my own criteria for ethics and quality which has emerged from my intent to live a more self compassionate life and to nurture a professional stance that is rooted in compassion. My criteria are adapted from Neff's (2011) definition of self compassion and combine to create a criteria for ethical, compassionate research where quality is checked against how honest, respectful, mindful and relevant the work is.

## Quality and Ethics according to others

There is a vast amount of writing in the qualitative (e.g. Denzin, et al., 2011 ) and action research (Reason, et al., 2008 ) fields that consider what constitutes *validity* within this paradigm. In constructivist, post modern research *extended* constructions of validity are explored. Validity is seen in terms of the 'goodness' or *quality* of the work and is assessed by how credible, dependable, trustworthy, authentic, collaborative, ethical and transformative it is (Lincoln, et al., 2011). This construct of validity guides my evaluation as it feels as though 'quality' offers a richer way of understanding this work. In considering validity as quality, Lincoln asks,

*Based on this assessment of validity can it be argued that all data are valid because what may not have meaning to one person could be the foundation of truth to another? Taking this approach, could we say that there is no such thing as invalidity of data or method if someone can find it to be an accurate reflection of their interpretation of reality?* (Lincoln, et al., 2011 p. 114)

Lincoln et al. (2011) conclude that in the end "*all representations fail us*" because there is inevitable slippage between life as lived and life as we write about it. Like Ellis (2004) they move away from representation as 'truth depiction' (impossible) and towards representation as *communication*. They conclude that those who continue to write for scholarly audiences with this aim in mind will,

*continue to be untidy, experimental and driven by the need to communicate social worlds that have remained unproven and non-scientific until now.* (Lincoln, et al., 2011)

The social world I have tried to surface and speak about is the one which encourages and supports people to strive, achieve, accumulate and conquer even though this pattern of relating and behaving can cause significant harm. I have sought to understand how it has come to be this way for some of us and discovered that without self compassion we will struggle to lift out of this powerful psychobiological, cultural and evolutionary loop (Gilbert, 2010). Although my research has been 'untidy' and 'experimental' I disagree with Lincoln et al (2011) that 'all representation fails us'. A more compassionate stance argues that representation which strives to be ethical and of high quality shows us (the reader) how it is (the 'truth') in *that* moment of time and place. The representation cannot be *otherwise* for the credible researcher who has truly delved in to and surfaced their subjective truth.

However, I remain very cognisant that from a Social Constructionist (Gergen, 1999) or postmodern stand point (St.Pierre, 2011) no method can deliver on *ultimate* truth. In the

latest research handbook Lincoln et al. revisit these ‘paradigmatic controversies’ commenting more strongly than ever that,

*Objectivity is a chimera; a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower.* (Lincoln, et al., 2011 p. 122)

As I reflect on these challenges I pay attention to Heron’s warning that we should not discard concepts of validity or truth simply because within a positivist paradigm they were, “*misappropriated and abused...for oppressive purposes*”. (Heron, 1996). Whilst I am reluctant to generalise about positivist methodologies in such a strong way,<sup>15</sup> I do believe that what I produce within the context of my research inquiry needs to demonstrate ‘interpretive rigor’, in other words,

*“can our [co-created] constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomena?”* (Guba, et al., 2008)

My ontological starting point is that multiple realities exist and are contingent on individual experiences of self, relationship and context. From this basic ontology it follows that my epistemology or way of knowing favours the subjective and concurs that,

*‘Social reality is a construction based upon the actor’s frame of reference within the setting.’* (Guba, et al., 1985)

Auto ethnography and the alchemical hermeneutic method offered me congruent processes for recognising and interpreting my subjective constructions and also encouraged me to think about how to transform my interpretations in to knowledge that might be useful to others. As I wrote and re-wrote chapters I learned – with critical feedback from my supervisor – how to present *just enough* of the material to show how moments in my experience, insights and reflections advanced my work beyond the personal. My early drafts were heavily autobiographical, however as the work itself began to speak to me my story opened up to make space for James, my clients, my practice and the connections that supported my propositions regarding self compassion and vicious looping.

The autobiographical and revelatory ‘tilt’ (Guba, et al., 2008) in my work started me thinking very early on in the research process about the ethics of my work. However, at that stage most of my data gathering was in the form of first person inquiry and remained in the private domain of my personal sense making processes. Then, as I started to write this thesis, I

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<sup>15</sup> Partly because a positivist ontology and methodology also informs this work

noticed my fears growing about releasing this document in to the world. I wondered about the impact my reflections and revelations would have on significant people – mostly my ex-partner and my children but also James and my mother. I consulted the research literature and contemplated the challenges raised.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) suggest that the key challenges of producing ethical research involve minimising harm, respecting autonomy and protecting privacy. However these values are frequently in conflict with one another and always subject to interpretation and judgment. In addressing these conflicts I was drawn towards Bochner and Ellis's question,

*"...are there any situations in which the 'greater good' outweighs individual's rights to privacy, in which you have a right to tell your story even if other characters in it object?"* (Bochner, 2000 p. 759).

And Rosanna Hertz's comment that 'voicing' always involves,

*"a struggle to figure out how to present the author's self while simultaneously writing the respondents accounts and representing their selves."* (Guba, et al., 2008 p. 278)

In seeking to understand these dilemmas I read more about validity and voice (Hertz, 1997) in qualitative research and considered whether what I produced would be,

*sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications?* (Lincoln, et al., 2011 p. 120)

I was drawn to questions that connected validity to *quality*. In particular Bochner and Ellis suggestion that validity (or verisimilitude) is related to the extent in which a work,

*evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life like, believable and possible.* (Bochner, 2000 p. 751)

Similarly, Manen writes about the 'addressive moment' when a text suddenly 'speaks' to the reader,

*in a manner that validates our experience, when it conveys a life understanding that stirs our sensibilities, when it pulls the strings of unity of our being.* (Manen, 2002 p. 237)

I knew as I began to write my thesis that my work had started to speak to others. I noticed how self compassion and vicious looping were subjects that easily captured my clients' interest. I might drop the words in to a casual conversation and be offered rich stories of inner critics, perfectionist loops and bouts of 'influenza' that Oliver James writes so well

about (James, 2007). So, in the final year when people asked me *'what is your doctorate about?'* I no longer blushed, stammered and changed the subject. *'It's about perfectionism and self compassion,'* I would say and was heartened when they responded with curiosity, interest and shared their perspectives and experience. These encounters with others gave me the courage and confidence to start writing the thesis and to believe that my work might evoke empathy, connection and unity with others. In particular I noticed how resonant the words 'self compassion' seemed. When I spoke of self compassion I would notice a melting effect which I started to interpret as a gesture to enter further in to the conversation. The resonance and impact these words had in my every day relating made me wonder whether self compassion could itself be a criteria for valid, ethical and 'good' research. I will return to this thought shortly.

In encountering and using the alchemical hermeneutic method my ethical deliberations expanded to include ethics towards not just other people but also towards the others *in myself*<sup>16</sup>. This supports what Romanyshyn describes as an *ethical epistemology*,

*All the bodies of knowledge we create, like the bodies of those who create them, cast a shadow. To come to terms with the shadow side of our ways of knowing and constructing the world, an ethical epistemology would have to make place for the unconscious in our ways of knowing the world.* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 336)

My inquiry in to perfectionism, idealisation looping and the impact these patterns have had and still have on how I know and act in the world represented my particular journey in to the unconscious realms of my experience. Here I discovered and eventually named the 'others' in me as the ideal, the actual and the real and in doing so began to expand my consciousness beyond the tight loops defined by my idealised self.

This process constitutes an ethics of research because, as Romanyshyn points out,

*To the degree that one does not admit the validity of the 'other' within oneself he or she denies the other person the right to exist.* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 341)

What this means is that the researcher not only accepts the deep *subjectivity* of the research endeavour but also recognises the shadows this subjectivity casts upon the work. My idealised self casts a long shadow yet for the first few years of my research I did not see it. Now, like Winterson (2012) I can acknowledge and even walk out with it and I talk about this

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<sup>16</sup> Which I have named in this research as the real, actual and ideal

in chapter five when I contemplate the reappearance of a familiar loop in response to a new relationship.

Thus I am more fully aware of the unconscious forces in my work (my research and my consulting) and I am more alert to the many manifestations of transference and counter-transference that occur particularly when I work with clients whose emotional and behavioural patterns share characteristics with mine.

Romanyshyn (2007) uses the term 'transference dialogues' to describe the core process involved in an imaginal and alchemical hermeneutic approach/method. These dialogues represent the researcher's attempt to meet, understand and integrate the 'other' (selves, ancestors, shadows) in to their work. Romanyshyn warns that this work can be 'dangerous' causing much anxiety, pain and grief yet,

*Weighed against the damage that the shadows in our epistemologies cause, the risk seems justified.* (Romanyshyn, 2007 p. 343)

I would agree and add that this meeting of the others – the moments when different parts of myself come face to face and which I describe later in this thesis as 'mandorla moments – can only truly happen in the presence of self compassion which regulates the threat based reactions that occur in this process.

Linking ethics back to quality Lincoln et al (2011) acknowledge the challenges associated with assessing quality and validity in interpretive/participatory postmodern inquiry. They suggest that the three biggest 'problems' are voice, the status of reflexivity and textual representation and go on to suggest that in addressing these questions we need to think about ethical *relationships*.

Lincoln writes,

*Only by recapturing the sense of sacredness about that which nourishes and sustains us can we learn both how to inquire sanely and to live in peace.* (Lincoln, 1995 p. 284)

It seems to me that in a first person inquiry where the subjective and personal is laid bare and explored one not only has the potential to re-discover the sacred but also to hold it with respect, dignity and love. The sacred is found in the appreciative, compassionate understanding of self (why I do what I do) and the courageous sharing of the flawed, complex messy self with others. In exposing my personal experiences I make myself vulnerable to your judgements, opinions and regard. Yet if I write with mutuality, respect and compassion (both for myself and others) it is my belief that you will be drawn in to a

relationship with me that does not seek to judge but seeks to understand. The ethical question is most strongly answered for me through the forming and enacting of this sacred intent.

Additionally, the practice of *critical reflexivity* supports me to write with respect, love and fairness. Reflexivity is described by Lincoln et al. as,

*..a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself. (ibid)*

Reflexivity involves questioning my own voices to notice and examine the assumptions, interpretations and partialities that shape my claims. It is the ability to be *immersed in* but also *apart from* myself in order to 'see' patterns and connections. To be able to engage in the work both as subject and object in such a way that heightens self awareness and creates personal transformation. Reflexivity partly addresses Ladkin's question,

*how can researchers engage their subjectivity while also looking up and out from it, in order to encounter something real about the other? (Ladkin, 2005 p. 109)*

In the writing, editing and gradual sharing of this thesis I have been open to feedback concerning the ethical quality of how I write. I have endeavoured to write with respect from my own perspective and to not judge, speak for or assign intent to others. I have also discussed my work openly with my close family, friends and children. My mother's response in reading a first draft of this work was,

*I have no objections. On the contrary, I am honoured and humbled to be part of your research...I am humbled that my behaviour has had such an effect on you that you are writing about it. (note from my mother: 31.01.12)*

In the end Clandinin and Connelly suggest that,

*Voice and the dilemmas created by the consideration of it are always sorted out by the exercise of judgment. (Clandinin, et al., 2000 p. 147).*

I chose *not* to show or discuss my work with either my ex-partner or James. With James I felt comfortable that his identity could not be revealed through the examples and references made to our work. I did this by changing his nationality, small details of his story and his profession. I did not speak to him about my research because for most of our time together I was struggling to articulate the nature of that research. I learned about compassionate practice *with* James and have, more recently, made him aware that our sessions informed

my emerging understanding of how to bring this practice more in to the fore front of my coaching work. He seemed pleased to have been part of that journey.

With my ex-partner I believe I have stayed true to my sacred intent to write about my experience of our relationship with respect, humility and love. If he were to read this thesis I would say to him that all experience is constructed, partial and subjective and this document is *my* truth that may or may not correspond to his. Together with my supervisor I have gone over the sections involving or referring to him to reflect deeply on whether I have met my ethical criteria. This process has been supported by self compassion and it is to this experience I now turn.

Any others, named or referenced, who could be identified in this work are aware of my research and have given me their consent to include them.

### **Quality and ethics according to me.**

Anxiety, fear, pain and grief in the alchemical hermeneutic method are honoured sources of bodily knowing and 'symptomatic' intelligence. Beebe even suggests that anxiety is, *'the proper starting point for the discovery of integrity'* (Beebe, 1992 p. 33). The exploration of the other within myself was my start and return point throughout the research. The lengthy, often painful and messy process of self examination eventually supported me to discover and apply compassion and equanimity in my writing about other people.

For me an ethical epistemology *starts* with an ethical stance towards the others *in oneself* and extends outwards towards an ethical attitude towards other people. To nurture and sustain the ethical stance both in oneself and towards others the capacity for (self) compassion is essential. Without it anxiety (and all the other threat based emotions) cannot be regulated and defence mechanisms activate to close down the exploration.

As I started to write the thesis I realised that writing *self compassionately* offered a criteria or check list of it's own. I started to ask myself as I wrote:

- Is this work kind, respectful and tolerant - towards myself and others?
- Is this work mindful –can it lift out of the personal and give voice to what is emerging without judgment?
- Is this work connected to and relevant to others?

These questions adapt Neff's (2011) definition of self compassion to inform my research approach.



The discovery of self compassion during this research has supported me to produce what I believe to be an ethical work of quality because:

- It has enabled me to let go of what I think the work 'should be' (the idealised) and enabled the emergence of what is (the actual)
- It has nurtured an attitude of patience which has tempered the desire for quick and premature 'conclusions' and allowed me to rest in and come to know my experience more fully.
- It has encouraged me to maintain an 'attitude of inquiry' and genuine curiosity which has helped me write about difficult relationships with sensitivity, respect and love.
- It had enabled me to recognise and work with the multiple and conflicting other 'voices' that wish to contribute to this process of discovery and in doing so I have caught glimpses of my real self that speak of possibilities beyond this particular research endeavour. (transformational)
- It has helped me to share and give my work with/to others by regulating my threat based fears associated with judgment, criticism and rejection.

Most importantly, self compassion counts as a criteria for evaluating good research because it has supported me to turn towards my 'terrible truths' and survive the exploration of experiences I might otherwise have hidden. As a result the work I present has become a more honest and open account of personal experience which I believe will resonate with others.

My clients often tell me about creative work they have begun but stopped because their inner critic has scoffed at or belittled their attempts to give voice and life to anything other than their perfectionist ideal. I know now that with self compassion the creative endeavours of many people would be given new breath and vitality that would support them to break out of perfectionist looping and contribute to nurturing cultures that are courageous and heroic. In answering his question, 'what is the heroic individual?' Becker suggests,

*The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something – an object or ourselves – and drop it in to the confusion, make an offering of it so to speak to the life force. (Becker, 1973 p. 285)*

This thesis represents my offering to support a life force that is compassionate, imperfect and real. I would like it to be judged on that basis.

## Summary

I have described the unfolding of my research process and shown how my initial approach to the work was defined by core beliefs that fuelled my idealisation loop. I was driven on by how I thought research 'should' be. I formulated an action research plan involving reading, experimenting, discovering and proposing. It was not until much later that I saw how linear and goal directed this plan was and how I wanted to by pass the cyclical characteristics of patient action and inquiry. My cycle became one of frustration and disillusion until events in my personal life created a shattering or 'burning out' of this loop. It was during my burnout that I discovered a different way of doing research – informed by an alchemical hermeneutical method. This methodological turn in my work drew me towards the rich information contained in my writing, dreaming and physical sensations. It encouraged me to wait and see what emerged and advocated a compassionate and ethical approach to the different voices within me that were seeking expression.

## Chapter Two: Loops and Spirals

In this chapter I show how I start to make sense of my emotional and behavioural patterns through the imagery of loops, circles and spirals. For many years I had used the metaphor of looping to describe stuck and repetitive emotions and behaviours. I understood looping as a 'bad' or problematic state. As my inquiry progressed and continues beyond the pages of this work, I am discovering that looping serves a function and, as Thomas Moore writes:

*...it is important not to lose the sensation of cycles, which may be painful to anyone living in a culture dedicated to the extending line. May be in life we never really develop but only expand the rotations that give us our firm identity. May be we should always expect to get in to familiar trouble and to repeat both the glorious and the defeating themes that are embedded in our soul. (Moore, 2001 p. 63)*

The loops that I research and write about in this inquiry are those that I experienced in myself and witnessed in many of the high achieving corporate client groups with whom I work. I refer to these kinds of loops as *Idealisation loops* and they play out something like this: I create an idealised image or goal. This could be a relationship, an achievement or a result that I must attain or achieve in its *exact* form. I see and create these forms through a perfectionist lens. They represent all that *should be* and are a powerful motivating force.

I set out to realise the image/goal.

To achieve this idealised (impossible) goal I need to believe strongly that I can.

This self belief is both useful and problematic.

As well motivate, my self belief can blind me to contradictory sources of information.

Thus, if I fail to realise the goal or image it comes as a shock, an intolerable experience which I haven't seen coming.

The way that I make sense of this failure is not to reflect on the constructed nature of the idealised goal or the unpredictable quality of life but to criticise my own inadequacy and to feel disappointed, angry or ashamed of *myself*. In this way I preserve the idealised image/goal and ensure the survival and repetition of my loop.

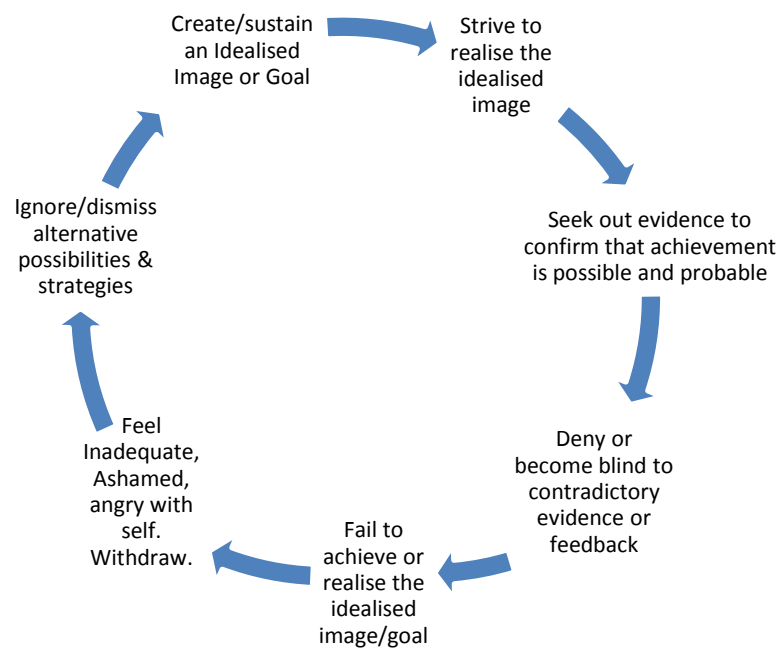


Figure 4: Idealisation Loop

Although the naming and exploration of this loop motivated my inquiry, my interest in looping itself is not new. I have long been curious about the *function* repetitive patterns or ‘strategies’ serve especially when they result in unwanted consequences and feelings. Twenty years ago I worked in mental health services and was fascinated and frustrated by the persistence of behaviours which resulted in extremely negative consequences for those enacting them. Family breakdown, convictions, unemployment, chronic ill health and homelessness were not enough to interrupt these tenacious patterns. These dark, thick, repetitive loops have a grinding, reinforcing, entrenching quality. They have the feeling and appearance of downward motion. In chapter seven I return to the phenomena of persistence for even *with* self compassion our loops are hard to leave. I contend that it is the resilience of our personal ontologies, basic existential fears and anxieties, cultural imperatives and our attitude and beliefs about change that keep even harmful strategies in motion.



Figure 5: Vicious looping

Now, working with corporate managers I notice that same tenacity in the ambitions and disappointments of high performers as they set goals, strive to achieve and compete and simultaneously suffer the negative consequences of their loops. The term 'burn out' is often used to describe those who have been destroyed or injured by the vicious looping that keeps them in cycles of work that are ultimately unfulfilling and damaging. In chapters two and three I explore the phenomena of burnout and its relationship to idealisation looping.

Throughout my clinical career I experimented with different approaches to understanding and working with looping. I have consulted psychologists, philosophers and (family) systems thinkers to help me think about and work with this phenomena.

Later I discovered similar ideas from psychology, philosophy and systems thinking adapted and applied in organisational and leadership development. For example, Smith and Berg (1987) explored the paradoxical loops that prevent organisational groups function effectively. De Board (1978) applied psychoanalytic concepts to understanding organisational life. Block and Koestenbaum (2001) applied philosophical insights to encourage employees to reclaim their freedom at work and break out of loops associated with anxiety and guilt. Senge (1990) influenced by systems thinker (Kaufman, 1980) introduced the notion of feedback loops as a way of understanding how organisations become caught in unproductive cycles. Schein in the

mid eighties wrote influentially about 'process consultation' (1988) and invited a new generation of consultants to think about how they could

*...seek to give the clients insight in to what is going on around him, within him and between him and other people. (Schein, 1988 p. 11)*

I see this multi disciplinary influence in my own work as I increasingly pay attention to personal, relational *and* systemic sources of intelligence and how they interact to influence how we feel and act. Now I frame my work with clients as an inquiry in three 'realms' of experience and awareness which correspond to Reason and Bradbury's 'first', 'second' and 'third' person research and practice. (2008 pp. 6-7). I use the following image (figure six) to visually represent the purpose of our work together. I draw attention to the place where the three circles intersect and suggest that this might represent moments of 'refection in action' where a person is able to act more effectively by drawing on and being aware of three kinds of intelligence. A client describes their experience of this,

*Now when I am given a finance spread sheet I don't just see numbers. I notice how I feel when I am given the sheet, my first bodily reactions when I open it up. I also pay closer attention to the words and the faces of those who present these figures to me. What are they really thinking? What are they truly feeling? All this has made my relationship to 'the numbers' more interesting and, I think, more productive.<sup>17</sup>*

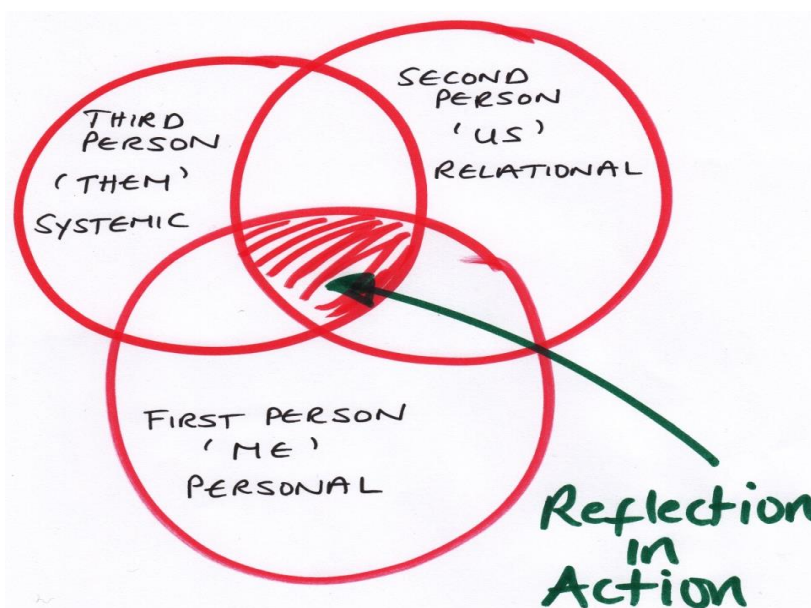


Figure 6: Three realms of inquiry

<sup>17</sup> A graduate from a 2011 leadership programme

Yet, even though my practice has evolved (become less categorical, more expansive), blended and became more responsive to different ways of knowing (Heron, et al., 2008), I continue to be challenged by the *persistence* of emotions and behaviours which appear destructive and unhelpful. I currently deliver a recurring one year leadership programme for a global client. By the end of the programme (we are in to our fourth year now) participants can articulate significant and potent personal insights that they feel will change the way they lead.

*The programme helped me to see that I am very torn between the instinct to defend my position and show that all I am doing is good and right and the awareness that this doesn't help and we need to find solutions beyond our little kingdoms of responsibility and leadership. Therefore I am trying to be as communicative and open with my peers and executives as possible. At the same time I strongly believe it is not the time to "shoot messengers"..... "transparency" is more important than "hanging" scapegoats.<sup>18</sup>*

Yet invariably these insights dissolve in the acidic climate of corporate life where reflective practice of the kind we teach is deemed too ponderous and perhaps too questioning. As Manen points out, "*the spirit of activism has taken over the spirit of patient thinking and quiet wondering.*" (2002 p. 250). Thus my clients' idealisation loops continue to revolve,

*Appreciation is probably the biggest issue I see at the moment..... our business is not running very well and thus it is never good enough and the only reward for good work is more work. I catch myself "switching off" too quickly and just doing what I am asked to do without challenging or attempting to improve things.<sup>19</sup>*

Up until now I have not known or understood how self compassion as a capacity and practice might support the exploration of vicious idealisation looping and subsequently the movement up and out in to more generative cycles of emotional and behaviour.

Throughout this doctorate inquiry, as I learned more about *my* vicious loops I discovered new ways of thinking about and working with *clients* whose own looping shared similarities with mine. As before, I experimented with approaches alongside my client but this time I felt changes in myself and my professional stance that felt significantly different. I name this change *the development of self compassion* and throughout this paper I contend that

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<sup>18</sup> Quote from participant at the end of the leadership programme 2011

<sup>19</sup> Quote from 2011 participant six months after completing.

compassion given, received and *experienced* is the quality or capacity required to acknowledge, understand and lift out of vicious idealisation loops.

The first step towards self compassion is to learn the art of appreciative re-framing. My therapist, who has been a great source of learning and support for me since September 2011, challenged me to re-examine my belief that looping is problematic and undesirable;

*Me: .....I'm interested in this idea of looping...it's so hard to get out of them isn't it? That's the work of this..*

*E: Absolutely and getting in to the next loop, that's the trick!*

*Me: ....so looping in itself isn't bad?*

*E: No, no , no. That's how it works. We loop. That's what the brain does.*

*Me: That's interesting. I've kind of got myself into a position thinking looping was not an attractive thing to be doing*

*E: No, that is what you do. You go over your tracks and you make things bigger and you feel them deeply until there is enough momentum to take you out of the loop in to the next loop. It is like a spiral...you loop for a little bit around and then it looks up a bit, it's like going up a staircase in that sort of position....although some people loop down, they get stuck in the loop and then they go down, a downward spiral, then it is not so attractive...*

*N: yes!....the going around in what appears to be the same space, creating a furrow, getting stuck.<sup>20</sup>*

I notice I am more responsive to the framing of looping being vicious or a spiralling *down* and also that I consider looping to be 'unattractive' which illustrates for me the sense of shame I feel at not being able to find the momentum to lift up and out of my loops. In chapter four I consider the role shame and other threat based emotions play in sustaining these kinds of loops and advocate an appreciative and evolutionary approach (Gilbert, 2010) to working with shame based responses that motivate and sustain vicious loops.

In this same month Chris, my Doctorate supervisor, comments that my urge to 'interrupt' looping "*..implies that looping is in itself 'bad'*". She goes on to say, "*I see being stuck in the loop as being the limiting gesture – lacking choice and resilience.*"

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<sup>20</sup> From an audio recording of a session in April 2012



For a long time I *have* been exclusively focusing on the downward spiral, the furrow that deepens (see figure five). In my work I have co-created pathologies with my patients and clients. During the early part of my career I worked with them as my parents had ‘worked’ with me. I helped them to identify what was ‘wrong’ and then to adapt their behaviour to fit. I tried to make them *the same* as others because I believed it was the best chance they had to adapt, survive, succeed. This is what society says is normal, so how can I help you approximate this norm? I was eager, well intentioned and carried with me a deep, unacknowledged *fear*, for I knew what it was like to be different. My idealised image of psychology was that it could *normalise, enlighten and make good*. I was determined to help, to cure, to save people from the fate awaiting them should they not conform. The ‘dark’ side was to be dissolved or disappeared not integrated. I see now that my practice was driven by the energy contained within my vicious loop. An idealised image of ‘good’ (i.e. perfect) energised a practice of salvation and redemption (Lawrence, 1994).

Now I hear more people tell me that loops can be exhilarating, meaningful, necessary and rich with learning. For example, the creative loop that sees me structure more and more mornings in a repetitive and generative way. Early rising, breakfast for all, children to school, coffee, silence, reading, bursts of writing, gazing, more reading. I protect this virtuous loop as if my life depended on it. I ward off phone calls, hide my Blackberry, mark my diary as BUSY. I call this a *virtuous* loop. Yet the vicious loop, the one that wreaks havoc or slowly erodes may *also* possess some of these qualities. Looping is, as my therapist suggested, what we do. It is a process of experiencing, sense making, strategising and acting. The vicious loop can be the process through which our old strategies, personas and attachments finally break or burn. It is in this break down or burn out that our new self may emerge. In chapters three and four I contend that it is through the practice of *compassionate inquiry* that vicious looping becomes generative, meaningful and developmental. This shift in attention from fighting, fleeing and freezing to accepting, resting and opening calls forth a practice collaborative, compassionate mindfulness that I explore in chapter six.

## Circles and Mandorlas

*“All good stories are like mandorlas. They speak of this and that and gradually through the miracle of story, demonstrate that the opposites overlap and are finally the same.”* (Johnson, 1991 p. 107)

As my inquiry developed the image of the loop was joined by another – that of the mandorla. A mandorla is the almond shape segment made when two circles intersect.<sup>21</sup> (Johnson, 1991) Mandorlas are referred to in medieval Christianity to symbolise the overlap of opposites. The mandorla represents reconciliation and merging. God and man, good and bad, heaven and earth, light and dark, masculine and feminine.



**Chalice Well** is a holy well situated at the foot of Glastonbury Tor in Somerset.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalice\\_Well](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalice_Well)

Figure 7: Chalice Well

The transfiguration of Christ is often depicted using the mandorla image. The example below draw attentions to the way the mandorla’s concentric bands of shading often get *darker* towards the centre rather than lighter. This represents the difficult, mysterious and uncertain journey that must be undertaken in order to finally ‘know’ or encounter Christ. It also suggested that *‘as holiness increases, there is no way to depict it’s brightness except by darkness’* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aureola>). This imagery makes sense to me and supports my contention that the dark, burnt out places that we might find or lose ourselves in are fundamentally fertile.

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<sup>21</sup> Mandorla is the Italian word for almond

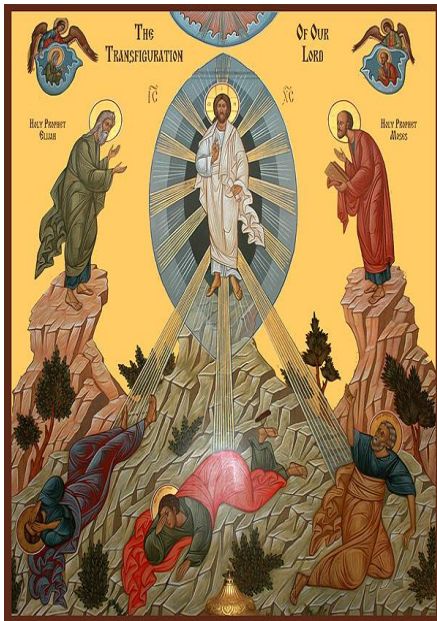


Figure 8: The Transfiguration of Christ

<http://acatholichomejournal.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/overview-of-gospels-of-lent.html>

When I began this inquiry I was trying to understand how to *reconcile* my split and torn 'selves'. Yet when I thought about looping I did not think about mandorla intersections. My loops were self contained. I was 'going round in circles', deepening the furrow of an isolated loop without seeing connections, relationships and possibilities in the meeting of my various loops (vicious and virtuous). My loops were connected by fragile threads best left hanging.

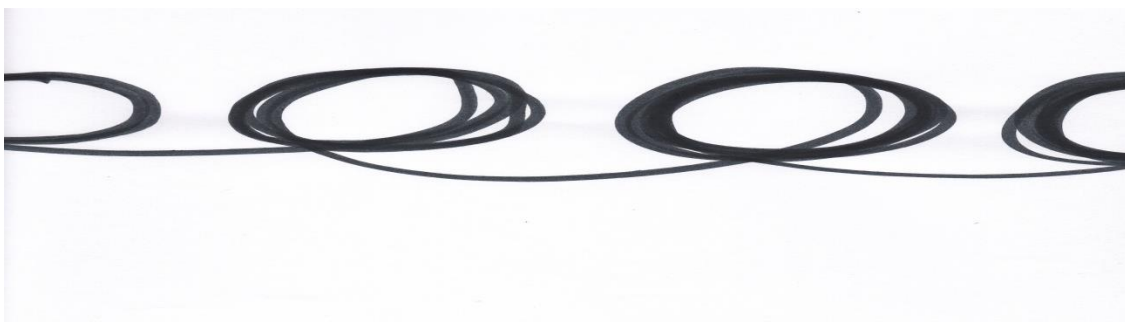


Figure 9 Isolated Looping

On reflection I think this chain of isolated loops are my idealisation loops travelling from one familiar experience to the next.

It also comes as a surprise for me that only recently did I 'see' the mandorlas contained within the sketch I use to frame my client work

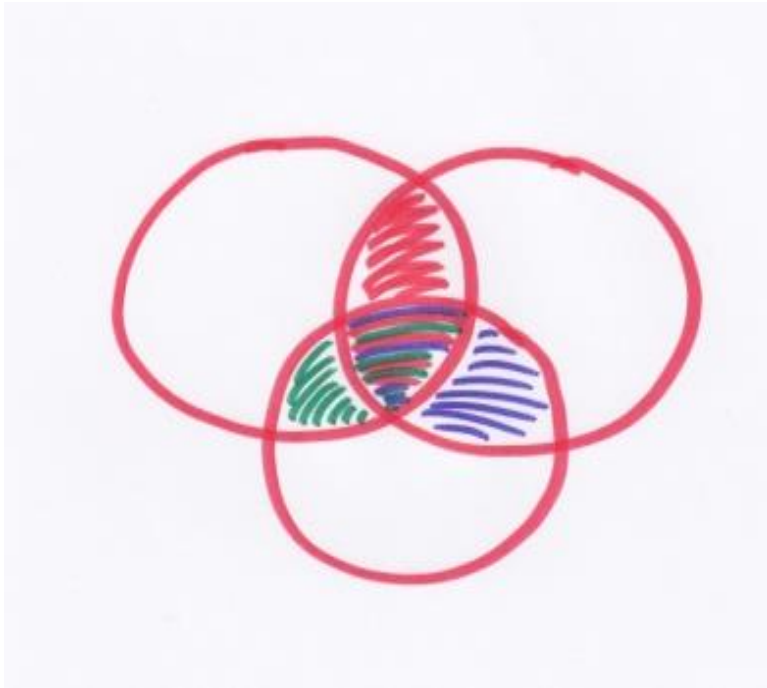


Figure 10: Three landscapes of inquiry.

Now I can see four mandorlas (self/other, self/system, other/system, system/self) and a fourth central mandorla that represents an intersection of three elements (self, other, system). It occurs to me that a compassionate practice would support the exploration of first, second and third person intersections. I also realise that when such mandorla experiences occur clients often experience turbulence and discomfort. To anticipate and support this experience enables the client to stay ‘in the work’ rather than retreat back to the divided self that strives to keep the complex, multiple and messy apart.

As I began to discover self compassion I was more able to see the other loops playing out in my life. How, for example my perfectionist tendencies also support a *survival* loop (hard work, diligence and duty) that has rewarded me well (I have an excellent job, loyal friends and family and two fabulous children). Thus the mandorla represents for me not just the *static* intersection of two opposites but a dynamic interplay of *paradoxical experiencing* that is my life. My mandorla image is swirling and multiple.

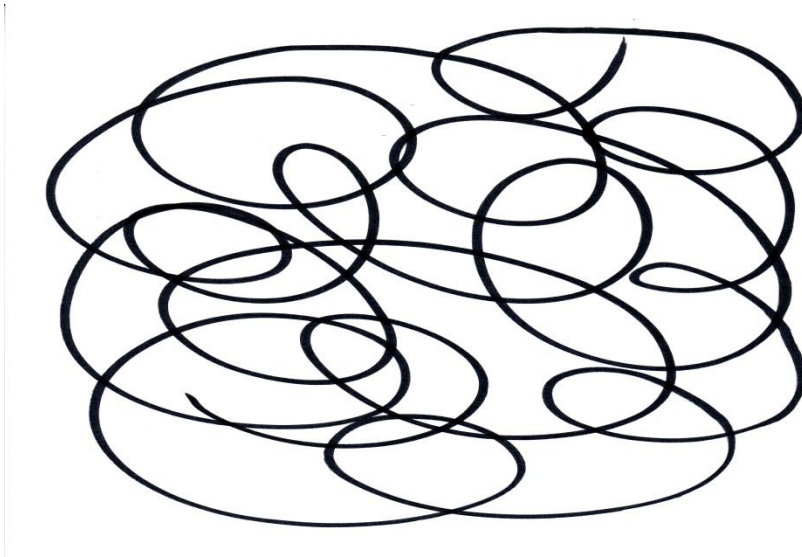


Figure 11: Dynamic mandorlas- messy and misunderstood

In this first attempt to draw this mandorla image I found myself making swirly messes on the page. It is difficult to make out the mandorlas although they are there. This 'mess' represents what it may be like to experience the emergence of mandorlas without yet understanding them. This picture represents the confusing, tangled and somewhat incoherent first impression that a mandorla experience brings.

Mandorla experiences can be confusing and unpleasant because they can represent the meeting of opposites and differences that takes place as part of a reconciliation process. These meetings are a vital step in the journey towards self compassion. And they are going on all the time. I might notice them in the knot I feel in my stomach or the way my heart beats faster when I am criticised or in a blush that comes from nowhere. I might hear them my voice which changes pitch or feel them in the irritation I inexplicably feel when a certain someone starts to speak. To notice, be curious about and brave enough to honour those meetings is a first step towards the internal reconciliation I seek.

Horney (1950) would describe this intersection or meeting as an appearance of the *actual* self which sits between the *idealised* self and the *real* self. The concept of the idealised self is central to Horney's work and is of great interest to me because it feels as if my strategies have been in the service of this self. By way of contrast Horney reminds us that there are two other selves – the *actual* self, which is what we are at any given time and the *real* self which is the original and often hidden self that represents all that is possible, yearning and authentic in us. The journey towards self realisation involves a recognition and acceptance of the actual self (what is) and then a gradual acceptance of *what is possible*. It is the cultivation of this acceptance which defines my work with clients.

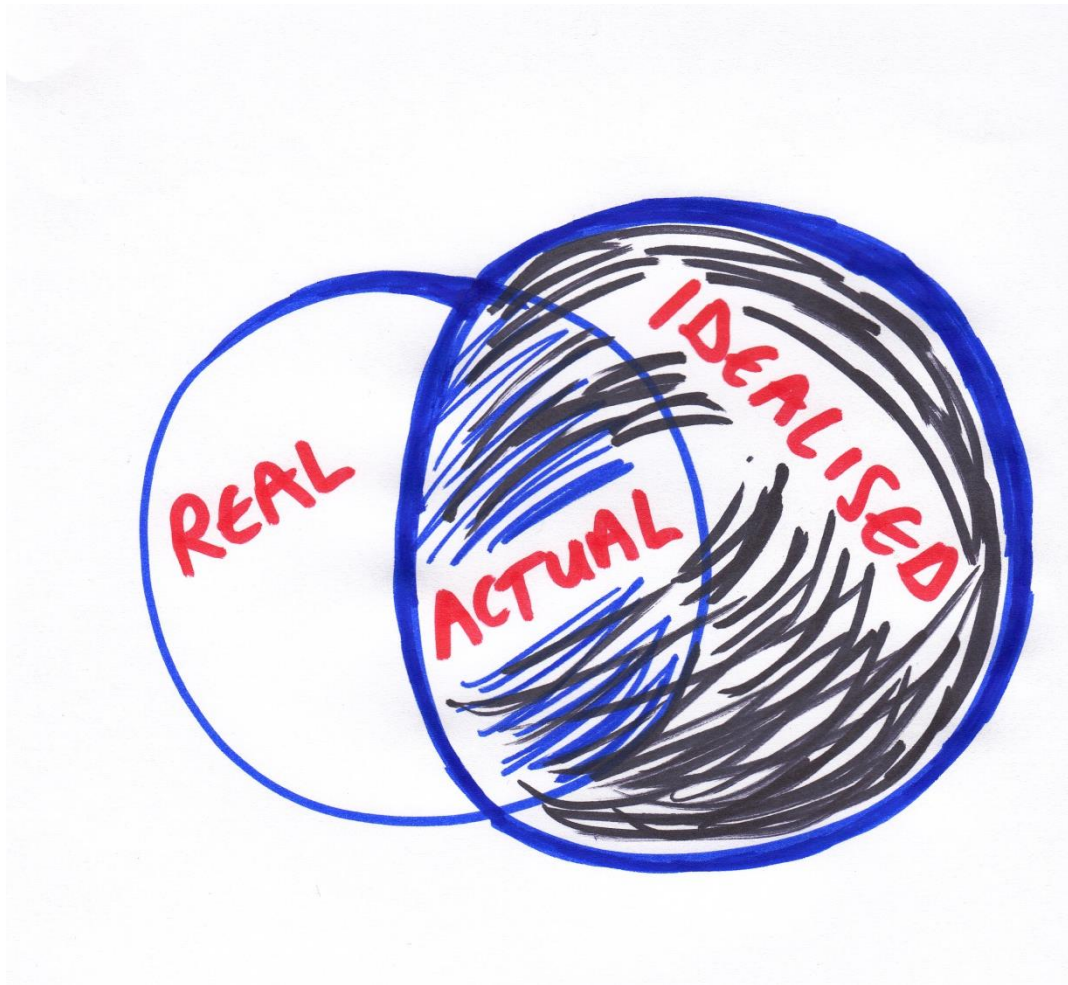


Figure 12: The ideal, actual and real.

Mandorla experiences do not need to be confined to the meeting of idealised and real selves. A mandorla experience may, for example, occur when two *virtuous* loops (or real selves) intersect to create profound moments of joy and deep understanding. So, for example I may experience a profound mandorla when a creative loop (such as my writing) intersects with a professional loop (such as an inspiring work assignment) and generates a moment of new understanding and possibility. Or it may occur when two vicious loops intersect. When, for example my idealised image of family life collides with my idealised image of work and in the collision one or the other image is damaged. So, when I am working abroad I am a successful consultant *and* an absent mother. When I am hanging out mid week with my children I am an attentive parent *and* a part timer who isn't fully focused on the job. These idealised intersections can cause me deep turbulence, dissonance and pain.

In *this* inquiry I am interested in intersections that involve at least one vicious idealisation loop. I am *particularly* interested in mandorla experiences which represents moments when

the *actual* self is acknowledged in the meeting of the idealised and the real self – the intersection of a virtuous and vicious loop. (see figure twelve). In chapter three I refer to a very turbulent meeting between my ideal version of intimate relationship when it comes face to face with my actual experience of it. Similarly, James experiences meetings between his idealised version of successful corporate man and his actual experience of the work.

When these mandorlas form, when the ideal, actual and real intersect, there can be turbulence and pain. Often there is darkness at the centre of the mandorla. So one circle represents my idealised images of how the world should be and another circle represents what I yearn for – what Smith (2010) might describe as my *primary intention*. Throughout this inquiry I have become increasingly aware that I frequently disappear the actual, even though it is there in the intersection of the real and the ideal. This disappearance is facilitated by the powerful and dominating influence of the ideal self which as we shall see later can completely engulf and hide any other experiences of self.

In disappearing the actual (what I am) I also disappear any possibility of becoming all that I could be – the real. Thus the process of *actualisation*, the urge to ‘*expand, extend, develop, mature.*’ (Rogers, 1967 p. 351) is blocked if the actual self is kept out of awareness. I have learned that for some people (those caught in idealisation loops) facing up to the actual is terrifying. The actual self is too imperfect, inadequate, flawed and ugly. James, for example, was not able to ‘hear’ the feedback from his boss and colleagues about his management style. His ideal self was too intent on fuelling a loop that James must be a perfect manager. The developmental challenge is to understand how to facilitate the meeting of the actual (what I am) and idealised self (what I should be). If the ideal self (I should be a perfect manager) can be explored through the actual experience (sometimes I am not a perfect a manager) then it becomes more possible to enter the realm of the real self where deeper questions can be asked (what is a perfect manager? Do I really want to manage?)

My initial images of looping involved self-contained isolated loops lacking in mandorla intersection



Figure 13: Isolated Looping

And perhaps illustrates how I have not wanted to engage with the paradoxes in my own life. I fail and succeed, I love and I hate, I lose and I gain, I connect and I separate, I am fulfilled and disappointed. The messy merging of my loops (see figure eleven above) as I re-imagined my experience (Romanyshyn, 2007) came to define my inquiry. Yet I needed to find a way of making sense of the mess.

As my research evolved I learned ways to recognise, accept and stay in mandorla experiences without withdrawing (which is my response to disappointment, failure, fear) or defending (which is manifest in the creation of ideals and the striving that follows). Scot Fitzgerald noted that the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function was the mark of true fortitude and intelligence. (Martin, 2007). Now I am deeply interested in what it would mean to live in paradox. To be bad and good at the same time.

My images now look something like this



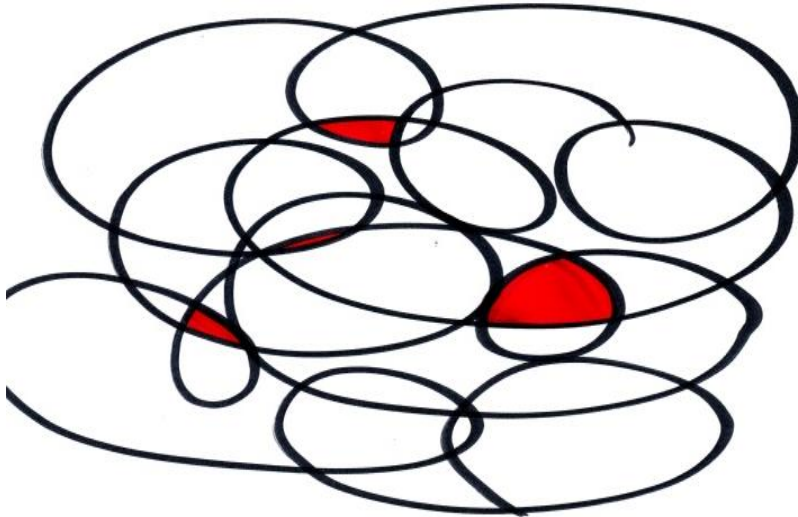


Figure 14: Emerging mandorlas

Here you can see that I am still looping but more clearly able to see the intersections or mandorlas. By paying attention to my patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving *with compassion*, I have learned to tolerate, make sense of and become enriched by the dynamic interplay of loops that represent the way I strive to live, the way I do live and the way I yearn to live. Some examples from my own and client experiences of staying in the mess/complexity of a mandorla:

- I am an expert in my field.....I don't know what to do or say in this moment
- I want to change.....I want to stay the same
- I want to be with you.....being alone has served me well
- I want the status this work brings me.....I yearn to do voluntary work overseas

So it is the conscious attention we bring to the 'mess' that offers the possibility of seeing the rich messages of the mandorla. As Chris pointed out I am shifting the figure/ground of what I pay attention to so that, "*now the spaces in between and the relationships are sites of potential joy and growth.*"

Raising consciousness has always been part of the human endeavour. Yet somewhere along the way we have lost contact with how *quality* enhances quantity. Perhaps we have become more 'self aware'. Yet have we nurtured the *quality* of that awareness so that it can

support the growth of our authentic, soulful selves? I don't think so. James Hillman has similar reflections,

*That's what I mean about the therapeutic attitude hurting the actual potential of people...as Ivan Illich would say, therapy wants to ameliorate the suffering in the ore.....* (Hillman, et al., 1993 p. 31)

And he suggests that therapy needs to become,

*A building of doorways, opening conduits and making channels, like a giant bypass operation, throwing in all kinds of new tubings so that things flow into each other. Memories, events, images all become enlivened and our feelings about this ore become more subtle. Learn to appreciate it..... (Ibid)*

Self compassion is *partly* about ameliorating suffering but not as an end in itself. The purpose of self compassion is to create flow, integration, connection between the torn off, split off divided parts of our self. Self compassion is not about 'fixing', 'curing' or solving. It is a practice that seeks to understand, tolerate and soothe.

I now understand my initial research question *what is good work?* not so much as a question seeking an answer but a question inviting me to pay attention to these behavioural and emotional loops that left me exhausted, uneasy, frustrated and frequently disappointed. The unheard whispered questions may have been, *how do these loops serve you well and how do they constrain you? How can you make a move from vicious looping to virtuous looping?*

What unfolds as I represent my research is not simply an account of my developing practice but also an account of my four year struggle to live with, learn about and lift out of the vicious idealisation loop I have been circling for years. Thus I am, (not always knowingly or intentionally) the primary 'guinea pig' of my research endeavour. As I make sense of the material or 'data' I have gathered over four years I see myself at the centre of the work and in representing my inquiry in this thesis I use my own experience to understand a phenomenon which I see and work with on a regular basis. Following Rogers (1967) I also believe that which is personal is also most general.

To summarise: there are two aspects to my developing practice. The first is to better understand, recognise and name vicious idealisation looping. The second is to support a compassionate inquiry in to particular mandorla experiences - moments when the actual self is illuminated in all its imperfect, paradoxical colours and glimpses of the real become possible.

## Chapter Three: Seeking the good Life through a perfectionist lens

*I do not refute ideals, I merely draw gloves on in their presence.....all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity. Nietzsche, Ecce Homo.(p.4)*

### Spinning the wheel

This chapter relates to the period from May 2009 to August 2009. I describe how I constructed my first inquiry question through a perfectionist lens and set my idealisation loop in motion. I show how this same pattern appears in issues clients bring during coaching and also in some of the organisational development work I do. In this chapter I introduce the literature on perfectionism. It is my contention that in order to work with vicious idealisation loops practitioners would benefit from an understanding of the perfectionist character and the particular challenges inherent in working with clients who manifest these tendencies.

In May 2009 I transferred from the Ashridge Masters in Organisational Consulting (AMOC) to the Doctorate programme (ADOC). I accounted for this transfer in my doctorate inquiry proposal,

*“My decision to continue learning through the doctorate arises from my desire to explore what I am doing at work and whether it is of any benefit or use to others.....It is essential to me that I feel good about the work I do and that I feel it has a value and worth commensurate with the value and worth I make and experience when I stay at home. I do not want to leave my children for work which feels pointless, undervalued and poorly rewarded. In addition I have a strong sense of wanting to do something in the middle and latter part of my life that leaves a positive legacy. Before I depart this earth I want to create something or be part of an endeavour that lives on and has use longer than I do. These days I frequently ask myself, what do I want to be known for?” (Wickremasinghe, June 2009)*

Throughout the first few years of my inquiry and expressed in this extract, I was urgently preoccupied with grand questions which I record in my 2010 transfer paper. I asked, what am I here to do? What do I want to leave behind? How can I engage in work that makes me feel good? What is good enough? What would my practice and my relational presence be like if I were not so torn/split? (Wickremasinghe, September 2010). It felt *essential* to discover how to feel good about my work and to be able to justify my work and study activities in nothing less than the creation of a monumental legacy. I aspired for my

research to be ground breaking and unique and for my work to be valued, well paid and satisfying.

These questions and aspirations are commendable. It is not so much the *content* which is problematic for me but the way in which I *related* to them. So, for example, I turned these *possibilities* in to 'shoulds'. In doing so they ceased to act as guiding stars' beckoning me on but as *standards* through which I would evaluate and judge my performance. I also notice in the above extract that there is a strong sense of my wanting and needing *external approval* in order to make sense of and value what I do. Around the same time (May 2009) I repeat this behaviour in relation to a new consulting job. I had been reading a book about creating transformational change in organisations (Fisher, et al., 2003) and was drawn to one chapter in particular as it related to my inquiry question, 'what is good work?' In this chapter the authors argue that good work,

*...raises the consciousness of the worker. It generates mind-body integration and good health and it..... produces something of value to someone other than the worker.....good work unveils questions that evoke wonder in the worker, in co-workers and the audience.* (Fisher, et al., 2003 p. 154)

My new colleagues who had also read and contributed to this book, were inspired by these same aspirations and I imagined with some excitement that we would work together to promote self questioning in action, mind-body integration, organisational transformations and ultimately good work.

What I did not see at the time was how once again I quickly turned those 'guiding star' ideals relating to the Good Life in to 'shoulds'. Horney (1950) makes a clear distinction between guiding ideals and shoulds. The former have obligating power over our lives yet fulfilling them is what we ultimately and authentically want. This alignment between our values and our actions gives us positive energy, choice and resilience. In obeying our *should* however,

*There is just about as much freedom as there is .....within a dictatorship....there are quick retributions if we do not measure up to expectations.* (Horney, 1950 p. 74)

The first entry of my doctorate journal illustrates the punitive and obligatory atmosphere I created around my research and which seems to accompany striving of this sort.

*I have decided to force myself (and force is the right word for now) to write, in journal style, for half an hour a day. I will allow myself up to 2 days off a week before permitting guilt to set in.... (LJ: 14.05.09)*

Within months of starting work with this new consultancy I was working with some of the best consultants in the field, I had access to the board rooms and senior management groups in large organisations and I had a pulsing vision of how it could be, how it *should be* for my clients. My idealisation loop was well and truly in motion and for the next two years, until 2011, I undertook a personal quest to transform organisations, to discover the meaning of good work and to produce a brilliant doctorate thesis.

Idealisation loops are driven on by a strong sense of what *should be* and I notice this same pattern emerging when I work with clients.

When I first started coaching James in November 2011 he told me he wanted to work 'without fear'. He went on to describe how this would be possible if his organisation was 'just and fair', if they recognised and rewarded those who worked hard and *achieved* and if people were more open and didn't engage in back stabbing, political 'dances' and hypocrisy. He also described how good coaching could help him find his confidence, courage and purpose. Yet he told me his coaches and therapists never lived up to expectation and that he had been suffering the same pattern of striving and hope followed by disillusionment and depression for many years. When I listened to him I heard idealised images of organisations and relationships emerging. I heard him describe how organisations and coaching *should be*. I saw his shoulds and expectations as a manifestation of perfectionist beliefs and strategies which he himself understood and owned. Yet in that first session (November 2011) I did not have a thorough understanding of perfectionism nor how it might influence the coaching relationship. Furthermore I did not consider how I might inadvertently contribute to the continuation of his idealisation loop through my own attachment to similar 'shoulds'. I discovered all this as my own life experiences compelled me towards a deeper inquiry in to these issues. I will develop this personal narrative in the chapters that follow and also describe how I had the opportunity to experience a change in my own practice when James contacted me again in November 2012 to recommence his sessions.

So Idealism at work, at Ashridge and at home emerged as a theme early on in this inquiry. Bill, my first supervisor, commented on my idealist tendencies and warned of the cycle of attachment and disappointment associated with this pattern. I looked up the definition of idealism and noted it in my journal,

*Idealism....priority of ideals, principles, values, and goals over concrete realities. Idealists are understood to represent the world as it might or should be, unlike pragmatists, who focus on the world as it presently is. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idealism>*

At the time I reflected on his observation within the context of my *personal relationships*

*Could it be that my idealism exists to protect me from forming bonds that subconsciously I know will break anyway? (Journal 6.06.09)*

but I did not stop to deeply reflect on the impact of idealism and perfectionism in my work even though journal entries at the time refer to the negative affects I experienced as a result;

*The first 'dialogue day' is over. I feel flat.....just feels like an anti climax.....I want more. I want people to cross boundaries and experience revelations.... ...At the start of the day, as I was getting ready my heart momentarily felt heavy. No matter what happens today, I thought to myself, I will not be satisfied. I will never be satisfied. (LJ: 2.07.09)*

Yet even after these lengthy reflections my overall response to Bill remains one of defiant frustration,

*why can't I be an idealist and sometimes NOT be disappointed?! Ok, so let's say I am an idealist. Good. (LJ 2.07.09)*

Flett and Hewitt's (2002) research, which I will return to shortly, suggests to me that my idealisation loop is sustained because of *perfectionist* tendencies and perfectionists,

*...cling to their standards because of the perceived benefits and rewards associated with striving towards perfectionist goals. (Flett, et al., 2002 p. 24)*

This makes it difficult for perfectionists to lift out of their loops – a subject I return to in depth in chapter **seven**.

Despite feeling 'disengaged and bored' and unsure why I had settled upon 'good work' as my inquiry topic, I continued to diligently research my question. I looked at Howard Gardner's research exploring what promotes or impedes good work (Gardner, et al., 1997), Schumacher's reflections on the nature of good work (Schumacher, 1979),

Csikszentmihalyi's work on *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) and the Stoics on the 'good life' (Epictetus, 1995). I did this because I 'had to' complete a proposal by June 2009.

Reading back through my work from this period I see that I set up idealised goals relating to my doctorate, my work and my home life and went on to circle this idealisation loop in a familiar way; feeling driven, at times quite manic, deaf and blind to alternative perspectives and by the end of 2011 frustrated, disappointed, lost and abandoned. There is little joy or intrinsic motivation to study or learn or even be in relationship during this time.

A similar pattern emerged early on in my relationship with James. During our first coaching session (November 2011) he introduced idealised images of how his life *should* be, expressed self contempt and a great deal of doubt that anything or anybody could help him lift out of his negative experiences. He set the coaching bar very high, reminding me that he already had 'tried everything' to find peace, self acceptance and emotional stability. Towards the end of that session I heard my own therapist's voice,

*"You are so harsh on yourself. And you are hard on others. However, I suspect your judgment of others does not come close to the brittle cruelty you turn upon yourself."*

And I heard myself saying similar words back to him,

*".....and because you are so harsh on yourself you cannot understand why others react to your judgments of them in the way they do. You think you are gentle with them and you don't understand why they get upset with you. You describe them as weak. You say you do not have respect for them, that they do not live up to your standards...." It seems to me that your work over these coming weeks is to rediscover some compassion towards yourself."*

James seemed to physically recoil when I used the word compassion yet he also looked curious and asked me to say more. I remember being unsure what to say next and feeling that compassion was not something I knew much about either. Nevertheless I continued,

*"I guess you will probably continue to feel angry with your boss, frustrated with your peers and unhappy with your achievements. I wonder if it is possible for you to refrain from trying to change these emotions? Whether it is possible for you to simply notice them arising in you without acting any further on them."*

He looked perplexed. I tried again.

*"You describe great compassion towards your children and you spoke of your own childhood with some sadness. You said you were left by your father and you did your best*

*to survive the loneliness, fear and anger that caused. It seems to me you have done the best you can to get along in spite of these feelings and also that you now feel it is time to learn another way of going on with your life. That feels very hopeful. I wonder if you could simply remind yourself of that from time to time?"*

In this brief extract from our first session I notice how I respond to and search for ways to work with the constellation of behaviours I have not yet named as perfectionist or idealised but nevertheless feels *known* to me and which I intuitively feel might benefit from a compassionate intervention. In this session my compassionate interventions are: asking him to notice his feelings without analysing or judging them, reflecting back a compassionate version of his survival story (he has done the best he can) and introducing the practice of 'free fall' writing (a non judgmental, spontaneous method) to develop mindfulness. At this stage my interventions are *experiments* that are held within an *implicit* theoretical frame. I have a hunch about what is going on for him which is made stronger as I connect my experience with his. I offer him a few practices that I have found useful in my own quest to cope with disappointments and frustrations. It is only later (when I wrote this thesis in late 2012/early 2013) that I connect these hunches and interventions to articulate a proposition and practice to work with idealisation loops.

The constellation of beliefs that motivate idealisation loops and which I refer to as *perfectionism* is a construct well known in the clinical and psychotherapeutic literature. Research and theory on perfectionism has increased over the last three decades. Flett and Hewitt (Flett, et al., 2002) survey the references within the *PsychLit* database that use the term perfectionism. They find 102 publications in the 1980's and 336 in the 1990's. My search in *PsycInfo* between 2000 and 2012 show almost 2000 publications relating to this subject. Clearly it is an area of growing interest and my reading around the subject has shown that very diverse writers, practitioners and researchers are considering the consequences of perfectionism in business, economics, health, relationships and education (Chelminski, 2005); (Beheshtifar, 2011); (McMillan, 2010); (Mainwaring, 2009); (Marano, 2005); (Bousman, 2008); (Molnar, 2012); (Brown, 2007).

I end this chapter by taking a tour in to the theory and research about perfectionism. A clear understanding of this construct - or constellation of beliefs and behaviours - supports a more focused and purposeful approach to working with people who manifest these tendencies. In this chapter I focus on how perfectionism is defined and understood and offer an over view of the factors and processes that contribute to its development and some of the difficulties of working with this particular loop. In doing so I lay the groundwork for a later exploration about how compassionate practices can contribute to our still developing understanding of



how to work with people who might be circling this particular loop and how they can support us to work with the difficult experience of 'resistance', 'relapse', doubt and persistence.

## **What is Perfectionism?**

Flett and Hewitt (2002) provide a comprehensive but mostly Cognitive Behavioural overview of theory, research and treatment which is still deferred to in more recent publications on the subject (Stoeber, et al., 2006) They suggest that perfectionism is a *multi-dimensional* construct with both personal and interpersonal aspects. They distinguish three dimensions; self-oriented perfectionism (I must be perfect), other-oriented perfectionism (you must be perfect) and a generalised or socially prescribed perfectionism which nurtures a culture of perfectionism that puts pressure on individuals and groups to aspire to prescribed social standards in order to be accepted. These three dimensions interact and influence each other and as a result an individual's experience of perfectionism varies in intensity and kind. It is the intensity of the attachment to this construct that determines whether a person will experience perfectionism as more or less adaptive, particularly because the more intense the attachment, the more painful and heightened the feelings when a person's efforts towards perfectionism are frustrated (Horney, 1950). This approach to perfectionism resonates with me as it relates to the three landscapes of inquiry that I refer to and explore in my client work (see figure fifteen). It encourages exploration of the personal, relational and contextual influences that sustain our assumptions and beliefs about the world and our place in it.

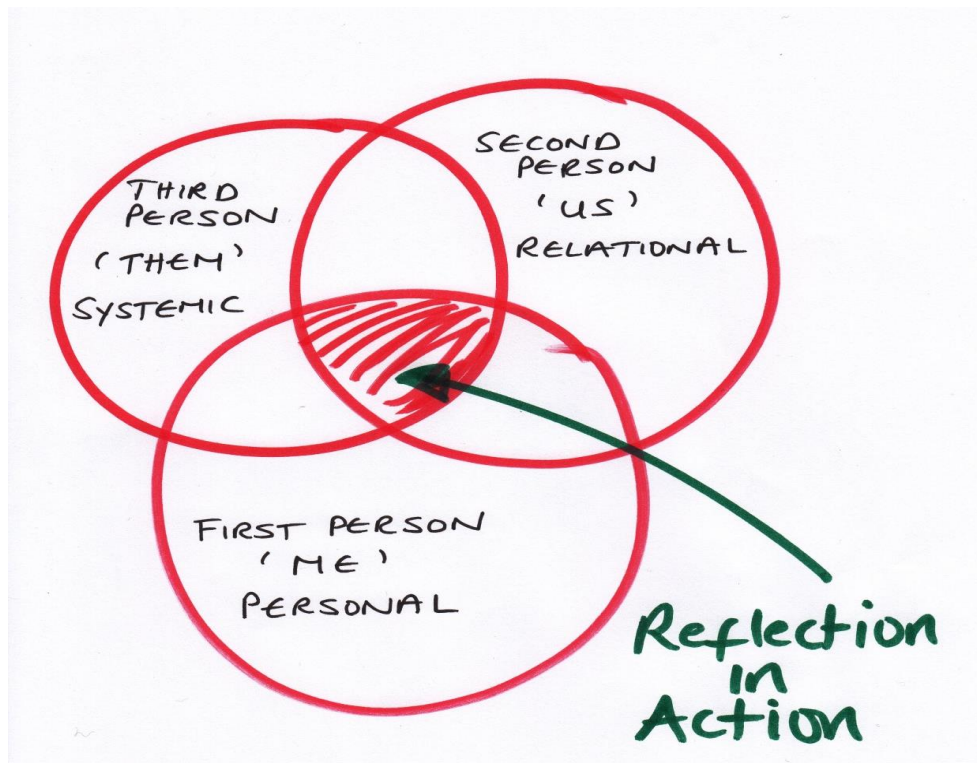


Figure 15: Three landscapes of Inquiry

Despite the complexity of this construct most researchers and practitioners agree that perfectionism is a '*striving for flawlessness*' (Flett, et al., 2002) and that it has adaptive (positive) and maladaptive (negative) qualities. Burns, who developed one of the first instruments to measure perfectionism focused on the maladaptive aspects and described a perfectionist as one whose

*...standards are high beyond reach or reason...who strains compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measures his [sic] own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.* (Burns, 1980)

Many researchers are interested in distinguishing between the adaptive and maladaptive qualities of perfectionism although Shahar (2009) argues that 'adaptive perfectionism' should not be called 'perfectionism' at all. He suggests that adaptive behaviours should be described as 'optimalism' and maladaptive behaviours as 'perfectionism'. Stoeber and Otto (2006) suggest that *perfectionist strivings* are associated with positive aspects of perfectionism and *perfectionist concerns* are associated with the negative. In my consulting work I notice that clients more frequently speak about their perfectionism as a problem. They are able to distinguish when their strivings are positive and when they have begun to take on the negative qualities of a vicious loop. Thus I would concur with Shahar that is it

useful to distinguish with different words (perfectionism and optimalism) behaviours that may appear very similar but which arise out of very different beliefs, purposes and intents.

Regardless of whether one takes a single or multi dimensional view of perfectionism most researchers agree that perfectionism involves having high standards that are very difficult or impossible to meet and which interfere with performance. Perfectionism is also recognised as being associated with depression and anxiety. (Antony, et al., 2009)

The table below, taken from Enns et al. (2002 p. 51) draws together findings from across the literature and offers a useful summary of the differences between adaptive ('normal') and maladaptive (neurotic) forms of perfectionism.

<b>Maladaptive Perfectionism</b>	<b>Adaptive Perfectionism</b>
<b>Unable to experience pleasure from labours</b>	Able to experience satisfaction and pleasure
<b>Inflexibly high standards</b>	Standards modified in accordance with the situation
<b>Unrealistically or unreasonably high standards</b>	Achievable standards
<b>Overly generalised high standards</b>	High standards are matched to the person's limitations and strengths
<b>Fear of failure</b>	Striving for success
<b>Focus on avoiding error</b>	Focus on doing things right
<b>Tense, anxious attitude towards tasks</b>	Relaxed but careful attitude
<b>Large gap between performance and standards</b>	Reasonable match between attainable performance and standards
<b>Sense of self worth dependent on performance</b>	Sense of self independent of performance
<b>Associated with procrastination</b>	Timely completion of tasks
<b>Motivated to avoid negative consequences</b>	Motivation to receive positive feedback and rewards
<b>Goals attained for self enhancement</b>	Goals attained for the enhancement of society
<b>Failure associated with harsh self criticism</b>	Failure associated with disappointment and renewed efforts
<b>Black and white thinking: perfection Vs failure</b>	Balanced thinking
<b>Belief that one <i>should</i> excel</b>	Desire to excel
<b>'Compulsive' tendencies and doubting</b>	Reasonable certainty about actions

Figure 16: Maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism

The idealisation loop that I refer to when I describe my own patterns and circling of behaviour and emotion is a *vicious* loop or, referring to the above, a 'maladaptive', 'neurotic' or 'negative' loop. My work over the last year has been to recognise the vicious quality of this loop and *also* to discover the positive, helpful aspects of it. This self compassionate inquiry recognises the role all our selves play in sustaining life.

However, as I have already said the process of discovering the richness of mandorla experiences (the intersection of the real, actual and ideal selves) can be very painful and I concur with Flett and Hewitt (2002) that maladaptive perfectionism related to idealisation looping is very difficult to interrupt. I would add that this is partly because perfectionists *resist* mandorla experiences. In James' first session unexplored mandorlas could be found in his paradoxical experiences; a deference to and a hatred of authority, an ambition for corporate success and a longing to be 'free' from workplace obligations, wanting to do the best for his children and knowing at the same time that he is landing his own 'shadow' on them, wanting to be accepted by his colleagues and feeling contemptuous towards them. He was able to articulate these conflicts but became *very* frustrated with himself when trying to make sense of them. This frustration triggered a resistance to further exploration.

So how does this tenacious personality construct or strategy for survival and way of understanding the world develop? In surveying the literature I have gained a deeper and more self compassionate understanding of how it has come to be this way for me. In chapter six I expand this understanding through learning about and applying a biological and evolutionary perspective of vicious looping. (Gilbert, 2010)

## **How does perfectionism develop?**

In considering the origins of perfectionism I will cover a broad theoretical terrain that considers key personality developmental models including social expectations, social learning, social reaction and anxious rearing (Flett, et al., 2002). In addition I draw upon Bowlby's theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1997) and Horney's theory of neurotic pride (Horney, 1950). This landscape will provide a rich backdrop for the emerging stories of perfectionism – my own and my client(s) - and will be important in supporting an informed and considerate approach when working with people who manifest these behaviours. Later I expand on this understanding by including the research in to compassion which offers an evolutionary and biological way of thinking about perfectionism and vicious loops.

Most theorists consider that perfectionism is a set of personality characteristics which develop in response to family influences. The developmental frames offered below include different perspectives on how these influences impact and endure.

## **Social Expectations**

Children learn that approval from their parents is contingent on meeting parental expectation and perfectionist tendencies arise when parental expectations are high (Hamerchek, 1978) . A child experiencing these conditions will develop a contingent sense of self worth that corresponds to Flett and Hewitt's (2002) *socially prescribed* perfectionism. The authors were interested not just in parental pressure but the wider influence of *societal* pressure to be perfect. Research has also indicated that people who have been exposed to conditions of contingent self worth are hypersensitive to criticism from others and experience frequent feelings of helplessness and despair. (Burhans, et al., 1995). Hamerchek (1978) also suggests that an *absence* of expectations or standards can also give rise to perfectionism tendencies. Here the child sets high expectations for her self as a way of coping with her uncertainty as to whether her behaviour will lead to punishment or reward. Setting of high personal standards in this respect correspond to Hewitt and Flett's (2002) *self oriented* perfectionism and could be a strategy for maximising the likelihood of reward over punishment by ensuring unequivocal achievement. In organisations we see these dynamics at play when bosses set targets and base their appreciation of staff on the achievement of those targets. Or when bosses constantly change the goal posts of what is acceptable or not. These dynamics can trigger responses that arise from childhood memories of how to cope with uncertainty, how to gain approval and avoid punishment. Whilst many of us develop new strategies for coping with the different contexts and challenges of adulthood, some of us *don't* and resort consciously or unconsciously to tried and tested familiar ways of dealing with stress, threat and difficulty. Maladaptive perfectionism is an example of how tenacious and recurring childhood strategies are – even when they no longer bring the emotional relief or safety they once did.

Of added interest is research that shows even *positive* feedback can foster a sense of contingent self worth as it may contribute to sustaining a highly evaluative, comparative environment. Mary Gordon is the founder of **Roots of Empathy** which provides programmes in schools to teach empathic skills. I had the pleasure of working with Mary and finding out about her work at *The Empathy and Compassion in Society Conference* (November 2012). Roots of Empathy practitioners work with children and intentionally avoid praise or criticism in order to dampen the culture of competitiveness within the classroom.

Their programmes demonstrate how children over the nine month period become less critical, more willing to help each other and more accurate in describing how other people feel and think (Gordon, 2009). I see this approach as supporting the kind of inquiry required to explore the mandorla experiences that involve at least one vicious loop. It is a technique or skill described by Bohm (2005) and Isaacs (1999) to encourage dialogue around difficult issues. They call this skill 'suspending' – the ability to detach, even momentarily, from your own beliefs and assumptions (and views of right or wrong) in order to nurture the non defensive emergence of other realities and truths. It is a technique I both teach and work with and I will say more about dialogue and its role in compassionate practice in chapter five.

## **Social Learning**

Social learning research explores the impact of children observing and imitating perfectionism in their parents. Imitation is motivated by the developmental tendency in young children to idealise their care givers. Bandura's (1986) well known research in to social cognitive learning offers many examples of how children learn through imitation and inspired further work that shows how social learning processes operate in perfectionism. Flett et al. (2002) conducted a number of studies to show a high correlation between participants' self ratings regarding perfectionism and their perceptions of parental perfectionism.

## **Attachment Theory**

Born in 1907, John Bowlby pioneered research in to the importance of positive, nurturing early attachment experiences. His interest in maternal deprivation and childhood trauma may have arisen from his own early and unhappy experiences of an unavailable mother, the departure of his beloved nanny when Bowlby was four and boarding school. After the second world war Bowlby became involved in studies to explore the impact of loss and suffering experienced by young children separated from their primary care givers. At the time psychoanalytic perspectives were popular and a child's separation distress was understood as the product of unconscious fantasies (Mitchel, 1986). Bowlby challenged this and argued that children were responding to *real* life events that threatened their survival. He emphasised an evolutionary and biological perspective to expand the scope of Psychoanalytic insight. This is an approach I also develop and adapt in chapter four following the work of Paul Gilbert (Gilbert, 2010). Bowlby's main contribution is to suggest that the quality of early attachments –particularly to the primary care giver – contributes to the foundation of later emotional and personality development. (Bowlby, 1997).

Donald Winnicott, born some twenty years after Bowlby, and the product of what he described as an 'oppressive' relationship with his mother was similarly interested in the subject of early attachment relationships (Winnicott, 1973) and the importance of the 'holding' environment. Winnicott suggested that the way the mother (or primary care giver) picks up, feeds, clothes, carries and bathes her baby lays the foundation for the child's first and rooted memory of dependence and is extrapolated to the wider world. These early nurturing experiences contribute to what Winnicott described as a sense of being – the capacity to 'be' and to feel alive. This feeling is essential if a person is not to be caught up in a false self and a compulsive cycle of 'doing' to conceal the absence of 'being'. (Minsky, 1996). Idealisation looping can be understood as an example of this compulsive cycle.

Research that followed Bowlby and Winnicott showed that perfectionism is strongly associated with attachment variables such as relationship preoccupation and the need for approval (Andersson, et al., 2000) and maladaptive perfectionists are shown to have experienced high parental criticism – which is seen as antithetical to the development of secure, strong attachment bonds. (Rice, et al., 2000). Research suggests that perfectionists manifest insecure attachment patterns and are therefore prone to experiencing related problematic affects including anxiety and hostility towards others. Melges also suggests that a perfectionist's strong need for external approval and validation continues to interfere with adult attachment patterns *'because they desire to be with others yet remain highly fearful of negative reactions.'* (Melges, 1982)

### **Anxious rearing**

Children exposed to anxious parents in the form of excessive parental worry, protectiveness and fear of failure may promote the development of perfectionist tendencies and a future orientation that involves avoiding risks that may lead to failure. In a study of 117 university students Flett et al. (2002) conclude that socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with anxious parental rearing although self and other oriented perfectionism were not. A fear of failure which may arise from anxious parenting is noted by several other authors as being associated with the perfectionist type (Horney, 1950; Clarkson, 1994; Shahar, 2009; Hanh, 2012).

My work with clients and my own experience confirms that one's relationship with early care givers is hugely influential in shaping and forming adult behaviours. From my own memory and through experience with clients I would argue that parental criticism, standard setting and praise contingent on performance are the three most significant variables fuelling perfectionist behaviour.

Shahar (2009) sees fear of failure as *'the central and defining characteristic of perfectionism'* and writes of the terrible, overwhelming sense of defeat and shame that perfectionists experience when they do fail – which is frequent because their impossibly high standards set them up for this. This response to failure is captured by Horney,

*Any misfortune befalling him.....may bring this seemingly well balanced person to collapse...it invalidates his whole accounting system and conjures up the ghastly prospect of helplessness....just as misfortune pulls the ground away from under him so does realisation of his own fallibility. Self effacing trends and undiluted self hate, kept in check successfully hitherto, then may come to the fore.* (Horney, 1950 p. 197)

In an early session with James I heard echoes of this when he described to me his 'failure' to sleep the night through without waking. This inability to tolerate his waking moments had created a tense and vicious loop of insomnia resulting in long nights of self accusation and hate. When I invited him to explore the origins of his wakefulness he discovered that it had begun when he had set himself a target of falling asleep within five minutes after getting up to visit the bathroom. He had never achieved this five minute goal and the self criticism started from there. In chapter four I introduce Paul Gilbert's evolutionary perspectives to develop understanding of the compassionate mind. (Gilbert, 2010). Gilbert suggests that the brain is wired to detect threat and notices problems before it notices positives. He offers this evolutionary model to support a compassionate approach when working with punitive, self hating clients and his work has been very significant in the development of my own practice.

## **Social Reaction Model**

This research looks at the responses of children to harsh environments and whether perfectionism is a coping mechanism to escape from or minimise abuse or reduce the likelihood of shame and humiliation. Alternatively, perfectionism may be a way of trying to establish a sense of control and predictability in an inconsistent, uncertain environment. The corporate world can be competitive, changing, ruthless and punishing and thus may trigger memories of and original strategies for surviving such environments.

Researchers separate this model from the social expectations model, even though there are overlaps, because in this model the *hostile, harsh and punitive* environment is key to understanding the child's response. High parental expectations can exist within non punitive, harsh environments. (Flett, et al., 2002)



It is within this model that I draw attention to the work of Karen Horney (Horney, 1950) who in my survey of the literature offers the most compelling and perceptive insights in to perfectionism as a 'neurotic solution' that arises in childhood as a response to hostile, harsh experiences.

### **Karen Horney's developmental theory**



**Figure 17: Karen Horney**

Horney was born in 1885 near Hamburg in Germany. According to Horney's adolescent diaries her father was "a cruel disciplinary figure" holding his son Berndt in higher regard than herself (Rubins, 1978). Feeling unable to secure her father's affections Horney turned to her mother and developed (like her mother) an ambitious and rebellious perspective on life. When Horney was sixteen her mother left her father and took her children with her. Despite being a single parent she managed to support Horney through medical school and probably role modelled the strong and enduring feminist perspectives which Horney emulated. Horney's mother died in 1911. She felt the loss of her mother acutely and fell in to a recurring cycle of depression which culminated in a suicide attempt in 1924 and the decision in 1926 to leave her husband and emigrate to America with her children. It was here that Horney established herself as a prominent and challenging member of the psychoanalytic community. By 1941 Horney was Dean of the American Institute of Psychoanalysis, a training institute for those who were interested in Horney's own organization, the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis. Horney founded this organization after becoming dissatisfied with the generally strict, orthodox nature of the psychoanalytic community. Horney's deviation from Freudian Psychology led to her resigning from her post and accepting a teaching post in the New York Medical College.

Horney founded the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, taught at the New York Medical College and continued practicing as a psychiatrist until her death in 1952.

Although Horney died over fifty years ago her work is echoed in many of the psychological theories in use today. Nevertheless her writing and work has not gained some of the prominence of writers who in many respects are influenced by and apply her ideas (such as John Bowlby (1997); Melanie Klein (Mitchel, 1986), Donald Winnicott (1973) and Carl Rogers (1967). Both Smith (2007) and Chodorow (1989) who credit Horney for her prescient and hugely influential clinical, cultural, feminist and spiritual insights note that there is no convincing argument or story for why Horney's insights should have disappeared or at least not been credited to her. My speculation, aligned with others, is that at the time of her ascendancy within the field her challenges to the patriarchs of psychoanalysis, in particular Freud, were simply too outrageous and too destabilising for the established (mostly male) community to absorb or forgive. Even in America her disruptive influence enraged colleagues who warned of the potential disintegration of Psychoanalysis if her concepts were to be taken seriously (Quinn, 1986). Thus it took the passage of time for Horney to be rediscovered and re-established as a founder of cultural and feminist psychoanalysis and the forerunner of inter-subjective, humanist and relational clinical practice (Smith, 2007); (Westcott, 1986).

Horney's main point of departure from Sigmund Freud was in arguing that a person was not only ruled by the pleasure principle but by a basic need for safety. (Smith, 2007). This aspect of her work strongly influenced the attachment theories of Bowlby (1997) and Winnicott (1973) mentioned above. Practitioners today are very familiar with, for example, Bowlby's concept of the 'secure' or 'safe' place in child development and it is generally accepted that without the nurturing and loving relationships that create this safe place a child will have difficulties in developing self esteem, confidence, trust and adult attachments (Paris, 1999).

Her second and significant challenge to traditional psychoanalytic theory and practice was to introduce the concept of feminine psychology. Horney argued that the psychology of women had hitherto been described and defined from a male perspective. She took as an example Freud's notion of penis envy and argued that if it existed at all it was related not to a literal desire to possess a penis but in a female yearning to have the independence, status and recognition awarded to men through cultural norms and values. Men, she suggested, might possess a comparative 'womb envy' arising from their inability to bear children which would explain in part their need to succeed and create not in the womb but in the world. Similarly,

Horney argued that women were not (as Freud and others had suggested) inherently masochistic. Women's dependence on men for love, money, security, and protection led women to overemphasize qualities like beauty and charm and also to seek meaning through their relationships with husbands, children, and family. (Horney, 1967)

Smith (2007) notes Horney's conviction that cultural factors exert a powerful influence on our ideas of gender and development would seem obvious today. Yet seventy years ago these ideas were radical and laid the first foundations for a feminist, gender oriented approach to therapy. Chodorow (1989) locates the theoretical and political origins of feminine psychoanalysis in Horney's work. She illustrates just how lastingly significant Horney's work is in influencing contemporary practitioners.

In all her work Horney emphasised the importance of human relationships in shaping our instinctual and evolutionary responses and characteristics. She argued against the pessimistic perspectives offered by Freud (for example in postulating a destructive instinct in us all) and suggested that people were neither inherently good nor bad but could *become* destructive as a result of environmental/cultural circumstances and relational experiences. In this sense her work anticipates contemporary biological and neuroscientific approaches that explore human motive and behaviour from an evolutionary, psychological and social perspective. Later in this thesis, when I turn to these perspectives featuring the work of Paul Gilbert (2010), the reader will be able to make connections with Horney's focus on the plasticity and functional aspects of human development. Horney can also be seen to be a forerunner for what Orange (2011) describes as a *hermeneutics of trust* in the practitioner-client relationship. Horney writes about the 'exquisitely cooperative enterprise' between practitioner and client and describes the therapeutic process as one of observation, understanding, interpretation and 'general human help' which Smith (2007) describes as a phrase referring to,

*...an attitude of friendliness and serious interest that helps the patient to regard his/her own growth as important and to accept his/her less than perfect self.* (Smith, 2007, p.62).

Horney described the therapeutic stance as 'whole hearted' and encourages full emotional expression and vulnerability from the practitioner. This offered a very different perspective to the 'blank screen', 'objective' approach of early analysis and laid the foundation for contemporary relational and humanist approaches practised today (Smith, 2007).

The concept of vulnerability as transformational (Brown, 2012) is particularly topical now and the notion of whole hearted living is one currently being researched and spoken about by the

prolific author Brene Brown (2012). Brown's recent TED talk has attracted over fifteen million viewings and is used as reference material in the coaching and development contexts in which I work. <sup>22</sup>

Horney's work in its emphasis on the relational, the possible and the functional has most certainly enriched the soil from which my own compassionate practice has grown. However, as I show in subsequent chapters her work has been enhanced and added to by research practitioners working outside the psychoanalytic field. In the next section I will describe the main tenants of Horney's work that are relevant to this inquiry and then go on to consider how her insights and practice could be enhanced by an explicitly compassionate frame.

Like Bowlby (1997), Winnicott (1973), Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1967) Horney believed that given favourable childhood conditions of warmth, love and affirmation the human will tend to develop in the direction of self realisation - in other words striving to achieve their full potential within recognised and accepted constraints. Horney believed that in order to achieve this potential an accurate and honest conception of self was required, in other words we need to understand and come to terms with who we actually are. However, unfavourable conditions and injurious childhood experiences such as harsh criticism, the withholding of affection, unreasonable standards, over protectiveness and indifference result in the child becoming profoundly insecure, isolated and helpless in a world perceived as threatening and hostile. This feeling of profound *basic anxiety* gives rise to a range of strategies designed to help the individual cope with this anxiety and protect themselves from perceived and actual threats to her survival.

*To the extent that safety has become paramount, his innermost feelings and thoughts have receded in importance – in fact have had to be silenced and have become indistinct. It does not matter what he feels, if only he is safe. (Horney, 1950 p. 21)*

Horney understood these strategies or 'neurotic solutions' to be in the service of the 'idealised self'. This is the version of self constructed and maintained by the individual in order to,

*Make him meaningful to himself and, despite all the weakness in his structure, give him a feeling of power and significance. (ibid. p. 21)*

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)

For Horney the idealised self represents all that is *impossible* as its function is to protect the integrity of the psyche by creating an all powerful, perfect self that can overcome, disappear or disregard the *actual* and *real* feelings of inferiority, fear and isolation or indeed hope, strength and joy. A person's idealised self image is created out of the materials of her own *particular* experience, needs, fantasies and faculties. This version of self not only works hard to prevent painful and unbearable feelings but also to promise a perfect life where such feelings no longer exist. No wonder, said Horney, that the idealised self becomes such powerful and compulsive solution. Thus from a very early age the frightened, anxious, insecure, confused child shifts her energies towards actualisation of the idealised rather than the 'real' self and this shift in direction influences the shaping and solidifying of the whole personality. The idealised self becomes a resilient personal ontology and I return to this subject in detail when I discuss persistence and change in chapter five.

Horney refers to the process of actualising the ideal self as 'the search for glory' and whilst varying in intensity and degree this search is driven by the need for *perfection*, by *neurotic ambition* and *a need for vindictive triumph*. These needs arise out of a complex set of beliefs and feelings that the individual experiences. Of particular significance are beliefs about *entitlement* (the world owes me...) and what *should* be (..and nothing short of what *should* be is good enough) and a feeling of false pride (based on external evaluation, reward and recognition).

In my work I notice how corporate life attracts and feeds individuals who are seeking glory and validation in the way Horney describes. In this environment goals are never truly reached because capital (rather than human) expansion and growth are usually at the heart of corporate endeavour. Success and fulfilment are necessarily always one step away and for those driven by neurotic ambition and ideals this supports and sustains the vicious loops I have already described. Brown (2012) refers to this phenomena as 'the never enough' problem which arises out of a culture that thrives on a sense of scarcity or 'lack'.

In her later work Horney distilled her observations in to ten neurotic needs or trends, which lead to three ways of relating to others. *All* are concerned with maintaining an idealised self yet manifest in very different behaviours and emotional loops. The three solutions are ***moving toward people*** (compliance), ***moving against people*** (hostility), and ***moving away from people*** (detachment). These types of behaviour, as a result, can lead to three basic orientations toward life: ***the self-effacing solution***, an appeal to be loved; ***the self-expansive solution***, an attempt at mastery; and ***the resignation solution***, a desire to be free of others. It is the *self expansive* solution which includes behaviours that most

correspond to the maladaptive perfectionist characteristics described above. However, for Horney *all* neurotic solutions were driven by a need for perfectionism because all were trying to achieve some version of the idealised (perfect) self. Thus Horney's work draws attention to the *manifold* ways perfectionism can show up. A withdrawn, detached person may still be seeking a 'perfect' solution – to rid himself of others and not be constrained or bothered by external demands. In this inquiry I am focusing on the **expansive** types who are concerned with *mastery* and the *overcoming* of every obstacle, challenge or problem that is presented on life's path. This is because I recognise this 'solution' as I observe my own idealised strivings and I hear this story play out time and time again in the corporate world in which I work. This solution is motivated by strong belief that one *should* be able to overcome. A person employing this solution lives in fear of being found to be weak, incompetent and unworthy and is driven by a desperate need to avoid such a revelation.

## Horney – critical reflections

Horney's insights are very useful in providing detailed descriptions of the strategies created to survive unfavourable childhood conditions. I have become better able to recognise these strategies as old solutions in need of re-examination and testing. Are my strategies still fit for purpose? Do my childhood inventions help me navigate an adult world? These are questions I ask of myself and also explore with James in later sessions. I refer to Horney's work throughout this paper and use her tripartite version of self to understand the splitting and healing processes associated with my vicious loop.

I also agree with her view that awareness makes growth possible. I know this now because over the last four years I have made a commitment to increasing my self awareness. This has been my primary research method – a first person inquiry supported by my journaling, free fall writing, inquiry in groups (peer spirit circle, supervision), personal therapy and client feedback. Yet I also know – and here I depart from Horney – that until about a year ago I continued to circle my loop despite the advantage of new awareness. Horney does recognise, as do other neo Freudians (Reik, 1936; Rank, et al., 1925), that intellectual awareness must become an *emotional experience* for growth to occur. Yet Horney describes this emotional experience as becoming aware of the *specific* ways in which personal strategies manifest in my life. So, for example, an emotional experience from Horney's perspective would be my feeling the *full impact* of a previously unconscious drive – perhaps the intense pain of being rejected by a client as a manifestation of my drive to succeed. Horney does not fully explore the problem of releasing such pain other than noting how such pain is likely to re-trigger the original coping strategy – in other words the

problem loop. Thus whilst Horney emphasises the importance of increasing awareness – both cognitive and emotional – she does not offer an opinion about the quality of those awarenesses. Although, as is typical throughout her work, she touches upon and sows the seeds for future thought and development. In her chapter on self hate for example, she alludes to the very thing I think is at the heart of a compassionate approach to change and development:

*...there must first be some sympathy for the suffering self, some experiencing of this suffering before the recognition of beating himself down can set going a constructive move.* (Horney, 1950 p. 115)

In this inquiry I am deeply moved by the notion of the suffering self or what Romanyshyn refers to as ‘the wounded researcher’. This motivates me to explore how *compassion* can help to regulate the reactive response to painful awareness (or terrible truths). As part of this research I experiment with practices that might help a person become more compassionate – something which is missing in Horney’s practice which remains analytic in it’s emphasis on talking and sense making.

Nevertheless Horney is dedicated to exploring and expanding her understanding of how change occurs. In her final chapters in *Neurosis and Human Growth* (Horney, 1950) she sows several seeds in the mind of the readers that, in my case, inspired this thesis. The insights alluded to but not fully developed are:

- The person’s inability to experience him/herself with suspended judgment
- A persons’ difficulty in accepting his/her imperfections
- The prevalence and recurrence of relapse
- The need to experience oneself as part of a bigger whole - thus out growing a ‘neurotic egocentricity’ (Horney, 1950, p.48)

In these four points above I can see the roots of Neff’s (2011) three components of self compassion that form the basis of my inquiry and practice: learning to be kind to oneself, learning mindful (non judgmental) awareness and learning to connect oneself to humanity. I also explore in this inquiry what *acceptance* might mean and use the metaphor of the mandorla to understand this process not necessarily as an ‘outgrowing’ of one’s difficulties (as Horney would put it) but an integration of the shadow self (or the self that one despises).

A compassionate approach does not insist on ‘losing’, ‘getting rid of’ or ‘outgrowing’. Self compassion involves nurturing a warmer relationship with the parts of our self that we might

not like and recognising that all efforts to self express serve some function. In the last chapter I consider the phenomena of relapse challenging Horney's metaphor of change as 'pendulous'. Instead I see change as a *pulsating* movement where contraction (a going back to) is part of the force for expansion and growth. I reframe 'relapse' as *persistence* and offer a compassionate perspective on a person's tenacious desire to hold on to the familiar. Horney fully recognised the difficulties of working with conflicts arising from the meeting of the real, actual and ideal selves and described the phenomena of looping as

*..a process that grows by its own momentum, that with a ruthless logic of its own envelops more and more areas of personality. It is a process that breed conflict and a need for their solution.* (Horney, 1950, p.333)

Horney commented on the *terror* that arises when a person contemplates living without his/her 'neurotic props'. Yet without the biological and evolutionary insights available today she underestimated the real challenge of working with people whose threat system is active. This subject is explored in depth in chapter six where I consider how warmth and self kindness precede and nurture self awareness. I argue that without self compassion a person will be destabilised by fear (or feelings of threat) and will cling to the strategies that define their vicious loop.

The concept of the 'real self' is a central part of Horney's work and it is the aim of her practice to enable a person to discover, experience, connect with and realise this self. However, Solomon (2006), a clinical psychologist exploring the relevance of Horney's work in modern day analysis asks,

*Does a character disorder inevitably have a frozen healthy embryonic real self waiting to be unleashed....?* (Solomon, 2006, p.170)

Clinical experience, he suggests, sometimes says yes and sometimes says no. Solomon is challenging the notion that any individual has the potential to actualise the real self – an argument put forward by the positive and humanist psychology movement of which Horney is a forerunner. Solomon suggests that,

*The drive for completion of healthy potentialities may be so totally damaged that the real self may never emerge.* (Solomon, 2006, p.170)

In considering this important question I remember that the 'real self' is not a structure that 'exists' in some material form. The real self is an image, a metaphor and way of describing



human experience that is, in Horney's words, a quality of being that is observed when we are *'released from the grip of some compulsive need.'* (1950, p.158). Horney recognises the real self as a *'force towards growth and fulfilment'*. In my inquiry I discovered that this force for living is impacted by threat based impulses which instruct the brain to seek different pathways for immediate survival rather than longer term growth. I also discovered that if the part of the brain that helps regulate threat (which Gilbert, 2010, calls the affiliative or safe brain) is under developed or damaged through repeated and early childhood experiences of severe threat then it remains questionable whether we can fully recover our ability to soothe, calm ourselves and bring self compassion in to lives. In figure 33 (page 174) I include a disturbing slide of a potentially damaged three year old brain. The damaged area corresponds to the area we calling safe brain. Whilst there are no conclusive answers to the question of whether we can all discover and live in our 'real selves' my experience suggests (and I only have to think of my father's life here) that it is not achievable by all. Many people live in the grip of their compulsions until the day they die. Thus whilst I admire Horney's work in many respects I differ in my interest and acceptance of a life that continues to swirl in the intersections between the real, actual and idealised selves. The purpose of self compassion is not necessarily to liberate the real self but to bring a quality of awareness in to my experiencing that is accepting and kind towards whatever self is calling for attention. If by doing this I am able to live in a less punitive, critical and threatening way then may be the possibilities for the appearance of the real self become stronger. This is the subject of my final chapters.

## Summary

In this chapter I have shown how my idealisation looping was triggered at the start of this doctorate and how these behaviours manifest in all aspects of my life. To understand how it has come to be this way for me and for others I surveyed the research literature that explores how perfectionism develops. In doing so I discovered the deep rooted nature of these vicious loops and understood (with compassion) their function and origin. These discoveries have informed my developing practice and influenced my turn towards compassion as a practice for entering in to and staying with the powerful conflicts that arise when ideals start to crack – which is the subject and story of the following two chapters.

## Chapter Four: Warning Signs

### Introduction

This chapter covers the period from September 2009 to March 2012. Having created an idealised image of how my work should be I embark upon a period of intense goal directed activity. I am attuned to messages that confirm I am on the right track and disappear evidence to the contrary. This enables me to remain buoyant and motivated and to continue in this mode despite ill health, relationship break down and job loss.

By the middle of 2011 I start to notice that my strategies to complete the brilliant doctorate, juggle a family with a new consulting post and come up with new organisational insights are not working. People are not appreciating my propositions and 'solutions' which I interpret as 'failing to achieve'. People start to give me difficult feedback and withdraw from me. In particular I remember growing difficulties in my colleague relationships. I listen but do not hear them tell me that they want more team play, that I am 'categorical'. I work harder to overcome these criticisms and to control my environment so that my idealised images remain intact.

Towards the end of 2011 and early 2012 I notice a shift in my sense making. During these months I am more receptive to mandorla experiences - in other words I start to pay attention to the paradoxical feelings and thoughts that emerge as I write, reflect and experiment with small changes in my work and personal life. I think I became more receptive because these experiences were becoming more powerful and harder to ignore. I write about this later in the chapter.

This is the period just prior to my burnout when one significant and devastating personal event shattered a cluster of core beliefs (ideals) about family and relationship. It is my contention that the mandorla experiences I had prior to burnout helped prepare me at some deep level for this shattering and in doing so enabled me to survive my burnout and rise out of it with more resilient strategies for *living* (not just surviving) than before. For practitioners working with clients close to burnout the increasing frequency and clarity of mandorla experiences can serve as a warning sign for the significant life experience to follow. Striving, failing, and *seeing the connection between the two* is the realisation that dawns before the storm.

Romanyshyn (2007) uses the myth of Orpheus to draw attention to the archetypal themes and process of love, loss, descent and backward glancing that precede dismemberment (burnout) and (maybe) transformation. He describes these 'six Orphic moments' as the process through which profound change emerges.

My vicious loop tracks through these moments:

**Love** – setting up of idealised image (I will produce a brilliant doctorate)

**Loss** – failing to achieve/realise it (four years in and still no thesis emerges)

**Descent** – withdrawal/disappointment (am I capable of this? What's the point anyway?)

**Backward glancing** – rising up again *to try harder* to achieve the idealised image (wait a minute – here's the answer!)

**Dismemberment** – burn out (why don't you agree? Why are you rejecting my answer? Why are you rejecting me?)

**Transformation** – in to a compassionate life (wait, give up hope, keep the faith. Resting and repairing.)

In this chapter I am interested in the losses, descents and backward glancing that precede the dismemberment or burnout phase. I describe how my punishing work schedule resulted in relationship, health and psychological 'loss' and how, despite feeling despondent about this, I 'rise up' and continue to work even harder before. This rising up may well have been triggered by the death of my father in August 2010 and the initial experience of relief, release and freedom this brought. It may also have been a response to the growing sense of how untenable my idealised images were – a last ditch attempt to preserve them and avoid the challenging encounters ('mandorlas') with my actual and real selves. Yet it is in those desperate backward glances towards the familiar and the idealised that I began to see shadows of my other selves. In turning around I did not avoid the coming face to face with these selves, I actually brought myself closer to them.

It is in this chapter that I introduce the literature on burn out. This complements and expands the research on perfectionism covered in chapter one. I consider how those caught in idealisation loops have perfectionist tendencies that pre-dispose them to both succeed and burn out at work. The definition of burnout is explored as are individual and contextual characteristics which create the conditions for this experience. The purpose of introducing

this literature is to lay the foundations for a later consideration of how burnout forces *those caught in idealisation loops* to loosen their grip on what *should be* and face in to the reality of *what is*.

Although this thesis is grounded in my personal experience of moving through an idealisation loop my ultimate intent in writing is to enable practitioners to support their clients to experience burnout as a development and transformational experience. It is worth emphasising here that I recognise transformation takes many forms and does not *require* a person to burn out. However this work is not about transformation generally but about the role self compassion plays in the transformation of those caught in very particular emotional and behavioural loops. It is my contention throughout this work that burnout *is* a requirement for people very tightly wedded to perfectionist looping. Thus my reading and referencing of burnout research is in the service of expanding my understanding of the relationship between the two experiences. Later in this section, when I describe some of challenges of 'treating' or working with perfectionists, I start to indicate just why burnout might a necessary component of transformation for people compelled in this way.

## Loss and descent

Towards the end of 2009 I began to secure larger pieces of consultancy with corporate clients. This work represented a significant departure from the mostly public and voluntary sector facilitation and team development I had been engaged in.<sup>23</sup>

To begin with I spent some time shadowing new colleagues to learn about the work they were already doing with existing clients. Mostly this involved observing their work with senior leadership teams - either on modular development programmes or during team away days. However, I was not particularly impressed by what I observed. I felt that my new team offered interventions that were safe and predictable and failed to 'disturb' the client system by encouraging the testing or evaluation of deeply rooted assumptions, beliefs and behaviours. This reaction was symptomatic of the loop I was caught in. I had already set in motion an idealised image of what this job would be like and was quick to notice what did not measure up to this image. I was not able to see how my team were both limited in their practice *and* doing good work to engage and stay connected to the client. There is a *fleeting* glimpse of this when I write,

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<sup>23</sup> The introductions provided from the consultancy firm I had joined gave me the opportunity to enter this new world at a senior level.

*I must acknowledge that they have managed to secure and keep this lucrative contract for a number of years so they must be doing something right...(LJ 22.09.09)*

However, as you can see, this is a begrudging comment which I did not reflect on further. Instead I wrote about wanting to leave and find more fulfilling work. Withdrawal of this kind is part of my looping and it frequently follows a disappointment of some kind. In September 2009 this disappointment was triggered by feeling uninspired by the work my new colleagues were doing and also by a significant meeting with my colleagues during which I was criticised for 'not being interactive enough' and not being a 'team player'. This is a very low point in my work and offered an opportunity for new reflection and looping out which I resist. Instead, I write in my journal,

*...in this moment of criticism and mistrust I have lost something. A will to bring myself and my heart to this place.....tonight my joints have ached and body has struggled to uncoil from its tight knot of anger, frustration, fear and weariness.....yet my pride keeps me going. I want to do this work well.....so I will focus on results, not dreams. (LJ: 30.09.09)*

What I see here is my intense reaction to what I now consider to be mild (and just) critical feedback. I feel I have 'lost' the idealised image I had of what this new work would be like. Horney (Horney, 1950) recognised this as a response to the *coercive* nature of the idealisation process or what she refers to as the 'inner dictates'. In her clinical work she noticed '*the violent emotional reactions to non fulfilment*' and that these reactions often escape attention '*because the customary defences against anxiety are set going instantaneously*' (Horney, 1950 p. 74). This is the motion of the vicious loop which gains momentum as anxiety or fear increase. It is also as Melges (1982) has noted an anxious attachment reaction to criticism which is triggered by a fear of losing a relationship. That relationship could be with an external 'other' or it could be the relationship one has with one's dominant ideal self who hates to be criticised.

Horney (1950) observed that the most comprehensive conflict of all was that between the 'pride system and the real self, "*between his drive to perfect his idealised self and his desire to develop his given potentials as a human being.*" (p.356)

This intense reaction to criticism can be further understood as a defensive response to a potentially generative mandorla experience –or what Horney refers to as ‘a gradual line up of forces’ the intensity of which is directly commensurate with the basic importance of the issue at stake. I *knew* I was compromised and unhappy,

*These doubts are not really about my new colleagues, they are about me and this nagging sense that I am not doing what I need and want to be doing. I am not fulfilled and feel trapped (personally and professionally) – caught in a vice of my own making, which seems to be related to my desire to be successful, acknowledged, wealthy (or well off), admired. The hunting down of these external rewards is getting in the way of my discovering what it really is I need.....and at the same time I guard against self indulgence. I am a mother, a daughter, a friend and a sometimes partner. I have responsibilities and other people to consider as I journey.*  
(LJ: 30.09.09)

Yet this is not a *compassionate* reflection and I have already noted that self contempt or hostility does not support an exploration of this kind of mandorla experience. My accusation of potential ‘self indulgence’ closes down the opportunity. Instead I continue trudging the loop even more determined to achieve the idealised goal - which in this case is being the ‘best’ consultant even though being the best consultant is not what I yearned for or dreamt about.<sup>24</sup>

The conflict generated by the clashing of *two* strong ideals is an experience I identify with and hear my clients describe. For example, the conflicting interests of home and professional life. One ‘should’ represents the idealised image of family and the other ‘should’ represents the idealised image of work. Here we have a very potent mandorla experience where two *vicious loops* intersect. The combined experience of feeling torn and *simultaneously* inadequate gives rise to powerful and destructive emotional/behavioural patterns. This kind of powerful mandorla surfaced for me whilst waiting for a plane in Sydney. I describe on page 101 (‘the final outpost’) the disappointed ‘*is that all there is?*’ feeling which is the lament of an ideal self that has ceased to make impact. In this story I

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<sup>24</sup> I have been asked ‘what did you dream about or yearn for?’ At the time I was spinning in my loop I did not remember dreams of this kind. I remember *feelings* of longing upon waking but I could not associate images to that feeling. That came later when I gave my self permission to pay attention to this source of knowing.

talk about my need for approval from my client to compensate for my feelings of guilt about being away from my family.

The other kind of mandorla experience I am interested in is when the idealisation loop meets a virtuous loop representing aspects of the real self. James, for example, sometimes talked about his yearning to do voluntary work for an organisation promoting world peace. In this yearning I saw glimpses of his real self – not in the desire for world peace (which could become another idealised ‘should’) but in the genuine and gentle reflections he made about his gratitude to have survived the violence and war in his Irish home town. Writing this now I can see how glimpses of the real self appear in moments of compassion to the self.

My sense is that these two<sup>25</sup> mandorla experiences when *felt* individually or in combination, trigger a deep sense of loss – loss of the intact idealised image. The clashing of ideals and the turbulence created from sensing that the ideal self is not the true or only self are powerful experiences that are dark and which also hold rich developmental potential. Loss of the pure idealised self/image is a precursor to burnout.

It is my contention that for those circling *idealisation* loops, burnout is a *necessary* condition required for transformation to occur. It is necessary because (as I will go on to discuss) perfectionists caught in idealisation loops are very seduced by these loops – particularly in the corporate world where looping of this kind (set high standards, work harder and harder, never rest content) is rewarded and encouraged. Therefore idealisation loops are difficult to work with unless something extreme occurs to shatter or burn the tightly held ideal.

## **Backward glancing – holding on to the ideal**

In October 2009 I started to read *The Joy of Burnout* (Glouberman, 2003) in which the author asks, ‘*are you burning out?*’ and lists thirty or so tell-tale signs.

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<sup>25</sup> Vicious loops intersecting or vicious and virtuous loop intersecting



Figure 18: Dina Glouberman

Leaving

Leaving  
 Still dark. A bottle clinks in a nearby street  
 And the milk cart moves on.  
 And the milk cart moves on.  
 One is stirring, the other asleep.  
 I want to wake you both  
 Hold you.  
 Will we mend the thing that tears and breaks  
 Each time a door closes, a phone rings unanswered?  
 Each time a door closes, a phone rings unanswered?  
 Long way away now.  
 I see your faces reflected in mine  
 Against the mud-streaked glass  
 As the landscape rushes past.  
 Your faces dance in the green hills beyond.  
 I left you in your milky sleep.  
 Still time for one more dream.

I answered 'yes' to most of them. In a supervision paper I wrote from my sick bed (I was often ill during those months) I describe my punishing schedule:

*Leaving at the crack of dawn, before the boys are awake, enduring a ten hour round trip for a 2 hour coaching session..... In between I am given tight deadlines to produce intense and difficult propositions. To fit it all in I feel I am cutting corners, doing nothing particularly well. Setting the alarm clock earlier and earlier. Feeling permanently irritated. Finding little time for reflection. (Wickremasinghe, October 2009)*

And a few months later, on an early morning train, I wrote a poem called 'Leaving' in which I allude to the deep pain I felt each time I parted from my children to do the work.

I heard a similar conflict expressed in my second session with James. It was December 2011 and he arrived in a particularly black mood. He described how hard he had been working during the lead up to Christmas and how bitter he felt that his boss neither recognised nor rewarded his commitment. He went on to describe his growing disillusionment with the job and the fear that his children were growing up without a father. *Just like he did.* He berated himself for being no better than his absent father. Why, when he valued his family above everything, was he unable to love and support them in the way he wanted? Why did he constantly put work first? Why when he so wanted to be good at *one* thing was he proving to be no good at *anything*?



I talked about these kinds of conflicts in my early doctorate supervision groups and heard my colleagues confirm that confusion and complaints of this nature are common themes arising in the coaching relationship. A typical response might be to support the client to explore how they might achieve a better 'work life balance'. Yet having lived through and worked with this loop for many years I am uncertain whether the work life balance approach is an adequate response. Whyte (2009) argues that we should give up the attempt to 'balance' personal, relational and work related commitments (which he refers to as marriages). Instead he suggests

*We start thinking of each marriage conversing with, questioning or emboldening the other two....as we discover how each one of the three marriages is non-negotiable at its core, we can start to realign our understanding and our efforts away from trading and bartering parts of ourselves as if they were saleable commodities and more toward finding a central conversation that can hold all of these three marriages together. (p.11)*

Whyte draws attention to the work of *integration* that needs to occur in order to bridge the gulf between the idealised and the real self (Horney, 1950). According to Casserley and Megginson, who studied burnout amongst high flying young executives, this work also involves a form of surrender or,

*Giving up many things: old assumptions hopes, belief systems and in particular notions of invulnerability and personal power and harsh judgments of self and others. (Casserley, et al., 2009 p. 195)*

Yet I know this is very difficult and painful work and many coaches do not feel equipped or contracted to work alongside their client as she undertakes this journey. Furthermore, the client herself is tightly attached to a way of understanding and being in the world which has served her well – to an extent. In my journal I write,

*I am withdrawing once more in to an all consuming world of work...to soothe.....work allows me to escape myself, the self that is vulnerable, unsure, breaking, lost, still a child. (LJ: 06.02.10)*

It is this *functional* aspect of problematic or harmful looping that is important to understand. For the perfectionist their so called 'dysfunctional' behaviour has often brought a degree of observable success – particularly in the work place. It is also why perfectionists 'glance backwards' and return time and time again to familiar strategies that have apparently served

them well. In chapter seven I will say much more about the persistence of idealisation loops and consider how resilient personal ontologies, basic fear and anxiety, cultural contexts and beliefs about change all contribute to maintaining the old and established ways. However, I pause now to explore some of the perspectives offered by clinicians who have attempted to research and work with perfectionist idealisation loops. Their experiences and observations expanded my understanding of what might be possible in my consulting work and encouraged me to think carefully about how I would evolve my practice to work with these behaviours. Their work also lends insight in to why burnout is associated with perfectionists who respond poorly to treatment interventions. The perfectionist prior to burnout has many strong strategies for dealing with and deflecting 'help'.

## Treatment Perspectives

Clinical researchers have explored the difficulties of 'treating' perfectionists and this research is helpful when thinking about the coaching challenges that might arise when working with perfectionists in an organisational setting. In a clinical context studies have repeatedly shown that perfectionism is associated with poor outcomes and problems in establishing productive relationships between therapist and client. These findings hold across treatment approaches including cognitive behavioural, analytic and pharmacological. (Flett, et al., 2002).

Perfectionism is associated with bi-polar depression (Scott, et al., 2000) yet anti-depressants have not been shown to impact upon perfectionist beliefs in part because the treatment regime itself conflicts with the perfectionists need for personal control and also because the regime on a daily basis reminds the person of her own shortcomings (Flett, et al., 1994); (Greenberg, et al., 2001).

Cognitive Behavioural (CBT) approaches to treating perfectionism have some moderating effect. Researchers consistently report high compliance with the CBT homework tasks such as keeping/evaluating a perfectionist diary, exposure practices and communication training (Antony, et al., 2009). However compliance and 'achieving the task' is a feature of perfectionism and as Gilbert (Gilbert, 2012) points out whilst perfectionists understand the *logic* of CBT they often do not *feel* any differences in their self-experiencing. Thus their loops continue.

Greenberg and Bolger's (2001) research in to emotion focused therapy comes closest to the compassionate practices I learn about and introduce later in this thesis. They outline a three step process involving increasing awareness of feelings and learning how to comfort

and soothe one self. Self soothing (making one self feel better) the authors argue, enables a client to combat self criticism and low self worth. However, the authors are not specifically interested in self compassion (tolerating and loving the self because it feels bad but not necessarily to feel better) and lean towards standard CBT approaches in their work.

Hewitt (2001) integrated CBT with a psychodynamic and interpersonal approach that focused not so much on the perfectionist behaviour but on the interpersonal *precursors* that drive these behaviours (e.g. the need for approval or control). Their initial finding suggested this approach decreases perfectionist behaviour and the associated distress symptoms. Horney (1950) had already arrived at this integration in her book *Neurosis and Human growth* which I refer to in chapter three. Horney observed the patients intense drive to avoid glimpsing the truth of his/her life which she argued was

*An endeavour to ward off an experience of self hate or self contempt....to avoid any realisation of unfulfilled shoulds. In analysis he must therefore fight off any real insight in to those shortcomings which according to his inner dictates are unpardonable sins....the stringent needs of the patient to protect his subjective values....account for the impairment of his ability to cooperate with an analyst... (p.336)*

An integrated approach focuses on enabling the client to surface and test the validity of his/her core beliefs and values. Horney (1950) calls this a 'disillusioning process' which enable a person to experience the limitations of some of his/her current coping strategies. However, as I argue later, in order for a person to enter in to the mandorla experiences which offer insights in to the conflict between a person's values and beliefs a quality of feeling is required – which I name as self compassion. For it is self compassion that enables a person to manage the self hate and other threatened reactions arising from this exploration.

Researchers looking across treatment approaches recognise how difficult perfectionist behavioural and emotional characteristics are to modify. Sorotzkin (Sorotzkin, 1998) noted that perfectionists have difficulty accepting *small* improvements and changes and adopt an 'all or nothing' approach when evaluating their progress. The author observed,

*...it is very painful for someone with a poor self-image to give up the dream of glory inherent in perfection for the, as yet never experienced, joy of gradual emotion growth. (Sorotzkin, 1998 p. 91)*

Another difficulty identified by Sorotzkin and others (Hirsh, et al., 1998) is the tendency of perfectionists to want to be the 'perfect' client or patient. Whilst this can be helpful in that the person is usually highly focused and dedicated to the process of change it can also result in the formation of unrealistic treatment goals such as the desire to want to become *totally* free of fear, anxiety or conflict. Conversely the client may be unwilling to reveal or explore aspects of himself because this admission of imperfection would pose too great a threat to their self esteem. Once again this modern day research is anticipated by Horney (1950) who wrote extensively about the patients tendency to overrate his/her progress and go on 'perfect health binges' where health becomes another goal for the idealised self to conquer.

The perfectionist might also expect or desire the *therapist* to be perfect. Hewitt et al. (2001) note that this can lead to extreme hostility towards and excessive demands being made of the therapist. They conclude that the tendency of perfectionists to be extra punitive and hostile towards the therapist points to a need for *well trained* therapists who are familiar with this personality style and can tailor their interventions accordingly.

I have worked with many clients who I recognise as manifesting perfectionist tendencies. However, up until now I have not deeply inquired in to the implications this might have for my practice or considered the complex transference that goes on between coach and client when perfectionism is a central theme. The latter work of my doctorate inquiry has been to understand the phenomena of perfectionism more thoroughly particularly because it is a tendency I frequently observe in my highly successful corporate clients and experience in myself. Now I am more able to notice my threat based reactions kick in when I sense a client is evaluating me against impossible standards. Often I still see my ideal self at play as I momentarily think of ways to live up to those perfectionist expectations. Yet now I am better able to 'manage' that self by joining it with other internal voices. Not a battle but a conversation between my different selves.

Flett (Flett, et al., 2002) insists that perfectionism should be an *explicit* focus of a therapeutic intervention. Throughout this thesis I argue for a blend of approaches to work with idealisation looping. The analytic insights Horney (1950) provides complement and enhance the cognitive, behavioural and evolutionary perspectives that Gilbert (2010) offers. However, added to this are the spiritual and existential components of my work which pay attention to a client's patterns of sense making, meaning making and purpose and how their experience is connected to a larger and complex ecology of humanity (Neff, 2011).

During the December 2011 session with James I had not yet clearly conceptualised or experimented with compassionate practices. However I had started to pull through the threads which would eventually weave together to create the distinct practices I describe in chapter six.

The first thread appeared in that December 2011 session when I introduced James to the Buddhist perspective of 'no self'. I did this because I wanted him to inquire in to his own strongly held 'attachments' which I thought would lead to a better understanding of his particular idealisation images. I asked him to pay particular attention to moments when he experienced strong emotional surges. I suggested that strong reactions often arise out of deeply held beliefs or desires – in other words 'attachments'. I asked him to simply notice when this happened and to be curious about the beliefs they might arise from. I also invited him to read *Stepping Out of Self Deception* (Smith, 2010). It was a book I was reading at the time and which supported my first significant step towards a developing a compassionate practice in the service of understanding and working with vicious idealisation loops. I will return to Smith's ideas in the following chapter. The point I wish to emphasise now is that James' reaction to the book in those early sessions was one of bewilderment and probably disconnection.

*"I'm not getting it,"* he told me in January 2012. He then went on to tell me how he was feeling much better and more optimistic that he could make 2012 work for him. In this third session he talked a lot about the plans and ambitions he had to turn his part of the business around. On retrospect I see this as James clinging to his idealised images – the ones that depict him as a successful, resourceful corporate man – and withdrawing from the dilemmas we had previously raised in the coaching. In this session he barely talked about his family.

That James' did not 'get' my intervention may be related to my own emerging and fragile sense of what we were trying to do together. Perhaps I did not frame this intervention in a way which spoke to his tenacious perfectionist self or which addressed the challenges of how loops of this kind persist and reinforce themselves. It may also be because the intervention triggered a threat based response (fight, flee or freeze) in James – and I explore the implications of such responses in chapter six.

It is this 'not getting it' and this clinging that represents for me the pivotal moment in my own journey. Throughout 2010, despite warning signs that things were not right and the recurrence of very troubled emotional states (Wickremasinghe, March 2010), I carry on in the same groove, doing the same thing. Bill, my first doctorate supervisor, asked,

*I find myself wondering why you comply with such a punishing and questionable work regime...I wouldn't.* (Wickremasinghe, June 2010)

I might now answer that this vicious loop persisted until something happened to force the realisation that its function and benefit were diminishing. Or until shadows of the actual and the real were cast across my idealised images. I know now that I had to go on in this way until I came to feel for myself that this way was no longer possible. A coach or friend may have observed me loop and may have seen the damage it was doing. Yet until I *felt and experienced* the damage for myself I continued to believe that the loop was helping me survive and succeed.

I am increasingly convinced that those of us who are *welded* to powerful ideals about the world *because* these ideals have helped us survive need nothing short of a shattering, a breaking to detach from them. This is an idea shared by many therapists, coaches, artists, poets, writers, religious/spiritual figures (Estes, 1992); (Casserley, et al., 2009); (Glouberman, 2003); (Romanyshyn, 2007); (Zweig, et al., 1991); (Moore, 2004) and others who believe that transformation arises from loss. I am not sure that is that is the case for *everyone* but I *am* convinced it is the case for those caught in idealisation loops.

It is also my belief that *before* burnout or 'dismemberment' comes an important and often missed experience which Romanyshyn (2007), drawing upon the myth of Orpheus, describes as the 'backward glance' and Glouberman (2003) refers to as the process of 'killing the goose that lays the golden eggs',

*For burnout people the greatest pressure comes from their own expectations and tendency to drive themselves. The golden eggs are what makes them feel worthwhile. The goose? Who cares about a silly goose?* (Glouberman, 2003 p. 114)

Both authors describe a situation in which a person dismisses the truth of their own vulnerability and mortality in favour of an 'idealised' belief that they can produce, perform, conquer, overcome and control their destinies. It is a belief in their own *invincibility* that makes the loss that follows more shattering, more painful and potentially fatal.

My response to the challenges and pressures of work and family life was to work harder, make plans, invent solutions, and convince myself that not only would I endure, I would overcome whatever challenge, obstacle or problem I encountered. From December 2009 until the early summer of 2010 I submitted and won two new client contracts and was given the autonomy to experiment with the content of their leadership programmes that I would

design and deliver. Yet my efforts created a paradoxical result. In July 2010 my relationship with colleagues had deteriorated to the point that we decided to part company. We were no longer able to work in partnership and I could not bear to 'managed' any longer. At the time I understood this parting as a fundamental difference in our working styles. Now I can see how my (and probably their) attachment to what *should* be prevented us from experiencing the richness and positive energies of our inter and intrapersonal differences<sup>26</sup>. However despite quite a traumatic parting I remained buoyant. I was asked to remain as an *associate* and to continue leading the 'excellent' client programmes I had started. I saw this as a sign that my good work was *indispensable* and this fuelled my ambition to carry on in much the same vein. In other words I ignored a critical and fairly clear warning sign that my behaviour and strategies were not working.

James also went through this experience of 'backward glancing'. In our fourth session together (February 2012) he advised me that our coaching would have to stop because his boss had proposed a different developmental option. James described how his boss frequently expressed strong frustration that James was not a good team player (an ignored warning sign). Because of this he wanted James to go on a course to learn how to manage his emotions and relationships better. James made sense of this request by deciding his boss had in fact spotted his unique capabilities and was splashing out on this very expensive course as a precursor to promotion. James only had to attend the course to ensure his advancement.

Like me, James' ignored the clear warning signs offered by his boss and saw instead evidence to confirm his idealised self images. James continued to believe that he was a unique employee who just needed a little grooming in order to shine. I was a brilliant consultant who despite her eccentricities was an extraordinary practitioner. Both of us chose to circle our idealisation loops one more time.

### **Backward Glancing – seeing shadows**

Both James and I held on to our ideals and familiar strategies yet at the same time we started to notice shadows cast by the mandorla. I only learned about James' story nine months later in November 2012 when he contacted me to resume sessions. I will pick up his thread shortly.

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<sup>26</sup> The intrapersonal differences are those manifested by the different selves (ideal, actual and real)

My shadows started dancing in the summer of 2011. In August of that year my partner and father of my two children informed me that he had met another woman and wanted to start a new relationship. We were sitting in my garden. It was a rare blue sky day. I remember listening to the sound of bamboo swaying in the breeze and watching a bee hover noisily over the tall scented lavender fronds that bloom year after year. I remember thinking, '*not again!*' for this was not the first time he had tried to leave me or had an affair. I then experienced the most strange sensation of leaving my body or lifting out of the loop that had begun to spin. I rose above and *away from* my self and watched the loop like a cog in a great clunking machine, splutter to life and start turning again.

*'This must not happen! This is not possible! You will have to stop him.'* wheezed the machine.

In that spluttering and slow turning I could feel my weariness and reluctance to set the wheel in motion again. The leaving, the seducing, the returning. Such a familiar, tired pattern for us both. Yet the tyrannical *Should* reminded me that children *must* have a father, a woman must keep her man, that successful families *do not* break up. Later I wrote,

*Like a heroin addict unable to kick the habit .... I cannot let go of him.....my inability to carry out the actions I know I must take and the visceral experience of pain and fear are debilitating, distracting and overwhelming....(LJ 6.08.11)*

Nevertheless, in that moment of self observation I experienced the faintest trace of a mandorla. The bodily sensation of tiredness and separation, clarity about the loop and what it required, reluctance and amidst this, *doubt*. Is this what I truly want? Could it be otherwise? I was reminded of the words we had carved on to my father's headstone only a few months previous.

### **Es muss sein! Es könnte auch anders sein.<sup>27</sup>**

It must be! It could have been otherwise. A fitting epitaph for my father. And for me.

In the months that followed (August 2011 to March 2012) I cranked and forced my loop that was rusting and not fit for purpose, through another turn. I was determined not to give up. I had to compete, win and ensure my family – the ideal of my family – remained intact. I was

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<sup>27</sup> Under the introductory slow chords of String Quartet No.16 Beethoven wrote in the manuscript "Muß es sein?" (Must it be?) to which he responds, with the faster main theme of the movement, "Es muß sein!" (It must be!). My father was half German and would have, I think, appreciated the association.



utterly blind to the actual unfolding of events, determined to believe B.'s half hearted retractions that the woman was still 'just a friend'. I took his tattered truths and skilfully wove them in to the fabric of my idealised images. I simply could not see beyond the goal of holding the family together. This effort eroded and weakened me and also prepared the conditions for my burnout eight months later. It also, as Estes notes in her interpretation of the Handless Maiden, weakened my hold on the ideal so that later, when burnout came there was room for new meaning to take seed.

*By cutting off her hands the father deepens the descent, hastens....the difficult loss of all one's dearest values....with the cutting off of the hands the importance of the rest of the psychic body and its attributes is emphasised...the deep and dismembered woman is going to do her work...and as gruesome as it may seems.. this new version of her body is going to help. (Estes, 1992 p. 408)*

Despite fighting hard to keep my ideals alive I could sense holes appearing on the surface of this utterly false and demeaning life – which I colluded with entirely. B and I stayed together and even began counselling in a strange and co-dependent effort to mutually deny the future that was *actually* unfolding for us both. I can only assume that B. also had a vicious loop in motion that welded him to a version of truth that no longer served him either.

It was during those months that I encountered my other selves (actual and real) in a series of mandorla experiences. In the messy, confusing looping that defined my life at that time I occasionally felt moments of connection and sense. So from this,

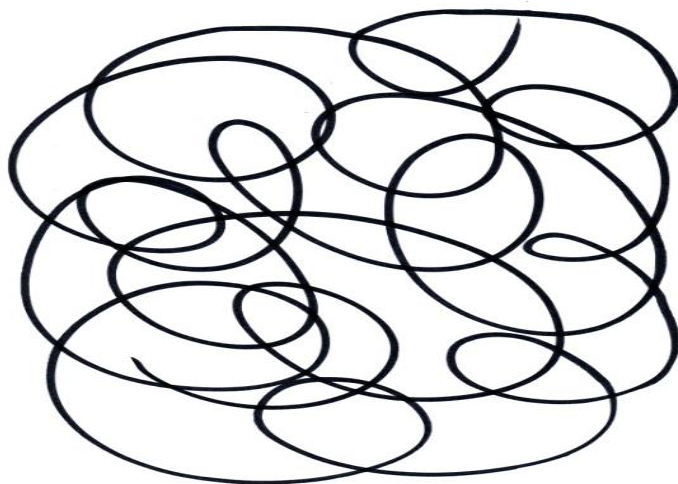


Figure 19: Unknown knows

To this

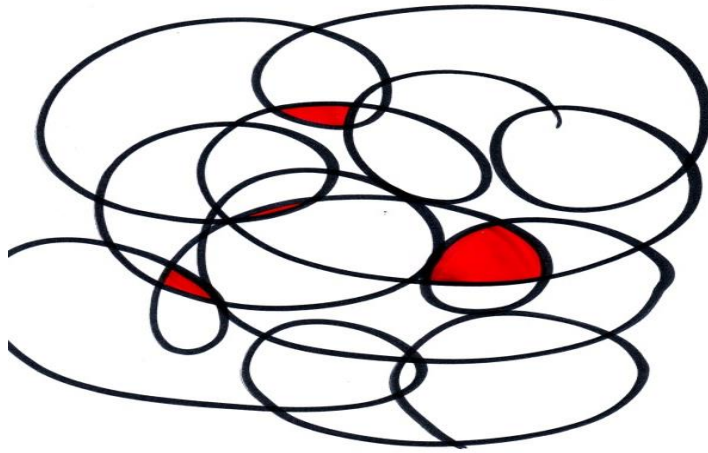


Figure 20: Glimpses

I will describe the most significant mandorla experiences I had in those six months leading up to my burnout. Each one speaks to the idealised images I hold about my self, the work I do and the family I am part of. Each one disturbed the idealised image. Loosened it. So that when in March the thing shattered, the pain, perhaps, was not as debilitating or fatal as it could have been. In chapter three I share some of James' mandorlas to illustrate his parallel story.

## Mandorla Experiences

I offer these journal entries as evidence to show the way mandorlas increase in intensity and power preceding a burnout. I also offer them as examples of how my inquiry method was turning towards the imaginal and alchemical (as described earlier).

### August 2011: a vivid dream

*My PhD and my novel await me. I see whatever is representing them standing at the end of a very long driveway. Behind them is a beautiful house surrounded by acres of landscaped gardens and mature trees. They are standing together like husband and wife on the steps of their splendid home. And I watch them longingly from behind the tall wrought Iron bars.*

*I notice that the gate is open and I see them beckoning me. But I do not move. I stay holding on to the gates. Then something, someone, a breezy shadow that feels cold against my shoulders, distracts me. I turn around and see a Dickensian landscape. Crying children, noise, thieves and rain. Through the gloom I can see my own children sitting on the steps of a terrace house. Are they waiting for me to come home? Somewhere in that*

*gloom I know B. is with his new woman. They have a better house and breathe cleaner air. How can I leave and walk through the tree lined driveway towards my writing?*

*Now I am calling to my children to come with me. They cannot hear. Or they do hear and they do not want to follow me. Or they do hear and they come running and together, hand in hand, we walk (and sometimes skip) towards the big house. I try all these endings and I awake confused. (LJ: 8.08.11)*

I am torn between wanting to be with my children and to write or work. I see B. and his other woman as a threat. When I am in threat my vicious loop activates and colours out the yearning and longing that comes from my real self. Yet in this dream both my virtuous and vicious loops make an appearance. The multiple endings I construct are a manifestation of my willingness to enter the mandorla created by their intersection and to stay in the complexity and richness it offers.

### **August 2011: A forgotten paper**

I write a supervision paper entitled Amor Fati (Wickremasinghe, 2011) in which I recognise that I have 'difficulty coming to terms with endings' – both personally and professionally. Now I would say that I have difficulty working with mandorla experiences which contain paradoxical and often conflicting themes, ideas, wishes. In this same paper I notice,

*"I ask my clients to inquire, to change, to develop when I am stuck in my own mire doing, it feels, none of those things particularly well. I am unable to choose and I repeat patterns like a factory loom spinning out cheap fabric....." (Wickremasinghe, 2011)<sup>28</sup>*

### **September 2011: A new experience**

*After weeks, perhaps months or even years of secretly and openly thinking about this, I have made my first move towards a different way of being 'in the weekend'. I am here, near Abergavenny, in a farm cottage alone, writing.*

*When I dropped the boys off at Newport station to meet B. yesterday I felt myself sinking in to darkness. Loss, failure. The belief in 'togetherness' no matter how unsatisfying it has been was finally disintegrating in this act. B. behind the barrier collecting the children for his bit of the weekend.*

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<sup>28</sup> Notice also the lack of compassion I apply to my own emerging understanding – no wonder I exit these mandorla experiences quickly! I dishearten myself.

*And then something happened on the drive back to the cottage. My heart started to lift. Not lightness exactly but certainly a feeling that it might be OK. I felt nervous. What would it be like opening the door to the cottage, the boys gone, me alone?*

*I opened the door and it felt OK. And it has continued to feel OK.*

*Yesterday I wondered whether my strangulating grasp around an image (the Waltons) of family has done more, so far, to harm me than any one else. The image shattered years ago yet I picked up the broken pieces and glued them (badly) back together. Over the years the pieces have continued to drop out and I have re-glued the bits until this jagged image bears no resemblance to the thing it once was. Just an ugly, cracked and badly mended artefact that cannot be used or admired in its current form.*

*Yesterday I realised that I breathe more easily, the knot in my stomach loosens a bit, when I am away from the broken image. (LJ: 4.09.11)*

### **December 2011: Accepting rejection**

In December 2011 Guy, a longstanding client, terminated my contract in an unpleasant way. He was unable to accept a key point of difference we have about the work. I wrote,

*....why did I not trust my instinct? From day one I have always thought Guy to be unstable, capricious and self serving. And I have also been seduced by his flattery, attention and energy. I have been led by my desire to progress a career that – within this company at least – has more often than not left me frustrated and unfulfilled.....I have stewed over night and softened my anger and resentment. I know this is a helpful outcome. I can do less now, focus on my writing, stay at home and look after myself. It just feels as if endings are too harsh, too abrupt. I don't know why we cannot end with more dignity and respect for each other....(LJ 14.12.11)*

### **January 2012: Reaching out to 'the enemy'**

I draft (but do not send) a letter to the 'other woman'. The words come from a place of fear and desperation but also of love and trust. Here are some extracts.

*I wanted to communicate with you in the hope that you might support B. to be the best he can be in this relationship. At the same time I know he will not thank me for writing to you and it is unlikely that in doing so I*

*will achieve anything other than contact with you and a sharing of my truth that I fear is constantly being disappeared.....*

*B. and I need to work out a new way of living – either together or apart. However, your involvement right now is making that harder. Perhaps you would consider stepping back and giving us the true space we need to work things out.....*

*Or perhaps you could offer me some insight and support – a strange request perhaps but reflective of how I see your role in this.....*

*This letter comes mostly from the soul of my motherhood. I hold my two boys in mind and wonder how best to live in the light of this. My anger and grief resides more in their loss than mine. I hope you will understand.*

## **February 2012: The final outpost**

Sitting in an airport in Sydney I write a letter to myself. I have been away working for two weeks. I am exhausted, disillusioned and ready to give up.

*I have a lump in my throat. I have been away two weeks. Away from my family and all that is familiar to me.....*

*.....why am I sitting here feeling so deflated?*

*I have done good work over these last few weeks. Made sacrifices to be here. Stayed focused and given the best of myself. Many of the participants have expressed their thanks and gratitude personally to me and given me gifts and contact details. I know how important this development has been for many of them and I know the role I have played in supporting this process.*

*Yet what I want – and it is not forthcoming – is more appreciation from my client. I want the commissioner who has witnessed all this to say thank you and well done. But he doesn't, never has and likely never will. And this upsets me and dilutes all the other appreciation I have been offered.*

*This has got to stop. How? How can I lessen this need for external validation and approval? If I don't find a way I will have to stop this work. The toll it takes is too much.*

What I discovered on that long thirteen hour flight – and I didn't sleep much – is that just as there is a contingent relationship between proposition and experience, so too is there a contingent relationship between self compassion and compassion. And I have ignored the contingency in both relationships. In other words – compassion for others cannot be fully realised without compassion for self – the *experiencing* of self love is the ground from which other love grows. If there is no self compassion how can there be compassion? If there is no experience how can there be useful proposition?

The week I returned from Sydney I Googled the word *compassion* and was directed to the work of Paul Gilbert (2010) and Kristin Neff (2011). It was early March 2012. My relationship with B. remained fragile and my doctorate mid term VIVA loomed. As I read about self compassion an ancient feeling in me stirred – which is the subject of the next chapter but is probably related to my conception of the real self which is fundamentally generative, soothing and a voice of yearning. It was in February 2012 that I began to wonder about the value of self compassion as a practice that might enable me to face my mandorlas with courage and resilience.

Before describing my burnout and the transformation process that accompanied it I visit the theoretical and research terrain of *burnout* in order to better understand the process through which looping of this kind is halted.

The literature I draw on is specifically concerned with burnout experiences that are associated with the idealisation patterns I have so far described. Authors such as Glouberman (2003) and Casserley and Megginson (2009) write extensively about how rigid and tightly held beliefs about how the world *should be* persist until they are bombed and burnt out by (usually) unexpected, cataclysmic events and experiences. In chapter **five** I will describe what happens in the quiet and lonely *aftermath* of such events but before that I offer a deeper understanding of a phenomena which helps me answer a question I posed myself back in June 2010,

*How can I unite the conflicting, competing and unfamiliar aspects of myself?.....What is the process through which we move towards more complex and liberating forms of meaning making? (Wickremasinghe, June 2010)*

## What is burnout?

As with research about perfectionism interest in burnout has increased exponentially over the last twenty years leading to some common ground in definition and understanding.

Casserley and Megginson (2009 p. 14) offer a helpful summary of key research findings

- Burnout is a negative psychological condition that develops over a long period of time among individuals who do not manifest behaviours indicative of mental illness
- Burnout can go unnoticed for a long time
- It is primarily a work related phenomena
- It occurs more frequently amongst younger employees in the earlier stages of their careers
- It occurs most often amongst those who have high expectations and goals and are driven to succeed
- It is a multidimensional syndrome – manifested by a range of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms
- It is a universal and not culturally dependent phenomena

Whilst this summary illuminates points of convergence between researchers it is important to stress that some of this research is contested by those who believe burnout can be experienced at *any* point in life and is *not* primarily a work related phenomena. (Glouberman, 2003); (Estes, 1992); (Moore, 2004). I return to a further consideration and critique of these themes at the end of next chapter.

It is Glouberman's definition of burnout which I quoted earlier<sup>29</sup> that most speaks to me for it calls forth the image of an end point, a boundary *edge* which both contains the old and carries the possibility of opening into the new. The mandorla is an image I am drawn to because it shows an intersection/collision/meeting of these boundary edges which for me represent different world views and experiences and,

*When the most herculean efforts and the finest discipline no longer keep the painful contradictions of life at bay, we are all in need of the mandorla...the mandorla begins the healing of the split.* (Johnson, 1991 p. 102)

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<sup>29</sup> "...a state of mind, body and spirit reached by those of us who have come to the end of a particular road but haven't acknowledged this." (Glouberman, 2003 p. 10)

**Thus, whilst burnout may be experienced as a negative end state it is also an opportunity for the idealised self to encounter the actual and the real self .**

In chapter six I suggest that it is the development or reviving of *self compassion* which creates the conditions for this meeting of selves to occur in what I refer to as mandorla experiences. However, self compassion is not easily accessible to those caught up in idealisation loops. In fact this vicious loop is driven by a deep sense of unworthiness or self hate. When idealisation becomes the strategy for survival (as we have seen in chapter one) the person who utilises this strategy measures their actual self against these impossible ideals. Since nothing can live up to the idealised images the actual self – what a person is at any given time – *always* falls short

*..this actual being is such an embarrassing sight when viewed from the perspective of godlike perfection that he cannot but despise it...the human being which he actually is keeps interfering – significantly – with his flight to glory and therefore he is bound to hate it, to hate himself.* (Horney, 1950 p. 110)

This condemnation of imperfection fuels the perfectionist standards that have already been described and blocks a true encounter with and exploration of the actual and real.

In consulting the literature on burn out I discovered the characteristics and behavioural patterns of those prone to burnout correspond to the characteristics of people who are deeply attached to beliefs and needs that fuel unhelpful idealisation loops. In the research literature they are often referred to as ‘type A’ personalities who are driven, have a high need for control, find it difficult to relax and exhibit strong competitive tendencies; (Cordes, et al., 1993); (Freudenberger, et al., 1980); (Taylor, et al., 1989). In addition, there exist a number of recent studies to indicate a more *specific* correlation between perfectionism and burnout: (Philp, et al., 2012); (Leonard, et al., 2008); (Stoeber, et al., 2008).

Philp et. al (2012) in trying to understand the possible relationship between perfectionism and burnout identify two ‘pathways’ to burnout, both beginning with perfectionist concerns. The first starts with a hyper concern over making mistakes which leads to procrastination, poor performance and burnout. The second starts with overly high personal standards which lead to an over commitment to work, leading to exhaustion and burnout. They conclude that practitioners working with employees manifesting signs of burnout would benefit from examining whether the employee displays perfectionist traits and the impact of this on their working behaviour (p.73).



Similarly, Casserley and Megginson (2009) argue that the two most significant driving factors for burnout are over-identification with work and add to this *an insufficient sense of meaning or purpose in life*. High achievers, perfectionists and those caught in idealisation loops of all kinds are generally united by their fixation on external, standards, rewards and goals. Whilst these provide the drive and motivation to achieve success of a certain kind (material wealth and status) such success does not fulfil an individual's desire and human need (Frankl, 1986) to understand who they are, what they stand for and the ultimate purpose and meaning of their life.

These 'big' questions were the same ones that haunted me at the start of this inquiry and I now see them as precursors to my own burnout. They were questions that created the momentum for opposing and alienated aspects of myself to merge creating mandorla experiences which in the *first instance* were full of pain and threat. Now when clients begin to ask these questions I hear them as both an opening to deeper inquiry and also a portent. For in the asking of these questions there is a turning towards the diminutive whispers of the real self.

Burnout is a term understood and used by many of the clients I work with. Depending on the individual it can refer to a spectrum of experience ranging from episodic tiredness (e.g. following completion of a tough goal or target) to existential depression (e.g. loss of meaning, hope or purpose.) It is the latter end of the spectrum that I am particularly interested in because that is the place where perfectionists, like myself, often find themselves when their ideals are frustrated. I understand burnout as one kind of mandorla experience that can bring intense emotional and relational challenges AND if worked with appropriately can be the fertile space in which new and transformational experiences arise.

## Summary

The literature indicates that certain people are more prone to burnout than others and that burnout is an experience that can be transformational and generative. It is an experience that occurs when enough 'fires' have been started to destroy or seriously damage current structures of belief and behaviour. These fires can be started and fanned by the cumulative pressures associated with increasing workload and lack of time, significant life events such as divorce, death, redundancy or illness to the less tangible but no less intense experience that Glouberman describes as, *'our heart going out of the situation'*.

During the period leading up to my burnout I can see evidence of the following

- Increasing frequency of mandorla experiences
- A reluctance to enter in to the truth of those experiences
- More effort to keep the ideal intact – but the heart has gone out of this

## Chapter Five: Burnout – a developmental experience?

*Man wants the impossible. He wants to lose his isolation and keep it at the same time. He can't stand the sense of separateness, and yet he can't allow the complete suffocating of his vitality. (Becker, 1973 p. 155)*

### Introduction

In this chapter I describe in more detail the events leading up to my burnout in March 2012, including autobiographical details which show how my idealisation loop originated and was sustained. This has perhaps been the most difficult chapter to write for it contains very personal and still painful accounts of my own 'dismemberment' – the breaking apart of my core beliefs and the glimpse of other truths both welcome and not. However, these events are central to my learning and movement out of a vicious loop and it was through this experiencing that I discovered a different kind of 'knowing' which informed my practice in a radically different way.

I refer to this dismemberment as an experience of *burnout* and in the previous chapter I have described the relationship between perfectionism, idealisation looping and burnout. In this chapter I explore burnout as an *individual* experience and conclude that burnout cannot, as Casserley and Megginson (2009) suggest, be generalised as a work related phenomenon and also that the experience is strongly mediated (in terms of trigger events, intensity, duration and outcome) by the *particular* vicious loop an individual is trapped within and *quantity* and *quality* of awareness they have about these loops, their origin and the functions they serve.

In this chapter I offer three different examples (my own, my father's and James's) of burnout to illustrate how important both quantity (of insight, perspective, reflexivity) and quality (non judgmental, kind, patient, compassionate) are in characterising the burnout experience and whether one is likely to experience burnout as developmental or not. I also return to Casserley and Megginson's (2009) collation of burnout indicators and offer a critique based on my consideration of burnout as it is experienced by those caught in vicious idealisation loops.

### **Perfect Families – a core ideal**

Idealised images of all kinds (work, friends, success, goodness etc.) played a role in my survival, struggle and burnout. Yet it was when my idealised images of *family life* shattered in March 2012 and which I will detail in this chapter, that I experienced the 'dismemberment' Romanyshyn (2007) talks about. Or what might also be imaged as the breaking apart,

shattering and fiery disintegration of strongly held beliefs that supported many of the vicious loops that played out in my life. I now understand my idealised images of family as central to my belief and motivation system. It is when *core* beliefs of this kind are damaged that burnout – and transformation – become possible.

Thus, the story of my burnout starts with this image. A favourite family album snapshot.



Figure 21: The Waltons

Except it's not my family. It's the Walton family. *The Waltons* is an American television series based on the book *Spencer's Mountain* (Hamner, 1961). It features a large, extended family living, loving, growing and dying in a rural Virginia community during the Great Depression and World War 2. The year this show was first broadcast my own family made the journey from Sri Lanka to set up home in the rainy, cold suburbs of North London. It was 1971. I was a year old, my brother almost three. Both jabbering in Sinhalese. Both unaware of the scale and permanence of the life change we had been drafted in to.

In our second floor flat carelessly built on the perimeter of the Great North Road, the noise of traffic replaced the sound of the Indian ocean and the greyness of clouds, concrete and metal seeped in to our skin taking away its deep brown glow. Now we were a small satellite broken away from the mother ship. From the '*archiammas*', the grandmothers who remained in the homeland as one by one their children left, taking with them the born and still to be born future generation.

I think we were often a lonely family. I imagine it was a struggle for my parents to 'fit in' and that they became pre-occupied with not being *different* and with learning how to be British. My mother, I remember, was ambitious. She wanted a house with a small garden where my

father could grow the English roses she had dreamt of as a child. So we moved from London to live on a white working class estate in Essex, for a while. Long enough for my mother to find a job teaching at a primary school and for her to realise that our neighbours were not the sort of people she wanted to mix with. She convinced my father to move us again. This time to a 1950's semi in an aspiring but still very ordinary part of town.

Back then I don't think 'cultural difference' was seen as enriching or trendy. My mother closed all the windows before making her aromatic curries for fear of upsetting Bob and Jane from next door with the smells. Yet my parents' anxiety about these things lingered in the air and was far more distressing to *me* than the spicy, warm fragrance of roasting cinnamon and fennel.

When I watched the Walton's I noticed how *different* their lives were to ours. The sun always shone through pine scented trees and upon wide open spaces that *belonged* to them. I knew from a very early age that I did not belong in Essex. I was a guest and should behave myself. I should not *offend* anyone. My best friend's mother saw to it that we were placed in separate classes. She worried about the influence a 'darkie' might have on her daughter whose blonde hair she folded in to paper curls each night.

And then there was all that talking! The Waltons never stopped. After a full day of gentle moralising each episode would end with the characters in bed, their voices criss-crossing the dark corridors and seeping through the thin walls. Voices sharing a final thought for the day and binding the family together as they fell in to sleep. "*Good night John Boy. Good night Mary Ellen.*"

I did not realise until much later how important those idealised images of family life would be. Stencil shapes imprinted on my consciousness in which I tried to fit the people and experiences of my own life.

As a family we did not talk. We did not sit around a scrubbed wooden table and pass just-baked bread to each other. My mother left rice, chicken curry and fried cabbage warming on the stove and we helped ourselves. When my brother was nine he was sent to boarding school and my father worked away from home during the week. So, for a few years, it was just my mother and I and a lot of silence. My mother was consistent, dutiful and somewhat cold. Her gaze was turned outward towards the new world she had encouraged my father to bring us to. Her efforts were focused on integration and culturally appropriate 'success'. We didn't have much money yet we were well educated, well dressed, well mannered. By the

time my parents separated in 1993 we had upsized from our one bedroom flat on the polluted Great North Road to a Victorian semi in an affluent and leafy part of Essex.

The year my parents separated I met the man who would become the father of my two children and my 'arms length' partner for almost twenty years. The boyfriends I brought home always had one thing in common. They had prospects. This was important. It was also important, although I did not 'know' this at the time, that they were part of the establishment. I was attracted to white men who came from wealthy or 'established' English families. These men, in different ways, helped me to continue my mother's ambition of 'fitting' in and surviving. B. was no different in my mind even though *he* gently protested against the idealised image of privileged, Oxbridge man languishing in cricket whites that I projected on to him. Perhaps my idealisation loop was in full motion that year. My parents' separation must have frightened me at some deep level. We were a small nuclear family. Immigrants without roots. This thinning out of our family unit weakened us. Perhaps I believed at some level that B. possessed or had access to the type of resources I needed to survive and succeed. I did not consciously recognise my own powerful and resilient character that would in the coming years 'establish' me *in spite of* B.

During the August week in 1993 that my mother moved out of our family home – the redbrick semi with a glorious ninety foot garden that my father had landscaped – she threw a party. My brother and I were by then living in other parts of the country. Yet we both returned home for a final time. On the night of the party I remember standing in my empty childhood bedroom with a large glass of wine. I noticed the old carpet that my hamster had chewed and the floral wall paper faded and pock marked by blue tack and pop posters. From the tall sash window that over looked the long garden I imagined my father at work. Sometimes he would abandon the back breaking task of digging over the soil and cutting new borders to rest on his bench. And sometimes I would join him there under the apple tree whilst he sipped his whiskey and contemplated aloud his garden schemes. In those increasingly troubled years before they separated he wrote '*hell is other people*' in drunken scrawl on the dining room wall. He knew how to make a garden grow and bloom, yet we perplexed him.



Figure 22: Our garden beginning to grow (c.1985) and our garden in full bloom the year my parents separated (1993)

I offer these pieces of back story to illustrate aspects of childhood that informed my idealised images. Watching television I learned that families could be a source of protection and survival in a hostile, punishing world. They could be places of enjoyment, love and openness. These idealised images were powerful. They showed up the faults in my own family who seemed in the face of such perfection, isolated, fractured and different. These images also distracted me from or covered over the more subtle (and 'actual') generosity, loyalty and courage that both my mother and father showed. Nevertheless, I grew up believing that strong families stayed together, accumulated resources and networks. Weak families broke apart, argued, squandered their resources and abandoned their networks. I saw the seriously unpleasant consequences of the latter story play out in my father's life.

In 1993 I did not know I was angry about my parents' separation. Angry *and* fearful. These emotions were the under belly of my defiant, marching, soldier self that won battles, survived injury and collected victories. I did not see the mandorla that spoke of the *possibilities* inherent in their separation or the actual necessity of this act given how troubled their relationship had become.

Looking back I also see how anger and fear defined my relationship with B. In 1993 I needed to quickly re-establish a *basic safety* in the world and I decided that this person would enable me to do that. I must have brought a compelling intensity to the relationship. Fifteen years later he wrote me a letter that spoke of these things:

*You have an infernal machine against which you protect yourself with the highest standards. I don't always meet them.....you pointed out that perhaps I have an infernal machine that*

*generates a deep suspicion of standards. I think I do, if they don't come straight from the heart.* (letter from B. December 2007)

How prescient and knowing of B. My standards were *not* from the heart of my real self. They were generated and maintained by my ideal self.

Throughout my years with B. I circled a vicious loop that compelled me to strive for the qualities and trappings I thought made up the perfect home. Children, a pretty house, a good income, home baked cakes, a garden that bloomed, family holidays. All this symbolised connection, stability and belonging. These were my inherited and evolved ideals, not his.

Along side this vicious loop another loop traced a faint circle. It is the circle that represents the heartbeat of my real self. For I never lost my real self. Not properly. My real self is wild. It is the self that Estes writes about in *Women who run with the wolves* (Estes, 1992). She is,

*The life/death/life force...the incubator...she is far-seer, she is deep listener, she is loyal heart. She encourages humans to remain multi-lingual; fluent in the languages of dreams, passion and poetry. She whispers from night dreams....she is ideas, feelings, urges, memory...she is the smell of good mud...the mucky root of all women...she is the one we leave home to look for...she is the voice that says 'this way', 'this way'.* (Estes, 1992 p. 11)



Figure 23: Clarissa Pinkola Estes

My real self knows she can survive alone yet chooses company from time to time. My real self writes stories and can be idle. Idleness feeds her imagination. Strong, vivid images that foretell the future swirling in the fuzzy haze of siesta sleep. My real self craves quiet time, dark chocolate, fleshy curves and bodily pleasures my mother might not approve. My real



self is smart, alert, interdependent. Not needy of men but *wanting* them, sometimes. Not needy of children but loving and growing with them. My real self is not concerned about fitting in or seeking approval. My real self unfurls in tropical heat and is soothed by the sound of a fan turning slowly. My real self peers through the pale white nets draped around her bed and listens carefully to the sound of the hot ocean. Or the whip of wind and drum of rain in her new land. She lives in the moment. Her heart in rhythm with a hoof beat. She talks in tongues. Singhalese, Tamil, English, German. And remembers.

While I was feeding and living in the thick circling motion of my vicious loops, this other self, faint and ghostly, breathed, somersaulted her loop and bided her time. Perhaps I saw her sometimes in the fleeting recognition of a mandorla experience. For example, in the many rebellious, defended and 'runaway' moments that colour my past<sup>30</sup> or in quiet moments when I notice a yearning *underneath* my idealised (maternal) images,

*Today ...I have not done any domestic goddess things like bake with baby J or make paper chains or cover the floor in newspaper and get mucky with paint. I am not very good at this stay at home maternal thing. And yet I love being with J for short periods. I love working from home and hearing his chatter and chuckle as I work....I feel bad about this..... I should feel the sort of pleasure in my children's' company that I do at the best of times when I am working. But I don't. I feel guilt for being more interested in my books and projects than I do in chitter chatter and play....(LJ 6.06.09)*

In my work with James I sometimes glimpsed the sketchy outline of *his* other selves when he day dreamed (momentarily) about returning to the priesthood or imagined (with longing not anger) being reunited with his absent father.

Not knowing the potential of these mandorla experiences I lived for many years in the isolated circling of my various loops. Mostly paying attention to the demands of my ideals but sometimes being aware of the faint yet persistent activity of some other kind of demand or yearning or need. (See figure 18).

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<sup>30</sup> Moving to Devon to start a restaurant, living alone with my children, starting my own consulting business, retaining a strong, independent character through many personal changes and crises

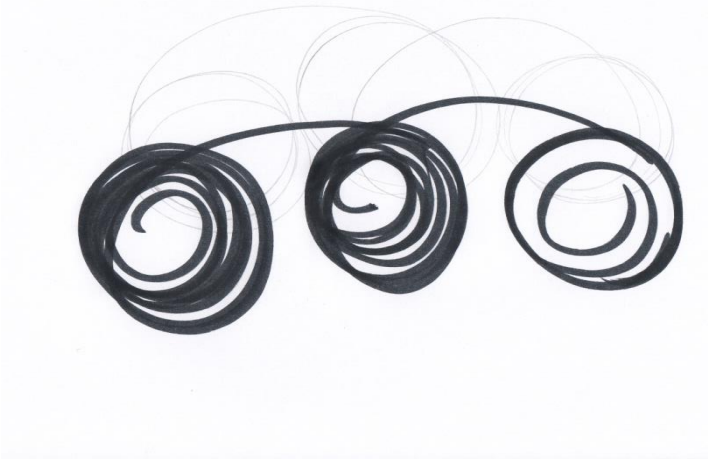


Figure 24: Traces of the real

In this image I show how my idealised loops are isolated circles of activity. I also show the faint traces of other loops that circle alongside, underneath and inside. These very faint traces represent the unseen or denied aspects of my real self. Where they intersect with the dark, idealisation loops we find mandorla's and the appearance of the *actual*. Yet at this stage it is difficult, if not impossible to make out those mandorlas. Imagine this picture in motion for it represents my dynamic patterns of cognition, emotion and behaviour. In movement the faint traces would be even harder to discern.

In my idealised image of family life there needed to be strong male-female presence. Yet in reality we were – and are – a matriarchy.<sup>31</sup> B and I never lived together and I accepted that. For most of the time I parented alone taking on the role of mother *and* father as best I could. I can see how my dual role was both punishing and reassuring. If I could *be* everything and *do* everything then the world came within my grasp and *control*. That of course is the underlying and deeply motivating 'push' behind many idealisation loops (Horney, 1950).

For eighteen years I circled loops of this kind. The personal diaries that account for this period (1993 – 2011) describe the monotony, exhaustion, isolation, rage and emptiness I felt in this relationship and with the life I was living. B, who I would now say corresponds to Horney's (1950) 'resigned type', circled his own loops choosing withdrawal, avoidance, procrastination and detachment as his survival strategies.

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<sup>31</sup> There are cultural and historical influences relating to my Sri Lankan heritage and the role of women that also inform and sustain the matriarchal expressions dominant within my extended Asian family. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore this subject in detail.

## **Dismemberment – letting go**

*The devastating impact of the explosion does not stop after the initial blast, as with regular explosives. A cloud of nuclear radiation travels from the epicentre of the explosion, causing an impact to life forms even after the heat waves have ceased<sup>32</sup>*

I have written about the events in March 2012 a few times. Once in my journal the day after the news broke and then later as part of my research endeavour. Each time I wrote I suffered for some days or weeks after. The recall activated my threat system and triggered my vicious loops. I became defensive, alert, angry, withdrawn and suspicious. I also struggled with the ethics of sharing a very personal and unpleasant story in a public document. Yet these events are central to my learning and movement out of a vicious loop and for this reason I include some details of what happened with the intention of inviting the reader to consider the quality and intensity of experience that is often needed to break apart idealisation loops.

In March 2012 the idealised image of family life that I had clung on to for years was shattered. For years I had glued the broken bits back together and convinced myself it looked OK. This time the image was flung so hard to the ground that the whole, already fractured and weak, splintered in to pieces so tiny and sharp that I could only stand back and stare at the mess and the irreparable damage.

It happened on a Friday night in March 2012. B. gave me a letter which, he said, would make me very angry. I did not want to read the letter but he insisted.

I recalled my reaction in a journal entry nine months later,

*....I hold the letter in my hand and feel the familiar burning or suffocating sensation of fear and annihilation. My head is filled with electricity, it seems. There is buzzing, sparking, a painful tingling across my tongue. Every nerve ending is alight.*

*I read.*

*Hot, chemical words. Burning my eyes. Haemorrhaging.*

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<sup>32</sup> . [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear\\_explosion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_explosion)

*“.....pregnant with my child....not planned or wished for...we have done a lot of talking....move in with her...raise the child together..my love and support always.....”*

*I feel the blood first in my tongue and cheeks. The epicentre. Tiny red hot cells burning dangerously. Lava. Glass. Heat. Radiating up in to my head. The pressure in my head is unbearable. There must be blood seeping from my eyes and ears. She was just a friend wasn't she? (LJ: 2.01.13)*

And I remember that I wanted to be soothed by my mother. This yearning took me by surprise and on reflection speaks to me of the enduring importance of early attachment. I cannot remember ever wanting to be soothed by my mother yet in this moment of trauma the feeling was there. Primitive and ancient, but there. It also suggests to me that the affect centre that regulates compassion based emotions (Gilbert, 2010) was alive and breathing even in that moment of deep threat – a point I return to in later as it becomes important in the healing process.

Perhaps not coincidentally the day after B's revelation and leaving was Mother's Day. The journal entry I wrote that evening is qualitatively different to anything I have previously written following set backs, rejection or pain. Even though I had suffered what felt like the effects of a nuclear explosion my journal entry has a calm after the storm quality. It speaks to me of terrible loss and at the same time of strange peace.

*There is nothing to say. My rage and fear and loss and despair fill a lifeless room. He has gone. Yes, you can rage and rage against the dying of the light but who will rage in the dark, when all light has gone? The room is empty. The rage has no purpose or object any more.*

*He has gone. My friend and my foe in equal measure..... It is not anger I feel so much as grief. I am grieving the irretrievable loss of my friend and my lover, a person who has been in my heart for as long as I can remember.....*

*Mother's Day. The boys brought me their cards whilst I lay in bed..The day was carried upon a rollercoaster of internal emotions. Joy, sudden piecing grief, tears flowing over uncontrollably, gratitude, relief.*

*In the afternoon I listened to some choral music and a church service whilst ironing the boys' clothes for our dinner out. I felt the grief coursing through me. Tears falling upon hot cotton. Ironing them away. Wondering if the salt will stain. I focused on breathing deeply. I thought about self compassion and imagined the other mothers on this day – the ones that came to mind were the mothers of the six very young soldiers lost last week during their first assignment to Afghanistan. I was not weighing out whose situation was better or worse – not comparative thinking which is so often the way for me. I just thought about them and held them in my heart. Mothers together. Wanting so much for our children, for ourselves and suffering. So much suffering. As I thought about these things my grief lessened to the point that I was able to get ready for the evening and genuinely look forward to spending time with the family I do have. (LJ: 18.03.12)*

During those first days I dreamt about a bird's egg falling from its nest and spilling the contents of its half formed life on to the grass below. In the shattering I see exposed a me that is incredibly soft, vulnerable and half formed. I now know that thing, that barely alive damp fledgling, was my compassionate self. Encased for many years in the hard shell of my idealisation loop.



Figure 25: Breaking

In the image above, which was a doodle I made whilst thinking about this dream, I notice that the casing is a thick, dark red and the circle beneath is faint and fragile. It also strikes me that the sharp shards of the broken top shell might prevent or make difficult the safe, pain-free emergence of what lies below. Like birth.

This image is helpful to me in thinking about the various ways in which the mandorla can be revealed. In glimpses, in dreams, in shatterings. Whilst on the run, in hiding or standing still. I see from this image that my idealisation loop was so entrenched, so powerful and consuming that it completely covered and coloured out other loops and life forces. No wonder it needed to shatter for the thing below it to be clearly (although still partially) seen.

In chapter one I offered insight in to how idealisation loops come in to being – often as a threat based response to unfavourable childhood conditions. Yet I also indicated that awareness of the knowing *why* is not sufficient to cope effectively with or move out of destructive looping. I knew this acutely in the months leading up to and following my own burnout. Over the years I had gained much insight about why I did what I did yet I still continued to do those things. I can also recall expressions of deep frustration from clients, including James, about their inability to act on insights that seem rational, true, compelling. *“I know why I do what I do but I still can’t stop doing it!”* These frustrations are most memorable to me now in their lack of compassion. They demonstrate *quantities* of insight

without the *qualities* of kindness, tolerance and patience that I now reach for in both my practice and my life.

In chapter four I wrote about entering a 'dark night of the soul' (Moore, 2004) towards the end of 2011. My relationships, professional life and doctorate studies were floundering. The winter solstice was approaching and I felt the pull and pain of increasing mandorla experiences. I have experienced dark moments before and have in the past sought spiritual comfort or rescue. Often this is in the form of reading, sometimes through meditation and always through writing.



Figure 26: Rodney Smith

I discovered Smith's book, *Stepping out of Self Deception* (Smith, 2010) at the tail end of an inquiry in to the function self deception (Trivers, 2011); (The Arbinger Institute, 2006) ; (McLaughlin, et al., 1988) which I became interested in as understanding about my own denial strategies grew. For example, I managed to deny on many occasions the now obvious signs of infidelity and deceit exhibited by my ex-partner.

When I read Smith I empathised with his story of *striving* to be spiritual and saw his own idealisation loop turn,

*I conceived of freedom as a very long and arduous process that needed focused determination and hard work. My efforts were directed toward surmounting myself. 'I' was the problem.* (Smith, 2010 p. xiv)

Smith works harder and harder to become spiritual and to 'achieve awakening' yet it is not until a painful encounter with the sage Nisargadatta Maharaj that he comes to realise,

*The path that Nisargadatta revealed was not a search but a find, not a struggle but an abiding, not a cultivation but something intrinsic to all. I had been committed to the long*

*enduring mind of practice but not the essence, not the inherent freedom immediately available.* (Smith, 2010 p. xv)

Throughout the book Smith argues that every suffering grows out of effort – the effort to hold on to what we believe, become what we are not or achieve what we do not have. Smith suggests that ‘wise effort’ involves relaxing (both mentally and physically), releasing (our desire to control outcomes), relinquishing (letting go of everything that is not authentic and natural) and rejoining (allowing our heart to take over from our mind). (Smith, 2010)

As I read Smith I became increasingly cognisant of the punitive and critical internal voice that dominated much of my sense making. Perhaps I had started to listen to it with the ear of my real self. These critical and punitive voices felt familiar but wrong. They were no longer motivating me. In fact, I had started to cower from them just like I did when I was a child.

More recently I have witnessed the awakening my clients feel when I ask them to pay attention to the tone of their internal voice. In a compassionate leadership session I designed and facilitated in July 2012 – and which I will detail in the next chapter – participants reported feeling surprised and concerned at how critical and harsh their inner voice could be. The inner critic is a well integrated and dominant force within the psyche of those ruled by their idealised selves.

In early March 2012, just before receiving the painful letter from B. I wrote a lengthy piece in my journal that considered the shift in my relationship to my inner critic,

*Awareness was the question but all I can think about is compassion. How little compassion I have had for myself and how I see this absence of self love and respect in so many of my clients. It seems to me that quality of awareness that leads to deep healing is one in which compassion for self and others is alive and active.*

*Yet how does one intentionally train the mind and the body to become compassionate? I think this is the focus of my final inquiry phase ...*

*I am surrounded by people who are and have been in deep pain and I have – to date – been powerless to change or effect this either in myself or in others. This has caused me huge frustration, disappointment, distress and anxiety. All the techniques, theories, experience and persistence have failed me and these people (friends and family).*



*So what is missing? I can only start with myself.*

*For me, undoubtedly, it is compassion. I have an inner critic that has raged at me since I can remember. First as a presence in the ceiling corner of my darkened bedroom, then in my own voice (I used to talk to myself a lot as a child – chastising and reprimanding) and then as I grew the voice transferred in to my head and my dreams and paced restlessly in my shadow cage.*

*Over the years I thought I was able to soothe myself and make myself feel good – I have always been one for ‘little luxuries’, dressing up, indulging in a fine glass of wine or two. Yet looking back none of these self spoiling techniques have made the slightest inroad in to my low self esteem or silenced my tough inner critic. (LJ 1.03.12)*

I cannot help but notice the ongoing punitive voice that speaks in the above journal entry.

*“All the techniques, theories, experience and persistence have failed me and these people”*

And I realise now how fledgling and fragile was my own compassionate learning and practice. Yet I *had* begun to realise I was unable to effectively soothe my self which is the first step of a compassionate practice. Soothing means regulating threat based responses may be through breathing, resting or stroking one self. Self compassion takes this process a step further by inviting a tolerant, patient and kind evaluation to whatever emotion/thought still resides. Around this time I started to pay closer attention to the way in which my clients soothed themselves. Invariably they told me that they went to the gym or took a long run. This did not feel like the kind of soothing that might diminish those tough inner voices. I imagined some of my clients pumping iron and exhausting themselves on the treadmill. I remembered Gilberts (2010) Compassionate Mind model which depicted three affect centres – threat, drive and soothing - and I wondered if the physical activities that many of my clients used to ‘relax’ were in fact simply stimulating the drive system and once more leaving the soothing system dormant and un-flexed.

To delve in to these questions more deeply and to discover how to activate the soothing system that I believed was a lost capacity within the minds and souls of perfectionists like me I began in earnest (from about February 2012) my research in to the field of compassion and its healing potential. Thus when my experience of burnout came I had already begun a compassionate practice guided by the work of Gilbert (Gilbert, 2010), Neff (2011) and Germer (2009). These practices helped me navigate my way through burnout and

supported me to construct a new narrative for living which is still (and maybe always will be) in progress.

### **Burnout revisited – an individual experience**

I pause now to reflect more deeply on the term 'burnout'. An expression I have used and described as an experience central to the breaking apart of strong idealisation loops typically constructed by perfectionist types. For perfectionists burnout is the end state reached after an event, an experience or series of experiences occur which are powerful enough to break in to their idealisation armour. Without this powerful event or experience the perfectionist caught in an idealisation loop will continue to circle indefinitely, primarily because their set of survival strategies brings important rewards and affirmations already discussed. (Flett, et al., 2002). I have referred to this in chapter two as 'backward glancing' – when a person dismisses the truth of their own vulnerability and mortality in favour of the idealised belief that they can produce, perform, conquer, overcome and control their destiny. Thus we saw both myself and James (see page 99) ignoring warning signs that our behaviours and strategies were not working and amplifying evidence to confirm our idealised self images of brilliant consultant and unique employee.

Casserley and Megginson (2009) - supporting the idea that burnout follows some sort of trigger event/experience - argue that burnout can be understood as a '*hardship developmental experience*', which they contrast with other (work place) developmental experiences arising out of learning from bosses or work assignments (Mcall, et al., 1988). Hardship development experiences in the workplace include personal trauma such as a health scare, a career setback such as a demotion or missed promotion, a change of job which is either too challenging or 'dead end', making a business error and being appraised as a poor performer. When James started the coaching work with me in December 2011 he was experiencing all these hardship experiences. He had been overlooked for promotion, was bored by his work, had been criticised for poor performance and was suffering ill health through excessive drinking and depression.

However, the authors point out that *learning* from hardship experiences (in particular personal trauma) is an unpredictable business,

*The temptation to distance oneself from the event can be compelling. There is always someone or something else one can blame. Disclaiming responsibility for the event can set up a chain reaction in which one also denies the response to it. A trauma can be used to justify cynicism or fatalism or withdrawal or overcompensation. (Casserley, et al., 2009 p. 118)*

The chain reaction these authors refer to is similar to the idealisation loop I describe throughout this work.

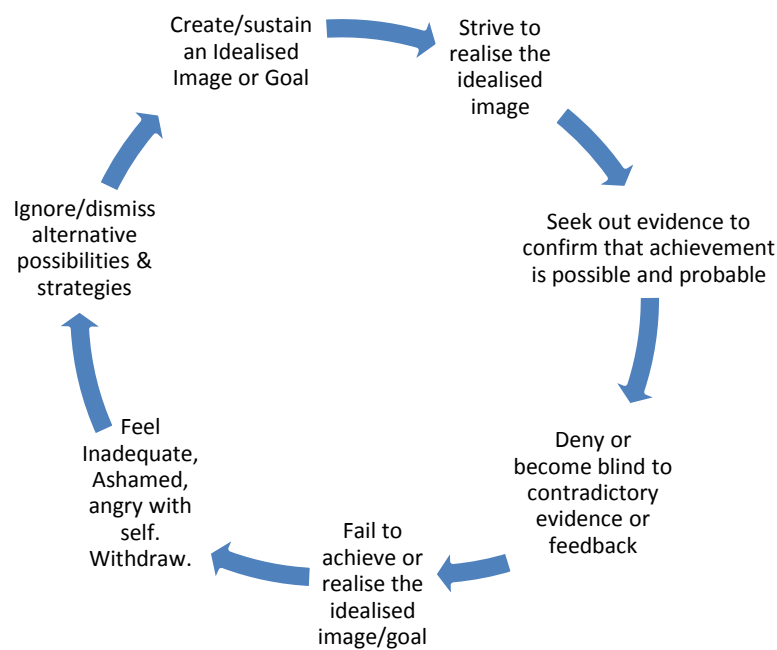


Figure 27: Idealisation Looping

It is my contention that to halt this chain reaction or vicious loop the trauma has to impact upon a deeply held *core* belief that supports and sustains an idealised image. This trauma can occur at any point in the loop but is perhaps most powerful in the phase when someone is busily working to deny contradictory evidence or feedback.

Once the core belief is exposed and vulnerable and no longer holds up as *the* 'truth' then the experience of burnout is likely to occur. However, burnout is an individual experience mediated by the quantity and quality of awareness a person brings in to, during and (hopefully) after the event.

Casserley and Megginson (2009) note that only 6% of the high flyers (often perfectionists) they interviewed experienced burnout as transformational. Most were derailed, set back and prone to returning to their previous behaviours. This suggests that 94% in their study of the high flyers continue to circle their loop.

The authors argue that the *degree* and *speed* with which people were able to learn from the experience determined whether burnout was transformational or not. They suggest that the key characteristics of those who experience transformational learning from burnout are: the ability to accept responsibility for their contribution to what befell them, the ability to reflect, an openness to self examination, a strong and internally referenced identity (including self

belief and confidence) and the ability to put things into perspective. These people are likely to exhibit certain behaviours that protect them from the long term de-railing and negative impacts of burnout. Casserley and Megginson (2009) list these behaviours as; a willingness to share experience with others, a proactive approach to resolving difficulties, setting clear boundaries, good organisational skills including the ability to prioritise and delegate, the ability to visualise a better future and engagement in activities that are personally renewing.

Casserley and Megginson's (2009) research offers important insights in to work related burnout amongst high achievers. These authors emphasise the point that those who learn from and move out of burnout with new strength and insight are those who are *emotionally intelligent* (Goleman, 2004) and who possess a high degree of self belief and confidence.

Daniel Goleman (2004), whose research and writing on emotional intelligence is widely referred to within the management field suggests that emotional intelligence comprises an array of competencies and skills including:

*Self-awareness* – knowing one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals and recognising their impact on others while using gut feelings to guide decisions.

*Self-regulation* – controlling or redirecting one's disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.

*Social skill* – managing relationships to move people in the desired direction

*Empathy* - considering other people's feelings especially when making decisions and

*Motivation* - being driven to achieve for the sake of achievement

(Goleman, 2004)

Being aware of oneself and being able to manage or regulate that self both individually and *with others* are indeed important competencies that support an individual to confront and move out of vicious looping. However, whilst empathy includes an aspect of compassion *towards others*, Goleman does not dwell on the importance of *self compassion* as a fundamental capacity required for us to become fully aware and able to regulate out threat and drive based emotions and behaviours.

In the latter stages of my inquiry I have reflected at length on my experience of burnout (which was intense, short lived and in some ways transformational) and compared it to the experiences of other people I have known and worked with. I observed that whilst emotional intelligence acts as a cushion in to and a spring out of burnout it is the capacity for *self compassion* which most significantly determines whether burnout can be experienced

developmentally or not. Thus, I contend that self compassion is a meta competency that *enables* a person to develop awareness, self regulation, empathy and motivation. Without self compassion it is not possible to fully enter in to or learn from the experience that follows the breaking apart of core beliefs and which I have referred to in this paper as burnout and which potentially leads to self expansion and development.

When I burnt out I was physically and mentally debilitated, slept long hours, experienced chronic apathy and deep depression. Yet this period only lasted a few months (March to July 2012). Why? Probably because I possessed a sufficient degree of emotional intelligence but also because I had started to imbue the content of my awareness with the qualities of compassion. You will remember that I had started to read about compassion in late 2011 (Smith, 2010) and that I had googled and begun to connect with those in the field of compassionate therapy in late February 2012 (Gilbert, 2010) (Neff, 2011). I had also begun to experiment with loving kindness meditation using the audio tapes of Sharon Salzberg (2005). Thus when faced with the terrible realisation that my idealised images of self, relationship and family were just that – *idealised* and not actual or real – I was able to catch the tumbling, diving, screaming idealised self before it hit and smashed bottom in an *irretrievable* way. Which is of course the outcome for some people, like my father, whose idealised images are broken. They do not recover or gain strength or useful insight. Thus development does not mean ‘killing off’ the idealised self for any form of violence to the self results in more threat and more looping. The *self compassionate* development I have been researching, practising and writing about involves meeting, befriending and creating new relationships with our inner voices.

Although I now know that awareness is not *sufficient* for healing and growth I return to and remind myself that awareness is a *necessary* part of a developmental or transformation process. I now know that the intensity of time and effort I have put in to learning about, struggling with and coming back time and time again to try and ‘know’ myself has served me well. When terrible truths materialised I was able to turn towards them because I had unwittingly (for many years) been preparing myself to do so. First by choosing Psychology as a profession and then over the years adding small amounts of awareness, knowledge and insight to my resilience ‘reservoir’. Through the years I have kept myself emotionally and spiritually *fit enough*. Then, as in birth, when the contractions of my experience became more frequent and painful I learned a more powerful way to open myself to experience. I started to learn how to breathe warmly and compassionately in to my pain. And it got me through. Thus my burnout was deep and painful but also calm and relieving. I was able to maintain my wonder and awe at the devastating turn of events which supported

my transition in to another way of seeing. I was also glad to let go and relinquish control. In other words I was able to surrender to the experience.

I contrast this experience with my father's journey *in to* but not *out of* burnout. On the surface he was a man who had little time for activities that did not stimulate the logical, rational and tangible. He pursued facts, enjoyed nothing better than a solvable problem and settled definitively on 'answers' that appealed to him. He was a left brain man whose right brain only spoke in drunken rage, furious at being unable to articulate its wisdom through the fug of alcohol and contempt. I wrote,

*Even though he had a hot temper and was punishing I loved his warmth, generosity and curiosity about life. I learned to be temperamental and withdrawn, judgmental and forgiving, passionate and cynical. For my father embodied paradoxical tension like no one else I have known. He was torn, split, divided and I think he hated, or was frightened to be so.*

(Wickremasinghe, February 2012)

Yes, he embodied paradoxical tension, as those caught in idealisation loops often do. Yet he had no will or ability it seemed to explore the source of that tension or the behaviours that gave it sustenance. In other words he avoided, turned away from or simply did not see the potential value of these mandorla experiences. Thus when his own terrible truths did materialise he was bewildered and drawn under by their relentless force. His disintegration began at around the same time I was beginning my undergraduate degree. It is not coincidental that I decided to study Psychology. I probably thought I could discover the grail that would 'transform' my father back in to the man I had glimpsed in sepia coloured photos. I suppose he was my first unsuspecting 'client'.



**Figure 28: My parents**

I assiduously tested the theories and methodologies I was learning on him. Yet he remained unwilling, stubborn and contemptuous of the questions I asked in a driven effort to make him happy. I did not succeed and this sense of failure fuelled my later professional practice with hot energy.

My father didn't soften, expand or surrender and he certainly didn't discover the self compassion that might have enabled him to do so. So I watched him drown in the amber coloured liquid that seemed to bring him more peace than I ever could. Both the quantity and quality of his self awareness were insufficient to support him through his burnout.

James' experience of burnout occurred during the period we were *not* in a coaching relationship (during the summer of 2012). However when we reconnected in November 2012 he told me his story. You will recall he left our last session in February 2012 with high hopes for promotion and recognition following attendance at a training programme his boss had recommended<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately the programme was over subscribed and instead James was offered an alternative coach whom his boss favoured. This coach was based in Australia and visited the UK twice yearly. Consequently James' coaching sessions were carried out using email reviews and Skype. James' new coach was intent on supporting James' to realise his *bosses'* performance objectives and provided strong (sometimes harsh) motivational coaching to encourage James to 'step up' to the job. By the summer of 2012 James had become extremely disillusioned and mistrusting of both his coach and his boss whom, he felt, were conspiring against him. James feared that the coach would submit a report to his boss which would suggest little improvement in key areas of concern. This, James worried, would lead to a poor performance appraisal and dismissal. During this time James' experience of turbulent mandorlas increased dramatically. Yet he remained in the the polarities of experiences that he was too fearful to connect and explore. One day he might cycle 30 miles and visit the gym (to be 'superfit') the next day he might drink excessively almost to the point of passing out. Or he would take long weekends and plan intense, 'perfect dad' family activities and then return to work to endure fifteen hour days hardly seeing his family at all. He would dream about emigrating back to Ireland and then wake up terrified of losing his London home and all the status it represented. In the late summer of 2012 one terrible encounter with his boss led to him walk out of the office in a rage and not return for four weeks. James's burnout was triggered by this aggressive attack from his boss that cut deep in to his idealised image of successful corporate man. I think it

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<sup>33</sup> See page 44

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

John Newton (1725 – 1807)

also shattered a core belief that he could control and secure the approval of male, authority figures.

James went home and withdrew to his bed until finally, two weeks later, his wife called the GP who prescribed him anti-depressants. In

chapter one I described how medication has a limited effect on those caught in idealisation loops partly because they offer a daily reminder of failure. James certainly felt that these drugs were an indication of imperfection. In our reconnecting session (November 2011) we talked about this pattern and at the end of the session James decided to give the medication a proper chance. This represented a self compassionate turn towards facing his situation as it actually was – which meant acknowledging the terrible emotional instability he was experiencing and was lost in.

James's burnout is different from both my father's and mine. He descended to what he describes as an 'all time low' yet somewhere in his darkness he saw and responded to a shadow figure that reminded him of other possibilities. He told me,

*"I remembered you talking about self soothing and I started to stroke my arm. It felt very, very weird but good, somehow."*

Then work we had begun the previous year had offered him a doorway out of his dark place. James's quantity of awareness had increased over the years he had sought help and support. I think our work together has enhanced the *quality* of that awareness. Thus, unlike my father, James had a degree of resilience when burnout came.

Burnout – or the experience that comes alive in response to terrible truth - is felt differently depending on the quantity and quality of awareness one has about one's own circumstances, history and disposition. The burnout experiences of myself, my father and James represent a spectrum shaped and coloured by both the quantity and quality of awareness brought in to, during and after the experience. I am reminded of the words to Amazing Grace and relate these to Oshry's conceptualisation of 'blindness' and Glouberman's image of the 'living truthfully muscle'. Both add another perspective to our understanding of looping.

Oshry (1995) refers to four kinds of 'blindness' which sustain vicious looping and other forms of stuck, repetitive and unhelpful behaviours. *Spatial blindness* involves seeing personal truth as universal and being unable to consider the relative, constructed and multiple nature



of belief. For those caught in idealisation loops these beliefs are essential to the maintenance and viciousness of the cycle. For example, James's belief that corporate success would generate self worth and affirmation. *Temporal blindness* refers to an ignorance or unwillingness to consider the complex *histories* that influence and shape the present. Although this research has encouraged me to explore my own complex history and how it informs and shapes my professional practice I am still aware that this is a huge vista that my eye can sweep over but cannot still process as a whole. *Relational blindness* involves not seeing the part we play in contributing to and sustaining the relationships we find ourselves in. Perfectionists have a tendency to externalise blame and see the faults and the failures in others before they see their own shortcomings (Flett, et al., 2002). Part of my inquiry has been to discover and nurture a *compassionate* relational practice which enables those caught in idealisation loops to see the part they play in their own down fall but with compassion rather than criticism. Oshry's final blind spot is *process blindness* - an inability to see the interdependence and connectedness of all things. I remember how hard it was for James to initially make a link between his childhood survival strategies and the way he interacted with male authority figures at work. You will remember that James' father left when James was six and he became the 'man of the house'. Developing self compassion involves understanding how our experience is connected to a wider ecology of human experience (Neff, 2011).

Glouberman (Glouberman, 2003) also refers to blindness and encourages a practice of living *truthfully* which, "*starts with the intention to be honest with ourselves about our own experience.*" Glouberman observes that our 'living truthfully muscle' becomes flabby unless we choose to exercise it,

*When our living truthfully muscle is weak, other muscles take over. They tell us 'not yet', 'just this one last time', 'I can't possibly' or 'please don't make me change'. Each time we refuse to follow these voices and consciously honour our truth, we strengthen our living truthfully muscle.* (Glouberman, 2003 p. 210)

I think my living truthfully muscle was stronger and firmer than both my father's and James's although like my father and James I had strong and compelling reasons not to exercise it regularly. Like a smoker, perhaps, who reasons that giving up would be more harmful than continuing on the basis that the body has adapted to the cigarette toxins and chemicals.

It takes compassion to live truthfully because truth can be unpleasant, unwelcome, terrible and grief making. Truth (the actual or 'what is') can be a powerful activator of our threat system and compassion is needed to regulate this reaction. Truth expands our field of vision

and makes it more likely that we will find a way of making sense of our experience during times of crisis and deep pain in a way that brings new insight and growth.

When I reflect on these three experiences of burnout I notice the weight of sadness I feel as I come to terms with the truth that my father lived without compassion and I was unable to affect that. Yet during the last two years I have seen the emergence of a compassionate practice that has (I now know) been seeded and watered by all those years of living with, against and may be finally through my family narrative.

Returning then to Casserley and Megginson's (2009) collation of burnout indicators I add my own comments that speak more specifically to and critique the phenomena of burnout as it is experienced by those caught in vicious idealisation looping.

- Burnout is a negative psychological condition that develops over a long period of time among individuals who do not manifest behaviours indicative of mental illness

*For those caught in idealisation looping an enormous amount of mental energy is expended maintaining ideals. This energy is siphoned away from the nurturing of relationships, self compassion or physical rest. Thus whilst a client may not appear to be mentally ill there are, all around, signs of these loops in motion. I refer you back to the chart on page 81 which lists the manifestations of maladaptive perfectionism which I would say are clear behavioural indicators of burnout.*

- Burnout can go unnoticed for a long time

*Often those most susceptible to burnout are highly concerned with maintaining a 'perfect' outer image. Thus burnout may go unnoticed. However, if you (a partner, a coach, a friend) look and listen closely it is possible to witness the many paradoxical 'mandorla' experiences playing out faintly beneath the surface of this tough exterior...these mandorla experiences are the golden gateway in to burnout as a developmental and generative experience.*

- It is primarily a work related phenomena

*Burnout can occur whenever and wherever the 'terrible truths' of a life materialise and are felt, seen, experienced as such. Idealised images and related 'loops' need not be confined to work. They can involve ideals of family, marriage, parenting, success, religion, gender and so on.*

- It occurs more frequently amongst younger employees in the earlier stages of their careers.

*Burnout can occur at any stage in a person's life, although for those caught in idealisation loops the more mature and well used the loop the more intense and profound the burning and breaking will be.*

- It occurs most often amongst those who have high expectations and goals and are driven to succeed

*This is certainly the case for those caught in idealisation loops for it often takes a very powerful trigger experience to finally halt the grinding, repetitive patterns of behaviour that are in the service of the ideal.*

- It is a multidimensional syndrome – manifested by a range of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms

*And the intensity, duration and outcome of the experience will be determined by the quantity and quality of awareness a person brings in to, within and out of the experience.*

- It is a universal and not culturally dependent phenomena

*Perfectionism and the kinds of idealisation loops that arise from it may be particularly nourished by Western cultures that promote the notion that one can achieve or be anything one wants if there is sufficient determination and perseverance. (Slaney, et al., 2002). The pursuit and importance of material wealth and success which characterises western society may also contribute to the anxieties and pressures handed down from parents to children and which fuel perfectionism and vicious idealisation loops (James, 2007). However, western attitudes and values have spread to almost all parts of the world and in my work with global clients I sense that the 'striving for flawlessness' that defines perfectionism and fuels idealisation looping may now be an increasingly cross cultural phenomena. However, this is a vast subject of research not within the scope of this thesis.*

## Summary and reflections

The experiences that can be referred to as ‘burnout’ or the,

“... *state of mind, body and spirit reached by those of us who have come to the end of a particular road*” (Glouberman, 2003)

cannot be confined to a work related phenomena and are strongly mediated (in terms of trigger events, depth, duration and outcome) by the *particular* vicious loop an individual is trapped within and the *quality* and *quantity of awareness* they have about these loops, their origin and the functions they serve. Warmth and compassion without self knowledge is not sufficient for transformation just as self knowledge without the qualities of compassion will not sustain development and change.

Although there is limited research conducted between perfectionism and burnout (Philp, et al., 2012) the research that does exist shows a strong relationship between the two. Of the 42 abstracts I collated between 2004 and 2013 where burnout and perfectionism were the focus of study all made a correlation between those exhibiting perfectionism type characteristics and those suffering stress and burnout (at work, on the sports field, at home, parenting) and the majority made a *strong* significant correlation. (Chang, 2012); (Childs, et al., 2012); (Lueneburger, 2013); (Tashman, et al., 2010); (Friedman, 2000)

However many of these studies do not take on the remit of or go on to describe how to work developmentally with these particular patterns of behaviours and associated difficulties. The writers I have so far featured in this thesis (Horney (1950), Glouberman (2003), Casserley and Megginson (2009), Shahah (2009) and Flett and Hewitt (2002) are emphasised partly because they *do* consider practice issues. They all suggest that a warm, holding environment that is without judgment, pace or sometimes even direction (recall Gouberman’s ‘wait, give up hope, keep the faith’ mantra) are important factors in working with perfectionists about to experience or already in burn out. Yet none of them specifically explore the purpose and function of intentionally developing a client’s capacity for *self compassion*. It is only later, in the work of Paul Gilbert, Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer that I began to understand how self compassion might be the essential human capacity that has the potential to free us from compulsive, limiting and destructive emotions and behaviour.

Thus, coaches working with clients who may be glimpsing terrible truths or who are feeling the pain and turbulence of mandorla experiences would do well to consider the particular and specific blind spots and repetitive patterns that cause the client dissonance. A resilient

and experienced coach who is able to recognise and *gently name*<sup>34</sup> their clients' particular form of looping and the dispositions that support it can be a significant resource. Above all the coach needs to recognise the role of self compassion as the client, caught in a powerful idealisation loop, turns to face his terrible truth.

In the next chapter I suggest practices based on my own experience of burnout and recovery that could inform a more intentional practice that is focused in particular on those caught in idealisation loops. You will recall the distinctions Horney (Horney, 1950) made between types of 'neurotic solution' *all* of which are concerned with maintaining an idealised self but which manifest in very different behavioural and emotional loops.<sup>35</sup> My work is focused on and particularly interested in one of those solutions which Horney calls the 'expansive' solution – a concern with *mastery* and the *conquering* of obstacles. It is in this solution that I observe the striving and desire to achieve and win that defines the motivations and stuck loops that many of my clients experience.

In the following chapter I describe how my experience of burnout compelled me to recognise the limitations of some life long strategies. It was during this phase of my inquiry that my still largely theoretical inquiry in to self compassion took a *visceral* turn. The experience of burnout compelled me to enter in to a much richer, personal exploration of self compassion. This enabled me to *apply* what I had been reading about. In burnout I learned through my own experience that by bringing compassionate attention to any part of my loop I was able to (even momentarily) interrupt the circling. I discovered in these moments of interruption new ways of thinking about and experiencing myself and others.

I will also describe the compassionate work I did to hold James safely in his dark place. Unlike me James has not yet found peace or new meaning in his experience. He has some way to go before that. And unlike my father he has not disintegrated from the impact of the shock.

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<sup>34</sup> The skill of 'gently naming' takes courage and fortitude for we have already seen that the character type we are working with is likely to disappear, become hostile to or avoid the emergence of new truths. Gently naming involves compassionate repetition and a willingness on the part of the coach to explore openly and with patience that which has been named.

<sup>35</sup> See page 76 - 77

## Chapter Six: The emergence of a compassionate practice.

### Introduction

Between March 2012 and July 2012 (the period that I now refer to as my burnout) I spent a lot of time at home resting (for I felt permanently tired), reading and quietly experimenting with compassionate practices. I was fortunate to have had a natural lull in my work schedule that allowed me to retreat and begin a healing process. For those tightly held in their idealisation loop it often takes a crisis of health to force this pause. I have never been tolerant of 'time off'. So had I not been on a three month break I would probably have dragged myself in to work and suffered the consequences of doing so. I was lucky to be spared this.

On April 4<sup>th</sup> 2012 I formed an intention in my journal to nurture my compassionate self which began a journey for me that continues to this date. What I offer now are the most significant experiences that supported my healing, informed my learning and inspired me (from July 2012 onwards) to bring compassionate practice more fully in to my client work. Thus there are two parallel stories: my own process of recovery and learning and the application of this in my practice which I track in this chapter to December 2012. I can distil this learning and application in to five distinct areas.

- The nurturing and emergence of my self compassionate voice. In this chapter I offer three examples of working with voice tracking using journaling and audio.
- Discovering the active role of the 'threat centre' and its importance in both triggering and maintaining idealisation looping.
- Finding a self compassionate path to mindfulness.
- Designing and including a compassionate mind session in a leadership programme I facilitate for a large corporate client.
- Working explicitly with perfectionism and self compassion in my coaching practice.

### Tracking my self compassionate voice using journaling

In the early days of my burnout (March to April 2012) and as the healing process began I paid particular attention to moments in which my critical voice appeared. This was usually in moments of anger or frustration which were frequent during that time as I struggled to cope with the loss of an idealised version of myself that I had become very dependent on. I was encouraged to track my critical and compassionate voices by Chris, my ADOC supervisor and my therapist who suggested I listen over the audio recordings of our sessions paying particular attention to the tone and 'feel' of my voice.

So I started to write down the conversations in my head and then go back over the writing to highlight what I observed as my critical and compassionate voices.

In the extract below I am battling to make sense of a strong feeling of disappointment and frustration that arises in me when a train I am due to take is cancelled. I wrote this entry whilst waiting for the next train. The red font represents my compassionate voice and the blue my critical voice

April 2012

*I will be late. Me, the facilitator who above all prizes punctuality. How awful....now I won't be the perfect facilitator, I won't be role modelling, I won't be able to raise an eyebrow or look disapproving when they are late. I won't be able to talk to them about the impact lateness has on other members of the group. If I did I would be a hypocrite and a hypocrite is tainted, unacceptable, lacking in self awareness. Write an email to the group! Let them know you are not lying in bed having overslept! Tell them about your cancelled train. Tell them you will come as quick as you can, you are dedicated, hurrying, urgent.....This is not self compassion. This is punitive. If you catch the next train you will only be 10 minutes late.... They'll make use of your lateness to reconnect, they will enjoy a slower start to the session. No! Being late lets people down. Don't let people down! You're remembering your own experience of being let down, abandoned. Yet you have not abandoned your group. You have emailed them immediately, you will get on the next train and run from the station. You care about them! You are not an abandoner. This is not your fault. You care for this group and you will give of yourself to them when you arrive, even though you are tired and afraid. You are not a bad person for being late.*

And then this entry after a difficult phone call,

April 2012

*I shouldn't be angry. Look at what my anger does! It damages the children, it tells the world that everything is imperfect and wrong! That I am not coping. Shut up angry woman. Get control. No, it's not your fault. You have been harmed. This anger could be useful. It is part of the healing. Do not turn it inward and allow it to eat you. Let this anger direct you to new action. Rest now. Stroke your arm, just as you taught J. To do: Breathe in to your stomach. Feel it rise and fall. Rise and fall. Feel the pain ease a little. The physical pain of abandonment. There. See. The hot knives are there but they are not turning in your gut anymore.*

What I am doing in both these journal entries is recording my first thoughts (usually critical) following an emotionally charged experience and then countering them with a more compassionate response. This was a very challenging practice to learn and to maintain. At first my compassionate voice seemed false, make believe and somewhat embarrassing to me. It was such an *unfamiliar* way of sense making and I questioned the value it brought. Yet I persevered.

*Each day I stop and ask myself what would a compassionate response be to myself right now? Often I think I will have to eliminate self criticism entirely ...because any appearance of self criticism (justified or not)...sabotages my efforts to soothe. This is tiring stuff. Now I am paying attention to it I notice how self critical I am. Yet there is now a new phenomena to deal with – before I managed/controlled my self criticism through self justification (I am right or I know what is right). This is the perfectionist character, driven by criticism and at the same time always in battle to prove the critic wrong. Yet...I have lost sense of who I am and what is right or true.....so now what? Self justification needs to be replaced with self compassion?*



*Cultivating self compassion in me and with people like me will not be easy. We are hardened, suspicious of ourselves, living in fear and prone to mania. (LJ 5.04.12)*

Gilbert (2010) and others (2010) suggest that the 'self' is simply the manifestation of how we organise our experience. During this period of tracking my voices I came to realise that my 'self' had been organised in a punishing and brutal way. I could not access much self compassion because I feared this different voice would jeopardise all that I knew and which had served me.

*I feel the left and the right sides of my brain warring....time and time again I ask myself what would a compassionate response be right now? My head is full of plans. It doesn't want compassion....(LJ10.04.12)*

I notice now the strong pull of my idealisation loop. I was ready and willing to create another ideal. This time I imagined I might move to the country, live the creative life, turn my back on modern values and all the destruction they bring. Yet the writing, the tracking of my voices slowed me down. I continued to include a response to my idealised self – which comes from both the actual self,

*Why is doing nothing so hard for me? Isn't doing a fundamental problem?  
I'm always searching for a solution, an answer, a way forward.*

And the real self,

*What might it be like to simply sit in this mess? ...to wallow in the shit and smell it and become curious about its texture and composition?*

And the actual

*I always want to clean away the shit, to scent the odorous air with plans and possibilities. Isn't the rural retreat the same again?*

And the real

*Wouldn't it be remarkable if I finally found peace in the midst of the shit?*

(LJ: 12.04.12)

This battle and interplay of the voices goes on for some months and probably contributed to my debilitating exhaustion. *Fighting* the critical voice drained me and often I felt powerless and beaten. It took me many more months to recognise that this language of warfare was exacerbating my feelings of fear and threat. To see my critical voice as an enemy was making the work more difficult and I will expand on this when I consider the impact of *threat* on our ability to feel compassion.

### **Voice tracking with James using audio and writing**

The process of voice tracking and the small but consistent changes it brought to my self experiencing inspired me to introduce the practice in my coaching work. In December 2012 I asked James if I could record our sessions so that we could listen back and introduce a more reflexive quality to our sense making (Hertz, 1997). He agreed. I sent him the recording to listen to over the Christmas period. Below is an extract from our session in January 2013 which shows just how powerful this process can be in revealing the deep and pervasive feeling of self contempt that defines perfectionism and sustains the idealisation loop. I start by asking James what it felt like to listen back to the recording,

James: ....its powerful, I won't deny that..

Me: How far did you get?

J: Quite far...I listened to bits of it but (sighs deeply)...I almost feel sorry for myself listening to it...

N: That's great, that's part of the process.... that you listen to yourself and feel 'poor guy'..

J: Yes but that's self pity isn't it?

N: Well that's your *current* default framing...but you could imagine using sorry for, compassion for, respect for...and may be in time *that* kind of framing will be more available to you..the biggest thing is to hear the person speaking as *you* and to be able to recognise the hard time that this person, you, is going through...

J: I didn't get that far!

N: No..it is only the first time though.

J: Yes, it is more about, pull yourself together and stop projecting such weak, negative, sad, helpless images...or states....as this is not necessarily intrinsically who you are.

N: OK, that's great...you are beginning to reflect on the different selves present in you and seeing the possibilities...

J: Yes, but I have a very strong sense of whining child...

N: Ah, so that's moving from feeling sorry to cross with? Reprimanding? Self critical?....did you notice the transition of first feeling *sorry for* and then *criticising* your voice?

J:...no.....only now talking it through...even if I listen to my own recorded voice on my answer phone I feel uncomfortable with the sound. I always have....so listening to the voice itself....I just don't like the *sound*, it's that simple.

N: OK, so that's a really powerful example of how deep that critical part of you runs....

J: Yes...it is interesting because when I speak publically I am very conscious of what I am saying, how I am saying it, how I sound, how I am coming across...I am so worried about all that and I become almost more focused on that than the substance

N: Do you get nervous speaking publically?

J: Jesus, Yes!.....I've had white outs – often can't remember what I've said, I couldn't speak or formulate a word and it feels as if the world is just standing there...and I think Oh my God I am going to die....

(extract from audio recording December 2012)

This exploration with James of what happens when he listens to himself helped him to surface and more deeply consider ways in which he experiences self contempt and his critical voice. Like me he found the process difficult. He was reluctant to listen to the recordings and as I worked with this reluctance I discovered in me a new (compassionate) patience. To support this work I suggested James also try some appreciative *writing to* nurture his compassionate voice. This was in the form of writing letters *to* himself *from* his best self. The self that is kind, tolerant, humorous, forgiving and able to offer perspective. James experienced this practice in the same way I did. Writing compassionately felt awkward, embarrassing and clunky – at first. However after a few weeks he said he felt the practice was soothing and he enjoyed reading back over his work.

### **Tracking my voice using audio recordings**

When I listened back to the recordings of my voice in my therapy sessions I was struck by how confident and strong my voice sounded. I reflected on this during a therapy session in May 2012.

N: My voice is not reflective of how I feel.

E: Yes...you sound jolly..as if you are kind of enjoying all this, as if you are proud of it....whenever you experience vulnerability you seem to come in with an injection of courage, strength, power, inventiveness, resourcefulness. That makes people feel and hear that 'she is OK'.

What this realisation opens out for me is an exploration of how strongly constructed my idealised self image is. My therapist comments,

E: you make yourself tighter and tighter...you never really allow yourself to expand in to what you really are, what you need, what you feel.....I recognise what you say about the world being merciless – you *do* have to survive – but I'm also aware that by doing it in this way you squeeze yourself all the time and there isn't enough depth and breadth to you....and you will be taken for granted...that you are not needy or need to be given anything...

N: I don't want to be a loser....

E: But in this situation you *are* a loser! (she is referring to the ending of my relationship with B.)

Over the next few months, as we focused on the way my voice supported my idealised images/self, I started to pay attention to how hard I work for my idealised self, how I was always on duty, on guard looking out for and then challenging threat. I started to feel sympathy and then empathy for this over-worked me. In July 2012 I told my therapist that I was beginning to like the sound of my voice.

E: do you think your voice has changed?

N: I don't know

E: I think so....it is relaxing. You seem to be finding your depth and your ease....you used to be very frightened, a bit tight. It's really opening up.

In March 2013 I listened back to a recording of that July 2012 voice. It was a recording of me delivering my first session on compassionate leadership – the one I had designed and will describe shortly. I was struck by how gentle, inviting and quietly knowledgeable I

sounded. I felt admiration and respect for that self - the achiever and striver – and noticed it was working collaboratively with another self – the learner and experimenter. I saw in this collaboration a joyful mandorla experience – expressed by the sound of my voice – revealing an imperfect yet strong enough ‘actual’ self facing the world with equanimity and courage.

### **Reflections on voice tracking**

Coaches embarking on this work need to be prepared to work with very small (but important) shifts in experiencing. I notice when working with James that I tried to affirm and appreciatively receive the *fleeting* glimpses he revealed of his compassionate self. I also received this kind of support from my attentive ADOC supervisor and my therapist who remained watchful of my dominant inner critic and facilitated the emergence of my meeker compassionate voice.

In their comprehensive research on burnout Casserley and Megginson (2009) strongly emphasise the role of coaches (or significant others) in ‘holding’ the person as they learn about and engage in these reflexive practices. Holding may simply be, in this instance, the appreciative reframing of the clients inner critic and an alertness to the expressions of the compassionate self. It may also be re-creating the environment for growth that Winnicott (1973) describes.

The combination of *listening to* one self and *writing* down internal dialogues is a powerful dual practice to bring the *quality* of voice sharply in to awareness (tone, feeling). Paying attention to the quality of voice brings insight (I never truly heard how critical and harsh I was with myself until I did this) and a shift in perspective from imagining the self as a single entity to glimpsing the multiple, various and rich contributions of the ideal, actual and real selves.

I also notice that compassionate practice requires me to work with the *pulsating* movement of change. I am re-imaging change from a pendulous swing between resistance and willingness to the emerging, loosening and expanding of the self and then its contraction again. I will discuss movement in relation to ‘relapse’, ‘resistance’ and doubt in the next chapter. It represents a significant part of compassionate practice and working with idealisation loops.

Two years on I still record my voice in coaching and in my therapy sessions (which are less frequent now). I have to say I have no problem listening to my voice now. I am able to recognise myself as a thoughtful, intelligent, vulnerable and caring person. I also hear my ideal self from time to time and although I find her rather bossy and deluded I quite like her

too. I hope that in working with voice in my coaching sessions I can support my clients to experience this shift in relationship to self through this process.

### **The significance of the threat centre**

Towards the end of April 2012 I wrote in my journal,

*I have been struggling so much these last few weeks to live compassionately. I have experienced a significant trauma and my threat system is in overdrive. I cannot self soothe in any regular, reliable or enduring way....And yet I get up in the morning, look after my boys, work, shop, cook and get through life. And on the surface who would know about the suffering underneath? I think of my clients, some of them struggling through each stress filled day with traumas of their own. And I am reminded of how harsh and self critical they are, how this opens them to abuse and exploitation and how confused they become – or ashamed – that they cannot cope with these so called quotidian burdens. Compassionate practice needs to involve a process of enabling clients to see their suffering without condemning and berating themselves for that suffering (because it is seen as evidence of weakness and failure). I know this because I am in the midst of that process. (LJ: April 2012)*

That same week I attended a Self Compassion conference at Reading University to listen to practitioners and researchers such as Paul Gilbert, Kristin Neff and Deborah Lee. I had intended to sign up for the workshop with Kristin Neff on self compassion yet during the morning presentations I was intrigued by Deborah Lee's work with post trauma patients. At the last minute I changed my mind and joined Lee's afternoon group.

I was struggling to live compassionately. I had experienced a significant trauma and my threat system was in overdrive. I was not able to self soothe in any regular, reliable or enduring way. I went to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) workshop because I wanted to find out how I might access self compassion even or *especially* when my threat system was throbbing (as for PTSD sufferers).

I had already learned about the threat system through my reading and brief conversations with Paul Gilbert (Gilbert, 2010). Gilbert summarises a large body of neurobiological and

evolutionary perspectives in to what he calls the Compassionate Mind Model. He argues that there are basically three emotional or affect regulator systems in the brain (see figure twenty nine) and for optimal functioning each system must interact with and regulate the other.

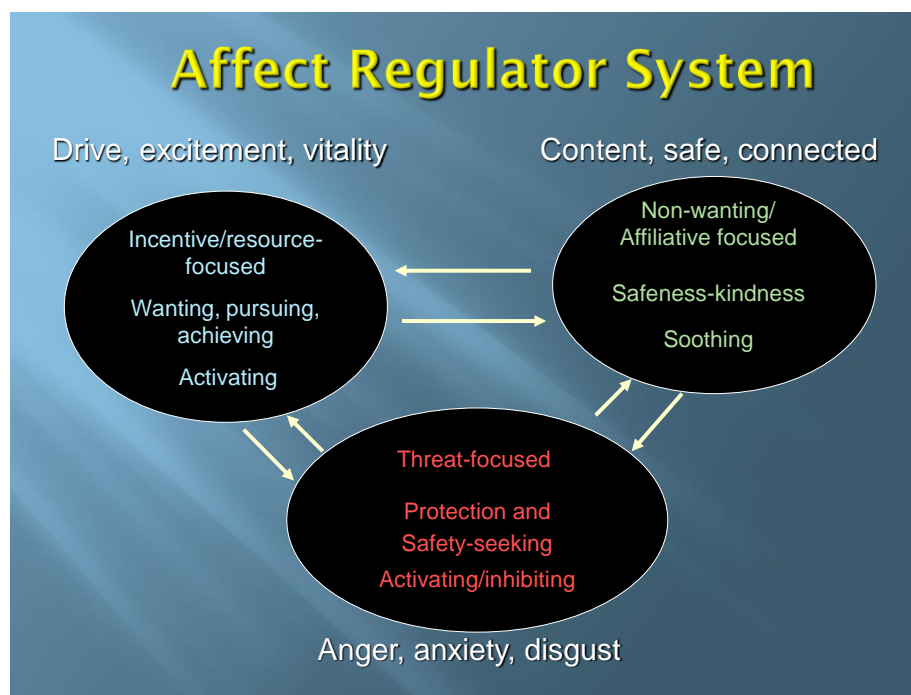


Figure 29: Affect Regulator System (Gilbert, 2010 p. 24)

In the April 2012 workshop I heard Deborah Lee articulate the jumble in my head so clearly. *That there is little point using traditional coaching or therapeutic intervention when the client's threat system is in overdrive.* When I received the letter from B., when James exploded on his boss, when my father was in a drunken rage. All of us in threat and needing not the voice of sense or even possibility. Just the voice of compassion and acceptance. Yes, right now it *is* terrible. And, it's not your fault even though it is your problem.

When the threat system is very active cognitive behavioural interventions (such as tracking and rationalising negative thoughts) do not generate the required *feeling* states (kindness, safeness, acceptance) required for change. Patients are seen to do the work but as if by rote. Similarly, psychoanalytic explorations of the past only serve to heighten the already over active threat responses through the re-living of experience.

It was this realisation that inspired the development of Gilbert's compassion focused therapy (Gilbert, 2012). His interest in compassion grew out of working therapeutically with people experiencing complex mental health problems. As a Clinical Psychologist he noticed that whilst patients understood the benefit and logic of 'alternative' thinking strategies offered by

Cognitive Behavioural Interventions, they often reported being unable to experience a corresponding alternative *feeling*.

*I know logically I am not a failure but I still feel a failure. I know logically I am not to blame for the abuse but I feel blameworthy and bad.* (Gilbert, 2012 p. 140)

Gilbert and others (Haidt, 2001); (Stott, 2007) agreed that awareness simply in the form of cognitive acceptance is not sufficient to produce a corresponding feeling state or emotional change. Psychoanalysts such as Horney (1950), Rank (1925), Reik (1936) and Auerbach (1950) had already suggested this and some new interventions focused specifically on surfacing strong feeling states were developed within the analytic field.

However, Gilbert was interested in how *evolutionary* psychology and more recently the *neuroscience* of reassurance and soothing could inform practice. Gilbert's research took him further along the path travelled by Darwin (1998), Bowlby (1997) and more recently neuroscientists (Depue, et al., 2005); (Ledoux, 1998); (Stein, 2007).

To guide his research Gilbert asked,

*What is self-reassurance and self compassion? Do they have therapeutic properties? How do they work in our brains? Could we teach people to focus on these elements in their relationships with themselves and others?* (Gilbert, 2010 p. 141)

It was in efforts to answer these questions that compassion focused therapy began to develop.

When I first read Gilbert's work and attended his training I was very moved by a phrase he often used in his teaching,

*It's not my fault but it may be my problem*

That phrase became a mantra for me in the early days of my burnout. It was a simple route in to self compassion and helped me to recognise the complex and multiple influences that sustained my idealisation loops. It is also a mantra I started to offer to my clients as I framed the evolutionary approach to looping. Recent feedback following a 2012 leadership programme suggests that this mantra has embedded for many of the participants and helps to regulate their inner critics.

During the April workshop Lee (Lee, et al., 2012) focused on the importance of recognising and working with clients experiencing threat. She was particularly interested in the role



shame plays in activating the threat system<sup>36</sup> and as I listened to her I felt my own shame of not being good enough, of having failed to hold my family together. It occurred to me that my threat system was highly active and probably had been for many years – perhaps from the time I was lifted from my cot and brought from the tropics to the Northern Hemisphere to begin a life that was not coded in to me. This felt like a compassionate realisation. Up until then I had not made sense of my behaviour as arising from a deep and pervasive sense of threat - at least not in a conscious way. I had understood my looping as an expansive strategy arising from a desire to succeed, emerge and conquer. This is a very different frame from the one that started to emerge as I understood my behaviour as a *survival* strategy designed to *protect* me.<sup>37</sup> In the previous extract my therapist pointed out how the former, more punitive understanding of my strategy ‘squeezes’ and ‘tightens’ me. It does not expand me at all.

In my exploration of the development of perfectionism and idealisation loops I have shown how threat based childhood experiences contribute to the development of these strategies for survival. Gilbert and Lee’s work reminded me just how important it is to pay attention to what is perceived as, and what triggers, threat as these perceptions and triggers offer clues relating to the a person’s particular idealised beliefs and related vicious loops.

During the workshop Lee suggested that when a person is feeling threatened the first thing to do is awaken the compassionate mind. There is no point trying to work with the threatened brain. She offered a practice which is patient, emerges over time and is above all careful and respectful of the client’s state. Lee called this practice *Compassionate Resilience* and it involved enabling moments of compassionate insight (such as the one I felt whilst listening to her), supporting the patient to develop motivation to care for them self by focusing on the lovable qualities of that person, encouraging compassionate feelings and sensations (Lee works with smell and asks her patients to bring in smells that they associate with good feelings/memories) and developing a compassionate approach to problem solving (she is interested in finding out what her patients do to make themselves feel better). I think what Lee is doing here is first enabling the client to soothe themselves (to regulate threat) and then introducing the practice of self compassion.<sup>38</sup>

Lee’s workshop called to mind Glouberman’s mantra, *Wait, Give up hope, keep the Faith.* (Glouberman, 2003). After that workshop I went back to Glouberman’s work and thought

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<sup>36</sup> See also Brene Brown who writes and speaks extensively on the subject of shame. (Brown, 2007)

<sup>37</sup> First as an immigrant, then as a growing child witnessing the disintegration of her family

<sup>38</sup> Soothing and self compassion are not mutually exclusive – there is an overlap. However, before the compassionate voice can be heard the physical and psychological threat responses must be calmed.

more carefully about those words. They made a lot of sense. Wait because whilst I am injured and bleeding there is no sense in trying to move, it would make matters worse so lie still. Give up hope because hope represented attachment to ideals that have driven me, blinded me, ceased to serve me well. Keep the faith because something in me had stirred – the real self I glimpsed in mandorla moments - that knew this place to be fertile.

### **Summary and reflections on threat**

The importance of understanding how and when a client becomes threatened is an essential skill in the development of compassionate practice. When a coach is able to spot threat they are better able to shift their inquiry or approach *in the moment* towards activating the compassionate mind. They might use Lee's interventions described above or they might pause to focus on relaxation and breathing that can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and activate the soothing system of the brain. They may also benefit from using some of the compassionate practices offered by Gilbert (2010) which I summarise in appendix one (page 214). I began to notice, for example, that James would feel threatened when I inquired in to *before* appreciating the changes he reported and felt were positive. Working with James has helped me to develop my capacity to appreciate as a stand alone intervention.

The important thing here is for practitioners to understand threat not as an irrational psychopathology but as a *functional* response that has enabled the client to survive. The client will be attached to, familiar with and probably reliant on the activities of the threat based brain. A compassionate practice accepts this and regulates threat by first honouring it's function and then gently turning towards re-framing and re-experiencing the emotion by activating the compassionate/soothing system capabilities.

In a recent Google group conversation hosted by the Compassionate Mind Foundation, Ron Unger, a clinical social worker specialising in adolescent psychosis, expressed this idea clearly,

If people are ever going to be compassionate with themselves and heal, they may have to be careful not to assume that parts of themselves are completely bad in their intentions, but instead be open to the possibility that however dysfunctional their strategies may be in particular situations, there are some valid wants and needs and intentions somewhere underlying them, which can potentially be discovered and then respected.

I think it is important that we find a way to compassionately see the threat system, and its sidekick "the critic" as allies in our lives, even as we guard against becoming too caught up in them. This keeps us from getting caught up in loops or vicious circles where we see the activity of the threat system as itself a threat, and fight against it, while it fights back, in a disruptive and unnecessary "psychic civil war" to use Eleanor

Longden's term<sup>39</sup>. Another way of describing this might be to say that when we look compassionately at parts of ourselves, they can become transformed by the way we see them, and themselves become more compassionate. (Ron Unger) <sup>40</sup>

When I reflect on my previous relationship to threat based responses from clients I see that my response has often arisen from a belief in the irrational and dysfunctional aspects of threat. For example, a young Asian male client confessed that he had some difficult memories and experiences of his dominant mother. I was alert enough to see that I as a female, Asian authority figure (in the form of a group facilitator) might trigger these feelings and create an 'unhealthy' transference. Whilst this still remains true for me, my approach might now be to first bring some compassion (not interpretation) in to my response drawing upon Neff's (Neff, 2011) three components (kindness, mindfulness and common humanity) of compassion,

*So, there may be some really good reasons why you and I might find it harder to establish a helpful relationship? [kindness] Can we both pay attention to that as we work together? [mindfulness]. And I am sure others in the group also feel that certain relationships in the group might be more difficult to form that others and perhaps that is something we can talk about and review as we go along. [common humanity]*

Being alert to threat is our evolutionary 'factory setting'. It is important to honour and work with threat based responses. It is not the case that the client has 'nothing to fear' and that his behaviour is merely problematic and irrational. Often clients caught in idealisation loops have *much* to fear – the very basis of their character and survival is dependent on the maintenance of their loop.<sup>41</sup> To know this and work with threat compassionately defines my coaching practice now.

### **Compassionate Mindfulness**

After the April 2012 workshop I returned to my work with a new attitude. In the light of these insights in to the threat system I understood just how important it was for me to develop the self compassionate voice that would awaken and feed the soothing system in my brain and regulate the threat and drive based behaviours so characteristic of my loop. I wanted to be able to bring these insights to my client group, who, I felt were also caught in threat based

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/a-firstclass-recovery-from-hopeless-case-to-graduate-1808991.html>

<sup>40</sup> **Is the Threat System itself a Threat?** Google group conversation March 2013. [compassionatemind@googlegroups.com](mailto:compassionatemind@googlegroups.com)

<sup>41</sup> I will return to the subject of 'character' or personal ontology in chapter five.

looping. So I began to research the subject of self compassion in more depth and followed the work of Kristin Neff, a leading researcher and writer in the field, with great interest. Her website offers an incredible resource for those interested in self compassion providing audio tapes, research papers, profiling tools and all the latest conversations relevant to this subject. <http://www.self-compassion.org/>.

Referring back to Neff's (2011) three components of self compassion I can see that I had some, and gained more experience of, practising (both personally and professionally) at least two – self kindness and mindfulness. I learned to develop self kindness primarily through voice tracking and physical rest. In this section I focus on mindfulness as a core skill of self compassion and how my mindfulness practice developed and informed the way I worked with clients. The third component – common humanity versus isolation - is a subject I expand upon in the final chapter as I reflect on the challenges of sustaining self compassion and extending compassion in to the 'outer arc' of my experiencing particularly in a culture that supports and rewards individualism.

Over the last few years mindfulness has become a subject of interest in the leadership field and is now included in the courses I run as a way of improving concentration and managing stress. I had facilitated a few of these sessions using the knowledge I had gained over the years studying and practising yoga. Neff describes mindfulness as,

*Being aware of present moment experience in a clear and balanced manner so that one neither ignores nor ruminates on disliked aspects of oneself or one's life.....*

Mindfulness prevents,

*Being swept up in and carried away by the story line of one's own pain*

Yet often, during the darkest moments of my burnout in March and April of 2012, I was swept up in that storyline. I realised (as I surfed the internet, paced the floor and took painkillers to quieten my clamouring inner voices) that mindfulness was not something that came easily to me. I found it hard to stay in the present. I noticed my mind constantly wandering to future plans or past experience. I saw how busy, preoccupied, always processing, evaluating and judging I could be. This realisation humbled me. I had been teaching a practice that I did not fully understand or use. Now, in the midst of my own burnout, I wondered whether I could expand my understanding and practice of mindfulness by learning about it as a participant on a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programme. I wondered what new insights I might gain from using this practice to manage my own distress. I also hoped that whatever I learned would inform my professional practice.

At the end of April 2012 I joined an eight week mindfulness based stress reduction course (MBSR) - a programme influenced by the work of Jon Kabat Zinn (Zinn, 2001)

I attended four of the eight sessions<sup>42</sup> and wrote extensively about my experience. After the second session I wrote,

*“I was struck by how self condemning the participants were and how their lack of self compassion seriously threatened their ability to act, participate and move forward...” (LJ: 20.05.12)*

Like the other participants I too had not been able to keep up with the 60 – 90 minute meditation practices that were given as homework. However, at the same time I was following a conversation with the Compassionate Mind Google group regarding the ‘dose’ and ‘duration’<sup>43</sup> required for compassionate mind exercises to be effective. The response and advice from one contributor, Russell Kolts (Kolts, 2012), was extremely helpful to me,

First, my tendency is to approach compassion focused exercises in the way I've always approached any behavioural homework assignment - with shaping - so that establishing the practices is itself a treatment goal to be gradually and consistently worked toward. I usually start them<sup>44</sup> up practicing soothing rhythm breathing for 30 seconds to a minute, several times per day (at least 3), often starting after the very first session. That's an easy one to get going, as it's brief, relatively easy to do, and can be done easily during TV commercials, etc... so easier to motivate the client to do. Once I've got compliance at this level and the foot is in the door, it's easier to move on to longer and more complex exercises...which we start blending in pretty soon after that.

Secondly (particularly with the anger groups), I've tended to emphasize relatively short duration, with several repetitions throughout the day. So maybe they do the exercise for only 5 minutes or so, but 2-3 times per day. It can also help to have brief cuing practices at different times that don't require the complete exercise. So I might have someone do a 10 (or 20, if they'll do it) minute compassionate self exercise in the morning, and then come up with ways to remind themselves throughout the day (cell phone alarm, small stone in the pocket, reminder in the day planner, et cetera) to take a couple of minutes to contemplate qualities of the compassionate self they are working to develop (for example, "kind"; "confident"; "wise" for 30 seconds each). Once they see it start to work, compliance tends to go up, as with anything else. <sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> After a discussion with my teacher I decided to leave the course prematurely as my own practice had begun to take a very different path to that being taught on the programme.

<sup>43</sup> This terminology reflects the clinical and medical context in which this discussion started

<sup>44</sup> His clients

<sup>45</sup> **Dose Duration.** Google group conversation April 2012. [compassionatemind@googlegroups.com](mailto:compassionatemind@googlegroups.com)

Kolts specialises in working with clients who have anger management problems - in other words, people whose threat systems are very active. I discovered as I followed this conversation and also through my experience of the MBSR course that very short bursts of meditative/mindfulness practice were far more effective than pushing myself to 'achieve' the 30 – 90 minute goals set by the course. A few minutes, several times a day, of deep breathing and focusing attention helped me to quieten my daily agitation. I felt I was successfully and gently making useful changes to my self-experiencing.

Both the course and my research conversations inspired me to re-design the mindfulness session that I was asked to facilitate in June 2012. This time when I taught free fall writing (a written form of mindfulness practice) and breathing I suggested very short, manageable practice sessions of three minutes. I also drew attention to the inner voice and asked the participants to simply notice the tone - is it critical? Kind? Tolerant? I realised that asking for more with those who have loud inner critics and who strive for perfection is a mistake and can actually serve to exacerbate their self loathing. Many of the executives attending this leadership programme admit to being perfectionists and come to recognise the problems (as well as the advantages) these strategies create. As I worked with them I was reminded again of Lee's point that interventions will bounce off a threatened mind.

In December 2012 one of the participants from that group told me that he had bought a book on mindfulness following the June 2012 session. He said he couldn't help but endeavour to follow the author's advice of forty minutes practice a day. Predictably he was struggling to maintain this regime and was starting to feel despondent and self critical. I reminded him once more about the 'short sharp bursts' and also shared with him my own struggle to bring this practice in to a useful place in my own life. He seemed surprised but also relieved to hear his 'teacher' describing her own struggles and attempts to practice. At the end of our conversation he said he would follow my lead and reduce his practice to three minutes, three times a day. This participant is a perfectionist, a high achiever and outwardly a successful and happy man. Yet during our work together between June 2012 and February 2013 he disclosed to me experiences which I could now describe as mandorla moments. He was in the midst of a divorce and this experience in particular was challenging previously held beliefs about himself and his aspirations. When I spoke with him in December 2012 I sensed his threat system would be (and was) easily activated by another perceived 'failure' – this time to meditate 'properly'. Hence my strong encouragement to try the three minute meditations. When the programme finished in February 2013 he told me that my 'compassionate advice' had saved him from entering a familiar downward spiral. He was using the short breathing exercises regularly each day and had not experienced deep

depression since. I asked him whether he thought his inner voice had changed in quality and he became very animated in response. He had *definitely* noticed. He told me that he had eased off his punishing gym schedule and was instead focused on eating well. He was delighted to discover that even though he was exercising less, taking more rest and generally having more down time he felt fitter, happier and slept well.

## Reflections

I am reminded now of Sorotzkin's (1998) observation regarding the tendency of perfectionists to strive for perfectionist goals as part of the treatment process. In other words give a perfectionist a practice and they will try to master it overnight! Unfortunately because practices and human growth are not overnight achievements the perfectionist is highly likely to experience a sense of failure in the change. Thus, as I have already noted in chapter two, perfectionism needs to be an *explicit* focus of the intervention. Practitioners need to be aware of the pattern of striving, goal fixation and self imposed standards for change that those caught in this kind of idealisation loop bring in to the development work. In response, interventions need to be clearly (and compassionately) framed and evaluated within the context of this tendency. I return in the final chapter to the question of how to work with the challenges of non linear, messy and pulsating movements of change that characterise the process of lifting out of vicious looping.

This exploration and re-framing of mindfulness also reminded me that I needed to support the shift in my teaching of mindfulness with some new reading that offers evidence and supporting arguments for the benefits of three minute mindfulness and gentle practices. This would enable my high achieving clients to become increasingly oriented to a kinder developmental approach. In my search for this material I noticed that I was looking for work that explicitly referenced and incorporated self compassion within its method. I found Christopher Germer's teaching and practice useful (Germer, 2009). In particular I remembered and wrote down his words at the end of a self compassion course I attended in July 2012,

*"We need to recognise the subtle aggression of harsh self improvement.....the goal is to become a compassionate mess!.....mindfulness takes us out of threat, self compassion allows us to be with it.....so just place the [kind] words on your heart and one day the heart breaks and the words fall in."* <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher Germer speaking at a Self Compassion workshop 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

## Compassionate Leadership – An Action Experiment



Figure 30: Professor Paul Gilbert

I now return to the ideas of Paul Gilbert, a Clinical Psychologist, researcher and writer whose work and support have been instrumental in the development of my own personal and professional practice during the later stages of this doctorate inquiry. It was Gilbert's book, *The Compassionate Mind* (Gilbert, 2010), that I picked up in February 2012 as I began to enter the vortex of my own powerful mandorla experiences. Gilbert responded to my request for support and collaboration and it is through this relationship that I have made connections with others who are interested in and developing compassionate practice. Gilbert was particularly interested in collaborating with me to develop compassionate leadership training and offered his own clinical material and image data base freely and encouragingly for this purpose.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> March 2012, only three days after receiving the letter from B., I contacted Gilbert in an email. I had started to read his book after a powerful mandorla experience, which I have already described, at Sydney airport in February 2012. I quote the full text of the email below as it serves as a succinct summary of where I had got to in my doctorate work and the request for help and collaboration which marked a turning point in my research.

Dear Paul

I am a doctorate student at Ashridge Business School completing (this year) a professional doctorate in organisational consulting. I initially (20 years ago) trained as clinical psychologist, psychotherapist and family therapist and worked for 10 years in the NHS and social care fields. I left to run my own business (restaurants) and then returned to psychology and groups but this time in organisations. I am now an organisational consultant working with mostly private sector clients from board level to middle management. I currently lead a global leadership programme for xx, develop senior teams in xx and xx, and offer coaching in a variety of other organisations.



My doctorate inquiry has taken many turns. For the first few years I was immersed in a first person inquiry exploring my own painful history and patterns to understand their impact on my consulting practice. More recently I have been connecting these experiences and sense making. What is emerging very strongly for me is the role of self compassion in my work and life. After twenty years of working with people and their difficulties I have realised that increased awareness – often understood as the start and end points of personal development – is very limited unless that awareness is accompanied by a practice that supports the individual to live with what becomes known. That practice, I think, is self compassion. I have been exploring this construct/practice within the context of my own life and difficulties, using myself as a guinea pig.....I also find I am indirectly bringing self compassion based methods in to my leadership and facilitation work. I want this now to surface as a more intentional and consolidated practice with clear purpose and direction (and outcome of course)

Over the next four months as I start to write my final paper and bring together my research my focus will be to explore how my clients and I might bring self compassion in to our work and development. My intention is to inquire with clients and colleagues to explore further the meaning, application and possibilities for this practice in supporting learning and development in organisations.....What, if any difference does it make to their work, their productivity and their performance?

I am very excited about how this inquiry is developing. I am writing to ask if you might be interested in a conversation with me about the following:

- Your views on how self compassion might be brought in to organisational life – there is more written about compassion than *self* compassion in this field. I was very interested to read the article by Shepherd and Cardon (2009) about project failures and how self compassion may be a factor used to understand variance in learning from project failure. I also see useful links that can be made in the research that suggests clinicians should be trained in self compassion practices to mitigate against burnout and compassion fatigue. This could also be said of consultants and coaches. I continue to search the literature but so far cannot find much more on how self compassion might be or is worked with in organisations – perhaps you know more or could put me in touch with someone who does?
- Whether you or any of your colleagues might be interested in collaborating with me on a profiling or assessment tool that could be used in organisations and
- Adapting current techniques (CMT, Imagery building, Gestalt, MBST, DBT etc.) – for use on corporate leadership programmes.

I would be happy to come to Reading if you could find the time to meet me. I am also coming to the conference on self compassion in April.

I do think this could be a very exciting and rewarding project. Bringing self compassion out in to the open and working with it as an essential and productive practice within organisational life could support the growth of so many professionals who are stressed out, losing meaning and purpose and in dire need of recalibration.

I do hope you can help and collaborate even in a small way with me.

Gilbert responded to my email the same day. We arranged a call and began a collaboration to explore how leaders could be educated and supported to understand the benefit of working and leading compassionately. This collaboration led to the formation of the Compassionate Leadership group which is now part of the Compassionate Mind Foundations' special interest group portfolio (<http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/>).

In June and July 2012 I attended Gilbert's three day training course to learn how he teaches and introduces compassionate practice (which he calls Compassionate Focused Therapy – CFT) to trainee Clinical Psychologists. This training helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the evolutionary and neurobiological roots and functions of compassion and its importance in interrupting vicious loops. Gilbert's clinical examples and interventions inspired me to adapt, re-frame and eventually bring these ideas in to the heart of my consulting work.

Since July 2012 I have included a session on compassion in several corporate leadership programmes I deliver. I use Gilbert's work to explore how our behaviour is both determined and constructed and how an appreciation of this might generate more compassionate and effective ways of behaving and relating in organisations (and beyond). His developmental and change theories which draw upon evolutionary, neurobiological and spiritual ideas provide an additional perspective on idealisation looping that enhances the key cognitive behavioural (Flett, et al., 2002) and psychodynamic theories (Horney, 1950) offered previously. My intent in bringing compassion in to my work is to invite a deeper inquiry in to human behaviour – one that is empathic, compassionate and patient. I do this because I believe these qualities make possible a courageous exploration of mandorla experiences that hold rich developmental potential.

In July 2012 I asked a key client (and friend) whether he would be prepared to support an experiment in the service of my research. I wanted to adapt Gilbert's ideas for a corporate audience and deliver a session entitled Compassionate Leadership. I showed him the slides and notes and framed my intention carefully. The leadership programme was already in to its fourth workshop. I proposed that in workshop five we trial the session and invite participants to evaluate their experience and the relevance of the ideas in their work.

I taped this session and found it extremely useful to play back and transcribe my work. As I have already mentioned I heard myself in this audio recording as a confident yet vulnerable practitioner bringing new ideas to a somewhat sceptical audience. I heard the passion and intent in my voice and also the genuine desire to interact with and learn from the responses and questions I received. The experience of designing and delivering this session in July 2012 highlighted for me:

- The importance of providing *scientific and evidence based* propositions to introduce the concept and practice of compassion
- The widespread *yearning* for compassionate experiences and environments

- The need to *integrate* compassionate practice into the leadership programmes I deliver so that compassion runs as a meaningful thread throughout the learning.

This workshop was a pivotal moment in the development of my practice and my confidence to start adapting Gilbert's work for my clients. I will summarise the key points in the design and delivery of this session and conclude with the learning that emerged from this experiment and inquiry.

### **Preparing participants**

In my pre-session design conversations with my client I understood that compassion as a word or practice was not familiar to or enacted explicitly within the organisation or industry. This is my first point of departure with Gilbert's work and experience. Gilbert works in the NHS where compassion *is* spoken of and (in theory) practiced. Thus when he teaches and trains his clinical staff or works with patients the concept is accepted as a relevant and potentially useful one for healing/recovery, clinical skill and general patient care.

This is not the case in the corporate contexts I work. I wanted therefore to offer my participants the chance to read and think about the subject before attending the session. The bullet points below are taken from the preparatory email I sent the group in June 2012.

- Read (at least some of!) the attached articles and papers

The articles<sup>47</sup> I sent were intended to clarify what (self) compassion meant and how it might be a useful concept when thinking about problems, failures and errors in the workplace. I also included a book relating to Appreciative Inquiry as this was a methodology already familiar to the client and could provide a useful frame (positive psychology) for thinking about and practising compassion.

- Visit this website [www.selfcompassion.org/](http://www.selfcompassion.org/) and complete the very quick self compassion scale (they will give you a score on line) – also worth having a browse of this site as it relates to the content of workshop 5.

Although this profile is a bit like the sort of thing you might find in a glossy magazine I thought this would be a light way in to a conversation about compassion and our individual experience and attitudes towards it.

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<sup>47</sup> - Self Compassion, Self Esteem and Well Being by *Kristin Neff* (Neff, 2011)

-Being Wrong by *Kathy Schultz* (Schulz, 2010)

-Negative Emotional Reactions to Project Failure and the Self Compassion to learn from Experience. By *Dean Shepherd and Melissa Cardon* (Shepherd, et al., 2009)

-Appreciative Inquiry: A positive revolution in change by *David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney* (Cooperrider, et al., 2005)

-Six exercises to strengthen compassionate leadership by *Andrew Newberg*. (Newberg, et al., 2012)

- Email me an image which triggers a **compassionate** feeling/response in you as we want to compile a slide show from these images  
(you can view the images participants sent me in appendix two)

I intended to play this slide show prior to them entering a compassionate coaching session. The images are intended to stimulate warm feelings and to open the heart.

- Come with an example of a distressing or significantly difficult situation/encounter you have been involved in recently and which still causes you concern or struggle. Be prepared to share with one other and receive some peer coaching around this issue.

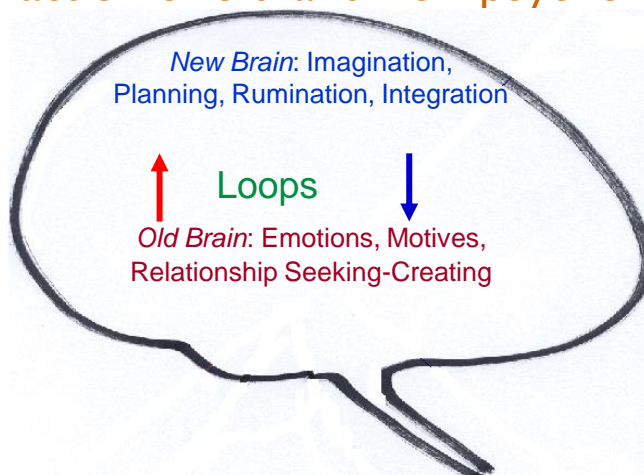
This was preparation for the coaching session that would enable them to try out some of the skills I would outline in the overview.

### Workshop overview

The workshop was designed around three key themes: *compassion*, *power* and *courage*. My purpose was to introduce self compassion as an intentional practice that could interrupt the threat based responses to organisational power and authority typified by over compliance, group think, stress, conflict and apathy. In the morning I introduced Gilbert's work to encourage participants to consider a neurobiological and evolutionary perspective of human behaviour. In particular I asked the group to consider how our 'factory setting' - the threat based affect centre of the 'old brain' – still resides within us and can get in to unhelpful interactions (or loops) with our evolved, 'new brain capabilities.

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## Interaction of old and new psychologies



Thinking brain can cause serious problems in using old affect and motive systems

Figure 31: Interaction of old and new brain psychologies (from a slide pack produced by Gilbert 2012 for training purposes)

I emphasised that these loops (as we have already seen) are particularly tenacious and problematic (or vicious) when we are feeling threatened. Our old brain is programmed to help us fight, flee or freeze in the face of threat. Our new brain, however, encourages us to think about, imagine our way out of, make plans about and reconstruct threat. This tension and difference in approach stimulates a loop, in particular the tendency for people to continue to ruminate about threat even when the threat has passed. (Sapolsky, 2004)

I asked participants to think about the 'threats' present in everyday organisational life and how they respond to them. The three most common threats talked about in this group were:

- Poor performance appraisal and the consequences that arise from this
- Conflictual relationships – especially with authority figures
- Unmanageable workloads

In these conversations participants were able to recognise some of their own stuck patterns or loops (the difficulty in saying no to additional work demands) and to frame this within the evolutionary (and compassionate) perspective, *'it's not my fault but it may be my problem'*. I suggested that mindfulness practice (of the kind we had already been learning about in workshops two and three) was one way to interrupt this kind of looping by enabling us to step back and observe what we are thinking, feeling and doing. I then developed this thought to suggest that *compassionate* mindfulness (as I have described in the previous section) does the same thing but also infuses our observation with warmth, tolerance and kindness. This is important, I emphasised, because compassion stimulates our *parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS)* which fires our neural networks and stimulates our hormones and body chemicals very differently to when we are feeling threatened. When we are threatened we may want to run away, fight or freeze. When we are excited (our drive system) we may want to take risks, work harder or pursue. Yet when our soothing centre is stimulated through PSNS activity our *motivations* to act are different again. This time we will want to connect, bond with others or rest. The point of this is to recognise that each affect centre (threat, drive and soothing) is designed to do different things and also to work together as a system to balance and regulate each other. It was surprising to me how willingly the participants accepted that mindfulness practice might be useful. Several people shared their experience and knowledge of their version of mindfulness and referred to exercises they did to prepare for sporting activities or difficult presentations. Most of these

involved some sort of calming, soothing or regulating activity such as breathing, silence or body stretching exercise.

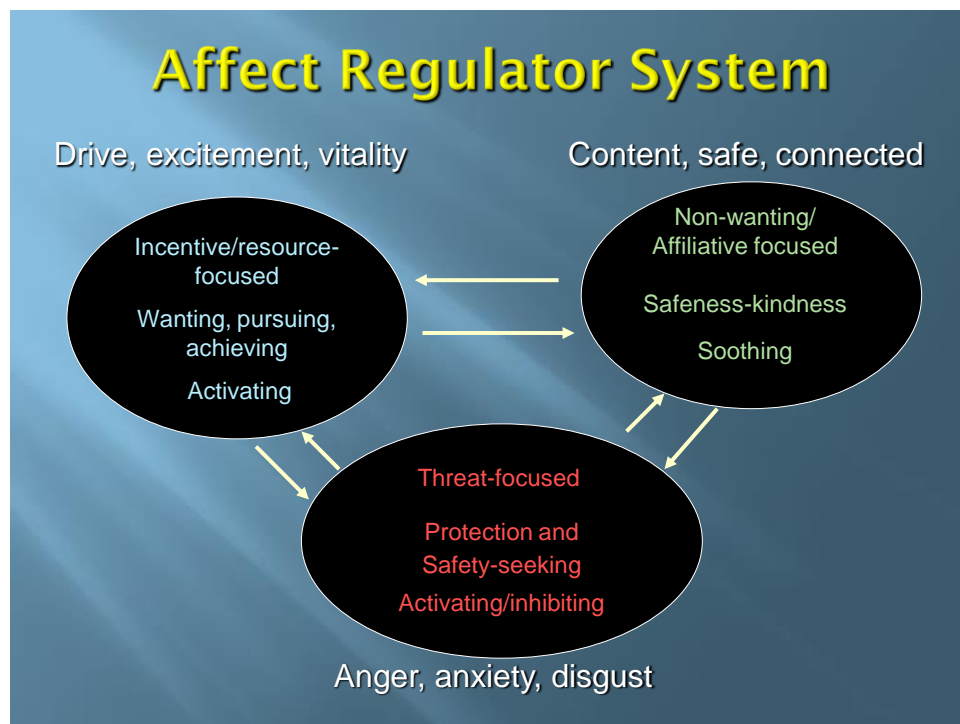


Figure 32: Affect Regulator System: (Gilbert, 2010 p. 24)

The final part of this session introduced the idea that modern living may encourage the threat and drive centres of our brain to be constantly stimulated (Sachs, 2012). Furthermore, if individuals have experienced problems in childhood relating to attachment and bonding it is possible that their soothing centre will be underactive or even undeveloped. I showed the slide in figure thirty three to emphasise that those who have suffered severe threat/neglect in childhood may find it very hard to stimulate that part of the brain which reassures, quiets and enables them to give and receive affiliative, reassuring emotions.

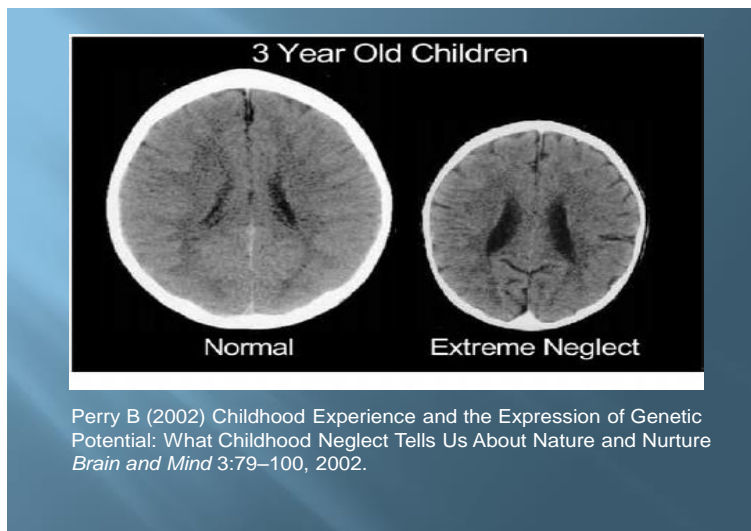


Figure 33: Impact of childhood neglect on brain development (Perry, 2002)

This encouraged a discussion in the group about how important it is to remain open to the idea that *'it is not my fault but it may be my problem'* applies not just to ourselves but to those with whom we work. A compassionate approach would enable us to understand that our angry boss may have very good reasons to be alert to threat and may find it difficult to respond to or be motivated by non threat or non drive based information and emotions.

I concluded the morning session by suggesting that one way to address the problems associated with the over-stimulated threat and drive centres is to develop the capacity of the soothing centre. Gilbert (2010) suggests that to do this we need to develop both compassionate attributes and compassionate skills. I provided an overview of these skills and attributes (see figures thirty four, thirty five and thirty six) and also gave them a hand out detailing some of the practices summarised in appendix one.

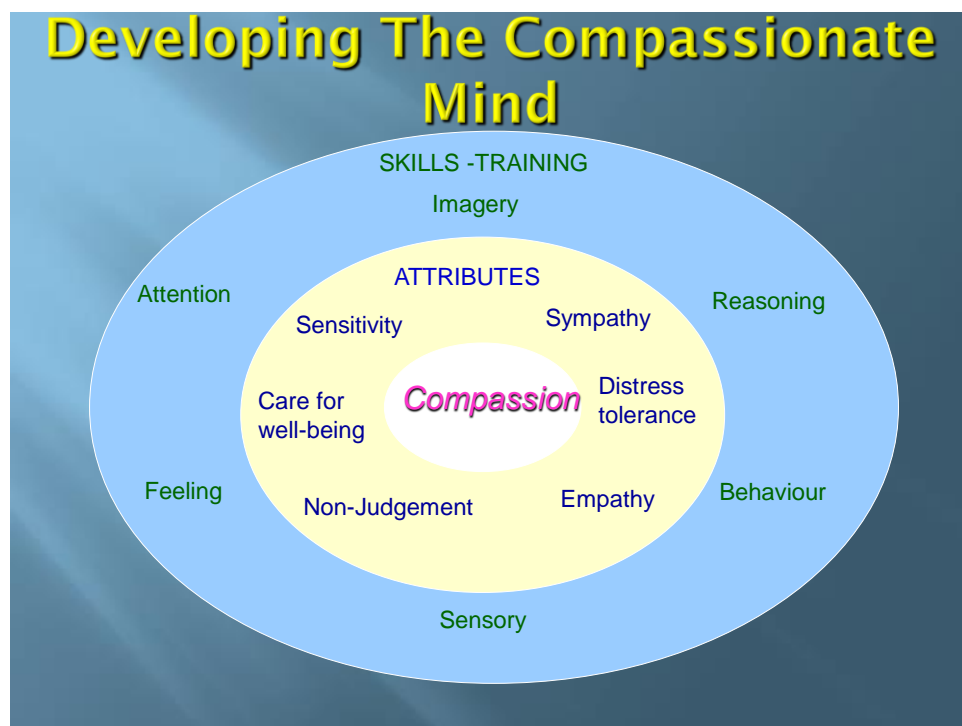


Figure 34: Developing the Compassionate Mind: (Gilbert, 2010)

## Compassionate Attributes

- ▣ **Care for well being**  
 Motivation to be more caring of the self and others
- ▣ **Sensitivity**  
 Allowing oneself to feel emotion
- ▣ **Sympathy**  
 Noticing and being moved by suffering and feelings
- ▣ **Tolerance/acceptance**  
 Being able to tolerate/stay with difficult or strong emotions without avoiding, denying, disassociating
- ▣ **Empathy**  
 Understanding how it has come to be this way
- ▣ **Non Judgment**  
 Engaging without condemnation and without submission – courage

Figure 35: Compassionate Attributes





Figure 36: Compassionate Skills

The discussion that followed increased the group's understanding of how to engage with each other during compassionate coaching practice session<sup>48</sup>. To support this discussion I drew on the recent work of Newberg and Waldman (2012) who have researched and compiled a list of twelve 'conversation strategies' that support compassionate communication which I summarised to six: *stay present, cultivate inner silence, access a pleasant memory, observe non verbal cues, speak briefly and listen deeply*. I also referred the group to the work of Orem et al. (2007) who offer an accessible approach to coaching which is grounded in appreciation and compassion.

Before breaking in to pairs I took the group through a visualisation exercise that calls to mind a person's compassionate self (Germer, 2009). The purpose of this exercise is to attune an individual to soothing images and to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system to release calming chemicals in the body (such as oxytocin). This regulates the threat system and prepares the coach to work with difficult or distressing content. After this the pairs formed and took turns to share a work based problem that had caused them some distress. One person took the role of the (compassionate) coach and the other the role of the coachee. The coach's role was to encourage compassionate attention and inquiry. The

<sup>48</sup> Coaching practice threads throughout this leadership programme as it is regarded as important leadership skill – the coaching and development of others.

coachee's role was to take and maintain a self compassionate stance and to stay open to receiving compassion from the coach.

In the afternoon I departed from Gilbert's work to make a stronger link between compassion and some of the challenges of organisational life. I showed a short film<sup>49</sup> replicating the 1960's famous Milgram Experiment which measured the willingness of study participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal conscience.<sup>50</sup> (Milgram, 2010)

The purpose of introducing this subject was to encourage participants to consider how compassion can help interrupt the patterned responses and behavioural strategies that arise when a person feels threatened or pressurised - in this case by a demanding or imposing authority figure. My proposition was that compassionate attention (or mindfulness) stimulates the soothing centre of the brain which in turn enables a person to enter in to an exploration of the mandorla experience of a conflicted conscience. At the time of presenting this idea I did not speak of mandorlas to the group for I had not yet articulated this notion in my own mind. However, I did speak of courage which, I have already said, is an essential quality required for the exploration of mandorlas. It was and is my contention that compassionate practice/attention nurtures the courageous in us which in turn brings forth the possibility of new action – or the interruption of looping.

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<sup>49</sup>

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcvSNg0HZwk>

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzTuz0mNlwU>

Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmFCoo-cU3Y>

<sup>50</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram\\_experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment)

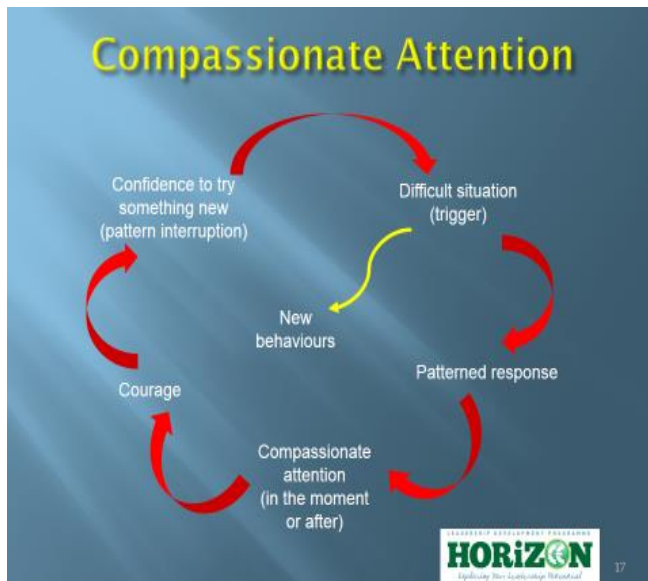


Figure 37: Compassionate Attention: a slide I produced for the July 2012 session

The integration of compassion with the themes of power, obedience and courage represented my first adaptation of Gilbert's work and my first attempt to frame compassion as a useful and productive leadership capacity, skill and attribute - in particular the role of compassion in interrupting vicious loops. In the review and feedback sessions that followed this workshop a number of issues emerged:

- Participants found it difficult to remain compassionate – coaches wanted to give advice 'solve' or 'fix' problems and the coachees wanted to blame, analyse and evaluate. *Compassion seems to require the ability to suspend judgment (of self and others)*
- Coachee's felt sad and sometime very upset when their coach was kind to them. *Compassion can activate a person's threat system.*
- Both coach and coachee felt at times that compassionate responses were embarrassing or 'soft' and did not have a place in a professional context. *Compassion is frequently not understood as a courageous, strong, productive capacity in organisational life.*
- Some participants found the exercise difficult and felt they could not access compassion as described in the overview. *For some people the soothing/contentment system is underactive or damaged. Compassion is not easily accessed.*
- Participants reported hearing for the first time the tone of their inner voice and expressed surprise and concern at how critical and harsh it could be. *The inner critic is a well integrated and dominant force within the psyche of many participants.*

Is that all there is? Self compassion and the imperfect life.

Nelisha Wickremasinghe

- Participants recognised the many threat triggers in everyday organisational life. *What are the implications of living and working in a consistently threat based environment?*

## Reflections

The learning from this workshop informed my developing professional practice, particularly in my one to one coaching work for it was there that I was able to experiment more directly and intimately with compassionate practice. In particular the workshop in July 2012 reinforced how unfamiliar and difficult the practice of compassion is for those 'expansive types' whose strategies for survival are based on striving, winning, achieving and conquering. In other words for those who manage the threats (perceived and actual) in their world through the creation and maintenance of impossible ideals.

Since July 2012 I notice I am more attuned to perfectionism and idealisation looping as resilient and challenging client phenomena – ones which underpin many of the complaints or frustrations that are brought in to the coaching and leadership development space. This may be because my interest in the subject spotlights it. It may also be that idealisation looping and perfectionism are on the increase in a society that demands relentless progress, growth, self improvement and bottomless aspiration.

To conclude this chapter I will describe in more detail how my coaching practice has evolved in response to my compassion focused approach. In doing so I draw to a close my work with James which ended in March 2013.

## Developing client self compassion in my coaching practice

During the final year of my doctorate inquiry (2012 – 2013) I paid increasing attention to the *tone* in which clients spoke about their difficulties and stresses. I noticed time and time again how harsh, self critical and impatient these corporate executives were with themselves. I also noticed how when I suggested a

I thought that the session in the morning on the evolutionary / neuro biological approach was very thought provoking. I got a lot from the session that I will apply or take into consideration in work situations going forward. In particular it gave me a lot to think about why I might react in a particular way in certain situations and some things that I should look out for. It also got me thinking about how others react in certain situations and on reflection I can relate to past situations in my working career where I have wondered why others have behaved in a particular way. In summary I found the session very useful and relevant to work. I think it will be very helpful to me going forward.

Being from an engineering background the slides showing the evidence for different brain activity were useful to set the scene. My understanding on the key points of the course were the principle that our brains have evolved and humans' brains are not ideally designed starting from a blank sheet of paper is interesting and I can understand this accounts for our "old brain" that I relate to the "gut instinct", this should be listened to but not rule our behaviours.

A few years ago I would be very sceptical about such research / statements on these approaches, but I think some of the evidence is certainly compelling. Some of the brain scans on neurological patterns are very comprehensive. During the session I was still a little sceptical as to the evidence to back up the "old brain" elements and what I perceived to be some leaps of faith in judgement. That said, I was keen to give it a go and pleased I did, as towards the end of the session a lot seemed to "make sense". I think the big question in how to take this forwards was how to "manage" the potential contradictions between old and new brain.

**Participant feedback: July 2012.**

practice (such as journaling or mindfulness) the client would invariably snatch at this and then attempt to master it before the next session. Inevitably this would not happen and the following session would create another opportunity for self condemnation. I saw this pattern emerging with James and it worried me. Was I becoming part of his problem? When one is working with perfectionists caught in idealisation loops how does a practitioner avoid colluding with another ideal – in this case compassionate practice as a panacea.

To answer this I return once more to the concept of *self compassion*. Through my own experience I have come to realise that without self compassion I simply cannot manage the energy and looping that arises out of both my threat and drive systems. As a (recovering) perfectionist my survival loop is an ongoing interaction between my threat and my drive system, the one reinforcing and triggering the other. So, when I am threatened (even subconsciously) my response is usually to ‘work harder’, to achieve and overcome. This relationship between the threat and the drive system is powerful because the drive or incentive and resource seeking system (releasing addictive chemicals such as dopamine) can block out or control the unpleasant feelings coming from the threat system. As Gilbert points out, (and which brings us in a circle back to Horney (1950))

*Losing that feeling of control can activate a very strong sense of self criticism and self hatred which is rooted in the rage and fear of disappointment...indeed this inability to feel kindness, gentleness and loving acceptance towards it partly fuels the disorder* (Gilbert, 2010 p. 175)

Now if I sense my client is caught in a similar loop the focus of my work – overtly and repetitively – is to first work to increase and sustain the clients feeling of self warmth and self regard. In other words the compassionate life *begins with self* compassion and for those for whom this experience is unfamiliar or absent the journey towards self compassion *is* the process of healing and recovery.

Now when I start work with a client I intentionally listen to the *tone* of their narrative and suggest they do the same by voice tracking and journaling. These two practices are the foundation pieces of my work to strengthen the self compassionate core. Beyond this I introduce short mindfulness exercises in the form of focused breathing and free fall writing, I work explicitly with appreciative re-framing of experience and thought and I encourage an atmosphere of ‘safe uncertainty’ (Campbell, et al., 2002) which means engaging in the work without necessarily knowing the outcome but trusting in the process. In other words we become co-inquirers keen to experiment, reflect and learn from the results of our experiments. I also act with self compassion as I work. I show the client through my own vulnerability that it is possible to do good work and at the same time be stuck, confused or de-motivated. Now I am more likely to say things like, “*I don’t know what to do or say next,*”

*or “I don’t have an answer or response right now. I’d like to go away and think about what happened.”*

In my last coaching session (March 2013) with James he seemed unusually agitated. He told me about two strategies he had put in place to find some peace – one was to give up drinking entirely and the other was to embark upon a strict personal fitness regime that would focus him and see him, in a few months, run a marathon. Yet as he talked he did not seem at peace. He seemed frenetic, determined to receive my approval and quite cross. I was perplexed. I could see that these two activities potentially fuelled a new idealisation loop – this time of the perfectly self controlled, healthy achiever. I noted this and he reacted with deep frustration implying that I was not interested in or supportive of the big changes he had made. This reaction reminded of how perfectionists can often become hostile towards their therapist if the therapist’s responses or interventions are not themselves perfect. (Hill, et al., 1997)

Awareness of this enabled me to manage my response in the moment – from one of possible defence (‘No, you misunderstand. I think it is great what you are doing’) to one of openness and (self?) compassion – I said,

*I can see why you might say that.....I am interested - but not so much in the content of what you are telling me...I am interested in the confusion I am feeling and the agitation I see in you...I am perplexed..... I thought we had explored what we both recognised as your ‘alcohol and fitness loop’ and now you’re circling it again but it seems as if you are disappearing the awareness you gained.....what’s going on for you? Are you seeking a particular reaction from me...can you help me understand here?*

At this point James asked if we could turn the tape off and what followed was an intense and revealing conversation which highlighted the disillusionment and disappointment and most importantly *fear* James was feeling. It was our last session and he was not cured (his words). Yet he was able to tell me about a men’s group he had joined in the preceding week and a new job offer that he hoped would lift him out of the toxic environment of his current organisation. He framed both developments as ‘yet another loop’ – new job, same industry. New group, same stories. He was still sceptical about ever lifting out of his loops yet ever so slightly changed the tone of his voice as we continued to speak to one of *wonder* – that in spite of everything he *still* continued along the change trajectory, *still* trying new things even without hope of change. And it was this theme we landed upon and finished on. I reminded him of the mantra,

*Wait, give up hope, keep the faith.*

And he expressed relief. *“I like that,” he said, “because you’re right. I don’t have hope. But I do have faith. In fact faith is all I have.”*

I remembered our first session when he told me about his thwarted career as a priest and wondered whether our work together had taken him back towards the possibility of a spiritual life. Glimpses of the *real* shining through and the *actual* truth of his ongoing disappointment and vulnerability. A mandorla moment explored with courage and emotion in our final session and enabling us to move beyond the ideal towards a different conversation.

Disillusionment, regression, oscillation, relapse and the arduous process of making and sustaining personal changes are the subject of the final chapter.

### **Summary & Reflections**

In this chapter I have described in detail the emergence of what I now call a compassionate practice. I have focused on five significant areas that have provided insight, learning and informed my developing practice.

- Discovering and nurturing my compassionate voice,
- New insights in to the powerful role of the threat system – especially for perfectionists caught in idealisation loops
- Discovering a self compassionate way to practice mindfulness
- Working overtly with self compassion in relation to client and organisational development (and linking compassion to organisational themes of power, obedience, courage)
- A deepening understanding of how self compassion supports the (often painful) exploration and loosening of perfectionist ideals.

As I have shown, my invitation to clients to consider the relevance and benefits of self compassion is framed by the biological and neuroscientific research that ‘shows’ us how are brains are affected by different kinds of stimulus and how those changes in the brain influence actions. However, as my practice develops and I as research more deeply the ‘science’ of compassion I am reminded how complex the relationship between mind and brain is. To claim, for example, that a threatening stimulus will *cause* a certain behaviour is an unhelpful simplification that one might assume most people now would not accept any way. Yet in a detailed study carried out by at Yale by Weisberg et. al (2008) findings repeatedly showed that the vast majority of the study population were more likely to accept bad or untrue explanations of a phenomena (in this case a theory about psychological functioning) if neuroscientific information was included in the explanation. Furthermore the

same explanations *without* the neuroscientific additions were appraised more accurately by participants suggesting that the neuroscientific evidence, when offered, took priority over their own knowing and personal judgment. The authors concluded that the general public is inclined to accept a form of 'medico-biological' supremacy in the description of psychological phenomena. In the early years of inquiry I reflected on my own attachment to this kind of propositional knowing and took some comfort from Heron's cultural contextualising of this attraction:

*"It is the main kind of knowledge accepted in our society – not only in academic theories but in the statements of politicians, propagandist, managers, marketers and others who would define our world and indeed in the more or less explicit theories each of us carry around which define who we are and the kind of world we tell ourselves we live in."* (Heron, et al., 2008 p. 374)

Neuroscientific supremacy is a subject explored in detail by Satel and Scott (2013). The authors are concerned about the rising 'neuromania' or what they describe as the 'mindless' application of neuroscience to explain behaviour. They remind us that neuroimaging is a young science and findings should be handled cautiously, especially given the limitations of the imaging technology itself,

*By obtaining measures of brain oxygen levels..(brain imaging techniques)...show which regions of the brain are more active when a person is thinking, feeling, reading or calculating. But it is rather a daring leap to go from these patterns to drawing confident inferences about how people feel about political candidates, paying taxes or what they experience in the throes of love* (Satel and Scott, 2013, p.xiv)

Or, for that matter, whether self compassion has the capacity to reduce or regulate threat based reactions both in the brain and in our behaviour. Brain images have been used to suggest that self compassion and other warm, soothing affects will stimulate the part of our brain required to regulate threat based reactions. Which may be true. Nevertheless we cannot then infer that our behaviour will change as a result. To give an example. I currently work with a client who has embraced self compassion practices and can report feeling much better about himself on a general basis. However, he still engages in destructive behaviours at home (infidelity) and at work (a task master driving his staff too hard). Self compassion, he says, has not stopped these behaviours but has made him feel less self contempt, which in turn has enabled him to begin a reflective process about his past and how it informs his present. Over time his behaviour *may* change but feeling better about himself (activating the soothing brain) does not in his case lead to a direct or immediate change in behaviour.

Satel and Scott (2013) usefully remind us that,



*Even though the mind is produced by the action of neurons and brain circuits, the mind is not identical with the matter that produces it...one cannot use the physical rules from the cellular level to completely predict activity at the psychological level. (p.xvi)*

The practices that I offer as part of a compassionate practice are intended to enable a person to soothe, develop self compassion and nurture a different relationship to hostile and hateful self experiences. However, I notice that within the frame offered by neuroscience many of my clients are perhaps overly hopeful that these practices – the re-training of the brain - will lead to quick and significant changes in their behaviour. I have not experienced this in my own development nor, to date, seen dramatic changes of this kind in my clients' lives. Lives don't change dramatically for most us and patterns of behaviour recur despite our awareness and our self compassion.

Perhaps this is why the evolutionary perspective emphasised by Gilbert (2010) is so helpful (*it's not my fault but it may be my problem*). We have a brain that is the product of millions of years evolution. As our brain evolves it does not get rid of what existed before. Our brains are new designs on top of old designs and that brings challenges as our new brain consciousness converses with our old brain instincts. It is a challenge which has perplexed and absorbed philosophers, psychologists, and scientist for many, many years. According to Legrenzi and Umiltà (2011) one of the positive benefits of neurobiology is it's strong reminder that not everything is a product of our social learning and our environment. They welcome the challenge neuroscience has brought to post modern thinking that argues a totally relativist and constructed ontology.

Neurobiology does offer new perspectives on old problems – it is useful to see how different parts of our brain activate and to understand the chemical and hormonal reactions that result. Yet how we make sense of these physical feelings and how we then translate them into action is still dependent on our personal and contextual histories and on our current circumstances. My client who remains unfaithful to his wife no longer loathes himself for his continuing actions. Yet without making changes in his relationship (not just his brain) his actions are likely to continue. It is tempting for practitioners in my field to over play the 'evidence' – as this twitter comment jestingly illustrates,

*Unable to persuade others about your viewpoint? Take a Neuro-Prefix – influence grows or your money back! (K.Laws: 28.01.12<sup>51</sup>)*

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<sup>51</sup> ([http://twitter.com/Keith\\_Laws/statuses/163218019449962496](http://twitter.com/Keith_Laws/statuses/163218019449962496))

Perhaps our temptation is not so much about the need to grow influence but to convince the corporate world that there might be a different way of approaching the challenges of organisational life. In this inquiry those challenges have been related to the problems arising from perfectionism strivings that can lead to burnout and poor performance. This different approach does not guarantee a quick fix or immediately observable benefit which is why it is helpful to take the wisdom of science and integrate it with the knowledge from other disciplines. Begley (2009) describes some of the challenges of integration in her account of the 2005 meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. The Dalai Lama spoke at this gathering despite protests from some scientists that spirituality had no place at a scientific conference. The Dalai Lama's response was that both disciplines were in pursuit of truth and,

*By gaining deeper insight in to the human psyche, we might find ways of transforming our thoughts, emotions and their underlying properties so that a more wholesome and fulfilling way can be found. (Dalai Lama in Begley, 2009, p.27)*

The integration of different disciplines has been at the heart of this work. I have used a mixed method approach that draws on both positivist and interpretive approaches to understand and make claims about my subject of inquiry. Compassionate practice of the kind I have discovered, adapted and now bring to my client work is, I believe, a good example of practical knowing that has emerged from the principles of 'eighth moment research' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) that I describe in chapter one. The interface of (neuro)science with the hermeneutics of individual experience I believe stimulate the kind of critical conversations that are responsible for profound change. Nevertheless the challenges of bringing this work to a corporate client group remain strong. In the next and final chapter I consider the complexity and mystery of human growth and argue that *persistence* is a *quality* of human life that cannot be disappeared by science, meditation or personal insight. In contending this I recognise the benefits of more gentle unfolding of my compassionate practice with people who, like me four years ago, have little understanding of its worth.

Thus, my inquiry has taken me closer towards an explicit framing of what I do and how I do it. In particular I have become more cognisant and intuitive about the patterns emerging in my work which connect themes of perfectionism, behavioural and emotional looping, burnout and compassion.

I can now more clearly articulate an orientation towards my work which enables me to loop back (virtuously!) to my 'going in' research question 'what is good work?'. During an

interview for this Doctorate in 2009, Kathleen King<sup>52</sup> asked me, '*what are you passionate about?*' and I struggled with my response. If I were to be asked that question *now* I might say I am passionate about *self compassion*. I would talk about how during this inquiry process I felt as if I were looking for and then finally (against all odds) was reunited with a lost relative once very dear to me. I would also say that I am renewed by and made hopeful again when I work with and support my clients to feel self compassion. At the same time I would caution that the work (my own and my clients) is slow and arduous. Germer (2009) refers to three stages of developing self compassion, the first of which is 'infatuation',

*The heady experience of loving oneself – letting go of fighting the way we are – gives confidence that seemingly intractable emotional problems can indeed be worked through..... the infatuation stage of self compassion eventually has to end though, because it is based on the narrow wish to feel good. (Germer, 2009 p. 224)*

When James first began the appreciative writing practice he sent me an email which illustrates this 'infatuation' experience,

This morning I wrote my first few lines. It was a real struggle to get going but I have made a start! The most surprising thing happened after I put the pen down. I felt a wave of positive energy...like something wonderful could happen. Haven't felt like this in a very long long time! I am hopeful, really hopeful that something amazing is going to happen if I commit to the work we discussed. (James: November 2012)

In the next chapter I consider in more detail what happens after the 'infatuation' stage passes. Germer (2009) suggests that infatuation is followed by disillusionment and then true acceptance. His work calls to mind Kubler Ross's (2005) grieving cycle that revolves through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

In discovering self compassion I have had to enter the mandorla of my actual self – the self that is an expression of a being that has lived without self compassion as part of a well intended strategy to survive. Entering in to this mandorla is grief making. It is also joyful. It is laughing and crying at the same time. Confusing, disorientating and perhaps, as Germer notes, a little like divorcing and falling in love again. There are times still when I revert to and believe in the ideals and strategies that have, at least, brought me to this point. Yet I do not see this as a 'relapse' or 'resistance' to change. Instead I see this movement as an oscillation between my old and newly emerging narratives. It is a creative and respectful process where change involves the honoring, incorporating and borrowing from what has come before.

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<sup>52</sup> Kathleen is the Ashridge Doctorate Programme Director

## Chapter Seven: Going back to the start

*The question of personality growth and change, if it is deep-going and authentic, is usually whether one will end in madness or suicide or whether one will somehow be able to marshal the strength to take the first few steps in a strange world. (Becker, 1970 p. 146)*

### Taking Stock

Throughout this thesis I have focused on certain kinds of repetitive emotional and behavioural loops that hold individuals in patterns of living that no longer serve them well. I called these vicious idealisation loops because I recognised that repetitive emotional and behavioural looping doesn't need to be vicious. Looping can be generative or virtuous. I also recognised that vicious loops can have different characteristics. *This* inquiry has taken me deeper in to an exploration of a particular form of looping which I call *idealisation looping*. Idealisation looping becomes a survival strategy and coping pattern particular to those Horney (1950) might describe as 'expansive types' or we might commonly label 'perfectionists' (Flett, et al., 2002)

My research has suggested that getting caught in a vicious loop is not necessarily our *fault* - even though it may have become our *problem*. Loops are not our fault because strong evolutionary and social factors have contributed to their formation. We become wired the way we are because once that wiring helped us survive. However, recent scientific discoveries have shown that the brain is more 'plastic' than we thought (Begley, 2009) . It is able to adapt and change and re-wire itself if it is exposed to new experiences and messages.

This inquiry has become my search to discover how to lift up and out of vicious loops that *seem* hard wired and permanent. I have been particularly interested in loops which are rooted in a need to control and create a perfect, flawless world. I have been stuck in this loop for many years and have learned that the new messages and experiences needed to re-wire this sort of brain are compassionate, forgiving, gentle and kind. This is because the vicious idealisation loop is fuelled by a harsh inner critic that is relentless in telling how it 'should be' and disappears or blocks our experience of how it actually is or how it might be.

Many of my clients are also caught in vicious *idealisation* loops of striving, self criticism, disappointment and more striving. They frequently describe themselves as perfectionists who never feel entirely satisfied with their achievements or the achievements of others. Whilst it is likely that their early childhood experiences contributed to the formation of their loop it is also probable that the corporate environments in which they now work continue to

nourish the loop. In other words the threat (competition, comparison, hierarchy) and drive (profit, ambition, success, reward) based imperatives that dominate our corporations today catch people in reactive and drive but not *restorative* pattern of working (Bakan, 2005) (Bunting, 2005). This thesis has explored ways in which threat, drive *and* affiliative affects can be better regulated to interrupt and diminish the power of vicious loops.

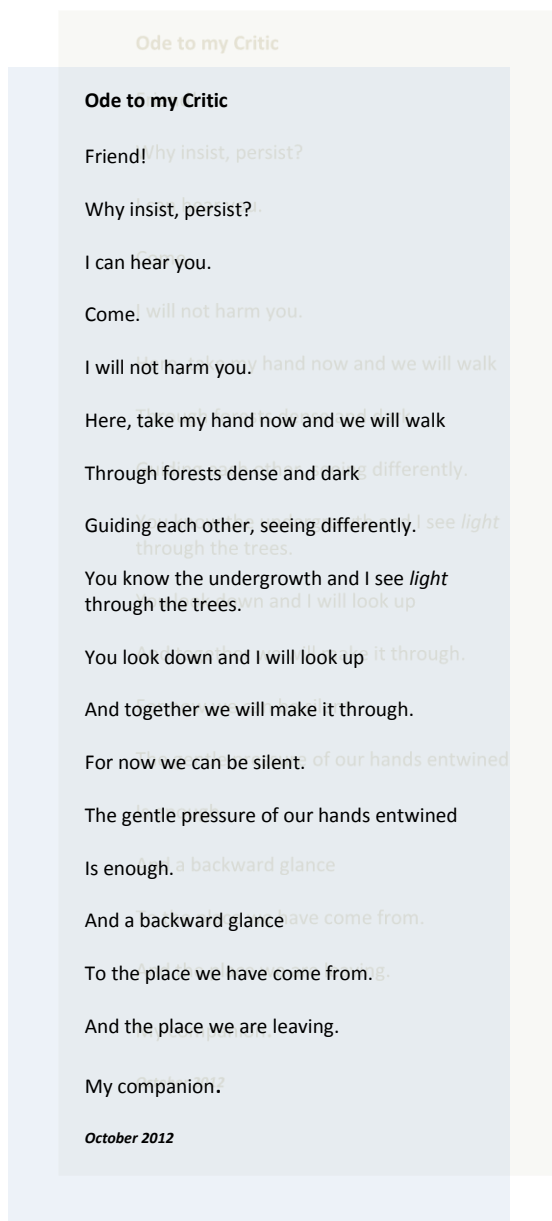
In chapter three I considered how the perfectionist character develops as a response to unfavourable early attachment and nurturing experiences. This exploration showed how deeply embedded or 'hard wired' these responses are and how reliant a person becomes on a particular set of coping strategies even when – as I show in chapter four – there is much evidence to suggest that these early strategies are no longer serving their original purpose. An early strategy to appease one's demanding or critical care giver can reappear years later as a tendency to want to please those in authority. For example, I am coaching a group of middle managers whose recurring dilemma is that they cannot say 'no' to the demands and requests of senior managers. This in turn leads them to focus (in their words) on the *urgent and not the important*. When I asked them what 'important' meant they told me that they would like to spend more time developing their staff and creating 'thinking time' for themselves. They also felt they wanted more time with their customers fearing that these neglected relationships, which had become somewhat transactional, would cause problems later when re-contracting or selling. Here we see a *yearning* to experience the relational and affiliative aspects of the work and also a recognition of a loop (not being able to say no) which blocks this experience and the attendant neurobiological benefits it could bring in regulating the loop.

Clients also get stuck because of a hard wired desire to appease and create positive feelings in the mind of others. From an evolutionary and developmental perspective impressing others, eliciting care and friendship are things that are beneficial to our survival and reproduction (Gilbert, 2010). To understand a vicious loop as a manifestation of our *will to survive* supports a compassionate inquiry that enables our clients to consider the constraining and reinforcing characteristics of their particular loop. Later in this chapter I discuss how the cultural context (of western society) nurtures and rewards threat and drive centred emotions and behaviours and diminishes the importance and contribution of self compassion.

In chapter five I described how this reliance on out of date strategies makes a person vulnerable to burnout *and* how burnout can be experienced in a meaningful way leading to deep learning and the lifting up and out of the vicious loop. However, most practitioners, including myself, will know just how hard it is to support a person to learn from and change

entrenched patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour – *especially* if those thoughts, emotions and behaviours seem to relieve the person of discomfort, distress or anxiety and bring tangible social rewards. You will recall, for example, that Casserley and Megginson (2009) found only 6% of the high flyers they interviewed made transformational changes during and after their burnout experiences and many returned to old patterns of behaving.

In chapter six I described the emergence of a compassionate practice which evolved in response to my own experience of burnout. In my attempt to make new meaning and sense of what felt broken and irretrievable I discovered that *self* compassion offered three important levels of support: First, even *small* amounts of self compassion can provide a



cushion when the burnout experience occurs thus making the pain less frequent, intense and prolonged. Second, self compassion can enable a deep exploration of the mandorla experiences that both trigger and define burnout. In other words experiences that give us glimpses of selves beyond the ideal - our actual and real selves. It is through the exploration of these experiences and the embracing of these lost, hidden or dominated selves that we 're-cast' our narrative – away from the ideal and towards the human and the possible. Third, self compassion as a life long practice can sustain and nurture change *alongside* ongoing 'resistance', 'relapse' and oscillation. Self compassion is the affect and experience of understanding, patience and tolerance. It manifests most strongly in our spiritual self, our best self and our mother self.

Although self compassion certainly helped me to both endure and lift out of burn out quickly and with new insight and resilience I still, over a year later, get sucked in to the swirling motion of my vicious loop. During the last few

months I have been joyfully experiencing the reciprocal and affirming qualities of a new relationship. Yet even in the midst of this I can hear my idealised self suggesting, dictating and seducing. This time she wants me to organise the relationship in a way that prevents

the repetition of patterns that played out in my previous long and problematic partnership. I can sense she is scared and threatened and because of this she is restless and wanting to 'help'. I have swirled in the loop and momentarily enjoyed the exhilaration of being with my idealised self again. I do *like* the way she goes about life – urgent, bold and certain. Yet she can no longer be the sole author of my ongoing narrative. Now I am able to recognise disconfirming evidence which challenges my idealised self and I want to include it in my story. For example, there are other people, most significantly my new partner, who disagree with my idealised plans. Once I might have disregarded such dissent (as I did with B.). Now I am more prepared to consider the complementary and enriching quality of our differences. Furthermore I see that there are choices in the plot structure of my narrative. *Slowing* the pace does not mean 'doing nothing' or ossifying. It often means waiting for the others to catch up and in the waiting giving myself time to look around and notice things that I might not have done in my previous sprint to the finishing post.

And what about James? A month after our coaching ended<sup>53</sup> (April 2013) he called me to report that he had finally left his job (a mutually agreed parting) and had enough financial security to spend up to a year away from employment figuring out what he wanted to do next. However, in the background was the allure of another appointment – the offer of a similar job in a different firm. He was tempted. The seniority of the post, the salary and the chance to prove himself as a competent accountant were compelling. His idealisation loop was idling, observing. At the end of the call I suggested that this might be his moment to say the great 'yes' or the great 'no' that Glouberman talks about and which, '*protects our health and allows the energy to flow back in to our lives*'. I had given James Glouberman's book some months before and he had connected with the story in to and out of burnout that she describes,

*The way forward is the Great Yes to what is true, healthy, loving and real and a Great No to what is not. Yes to our true selves and No to what we think we should be. It is a real choice in freedom, a decision to create a space between ourselves and the forces that usually push us from within or from without. [Glouberman p.130]*

Glouberman contrasts the Great Yes and the Great No with the *small* yes and no. The small yes and no support the idealisation loop's '*just one more time but better*' mantra. I think I heard a small yes when James' suggested that this new job might be the opportunity he was looking for – this time he would *prove* he was a competent, team playing manager. It

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<sup>53</sup> His organisation only contracted for four additional sessions

seemed to me that his plan to continue his self development fitted in the space *around* this new job and as before would eventually be relegated in the daily pressures of corporate life.

This 'just one more time' response is central to the persistence of the idealisation loop. Until one becomes mindful of this tendency the loop continues to receive the food it needs.

Glouberman (2003) includes the burnout experience of the writer Sue Townsend<sup>54</sup> who was unable to say no to offers of work despite chronic stress, the onset of diabetes and eventual blindness. Townsend's blindness was her deepest burnout experience and her most liberating. She writes,

*In one sense it [blindness] is a release. Because you don't actually have to do things anymore. I have a big overall excuse now.....a guilt free experience. [in Glouberman p.51]*

I *hope* that during our time together I supported James to reflect on disconfirming evidence. For example when I asked him to consider the incongruence between his (idealised)self image of being an insightful team leader against the actuality of a team that were filing grievances against him. I also hope I encouraged him to consider his own 'plot structure' and cast himself as the author of his unfolding story. His 'letters to self' helped him to practice this.

In our last call I wanted to draw his attention to the possibility that he might be at the brink of his Great Yes or Great No - a year out to understand his primary intentions (Smith, 2010) and experiment with living fully and authentically. Yet my sense is he may circle his loop again for, as Glouberman warns, something often becomes more important than the truth. However, if he does circle again and as a result enters a deeper and more debilitating burnout I am confident that the work he has begun and the shoots of self compassion he has developed will enable him, like it did for me, to learn from and lift out of that dark place more quickly and resiliently than he might otherwise have done. I don't think he will go blind.

Through my own development I have understood more fully that I cannot control or predict outcomes in this relational space.<sup>55</sup> Yet now I am less likely to feel this lack of control as a fearful, free floating, lost in space experience. Self compassion (as I will come back to shortly) has enabled me to anchor my experience to the experience of *others*, to see the interconnected nature of things. In doing so I feel generally less alone. Evolution shows us that survival is more probable when you have the support and protection of others. A crucial step for those caught in idealisation loops is to see that defending and overcoming are not

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<sup>54</sup> Most well known for the Adrian Mole Diaries.

<sup>55</sup> I refer here to relationships between me and my 'selves' as well as me and others and me in the system – refer back to three [circles \(p....\)](#)



the only strategies to ensure survival. Bonding, connecting and loving play an important role too. I think James began to understand this as well and towards the end of our work together he wrote a love letter to his estranged wife. The writing process released strong affiliative and compassionate emotions in him. He did not give her the letter but for him the process had begun.

It is this experience of *messy, static, complex and emergent* change that interests me and the ability to bring self compassion in to my life and my consulting practice precisely when I am feeling alone, lost, unhelpful, unwanted and uncertain.

In this concluding chapter I consider why it is so hard to lift out of loops and live more generatively in the *truth of things as they are* – which I see as the optimum relationship between the ideal, actual and real.<sup>56</sup> I identify four themes which recur when I work with, experience and reflect on the nature of *persistence*:

- Resilient personal ontologies
- Fear, anxiety and anger
- Cultural imperatives
- Beliefs about change

I draw on thinking from philosophical, management, clinical/therapeutic and spiritual disciplines to inform this exploration. To conclude each thematic exploration I consider how these insights might further enrich my emerging compassionate consulting & coaching practice and the *specific* challenges of working with those caught in idealisation looping. In particular, I explore the challenge of nurturing self compassion when the perfectionist inner critic continues to rage. This chapter concludes on a compassionate note – that our effort to *avoid* suffering and pain can reinforce the very loops that cause us distress, disappointment and anxiety. Glouberman's mantra *wait, give up hope and keep the faith* becomes a life long practice.

### **Persistence – core themes**

My observations, reflections and ongoing experience suggest there are recurring themes that arise in relation to the *persistence* of emotions, thoughts and behaviours that have ceased to be generative or useful. As a child I observed my father circle his loop and later

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<sup>56</sup> Living generatively in the truth of how things are honours the present moment (actual), visions a possible and nourishing future (real) and respects the voices that whisper and warn us to be careful (ideal).

as a psychologist I listened to my clients. I noticed their unhappiness and struggle to change and my struggle to help them. During the last twenty years I have read, written about, experimented with and talked with clients, colleagues, supervisors, teachers about the nature of change. In my final assignment on the Masters programme at Ashridge I wrote,

*“I understand that I cannot 'make' people change. Yet I do think it is possible to create more (or less) helpful conditions for people to make their own changes. A conducive environment, enough time, acceptance, humour, forgiveness, openness, authenticity, respect, curiosity, fascination, play, risk, messiness and uncertainty. None of these sufficient, most of them necessary. Yet I am still conscious of the spontaneous, unpredictable nature of change. It remains elusive and thus may have become a sort of Holy Grail to me” (Wickremasinghe, 2009)*

As I continue to seek the Holy Grail (what is change? how does it occur?) I have, as part of this research inquiry, attempted to categorise my observations which have accumulated in journals, essays, client notes and proposals and throughout my Masters and Doctorate studies at Ashridge. When my supervisor prompted me to expand on my methodology (*how did you come to this neat list of four?*<sup>57</sup>) I thought about the turn in my inquiry towards the alchemical hermeneutic method (Romanyshyn, 2007) and wanted to honour the many hours I have spent since March 2012 thinking, doodling, dreaming and gazing. It is during those long hours of what my ideal self might call ‘doing nothing’ that I have made connections which arise from a deep sense of knowing. This list of four is the proposition that emerges from twenty years of being a ‘change practitioner’. It is a proposition which is in the service of a compassionate approach to change and as such is new for me.

The themes interact and influence each other and it is difficult to untangle them. Nevertheless I have found it helpful to categorise. The process of categorising has felt like sculpting archways in to the thick wall of my accumulated information, knowledge and experience. These archways lead me in to a more informed and *explicit* form of practice. They help me to recognise more quickly patterns arising in the coaching or consulting relationship. Recently I was in a meeting with new clients who insisted that the leadership team they wished to develop would definitely not respond to approaches that seemed ‘flaky’ or ‘soft’. When I asked them what they meant by ‘flaky’ and ‘soft’ they seemed irritated and dismissive. I think they heard me challenging their beliefs about change and I felt it was unlikely that within this cultural context the work would go ahead. A few weeks later however they called me to progress the contract. I was very surprised, yet on reflection remembered

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<sup>57</sup> Resilient personal ontologies; fear, anxiety and anger; cultural imperatives; beliefs about change

the gentle approach I had taken and the genuine openness to rejection and acceptance of difference that I felt. I also held my four themes in mind as I engaged in this meeting. Thus when I felt rejection and conflict arising from attitudes to change, cultural pressures and deeply held beliefs about how to be in their world I was more able, in the moment, to bring compassionate mindfulness to my response.

I have learned during this inquiry that self compassion enables me to show up as I am and to deal with these difficulties without defending or collapsing as much as I used to.

I identify the core themes of persistence as:

- Resilient personal ontologies (schemata, core beliefs, memories,)
- Fear, anxiety, anger (existential considerations)
- Cultural imperatives (individualism vs. common humanity)
- Attitudes to and beliefs about change (design vs. emergence)

I will say more about each of these themes and suggest ways in which a compassionate practice might address and work with the complex and idiosyncratic combination of motivators and contexts that combine to maintain the early established, deeply embedded status quo.

### **Resilient Personal Ontologies**

Our personal ontology comprises all that we believe to be true about ourselves and the very core of our being. One way of thinking about our personal ontology is to understand it as our basic identity or our character. Our personal ontology emerges as we *experience* the world and develop ways to survive the particular and universal challenges of life. Eric Olson (2007) is an American philosopher who specializes in metaphysics and philosophy of

Come up to meet you, tell  
you I'm sorry  
You don't know how lovely  
you are  
I had to find you, tell you I  
need you  
Tell you I set you apart

Tell me your secrets and ask  
me your questions  
Oh, let's go back to the start  
Running in circles, chasing  
our tails  
Heads on a science apart

Nobody said it was easy  
It's such a shame for us to  
part  
Nobody said it was easy  
No one ever said it would  
be this hard  
Oh, take me back to the  
start

I was just guessing at  
numbers and figures  
Pulling your puzzles apart  
Questions of science,  
science and progress  
Don't speak as loud as my  
heart

Tell me you love me, come  
back and haunt me  
Oh and I rush to the start  
Running in circles, chasing  
our tails  
Coming back as we are

Nobody said it was easy  
Oh, it's such a shame for us  
to part  
Nobody said it was easy  
No one ever said it would  
be so hard  
I'm going back to the start

The Scientist, by Coldplay.

mind. Olson is most famous for his research in the field of personal identity, namely animalism<sup>58</sup>. In his *metaphysical* exploration of personal ontology he asks;

*What are our persistence conditions? What is necessary for a past or future being to be you? (p.6)*

Ernest Becker (1970 ) (1973), a cultural anthropologist and philosopher argues that our character is built upon a denial of anxiety, loss of support and obliteration. It is a response to the overwhelming feelings of terror that the small child experiences as he/she struggles to comprehend and secure his/herself in the world.

*Character, then, is a reflex of the impossibility of continuing one's early situation. What we call character is really a series of techniques or a style of living aimed principally at two things: to secure one's material survival and to deny the fact that one really has no control over his finitude. (Becker, 1970 p. 143)*

No wonder then that change is so difficult for in order to grow a person has to,

*...renounce precisely that form of comfort and salvation that has become inseparable from his deepest values as these are grounded in the muscles and nerves of his organism. (Ibid.)*

Practitioners from different disciplines and schools of thought recognise the existence of a fundamental and resilient personal ontology that defines character. It is the basis of , Bowlby's attachment theories (Bowlby, 1997), Piaget's 'circular reactions' (Piaget, 1954), Freud's ego defence psychology (Freud, 2011) Fromm's 'pathology of normalcy' (Fromm, 2011), Adler's compensation theory (Adler, 2010), Kegan's 'immune system' (Kegan, et al., 2009)and Leahy's 'schematic resistance' (Leahy, 2001) – to name just a few.

What these theories all point to is how embedded and central early adaptive strategies become. Avoidance, compensation, selective attention and recall, projection, denial, control are just some of the strategies that are in the service of maintaining one's personal ontology which lead Leahy to conclude that people,

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<sup>58</sup> In philosophy, **animalism** is a theory about [personal identity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_identity) according to which personal identity is a biological property of human beings, just as it is for other animals. Animalism is not a theory about personhood, that is, a theory about what it means to be a person. An animalist could hold that robots or angels were persons without that contradicting his animalism. For more: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animalism\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animalism_(philosophy))

*...utilising these defensive manoeuvres to protect the surface schema have difficulty gaining insight....since any challenge to their view that they are special or in control implies the polar opposite – that is that they are worthless or completely out of control. (Leahy, 2001 p. 118)*

A full discussion on the nature and origin of character is not within the scope of this essay. However, on the whole I share the perspectives of the above writers. *Character* is a constructed phenomena and is a reaction and a response to being and becoming human. It is the *expression* of a personal ontology.

In this sense character corresponds to or may be a combination of the idealised and actual selves. The 'real' self however corresponds more closely to what Hillman (Hillman, 1975) and others have referred to as *soul* (Frankl, 1986) or what Smith (2010) might talk about as our primary intentions. The real self is an expression of yearning, authenticity, essence. It is beyond construction or deconstruction. It is perhaps wisdom, intuition, shared consciousness, daemonic, mythical, archetypal and may be for many of us out of reach or unknowable in our lifetime. Perhaps all that is possible is to catch fleeting glimpses of the real self and have faith that it remains a guiding presence in our life.

A resilient personal ontology is not difficult to spot. In consulting and coaching we see it when we encounter justifications and preferences that fly in the face of contradictory evidence. For example, James absolutely believed he was an effective team leader able to build relationships, motivate and inspire. He believed this in spite of complaints from his boss, grievances from his staff and his own experience of a 'frosty' working environment. And I absolutely believed that I was able to hold together my family ideal despite many years worth of disconfirming experience.

Leahy (2001) presents a rich and valuable reference for anyone working with the broad and complex notion of what he refers to as 'resistance' and I refer to as *persistence*. He offers a detailed exploration of interventions that are useful when working with all four themes of persistence. When working compassionately with resilient personal ontologies I have found Leahy's (2001) processes useful:

***Vertical descent inquiry*** : a process of inquiry that reveals aspects of a personal ontology. For example when James told me he felt upset that his boss had criticised him I asked him what criticism meant to him. He replied, *It means my boss doesn't value me*. The vertical descent inquiry keeps asking what each level of sense making *means* to the client and in doing so eventually arrives at a basic personal ontology. In James' case - *I will always be alone*. This of course is a scary personal ontology and gives rise to resilient behaviours that seek to prevent this eventuality.

*My boss doesn't value me*



*I am bad or unworthy*



*I am therefore unlovable*



*People will find this out and eventually leave me*



*I will always be alone.*

### **Psycho-education**

Increasingly I have seen the importance of what Leahy (2001) describes as '*socialising the patient to the intervention model*' (p.24). My practice is informed by my own personal ontology and a constructionist epistemology (Gergen, 1999). It feels useful to explain this to the client and to offer some light theoretical content as a frame for our work together.

Recently I have been introducing the compassionate mind model as a way of understanding looping and refer the client to the two slides shown in figures thirty two (p.156) and thirty four (p.157). This early disclosure of some of my core practice beliefs has been useful in starting a conversation about assumptions and values that we hold and how they influence our choices and strategies for living.

### **Disconfirmation Experiments**

Leahy (2001) suggests that schema (or core ontologies) are maintained, *as an attempt to confirm a hypothesis* even if the client is seeking confirmation of a negative belief. When I worked with James we devised some experiments to test his belief that he was unlovable. This was relatively easy to do as he has a good relationship with his children. He was quickly able to see how some people (i.e. his children) do love him which enabled him to explore the qualities that his children love which he thought were: spontaneity, honesty and an optimistic outlook. Further inquiry revealed that these lovable qualities were not ones he displayed in the workplace. This was a real 'Ah ha' moment for James and triggered a very reflective session about why he felt he could not be spontaneous, honest or optimistic in his job.

### **Developmental analysis**

I frame this as an exploration to discover the functional origins of behaviours that the client wants to change (Orem, et al., 2007). I ask clients to remember what strategies they devised and implemented as children to gain attention, approval and care from their parents (or primary care givers). I then ask them to think about whether they still use some of these

strategies in the work place. Often this reveals a pattern – that early coping strategies are still relied upon even though the context and circumstances that gave rise to them have changed. This helps a client realise that their current behaviours are not *bad*, just out of date. With James his personal ontology was deeply informed by the departure of his father when he was just four years old. As a young boy he witnessed and absorbed his mother's vulnerability and grief and coped with his own feelings of fear and loss by becoming her 'pillar' and resource. He became a hard working 'fixer' who would control events through sheer determination and will. Part of my work with James was to support him to inquire in to how useful these strategies were now – given the protagonists, the context and his own circumstances were very different. The work I did in over two years with my therapist helped me to revisit developmental themes and explore my evolution more compassionately. Throughout this work my therapist re-framed and challenged my self critical constructions. 'You're not *bad* you're a *survivor*' she would remind me over and over again.

These interventions, although not exhaustive, give a flavour of how compassionate attention can be brought to looping behaviour. They draw upon both cognitive behavioural and psychoanalytic approaches and I use them in my work not simply to increase awareness but to develop a *self compassionate* capacity to reflect and review. When working with these interventions my most significant role is to remain alert to the *self critical reflex* and sustain the qualities of patience, tolerance and kindness throughout the inquiry.

Thus a *compassionate inquiry* when working with resilient personal ontologies - as I have already suggested in chapter four - first acknowledges the *function* of a person's core belief system and honours its role in ensuring the person's relatively successful survival to date. This process of *compassionate validation* supports Bowlby's (1997) observation that until a person experiences empathy and support they will continue to express negative and distressful emotions or abandon the relationship altogether. With James I accepted his version of leadership competence (for there were many examples of it which he shared) and *also* insisted we stay curious about his staff and boss's experience. I use the word 'insisted' to emphasise that compassionate inquiry is not only about validating (Leahy, 2001), 'holding' (Casserley, et al., 2009); (Winnicott, 1973) or offering 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1967). A compassionate inquiry is paradoxical and gritty – both affirming the clients truth and *strongly* encouraging curiosity and an exploration of 'the truth' whilst suspending judgment. This form of inquiry pays attention to what David Bohm (2005) has described as the '*impulse of necessity*' which, he argues, is the most powerful force overriding even instinct. If people feel something is *absolutely necessary* (for it arises out of their personal ontology) they will go to great lengths to preserve that necessity even (as we have seen) if it leads to their own demise and burnout.

Like Leahy I don't believe it is possible or desirable to 'rid' a person of their core beliefs/ontology. Instead a practitioner can assist the client in recognising how his beliefs inform, influence and control him. However, given the deep rooted and existentially functional nature of a person's core ontology this can only be achieved through a *compassionate inquiry* which pays attention to and stays alongside the fear and anxiety which arises when core beliefs are touched. I will describe ways of working with fear and anxiety shortly.

Before doing so I contrast *compassionate inquiry* with the work of Kegan et al, whose recent and popular book *Immunity to Change* (Kegan, et al., 2009), written for a management audience, outlines an argument and a methodology for working with the 'big assumptions' that feed an 'immunity to change'. My experience of working with this methodology highlighted just how difficult it is to surface and work with personal ontologies without simultaneously paying attention to and seeking to develop the capacities of self compassion that enable this kind of personal exploration.

Kegan (2009) uses the term 'immune system' to describe what I have referred to as a personal ontology. He argues,

*We can learn and reflect as much as we want but the changes we hope for, or that others need from us, will not happen because all the learning and reflecting will occur within occur within our existing mindsets.* (Kegan, et al., 2009 p. 5)

According to Kegan the 'immune system',

*can threaten our well being when it rejects new material, internal or external to the body, that the body needs to thrive, the immune system can put us in danger in these instances the immune system is no less focused on protecting us it is just making a mistake.* (p.37)

Kegan also recognises that the immune system is very resilient because it comprises,

*brilliant, highly effective behaviours serving exactly the purpose another part of him intend* (p.38)

Kegan describes this purpose as the *hidden commitment* underneath which lies a core belief crucial –we think– to our very survival. Their focus is on increasing the *quantity* of insight a person has about these hidden commitments. The authors have developed a worksheet which they suggest can be used to reveal these hidden or competing commitments (see figure thirty seven).



Commitment (Improvement goal)	Doing/not doing instead	Hidden/competing commitments	Big assumptions
<p><i>To be a better listener (especially better at staying in the present, staying focused, being more patient)</i></p>	<p><i>I allow my attention to wander off</i></p> <p><i>I start looking at my Blackberry</i></p> <p><i>I make to do lists in my mind</i></p> <p><i>I start thinking about impressive Responses</i></p>	<p><i>To not looking stupid</i></p> <p><i>To not being humiliated</i></p> <p><i>To not feeling helpless</i></p> <p><i>To not feeling out of control</i></p> <p><i>To not making a mistake</i></p>	<p><i>I assume that there are a limited number of 'chances' – that is I am seen as stupid too many times people will stop listening to me</i></p> <p><i>I assume that helping is always helping someone take a 'next step' in the right direction</i></p> <p><i>I assume that if I feel helpless I cannot be a good listener</i></p> <p><i>I assume that if I am not in control things are likely to get worse.</i></p>

Figure 38: Fred's Map in (Kegan, et al., 2009 p. 249)

By increasing awareness and insight in to the 'big assumptions' that support their immune systems a person is able to evolve their thinking and behaving in to more complex and effective ways of being.

I first used Kegan's (2009) worksheet in a corporate workshop in 2009 but did not feel the intervention achieved its intention. I remember that the group I facilitated (a very senior corporate leadership team) began the exercise with ease. They were able to identify improvement goals and the *actions* that got in the way of them achieving these goals. However, when it came to exploring why they sabotaged their own efforts to improve and what beliefs supported these unhelpful loops (columns three and four) I noticed they became somewhat edgy and defensive. By the end of the exercise I felt that these columns only contained superficial disclosures and insights and that the inquiry had not revealed new insights. This feeling was corroborated in the plenary session. I noted at the time that 'something more was needed'<sup>59</sup> either to prepare the group for this exercise or from my facilitation of the process. What I *now* know is that any intervention that activates the threat

<sup>59</sup> Learning journal September 2009, p.15

system is unlikely to create the depth and quality of awareness that Kegan requires for shifts in consciousness to occur. Furthermore, I would not now frame what happened as ‘superficial’ or inadequate. Now I understand (and it is self compassion that has nurtured this understanding) that the reluctance to enter in to this exploration is an expression of the belief, immune or looping system that has *served us well* and that pivots on the very core assumptions we are now seeking to change.

Challenged by several clients to consider how to create the conditions for employees of management programmes to enter in to such a deep and potentially threatening exploration, Kegan advocates courage – *the ability to take action and carry on even when we are afraid*. He does not, however, say anything about how a person finds or develops courage.

I agree with the authors that courage *is* required when entering in to an exploration of mandorla experiences where core beliefs and other ‘truths’ co-exist in a shadowy relationship that has the potential to cause pain and anxiety.

In the compassionate leadership session I designed as part of this inquiry I suggested that *compassionate attention* is the practice that draws forth courage to act. *Compassionate attention* involves:

- Becoming increasingly mindful about our emotions, thought processes and behaviours (noticing)
- Learning to honour and embrace our emotions, thought processes and behaviours without judging, criticising or evaluating (respecting)
- Compassionately inquiring in to our patterns and understanding *it is not our fault but it may be our problem*. (inquiring)

Compassionate attention interrupts the loop that turns when our threat system is activated and brings the qualities of kindness, patience and tolerance which regulate threat and make it possible for learning and insight to increase.

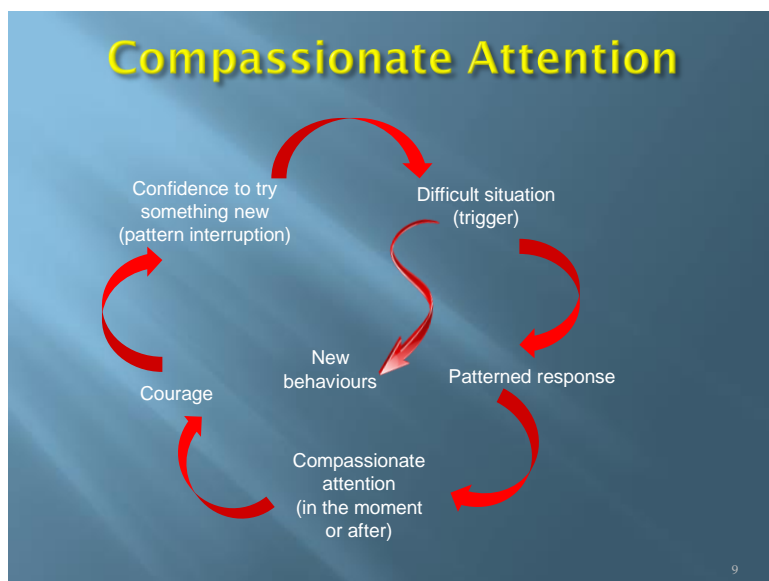


Figure 39: Compassionate Attention<sup>60</sup>

Compassionate attention is an essential capacity when exploring and trying to interrupt our 'patterned responses'. Noticing, respecting and inquiring with self compassion will reactivate and nourish the affects that we need both to repair our damaged selves and also to develop new capabilities (forgiveness, trust, warmth) that enable us to connect with others *because of* our vulnerabilities and fallibilities.

The final module of the year long leadership programme I co-facilitate for a large corporate is always dominated by questions of connection and continuation. Clients want to know how they can sustain the quality of relationships they have been part of during the programme (which has a strong and growing focus on inquiry, mindfulness and self compassion). I experience a great sense of satisfaction and appreciation of the good work I have been part of when I see these clients hug each other, cry and make genuine plans to sustain and grow their friendships. This is particularly emotional for me when I consider their starting position on module one where relationships existed within a competitive, cautious and comparative frame. It is a reminder to me not just that change is possible but that profound change within the corporate culture is related to the ability to regulate threat and drive based emotions so that new capacities in the brain and body can emerge.

Yet I would argue that threat and drive based emotions *are* the dominant emotions of organisational life and they erode or stifle the courage needed to grow and change.

At the root of threat based emotions are fear and anxiety which I would argue are the *basic* human emotions out of which all our strategies and preferences of 'character' emerge. They

<sup>60</sup> This is a slide I produced for the Compassionate Leadership session in July 2012

are the affects that dominate our first 'reptilian' brain and the emotions that have compelled psychologists, philosophers, artists, poets, novelists, scientists, theologians and many others to construct rich theories of human functioning, purpose and change. Later, as the new brain developed and consciousness evolved our emotional repertoire grew to include the drive and affiliative based affects and motivations. However, it is to the core emotions of our first and basic brain I now turn as they play a significant role in maintaining our vicious loops. How we as consultants and coaches work with these emotions becomes a central part of a compassionate practice.

### **Fear and anxiety.**

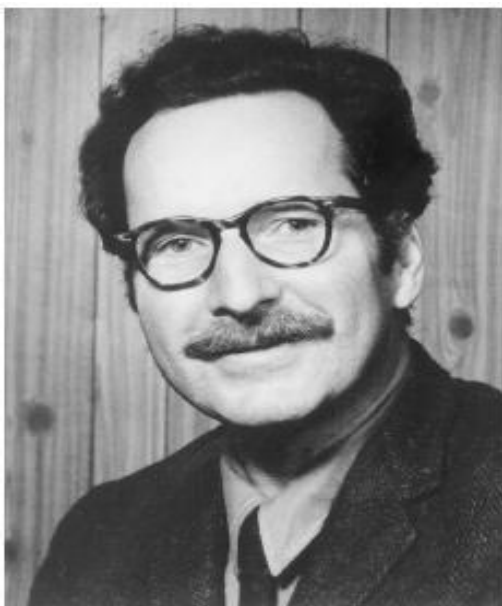


Figure 40: Ernest Becker

Fear and anxiety, disgust and anger are the basic emotions of our first reptilian brain. They are there to motivate us to fight, run away or freeze. In the following section I argue that these basic emotions (the emotions of the threat centre) when unregulated (for example by the compassionate emotions and motives) will ensure that our basic and earliest survival strategies and loops persist.

Becker (1970 ) may appear pessimistic when he writes,

*The tragic bind that man is peculiarly in – the basic paradox of his existence – is that unlike other animals he has an awareness of himself as a unique individual on the one hand and and on the other he is the only animal in nature who knows he will die....he is an emergent life that does not seem to have any more meaning than a non emergent life...and so despair and the death of meaning are carried by man in the basic condition of his humanity.*

*It is an affront to all reason that several billions of years of evolution and a few thousand of history plus the unique circumstances of an individual life would create gifts which might have no more reverberation than the ripples off a beaver dam. (p.111)*

Pessimistic as it *may* seem, Becker's work has long been influential to me. His book *The Denial of Death* (Becker, 1973) was instrumental in my decision in 1990 to continue post graduate training as a psychologist and therapist – so keen was I to cut through the 'appalling burden' of this 'tragic bind'. I probably read Becker and felt affronted, angry and motivated to do something about this human paradox. Yet I now realise that these threat and drive based emotions prevented the emergence (until recently) of self compassion and constrained my development – both personally and professionally.

Nevertheless it was Becker's extraordinary synthesis of psychoanalytic and existential thought that first encouraged me to view 'neurosis' as a necessary ( or functional) part of the human condition. Thus it was my reading of Becker that first sowed the seeds of what I now call a compassionate practice.

Becker argues that with a degree of ambivalence and self deception (repression), human beings not only survive the tension but are also capable of achieving great things. He suggests that, "*repression fulfils the vital function of allowing the child to act without anxiety, to take experience in hand and develop dependable responses to it.*" In his view, when evolution gave man an inner self (i.e. consciousness) it split him in two (ego from body) which was the price that *had* to be paid in order for organisms to attain more life and "*for the development of the life force on the furthest reach of experience and self consciousness.*" In other words Becker saw the split between the ego and body not only as a burden and problem but *also* as a way in which we survive, contribute and achieve. Maturity, he suggested, was the ability to fashion and enact our own '*creative myth*'; which is not simply a "*relapse in to a comfortable illusion*" but a bold, courageous attempt to face up to the eternal contradictions of our situation (Becker, 1973 pp. 262 -282). Becker's work is ultimately not pessimistic at all. He offers a version of human 'heroics' that fully accounts for the darkness and despair that is part of the human condition and suggests that out of this we can still fashion 'creative myths' that enable each of us of us to contribute to the 'life force'.

These ideas are echoed within the management literature by Block and Koestenbaum (2001) They argue that unless anxiety<sup>61</sup> can be embraced as the *normal condition* of human

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<sup>61</sup> Remember that vicious loops function to manage and repress anxiety

beings then vicious looping will continue and the authentic expressions of the actual and real selves will remain hidden and repressed.

Embracing anxiety as normal, useful and inevitable forms part of a compassionate practice. We learn to become kind and tolerant towards *whatever* emotion arises. In Becker's words,

*"... I think that taking life seriously means something like this; that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false."* (Becker, 1973 p. 283)

Whilst I have recognised and felt Becker's (1973) 'rumble of panic' in myself and others I have not until recently understood how to work with it. Psychoanalytic and Cognitive/Behavioural approaches offer extremely useful processes for inquiring in to and living with the existential anxieties. However all of these approaches can be enhanced by a compassionate focus which, I have argued, comes from a *self compassionate* stance.

In May 2012 I invited a group of six practitioners to inquire with me in to the role of self compassion in their work. All of them spoke about how self compassion was not an explicit part of either their continuous development or their work.

*..when you first suggested this I thought it sounds vaguely interesting but I don't know if I am particularly motivated to talk about it...but it's been knocking about at the back of my mind and I realise now that it is an absolutely fundamental step towards wholeness, transcendence love and healing...as long as I separate myself and am at war with myself there cannot be peace. [Jan, a coach, speaking at the practitioner inquiry group, May 2012]*

As the inquiry unfolded they all identified ways in which they indirectly nurture self compassion as a restorative and soothing activity that allows them to stay in the work. One practitioner talked about playing the harp and another described how she is working to reduce the 'noise' of her inner critic.

Self compassion is a quality that enables us to *flow with* the panic, fear, anxiety and anger that comes when our mandorla experiences reveal the partial and incomplete nature of our idealised selves. I have detailed in the previous chapter my own emerging methods for developing self compassion which include voice tracking, compassionate mindfulness and developing a different relationship with the inner critic.

When considering fear and anxiety as core themes of persistence it seems to me that the *most* self compassionate thing we can do is to befriend our inner critic *in spite of* the trouble and hardship it may have caused us. Jeanette Winterson in her (second) autobiography

(Winterson, 2012) describes her painful and long journey towards befriending her inner critic who she describes as a 'savage lunatic'. Winterson's strategy is to give her 'lunatic' one hour of her time a day. They go walking together,

*Our conversations were like two people using phrasebooks to say things neither understands...her conversational style was recriminatory (blame, accusation, demands, guilt)..her preferred responses were non sequiters.....occasionally the creature appeared when I was reading, to mock me, to hurt me, but now I could ask her to leave until our meeting the following day and, miraculously, she did. [p.174-175]*

And then after months of walking, talking, fighting and forgiving there is a break through,

*I said something about how nobody had cuddled us when we were little. I said 'us', not 'you'. She held my hand. She had never done that before; mainly she walked behind shooting her sentences. We both sat down and cried. I said, 'we will learn how to love'. [P.177]*

The inner critic or lunatic or shadow are, it seems to me, the expression of our basic fear and anxiety. To live with the 'rumble of panic' (for it can never be extinguished) we need the resources, wisdom and cooperation of our 'dark side'. This has become the doorway in to my next inquiry.

From the first two themes we can see how the call for change (primarily through a mandorla experience) starts to challenge our personal ontology and in doing so gives rise to fear, anxiety and anger. These emotions trigger our defensive behaviours and the persistence of our vicious loops.

As I have already suggested, the way we respond to this experience is contingent on both the quantity and quality of awareness we bring to it. The quantity and quality of our awareness is dependent on a variety of factors including our willingness and capacity to engage in personal and relational inquiry. However, it is also influenced by our cultural context. In other words by the messages we absorb about *how to live*.

### **Cultural Imperatives – individualism Vs. common humanity**

In this section I consider the third of my four themes of persistence. I suggest that cultures which support and encourage individualism over community are less able to support the growth of self compassion and the consequent transformation of self that have been the subject of this thesis. In other words cultures can support the persistence of vicious loops.

Often clients entering a mandorla experience express a deep sense of isolation and disconnection from others. The sense of imperfection that arises when the idealised self image is breaking or broken is often understood as a personal failing that must be hidden at all costs. This is one reason James was very reluctant for me to tape our sessions – he feared ‘exposure’ at many levels.

Karl Marx (Ollman, 1977) is perhaps the most well know exponent of the concept of alienation or ‘*entfremdung*’ (estrangement) which described the social alienation of people from aspects of their human nature. Marx understood this as a consequence of society being divided into classes and other hierarchies. Hillman (1975) offers a different perspective and suggests that *developmental psychologies*, promoting the view that ‘we are what happened to us in our childhood’, are very responsible for creating a myopic view of humanity. He calls this the ‘*dogma of internalisation*’ which ignores the fact that, “*the psyche exists wholly in relational systems*” and that “*everything out there is you*” (p.82). Hillman draws upon Jung’s ideas of the collective unconscious, religion and archetypes to expand our vision and experiencing of self and other and to suggest a way out of this *egocentricity*.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to describe or account for the ‘individualisation’ of human struggle as either a *cultural historical or psycho religious* phenomena. However it is important to emphasise the significance of being able to connect to *common humanity* as part of the development and nurturing of self compassion. In doing so we start to pay more attention to the cultural, historical and complex systemic influences that contribute to forming and sustaining our loops.

Neff (2011) suggests that the ability to recognise and connect with common human experience is one of the three essential elements of self compassion.<sup>62</sup>

*“When we are in touch with our common humanity we remember that feelings of inadequacy and disappointment are shared by all. This is what distinguishes self compassion from self pity.”*

Thus framing our imperfection in terms of an *inevitable* and *shared* human experience creates a different experience of self compassion. It enables the movement from self love or infatuation – Germer’s (2009) first phase of self compassion - towards true acceptance and equanimity.

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<sup>62</sup> The other two elements which I have explored in chapter four are self kindness and mindfulness.



When I started to learn about and practice self compassion in early 2012 I experienced a confusing array of emotions. At times I felt euphoric and released from the prison of my idealised images. I felt courageous when I caught more and more glimpses of my real self and the exciting possibilities present in *that* version of myself. Yet I also felt grief, which was complex in itself. What was I grieving?

When working with clients the subject of grief forms part of a compassionate inquiry. Entering a mandorla and experiencing the breaking apart of core (idealised) beliefs is grief making. Compassionate inquiry in to the source of one's grief takes in to account the *interconnectedness* of human experience and in doing so supports the clients to lift out of a personal sense of loss or failure (which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and fears) towards a realisation of '*a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering*' (Neff p.62)

In April 2013, during the completion of this thesis, Margaret Thatcher died. As I listened to the tributes to and condemnations of a woman who divided the country I realised (perhaps for the first time) how influential she and the culture she created were in reinforcing my own idealised self image. This cultural reference point helped me understand the grief associated with the loss or breaking apart of my idealised self.

Like Thatcher my idealised self was a powerful, principled, visionary leader in my life. It dragged, pushed, cajoled and inspired me to become a motivated, hardworking perfectionist. It promised me that anything was possible, that I could achieve whatever I set out to do. It was critical, direct, fearsome and fearless. Under the leadership of my idealised self I made money, acquired status and discovered my independence. So, when my idealised self was attacked and cracked open by terrible truths I witnessed a strong, proud part of me collapse. Like a magnificent lion brought down by a hunter's bullet or an extraordinary prime minister abandoned by her cabinet. My idealised self had aspects of greatness that enabled me – a female, Asian immigrant from a divided home – to make good.

Yet in the breaking apart of my idealised self new truths started to emerge. These were carried in the stories of my actual and real selves and told of how it was and how it might be. I began to sense how *little* compassion there had been in my life and I began to understand how unable I had been to receive such emotions. This too was grief-making and I continue to this day to make sense of how it came to be this way *and* how I might go forward without my strong leader.

In 1987 Thatcher became infamous for suggesting that there was no such thing as society.<sup>63</sup> This was an important year for me. I was starting university and embarking upon a Social Psychology degree that would become the foundation of both my clinical and management career. How strongly the notion of *individualism* featured. How little was spoken of self compassion. Thatcher's death has been a sharp reminder to me of how the construction and playing out of my idealised images was not merely an intra-psychic coping mechanism – as Horney might suggest – but *also* a cultural, relational and historic solution. How many of us from that era – Thatcher's children – still struggle with self compassion?

Most of my clients are in their forties or early fifties so they too would have been young adults in the Thatcher era. I think of one client in particular. A perfectionist caught in his own idealisation loops. He grew up in the North of England and recently he told me that his family did *not* benefit from Thatcher's philosophy. They may not have done. Yet what influences and ideologies *were* absorbed? For here he is in London, a driven, successful corporate man riddled with many of the anxieties and frustrations I have written about in this paper and articulated through James.

The point I reflect on here is whether compassion disappeared from our vision and experience in a threat based, post war era concerned with the protection of national boundaries, economic success and a deep desire never to return to the hardships of the war years. I do not propose to delve in to this subject but it feels important when considering the complex and paradoxical experience of finding and feeling self compassion perhaps for the first (remembered) time. A compassionate inquiry would guide a client towards a wider consideration of how it has come to be this way and in doing so would enable them to understand the contingent and also random nature of events. Compassion is required in this kind of inquiry because for those caught in idealisation loops the idea that one is not in control of this complex, interconnected universe is very frightening. Once again a practitioner needs to be alert to the voice of the judgmental inner critic who will often respond

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<sup>63</sup> "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation." **Thatcher quoted in Women's Own magazine, October 31st 1987**

by trying to reclaim control by personalising failings. For example, many of my clients are more receptive to harsh appraisals and warnings from their leaders since the economic downturn. Partly this is because they are genuinely concerned for the security of their employment but also because they are *motivated* by this approach – after all if the fault lies with them they can *control* a further downward trend through self improvement and working harder. To recognise that the outcomes we experience and create are *not* a neat equation determined simply by what we put in and take out can generate enormous relief.

*A deep understanding of inter-being allows us to have compassion for the fact that we're doing the best we can given the hand life has dealt us. [Neff, p.73]*

Perhaps this aspect of self compassion compels us towards others and in doing so brings us social and relational rewards. For example, Putnam (in Block, 2008) discovered that of the Italian towns he studied the more successful, more democratic, more healthy and better educated were those where a widespread *relatedness* existed between its citizens. Community *well being* had to do with the quality of relationships and the cohesion amongst its citizens.

There is further inquiry and discussion to be had about the socio-political issues that nurture cultures of perfectionism. It is a subject I hope to explore further as my work continues to develop.

## **Reflections**

In the last chapter I spoke about my efforts to practice self kindness and mindfulness. The broader cultural and historic reflection I touch upon here is offered as an example of how I am beginning to practice the *third* element of self compassion. I am recognising that my loop is not an isolated pathology specific to me but is common to all. *Looping is what the brain does*, said my therapist. And she is right. I think we all loop. We have different kinds of loops and some are helpful whilst others trap and entrench us. Nevertheless, looping is what we do. As I practice the third element of self compassion I realise that my aim is not to live a loop free life but to re-visualise the 'messiness' of my experience as complex and rich maze of mandorla's that offer up insights in to how to live well. I return again to my earlier image and see for the first time a coherence and beauty in the swirls and intersections that I once described as mere mess.

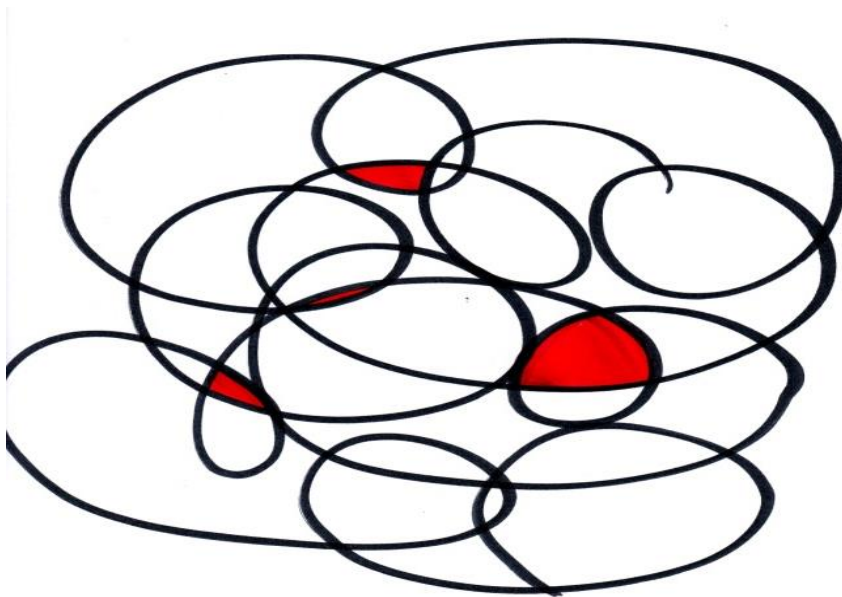


Figure 41: Coherence

However, the confused and powerful emotions that accompany the breaking apart of ideals and the first experiences of self compassion are not necessarily conducive towards supporting the practice of interconnectedness and relational equanimity.

During my work with James he told me that when he felt self compassion he also often felt anger towards his wife whom he felt had not extended compassion towards him or engaged with his life long struggle to achieve. James also thought that self compassion was not a quality valued in this society and was experienced by others as self indulgent. I got the impression his self compassion had been the source of some new arguments and disconnection between him and his wife. I share James' experience. When I began to work with and practice self compassion I sensed that those close to me expected me to show a greater degree of warmth and compassion towards them and others. For example, I remember an incident in a restaurant where I failed to pay sufficient attention to the waitress and my friend commented, "*that wasn't very compassionate!*". I felt very frustrated and misunderstood. My reaction in that moment came from my idealised self that reared its head in annoyance because I had not been able to convince my friend that I had 'changed' – for that had been the subject of our conversation - how I was *changing* as I learned about and practiced self compassion. I left that dinner feeling my friend doubted me and still saw me firmly caught in my loop.

So it is to my final theme I turn. This concerns beliefs about change that influence (and sometimes dominate) both the organisational contexts in which I work and also my own sense making. Here change is seen as a process that can be designed, predicted, observed, measured and controlled. In the next section I consider how this attitude to or belief about change can make it difficult to enter and *remain within* the messy terror of the mandorla experiences that despite (or perhaps because of) their dark qualities fertilise profound change. How we understand change influences the process of transformation and helps us make sense of persistence.

### **Beliefs about Change**

*I was neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish. Everyone kept telling me to change. I resented them and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. Then one day someone said to me, "Don't change. I love you just as you are." Those words were music to my ears: "Don't change, Don't change. Don't change . . . I love you as you are." I relaxed. I came alive. And suddenly I changed (Anthony de Mello)*

I have those words printed on pieces of card and sometimes I give them to my clients. Reflecting on who I have given this card to I can now see a pattern emerge. They were the clients who were most caught in the loops I have been describing and who appeared in my consulting room doubtful, defensive and proud.

I gave one of those cards to James at the start of our work together in December 2011. He read it in the session and without responding slipped the card in to the back of his notebook. He didn't look up for a while but when he did I could see he was somewhat distressed. I remember him saying in that moment or shortly after,

*"I do want to change. I really do want to change."*

When I first made these cards (following an Ashridge workshop on Change in 2009) I had not yet begun self compassion research or practice. Yet self compassion was an *unknown known* (Lawrence, 1994) within me that was being held in the careful and patient palm of my real self. I see these cards as the first sign that I was coming to the end of a particular way of practising that has informed me since the start of my career.

For most of my career I have been involved in work that seeks to change undesirable situations or states (intra or interpersonal). Very early on and very influential were Watzlawick's two questions: "*how does this undesirable situation persist?*" and "*what is required to change it?*" (Watzlawick et al. 1974). Only now can I see that I read the word

'how' as 'why' and this changed the question in a way that led me down a particular and very different learning and professional journey. *Why* does this undesirable situation persist is a qualitatively different question to *how* does it persist.

I asked the '*why*' question frequently and became involved in many attempts to understand the 'causes' of a particular situation or behaviour. I now understand how this search for 'causes' is never complete, *quantity* of insight is never enough. Clients caught in loops gained a lot of self awareness by asking 'why?' yet many of them did not significantly change their problematic emotional and behaviour patterns. And for a long time neither did I.

It is easy to become caught in a 'more of the same' cycle – asking more 'why' questions to gain further insight which only raises additional questions to which I have responded by asking 'why?' again. Instead, Watzlawick suggests exploring the situation as it exists *here and now*, "*In spite of our ignorance of its origin and evolution we can do something with it.*" (p.83). He advocates a shift in attention. Moving from a preoccupation with cause and problem definition to a curiosity about what *is*. So the primary questions become 'how?' and 'what?' not 'why?'

This shift from *why* to *what and how* is a subtle but important part of a compassionate practice and represents a shift in my conceptualisation of change. Asking *why* suggests that if we discover cause (gain more insight) somehow our problem will diminish. I have argued throughout this thesis that this is *not* the case and awareness, though necessary for change, is not sufficient. Asking *what and how* invites a client to develop a quality of mindfulness that supports the development of self compassion. Contrast these two approaches to James' relationship with his wife:

*Why do you think your wife gets angry with you now?*

*What happens/what are you noticing when your wife gets angry with you now?*

And

*How self compassionate do you feel when you are arguing with your wife?*

The *why* question – particularly for those caught in idealisation loops – invites self justification, self beration and the search for an 'answer'. The *what and how* questions invite self observation which, if practiced in a non judgmental, kind and patient way, encourages deeper reflection and safer entry in to the mandorla experiences.

Recently (April 2013) I facilitated a call with a group of managers who are part of a leadership course. They have just started to learn about and practice inquiry (Torbert, et al., 2008) paying attention to the quality of questions they ask. One participant reported feeling very frustrated that although he has started to ask more questions (which has been challenging in itself) he is not getting any *answers*. I asked him whether the *purpose* of asking a question was to get an answer which sparked a lively discussion about the value of compassionate inquiry. In other words inquiry that is not merely in the service of solutions but which also invites a person to look deeper at what is happening and perhaps leads to the re-creation of meaning and the possibility that when *meaning* changes, we change. <sup>64</sup>

Watzlawick and Weakland (Watzlawick, et al., 1974) draw attention to two different types of change: **first order** change deals with the existing structure of a given system and often involves doing more or less of something to restore balance. For example, a perfectionist in treatment may be asked to make one mistake a day to gradually restore balance in his somewhat compulsive life (Boscolo, et al., 1987) . **Second order** change involves changing the system itself often through the exploration and transformation of *meaning*. So for example a perfectionist begins to learn about the origin and function of his strategies. Einstein is often quoted as saying that you cannot solve a problem from the mindset that created it. What he is referring to is the shift in consciousness that defines second order change. This shift can be momentary, evolutionary and permanent (Kegan, 1982). Yet it is these gradual shifts in consciousness that define human growth and the capacity to 'see again' one's experience and experiencing.

This 'seeing again' is perhaps the heart of change. From this perspective change is not a tangible, observable activity that can be tracked but a gradual shift in the way we make sense or 'make meaning'. From a social constructionist perspective this sense or meaning is not located within the mind of individual actors but is a *continuously emerging* achievement of a relational process (Gergen, 1999).

Thus people negotiate meaning as *they interact*. Meaning from this perspective cannot be reified and 'located' (in space or time). It is co-constructed between actors in the *present* . Beisser (1970) gives an example of how a shift in the way we think about our 'problem' enables a change in the Gestalt client-therapist relationship. Gestalt practitioners shift the

meaning of psychoanalytic structures (such as 'denial') in to processes (such as 'denying'). This shift allows the person seeking change to become a dynamic participant in her own change process rather than a recipient of interpretive 'cure'. The example is relevant to coaching and consultancy practices which are moving away from the expert-diagnostic model to one in which the practitioner seeks to,

*Engage with people in organisations as they find them, in that moment, rather than concentrating on how they 'ought to be'. Their ambition is to notice and be curious about what is going on in the world rather than leap to premature problem solving or judgment.*  
(King, et al., 2010)

Thus a Compassionate practice is underpinned by a *constructionist* epistemology and pays attention to experience as it is *now*. For constructionists there are no problems, causes, forces or structures that do not derive their status from *relational* and *collective* interpretation. Change efforts therefore cease to be about revealing 'truth' but become attempts to generate information that can make a difference in the shared understanding of change participants – be they individuals in therapy or teams in an organisational setting.

In organisations the work of Isaacs (Isaacs, 1999) and Bohm (Bohm, 2005) is focused on developing *dialogic skills* that enable individuals and teams to enter in to and stay with difficult conversations long enough for new meaning and shared understanding to emerge. These difficult conversations in organisations, in the consulting room or in therapy often arise when individuals or groups enter mandorla experiences - moments when different belief systems, experiences and knowing meet and intersect. I use these ideas frequently in my work and latterly have noticed the relief people experience as they begin to make sense of their behaviour not solely as a personality preference but as a 'complex responsive process' (Stacey, 2002/03) that is an ongoing and mutually influenced exchange of gestures and responses. Change, from these perspectives comes from the creation of new meanings rather than new behaviour. I could for example begin to make sense of my behaviour not within the category of 'perfectionist' but within the dynamic frame of 'perfecting'. I could begin to notice when I am 'perfecting' and when I am not. As I write this thesis and make my practice more explicit I notice that I do already use the language of process rather than structure. I resist labelling my clients 'perfectionists' (even though this conceptualisation remains useful). Instead I am trying to remain self compassionately present to the complex and unpredictable nature of my client relationships.



In my last session with James (March 2012) which I refer to at the end of the previous chapter he was very clearly experiencing the confusing mixture of relief, grief, anger, anticipation and fear that characterises the experience of shifting ontologies and the lifting out of an entrenched idealisation loop. Part of this was related to the fact that this was the last session his organisation was willing to support. His relationship with this organisation had not improved and James's focus and associated agitation was on leaving his current job (he had interviews secured for alternative employment) and maintaining a relationship with me outside of the corporate coaching relationship. At the start of this session I felt a pull towards interpreting James' tone and expressions of doubt and despair as a 'set back' or 'relapse' in to his vicious circle of perfectionism. However, as I have described on page 175 I resisted this and instead shared with him my confusion and uncertainty about how to respond and asked for his help to make sense of what was happening. This was both an expression of self compassion (accepting my own limitations) and one of compassion or 'suffering with' (we are in this together and we are both confused). As I described in the last chapter my request for help opened in to a very honest and vulnerable admission of fear and an exploration of what role fear played in his story and how he might reframe fear in a more functional and appreciative way. (Hanh, 2012)

I can understand the start of that session now as James 'perfecting' – just in that moment. Later he was doing something else that involved suspending his 'absolute necessity' (Bohm, 2005) for a perfect conclusion to our work and 'accepting' alternative meanings to his experience. This 'in the moment', constructionist and emergent attitude to change is fundamentally compassionate and liberating. It frees up a much wider space for exploration, supports mutual 'not knowing' (we are all in this confusion together) and is responsive to fragile and still forming growth in consciousness.

## Summary

In this chapter I have drawn attention to four themes of persistence – resilient personal ontologies, basic fear and anxiety, cultural imperatives and assumptions about change. These themes deepen my understanding of why vicious loops are so difficult to interrupt and help me to work compassionately with 'resistance', hostility and relapse.

To surface and work with personal ontologies I offered four methodologies (vertical descent inquiry, psycho education, disconfirmation experiments and developmental analysis). An exploration of personal ontology requires *self compassionate inquiry* which pays attention to and stays alongside the fear and anxiety which arises when core beliefs are touched. When

working with the second theme – basic fear and anxiety – I suggested focusing on the voice of the inner critic which is often the expression of our basic terrors. To work with the inner critic and to face in to our basic fears courage is required. I considered how compassionate attention can nurture courage and interrupt vicious loops. The third theme focused on cultural context and the wider ecologies that support individual behaviour. I suggested that coaches need to pay attention to the broad and complex array of factors that influence our personal ontologies and strategies. Vicious looping is not only an intra-psychic coping mechanism but also a cultural, relational and historic solution. Finally I considered how a person's assumptions about change can serve to entrench or liberate them. I considered how a shift from asking 'why?' to 'what?' or 'how?' supports a compassionate practice. The 'why' questions, particularly for those caught in idealisation loops, often invite self justification, self beration and the search for answers. The 'how' and 'what' questions invite self observation, which if practiced in a non judgmental, compassionate way encourages deeper reflection and safer entry in to mandorla experiences. I suggested that a self compassionate practice is underpinned by a constructionist epistemology which recognises the contingent, interpretive and dynamic nature of meaning. The fundamental shift in our assumption about change is from seeking 'truth' or an ideal states to the *recreation of meanings* that can support a person to live a full and nourishing life.

These four themes of persistence when understood as primary, functional and deep rooted remind us that vicious loops – or any repetitive behavioural and emotional 'habit' – is precious and vital to the individual. Interruptions or changes will often be accompanied by a sense of loss or abandonment, grief and anger. A compassionate practice as I have described in this thesis is able to hold a client through this process and ensure that the breaking and shattering of ideals can become a developmental experience.

As I continue to work with my own idealisation loops I notice that I am less often influenced (or threatened) by cultural imperatives, positivist epistemologies and static or linear beliefs about change. Years of inquiry in to these constructs and a shattering of one core belief have enabled me to let go of many cherished truths about what is normal, acceptable and possible. However, far beneath these truths, in an undiscovered strata of my self, I know there are other life forms that pulsate and stir. They live in darkness and *are* dark. They are the anxieties and fears I have not yet surfaced or met. Yet I know they are there because in the stillness of night I can sometimes hear the echo of their call. I don't know that we will ever meet. It may be that they are forever the mystery that compels me to remain curious, alert and self compassionate.

## Concluding Reflections

As I come to the end of this inquiry I know I have both participated in and witnessed healing processes. Yet healing has not produced the sort of 'change' I have previously sought - in other words the cessation of 'bad' and the beginning of 'good'. Those around me may not notice significant changes in my behaviour but might notice a more porous edge to my sense making. Change has been about learning to inquire, to stay in the mandorla no matter how painful or dark it gets.

### Is that all there is?

I remember when I was a very little girl, our house caught on fire.  
I'll never forget the look on my father's face as he gathered me up in his arms and raced through the burning building out to the pavement.  
I stood there shivering in my pajamas and watched the whole world go up in flames.  
And when it was all over I said to myself,

*"Is that all there is to a fire?"*

Is that all there is? is that all there is?  
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing!  
Let's break out the booze and have a ball  
If that's all there is!

And when I was 12 years old, my father took me to a circus, the greatest show on earth.  
There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears.  
And a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads.  
And so I sat there watching the marvelous spectacle.  
I had the feeling that something was missing.  
I don't know what, but when it was over,  
I said to myself,

*"is that all there is to a circus?"*

Then I fell in love, head over heels in love, with the most wonderful boy in the world.  
We would take long walks by the river or just sit for hours gazing into each other's eyes.  
We were so very much in love.  
Then one day he went away and I thought I'd die, but I didn't,  
and when I didn't I said to myself,

*"is that all there is to love?"*

Is that all there is? is that all there is?  
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing.

I know what you must be saying to yourselves,  
if that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all?

Oh, no, not me! I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment, for I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you, when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath, I'll be saying to myself,

*Is that all there is? is that all there is?  
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing!  
Let's break out the booze and have a ball!*

**Lyrics by Leiber and Stoller (1969)**

In May 2013 my therapist commented on the changes she saw,

*You are in such a different place. I don't think you understand how much you have moved on. You used to be embattled about things, you used to want to prove that really you are the main victim. You never do that anymore, never. You never present yourself as a victim, you never present the situation between you and others as one where they don't see your worth or that they've been unkind. Now you look at your contribution. You ask, 'how am I messing this up?' you consider where you are going wrong and you try to get to the bottom of it.*

*(audio recording May 2013)*

I have come to accept that a lot of what I do is not my fault but is often my problem. My threat based reactions arising mostly from the fears of my ideal self are more acceptable, integrated and important to me. I am learning, like Winterson, how to step out and go walking together with my other 'selves' from time to time. The three of us have a lot to learn from each other.

Perhaps most significantly I have experienced the emergence, tenacity and elusive nature of

my real self. I have described this 'real self' as a yearning, as authenticity, essence, wisdom, intuition, shared consciousness, daemonic, mythical and archetypal. I have experienced her in apparitional form – fleeting, faint, whispery and dream like. I have wondered whether I can ever know her as a more solid, tangible reality or live my life under her leadership. At the same time I cannot imagine what it would be like to be without my idealised self. As I continue to explore these separate selves I simultaneously understand that these divisions are artificial or constructed (Laing, 1959); (Smith, 2010). There is no *thing* that is 'self' to be divided. The language and concepts I use are constructs in the service of helping me figure out what's going on and how to live. I recognise that as soon as I get attached to these images I am at risk of entering another vicious loop where these 'truths' are defended at all cost. So another image then, as I challenge my attachment to a divided self is that these three selves – the ideal, the actual and the real – are perhaps one and the same.

Johnson (1991) suggests that,

*The mandorla begins the healing of the split. The overlap is generally very tiny at first, only a sliver of a new moon; but it is a beginning. As time passes the greater the overlap, the greater and more complete is the healing.*

As I continue to learn to be with my selves I reflect on my professional practice and notice new questions starting to emerge. I am asking myself, *what is the purpose of my work in organisations?* Is it in the service of *healing* – in other words integrating the real and the ideal or is it, given the dominance and power of the idealised self, to support/enable/encourage the shattering and breaking apart of that loop so the actual ('what is') can emerge?

With clients I notice the desire for healing and 'redemption' is strong yet there is a great deal of fear and avoidance when they sense that there may be a process of breaking, shattering and grieving before healing and growth can begin. The relevance of this insight for the management professions is that unless 'falling apart' can be understood as a generative process – and supported as such – then the profound shifts in consciousness and behaviour that leaders are demanding will not arise. 'Pathologising', as Hillman (1975) so rightly argues, is valid, authentic and necessary

*Falling apart is never for the sake of the parts, the multiple persons who are the richness of psychic life; falling apart is but a phase preliminary to reconstituting a stronger ego.*

And like Becker (1973) he agrees that,

*Pathologising is present not only at moments of special crisis but in the everyday lives of us all. It is present most profoundly in the individual's sense of death, which he carries wherever he goes. (p.70)*

During the last five years of this research and inquiry I have learned about the value of self compassion. I continue to learn how to accept and respect the emotions and behaviours that cause me pain, that others criticise, that often shame me and bring about rejection and destruction in my life. I can accept and respect because I can now see what amazing creatures we are to survive even a day in the chambers of our 'new brain consciousness' which constantly reminds us how finite, limited, vulnerable and small we are. Only now can I see what clever, resourceful strategies I and my clients have devised to live with the perplexing and potentially meaningless endeavours of human life. Yet I can also see there is another way. Our threat and drive based emotions and motives can serve us so much better if they are prepared to be led by our affiliative, compassionate self, for it is *that* self who will keep smiling, will break out the booze and invite the rest of us to dance.

I wonder now if that ghostly image that I name my 'real self' is in fact the manifestation (or personification) of my self compassion. Perhaps as my capacity for self compassion grows my real self will cease to haunt or elude me. May be she will materialise more fully and I will see and hear more clearly what she does, says and asks. Right now I still only catch glimpses and I can't quite hear. Right now I *still* find my energy pulled in to the exhilarating motion of new loops. Yet I do know that now I have seen her she will not go away again. And this is what I hope for my clients. That an approach which nurtures the growth of self compassion will also enable a client to recognise that the 'haunting' (of the real self) is not demonic or evil but a benign and healing presence that is safe to turn towards.

Germer describes acceptance as the 'ripening of practice' and suggests self compassion grows as we start to understand that we give ourselves self compassion not to 'feel better' but *because* we feel bad. I think there are many other reasons for nurturing self compassion. For those of us caught in idealisation loops encounters with the actual are often very sobering and reminiscent of Peggy Lee's song, ***Is that all there is?***

A perfectionist needs to come to terms with the idea that yes, that *is* all there is and what 'is' is *good enough*. Self compassion is not just a capacity I draw upon because I feel bad. Self compassion enables me to face into and live with the existential terrors of my *own* and my *shared* human truths. It is helping me grow towards a more mature realisation that all our lives are finite and our legacies *are* small. Yet as I begin to accept that each small contribution connects and adds up to something much larger I find the courage to let go of my worn out strategies and to go forward in to the dark and light of my life *without* a sense of

how it should be. As the shoulds recede I start to catch more glimpses of and sometimes experience the realm *beyond* all that is. This is the realm of my real self and all that is *possible*.

## Epilogue

### July 2013

The Livery yard. It's hot. I am standing in a shaded stable resting my head against Lily's smooth, warm neck. She is watching me patiently. For the fourth time I raise the bridle and ask her to take the bit. A bead of sweat runs down my face as she clenches her teeth. Just then Karen who works at the yard passes by with a bale of hay in her arms.

*'You alright?'* she calls

*'Umm.... not really. How can I encourage Lily to open her mouth?'*

Karen smiles in a friendly way. She puts down the bale and comes over to my stable.

*'Put your fingers gently in to the side of her mouth...this part where there's no teeth,'* she instructs.

Under her guidance I try again and, miraculously, Lily opens her mouth. Karen gives me a thumbs up and wanders off with her hay, her cheerful whistle and two Jack Russells close at her feet.

Lily is my first horse. She is a gift to myself for finishing my doctorate. And she is more than this. Lily represents a return to childhood, to the place I started, where I find myself again and which looks so different now. Yet it is also the same. My love for horses, for writing, for novels and chocolate peanuts. The summer that stretches before me will be full of these things.

Later I walk Lily in to the school for my first lesson with Leslie, our fierce, kind yard owner and medal winning eventer. She wants me to take Lily through her paces. I am very nervous. *'You can't get a bridle on and you haven't ridden for years!'* taunts my ideal self but this time that voice is immediately joined by others. *'Yes, but you learn quickly'* and *'there's a bond between you and this horse already.....she'll look after you.'* The voices of my actual and real selves ringing out, harmonising. I am still nervous.

The sun burns down on the sand as I canter another twenty metre circle. Leslie is watching me, watching Lily. My hands are soft and I feel Lily respond. We are both doing our best. At the end of the lesson I bring her on to the centre line and we practice square halts and half halts. Leslie squints and leans back against the fence.

*'Well?'* I ask.

*'To be honest.....much better than I thought you'd be – both of you. She's young. A lot to learn. But I reckon you've got a little star in the making.'*

Afterwards in the tack room Leslie shows me how to hang the bridle correctly and talks to me about saddles, fly masks, rugs and riding boots.

*'We'll need to get you out of those wellies... and you need a silk on that hat,'* she says.

She wants her yard to be smart, ordered and efficient. I think Leslie is a perfectionist and also compassionate. I'm going to like it here.

Before I turn Lily out for the night I brush her mane, clean her eyes with cold tea and put sunblock on her white blaze. Her chestnut coat is gleaming. Everyone else has gone home. I don't want to leave. I remember the school fair. It was hot that day too. What is different? Lily and Micky Mouse. Both have magic in them. Yet this time I know I am the rightful owner of a prize and no one is going to take it away.

I don't know much about horses, or dressage or how to distinguish a Half Moon from a Banbury bit. I'm at the very start again. Yet the voice in the top left corner of the ceiling has gone, my father has died and not long ago I found some self compassion. The wheel still turns but it no longer spins.



Figure 42: Lily



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## Appendix One

### Developing (Self) compassion: a collation of techniques/practices/interventions

From: The Compassionate Mind by Paul Gilbert (Gilbert, 2010)

1. **Mindful breathing** (paying attention to your breathing and bringing attention back to it)
2. **Mindful attention/sensory focusing** (eating the raisin, holding the tennis ball)
3. **Mindful relaxing** (e.g. body scan)
4. **Memory triggers** – using a soothing object, smell, to start the practice
5. **Being an alien for a day** – make it strange/be amazed (mindfulness)
6. **Be appreciative** – look for the good
7. **Exploring the desire to be at peace** – loving kindness meditations
8. **Using memory to create compassionate feeling** – recalling kind, loving, joyful experiences (both receiving them and giving them) – compassion flowing in and flowing out
9. **The compassionate self** – imagining yourself as a wise compassionate person
10. **Finding your safe place**
11. **Imagining your ideal compassionate other**/building a compassionate image
12. **Heartfocusing** – placing hand on heart and imagining compassion flowing in to you and this area through your hand
13. **Flow of life** – using nature based images to connect to wide humanity/earth
14. **Mind training** – paying attention to the thoughts and interpretations that arise, writing them down. Notice how you construe events
15. **Behind the Scenes** – noting down what you think is behind/underlying your feeling of fear, anger etc.
16. **Compassionate mind training** – pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and try to inject them with feelings of kindness, warmth and gentleness
17. **Compassionate writing** – write down your thoughts/reactions/feelings and your compassionate response to them
18. **Validating our feelings** – reminding ourselves that whatever we are *feeling* is understandable and OK and not our fault (but may be our problem). Start with: 'it's understandable I feel like this because'
19. **Thinking about facts** – standing back and considering the facts that support a situation/event
20. **Thinking about assumptions** and rules that guide our behaviour (what are my guiding principles?)
21. **Balancing my strengths and abilities** – when did I cope with similar event in the past, what strengths am I underestimating?

22. **Thinking about what is supportive** – what support can I give myself, as if I were my own best friend?
23. **Taking an empathic stance** – trying to understand the perspective of the other
24. **Noticing blocks** – what holds me back from taking on board my own wisdom?
25. **Alternative thoughts** – write down your distressing thoughts/feelings and also alternative ideas about them
26. **The mirror** – stand in front of a mirror and imagine yourself as a compassionate person
27. **Two chairs** – allow the two systems (threat and soothing) to speak to one another. In one chair say what is upsetting you, move to the other and reply as your compassionate self
28. **Distinguishing between shame based self criticism and compassionate self correction** – use two columns to note down ‘how my self criticism helps me’ and ‘how my self criticism hinders me’ (can use table on p.373 to look at what you have written and decide which is shame based self attacking and which is compassionate self correction)
29. **Sitting with your self criticism** – think of/bring to life a situation that elicits self criticism/then engage in soothing breathing and visualise compassionate image. Now consider the same self critical thoughts as you breath and evoke compassion. What happens to them?
30. **The many parts of me** – consider a situation or event from the perspective of you many ‘me’s’- the angry me, the sad me, the safe me, the compassionate me etc.
31. **The unreliable self critic** – ask whether your self critic really has your interests/well being in mind. Write down all the ways your self critic is unreliable and acting against you.
32. **Best interests?** – consider the people who may have put you on the road to self criticism – imagine asking them why they passed judgment on you, what was in their life to make them so critical, did they have your best interests at heart.
33. **Conflicting feelings** – write a letter to someone who brings forth conflicting feelings in you (e.g. love and anger). Write down all the things that angers you and all the things you love about them
34. **Blaming others and forgiveness** – to move on from anger and victim mentality. Write a letter of forgiveness (and understand that forgiveness is not about accepting what they have done is Ok) being clear about how you feel and what you are now going to do to be compassionate towards yourself.
35. **Standing up to your self critic** – visualise your self critic, involve it in a conversation with your compassionate image – who is going to stand up for you/soothe your self critic

36. **Coping in the moment** – notice when you feel anxious/disappointed etc. about being criticised – accept these feelings as understandable, direct compassionate thoughts to them.
37. **Limiting your criticism of others** – monitor how often you are critical of others (without judging yourself) ask what is that about/why did I need to do that/where is the fear and vulnerability in me?
38. **Expressive writing** – writing compassionate letters to self, validating your feelings, allowing your writing to flow wherever it needs to (see prompt questions p.403)

## Appendix Two: Participant images of compassion







