

# A Paper by Mark Skelding

## Thinking Like Water – voices of Heart Politics

A personal reflection on the history of Heart Politics, a New Zealand social change gathering and its personal and social therapeutic effect since 1989. The piece is written by Mark Skelding, a former co-ordinator and ex-trustee of these Gatherings, and includes interviews with attendees. Mark has recently received a Masters in Education (Social Change) from the University of Western Sydney. He has Diploma of Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy (Auckland) and is a staff member of the Institute of Psychosynthesis NZ. He has a private practice in Thames, Auckland and online and leads Self and World experiential ecopsychology groups. Mark is a regular Heart Politics attendee.

## Thinking Like Water: SOURCE:

*So often, social change workers think in militaristic terms - strategy, conquering, winning, losing. Maybe if we look to more natural phenomena for how to think about our work and how to do it, we will find new ways. I want to be like water so that I can fit into any vessel, flow anywhere, move with the grade, not only in my own way.*

*Think like water!*

Fran Peavey, 2000

As dualistic, 'left/right' politics appears increasingly ineffective in the face of the neo-liberal behemoth, the former "left" appears enrolled in "a strategy of 'bending and moulding' existing political institutions and the free-market economic model rather than attempting radical political and economic reforms...(which has) come at the cost of a loss of intellectual confidence, ideological clarity and weakened identities." (Panizza, 2005). "Official" views of reality are increasingly one-dimensional, with no room for advocates of difference, whilst "post-truth" offers ever more surreal interpretation. Robert Socolow (Borgman, 1984), reflected that conservationists and politicians .. "except when they talk with one another (and perhaps not even then) ... refrain from articulating what really matters to them." In such environments, there can be no creative tension, no potential meeting, no new insights, no difference explored, no shared understanding, and no collective intelligence.

In Heart Politics (1986, 2000), Fran Peavey, activist, feminist, and clown, shared her experiences and techniques of "speaking across difference". She championed an approach that was heart-based, emotionally inclusive, recognised ideological variances, and assumed that socially transforming dialogue was possible when centred in respect and empathy for self and other. The book reached a group of New

Zealand friends and activists wondering how to support social and cultural change after a substantial period of largely patriarchal, National-led government, culminating in the Muldoon era. The heavy-handed approach of Government in response to anti-apartheid protest during the 1981 Springbok Rugby tour had set the nation reeling on many levels, and paved the way for the decisive move towards the Fourth Labour Government in 1984.

Milton Friedman, champion of neoliberal thinking, observed “*only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change*”. This is the essence of “shock doctrine” (Klein, 2007), and New Zealand was poised for trauma.

Lange's stand against nuclear weapons and US militarism caused a flurry of national pride and unity, and brought the country a sense of moral leadership, harking back to the country's 19<sup>th</sup> Century left-leaning idealism to ‘lead mankind into the promised land’ (Coleman, 1958 – quoted in Peet, 2012). This was first shaken - by the French government's sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland - and then broken - in the bruising, relentless, Roger Douglas-led neo-liberal revision of the country's economy (King, 2003; Peet, 2012). All this, plus the loss of youth culture leaders such as John Lennon and Bob Marley (particularly loved by young Maori who celebrate that he shares his birthday with the Treaty of Waitangi on February 6) combined to unsettle any sense that we had, as a nation, a fundamental shared set of values and identity. (Lawrence et al, 2013)

*The late twentieth century was the period in which New Zealanders dismantled many of the traditional certainties which had been their foundation for a coherent and national view of the world.*

(King, 2003)

vivian Hutchinson had been walking in Maori and pakeha worlds much of his life, actively engaged in Workers Rights, and raising awareness against injustice of all kinds. His gatherings at Parihaka Marae raised pakeha understanding of land rights and treaty issues in an interpersonal, relational context. These led him to found the Festivals of Cooperation which “*brought together community-based activists from a wide variety of service sectors from employment, environment, health, justice, race relations and peace issues*” (<http://www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz>) Hutchinson, along with friends Elaine Dyer and Rex McCann – variously involved in prisoner rights, gender activism, alternative education, intentional community, and more - recognised social activists' need to attend to personal and spiritual aspects of their lives to avoid burn-out and cynicism; that spiritual and personal development is complementary and both have a role in activism; and that, despite different perspectives, each shared in a sense that something better was possible in our society, and all would benefit from mutual recognition and support. Peavey's book provided the context of “speaking across difference” and tools, such as strategic questioning, that the trio saw as very useful. Dyer, already planning a trip to Scotland to explore what might be learned from the Findhorn phenomenon, arranged to stop-over in San Francisco to meet Peavey, and ask whether a New Zealand gathering could

borrow the name of her book.

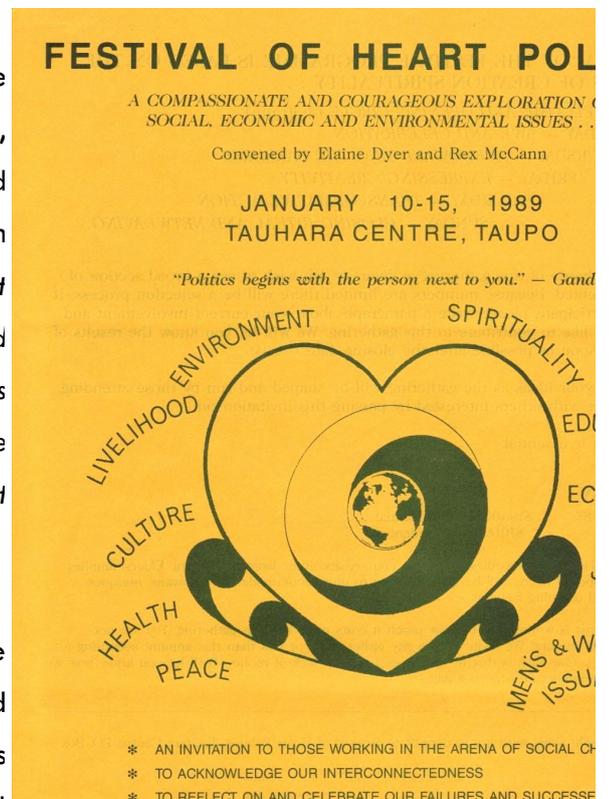
Peavey was delighted and the first Heart Politics Gathering took place in 1989, with Heart Politics itself as the theme, and Fran Peavey as its special guest. This was held at the Tauhara Centre, overlooking the great Lake Taupo and the source of the Waikato River, which has its own tradition of spiritual and cultural change work, and a fascinating heritage that includes secret metaphysical societies in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Havelock North, and the then radical learning ideas of such like Montessori, Steiner and pioneer psychologist, William James (Turbott, 2013). Pricing was structured to make these catered, residential events accessible to as wide a group as possible, offering low-income bursaries, and onsite provision for childcare.

### Thinking Like Water: FLOW

The DNA of the Heart Politics (Hpx) tradition is visible in the first flyer: an open yet contextualising theme, interconnectedness, relationship, individuality, difference, and children and families. Rosalie S. (Author Interview: March 2017) was there: *“the thread that took me to the first gathering was the opportunity was to meet with “like-minded people”. In New Zealand in 1989, there were multiple strands of social innovation... and I connected to multiple of these. The invitation indicated that most of these had their own camp... but what if we brought them all together?”*

She noted how the spirituality that questioned the sustainability of the often manic, driven, desperation of hard political activism, was often taunted in return by activists questioning the value of “ungrounded” meditation and reflection to achieve any change. The presence of psychotherapists, skilled in reflecting on the dynamics of relationship, enabled the process to unfold, and, despite the intensity of learning, *“the authentic, personal interaction”* was a huge change from the personal and spiritual isolation that many activists and meditators had experienced.

*For the first seven years it was like going into a fire, and yet it was intensely satisfying. I was getting more authentic communication from different perspectives over those five days than I had in the whole of my life.*



(RS – interview, 2017)

At the centre of the process, the gathering was developing the art of strategic questioning, which Peavey and Hutchinson described in terms that are remarkably similar to psychotherapeutic process in that:

- *it creates knowledge by synthesising new information from that which is already known.*
- *it awakens the suppressed possibilities of change embedded in each person, in each institution and in each society.*
- *it is empowering: ownership of the new information stays with the person answering the question.*
- *it releases the blocks to change and new ideas.*
- *it facilitates people's own responses to change.*
- *it generates energy to make changes happen.*
- *it creates answers that may not be immediately known but may emerge over time.*

• (Peavey/Hutchinson, 1997)

In a 1998 (Lesler) interview about her work, Peavey suggested two levels of strategic question – a general, and a personal: “What are the biggest problems you see affecting your country or region?” and “How would you like things to be different in your life?”. She often proffered this two level analysis:

*Sometimes I feel as though there are two realities separated by a curtain. One reality is our daily lives; we see people scurrying around, doing their work, living their lives. But every now and then we peek behind the curtain, and see a second reality: the world as a whole, poised on the brink of several disasters at once, our planet befouled, starvation, oppression, war, invasion, fifty thousand nuclear weapons . . . "Hey, there is a world out there, and the situation is really absurd! Oh my heavens, is this us? How embarrassing!" The two realities collide for a moment: I feel like a hostage on a planet of fundamentally crazy people, and I suspect I may be one of them.*

*Then I recoil for a while at the insanity of it all, and close the curtain. A wave of sadness, anger, or fear passes through me. Then something starts to go off inside me again. I peek through the curtain once more, and through the terror and insanity, a roar from deep inside comes up and out. It is a cosmic roar, a roar of survival, a burst of true energy that relieves just enough of my suffering to unleash the fury to heal and work even harder.*

(Peavey, 1986)

Holding paradox and tolerating discomforting emotion long enough for energy to be released is a therapeutic approach. Here it is coupled with a recognition of the interbeing between the external and internal experience, an extension that sits comfortably with Abram's (1996) observation that *“human mind is not some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth.... Intelligence is no longer ours alone... we are in it, immersed in its depths”* - and, in Peavey, it emerges as a *“cosmic roar”*.

However, exciting and transformative as such interbeing may become, it invites us to reject commonly held dualistic dichotomy. Accessing such a primal energy *“shakes our modern foundations”* (Fisher, 2013), and is not something that we moderns are well-trained in doing. It can leave us profoundly vulnerable and uncertain. With Hpx Gatherings attracting anywhere between 55 and 120 people, questions alone were insufficient to give the structure and sense of safety necessary for them to be usefully strategic. To pass comment on the global is to risk judgement from others, and to reflect on and reveal the personal risks exposure and self-inflicted shame. To build relationship, acceptance, connection and safety, Gatherings offered reflective and interpersonal spaces as well as the more familiar planned workshop type environment. These spaces have become known as *“the Pillars”* since, at a time of great change in the way that Gatherings were being held, the *“old”* structures were dismissed, and the Gathering recognised those elements it valued and wished to retain. These were:

- rituals of welcome and farewell (more or less formal, depending on leader)
- a process of orientation to place and programme (includes walk around site, available meeting spaces, health and safety issues, kitchen protocols etc)
- a self-introduction by attenders, including the children (often includes games/process to enable meeting and conversation)
- a morning circle (connection to whole group, including the children, for fine-tuning programme (location, times etc), notices, emergent themes, and brief other business.)
- a daily *“home group”* hour (spent with the same small group, for personal check-in, sharing and reflection)
- a sharing circle/*whaikorero* evening
- a Celebration (evening of co-created and sometimes

spontaneous creativity, song, tableau, dance, improv etc)

- the Well (reflective, meditative space with opportunity to share reading, poem, insight expressive of personal purpose or calling.)
- a facilitated integration process

Donald J (Author Interview: January 2017) is an academic who originally came along rather reluctantly due to his self-determined "*introverted and intellectual nature*", to accompany his wife. Since then, he has developed a leading role in recent Gatherings, initially by volunteering to ring the bell that alerted people to changes between workshop times, "*a role that allowed me to participate without being too visible*". Continuing to turn up, Donald felt fed "*from areas into which I would not normally stick my nose .... allowing me to be more fully myself than almost any other situation that I had ever been in in my life.*" He values the sustaining nature of Gatherings and now attends even though his wife has "retired". He has stepped up into roles he never imagined, drawing on skills he had not formerly recognised, "*learning to see more of myself, and draw from more of myself, so it's been both professionally and personally developing*". He comments on the many challenges that the group has had to face, drawing on and building the collective intelligence, ranging from the weather and flooding, to the trustees cancelling *Gatherings* – and the *Gatherings* deciding they would not be cancelled!

These occasions of deep questioning of purpose have tested both the collective and its individuals equally. Gatherings can be understood as an ongoing questioning of purpose "what are we doing here?" that can only be answered through participation: "*the path is made by walking*" (Machado, 1912). Berry (1988) writes "*the old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective..... we have not learned the new story*". A Gathering is both a personal *and* collective search for both an experience and a means of expressing something for which language has become lost or dulled. Christine Downing (quoted in Fisher, 2013) notes of Freud and Jung's hermeneutic searches "*there is no given mode of discourse, no recognised literary genre, no established philosophical option, which is wholly adequate. The fusions of myth and science are not confusions but conscious and deliberate undertakings*".

For Hpx these are not the "conscious and deliberate undertakings" of an individual, carefully thought through and rationalised against an intellectual framework. Whilst they arise from conscious and reflective consideration, this is an emergent process, held and shared in a circle of intentional, deep relationship, reminiscent of Siegel's (2011) description of mind as "*embodied, emergent and relational*".

Over their first decade, Gatherings closely followed a conference-style structure of invited luminaries speaking within a preset programme chosen by a self-selecting group, albeit with many of the pillars above in place. The Hpx guest list was varied, including futurist Sohail Inayatullah, prominent NZ historians Tony

Simpson and Michael King, veteran peace campaigner Sonja Davies, environmentalist Jeanette Fitzsimmons, theologian Lloyd Geering, psychologist Marijke Battenberg, film-maker David Jacobs, former NZ Governor General Sir Paul Reeves, social activists John Minto and Jane Kelsey, law professor David Williams, community activists Sue Bradford, Catherine Delahunty and Gordon Jackman, Green Party co-leader Rod Donald, Parihaka community leader Marjorie Rau-Kupa, investigative journalist Nicky Hager, newspaper editor Judy McGregor, and deep ecologist John Seed.

The opportunity to connect with peers and be stimulated by such a varied and rich range of presenters built a core of committed “old hands”, as well as drawing in newcomers - like myself.

*I began attending Gatherings towards the end of “the first years”, recommended by my psychotherapy tutor during training. I was struck by the organisers' sense of the zeitgeist in choosing speakers who could navigate the various currents of social change, often using personal story as anchor. Through presenters' words, reflections and experiences, attenders not only got a deeper insight into social currents but, increasingly into the currents alive in ourselves in response to what we were hearing, and to one another.*

*(Author's reflection)*

As these currents became more familiar, long-term attenders became as interested in how this community was growing as they were in the information being brought in by expert and specialist presenters. Some found this format to be limiting, too “Heart Politics presents...”, lacking opportunity to explore their personal perception of “*what really matters*”. This changed with the arrival of Harrison Owens' Open Space Technology (1993) as a key organising tool, and new “Pillar”. Open Space is carefully structured, enabling attenders to identify specific interests and gifts in terms of a gathering or theme, to triage these into a programme of workshops or activities. Over the next years, Gatherings experimented with variations of Open Space combined with Keynote Speakers, Keynote Listeners (keynotes feeding back to the gathering), or with Keynote Vignettes (short invited presentations from known attenders).

The Open Space process was introduced by Dale H, originally a keynote presenter who, as many did, became drawn into the wider, emergent processes.

*We had this agreement for a while that we would engage in “fierce friendship” which meant that we could take someone aside and challenge them. And they would take the challenge seriously, and take it in good heart, to look at that behaviour and see where it came from. That was good personal development .... it was a great learning experience in*

*terms of confronting my own ... parts of me being mirrored that were not always functional or helpful, and I could see that I could work through some issues of my own. You'd get the corners knocked off and get challenged. It was the opportunity to grow personally, and also to see that the dreams that I had had were totally doable ... that they were co-operative dreams because they obviously involved other people, so I had to get on with other people, and also I had to refine what I had to offer to move that forward.*

*(DH – interview, 2017)*

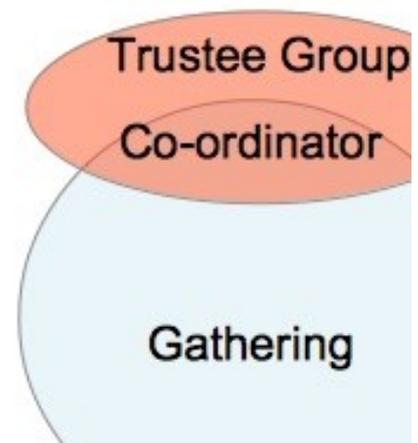
I asked how it was for Dale, an internationally respected leader in her field, to be in a very egalitarian environment with many others, some of whom were leaders in their own right.

*I was shifted from being a leader in my own field to being like a junior member in this new community – which was tantalising, and aggravating, but growthful. It is a gathering of leaders, with different things to offer, and learning how to do this together.*

*(DH – interview, 2017)*

Thinking like Water: FLOOD:

Although there were no legal structure or established formal processes, other than a bank account with two signatories, after ten years there was a core of regular attenders, plus a group of “trustees” that had evolved, by invitation, around the original initiators. Alongside their many other works in the world, Vivian Hutchinson had maintained a visionary governance facilitation role and Rex McCann had shared, complemented and nuanced this to realisation as event convenor, before devolving the nuts and bolts of organisation and admin to a co-ordinator. Elaine Dyer, whilst still involved, had stepped back as other projects demanded her focus.

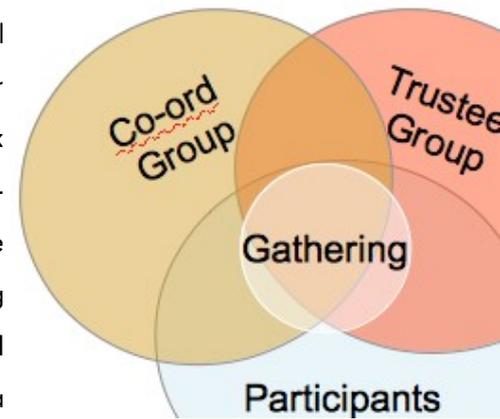


*After volunteering, at the end of my first Gathering, to assist the co-ordinator, his having to step down propelled me into his role. I was daunted by the competence, experience and wisdom of the long-term trustees and overwhelmed by my own perceived lack of these qualities! For support, and for security, I drew a group of newer Gatherers around me, evolving a Co-ordinating Group approach to event management whilst the trustees took on more governance.*

*(Author's reflection)*

This differentiation of roles, coupled with the reduced need for content in Open Space, allowed the process of Gathering to gain greater prominence.

The presence of experienced therapists as well as group facilitators coincided with a new generation of younger activists, and brought new ideas about purpose and potential, and what this might mean. This reflects Bion's (1961) observation that the first assumption of a group is that it is there to receive something from its convenor. When a member brought Kegan's developmental theory to the table we recognised that the process of Gathering, as a whole, had started to become **object** to those participating in Gathering – participant, “Co-ord Group”, and Trustees all **subject**. This allowed the group to develop more language about our personal and collective experience with each other, the group, and our work in the world. The therapists helped us to ground the knowledge in the felt-sense of the moment, and so recognise personal change occurring in the context of the group change. In Wilber's terms (2000) we were beginning to turn our attention to the contours of our interior quadrants, our shared and personal consciousness. In Berry's language, we were beginning “a communion of subjects”. For Bion (1961) we were beginning to recognise the potential outcome of a successful marriage of ideas.

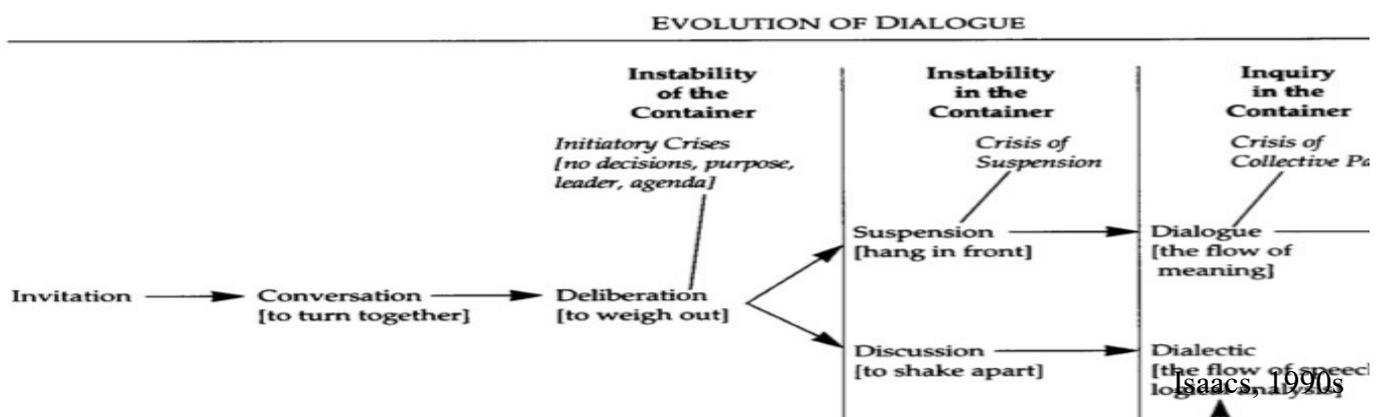


These were exciting and transformative times. Vivian Hutchinson introduced Bohmian Dialogue:

*something between the individual and the collective. It can move between them. It's a harmony of the individual and the collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence. So there is both a collective mind and an individual mind, and like a stream, the flow moves between them. The opinions, therefore, don't matter so much. Eventually we may be somewhere between all these opinions, and we start to move beyond them in another direction - a tangential direction - into something new and creative..... And perhaps in dialogue, when we have this very high energy of coherence, it might bring us beyond just being a group that could solve social problems. Possibly it could make a new change in the individual and a change in the relation to the cosmic. Such an energy has been called 'communication'. It is a kind of participation. The early Christians had a Greek word koinonia, the root of which means 'to participate' - the idea of partaking of the whole and taking part in it; not merely the whole group, but the whole.*

(Bohm, 1996)

Many Hpx processes were located in this territory already, but Bohm's work, and insights such as Theory U (Schwarmer, 2007), Senge's *Fifth Discipline* (1990), the Isaacs/MIT Dialogue Project (1990) and Block's *Community Conversations* (2008) coincided with the community's growing understanding about process and precipitated change and experimentation within the Hpx community. In 2002, Hutchinson initiated an 8-Day Wananga, based on such ideas, yet with a focus on exploring the Hpx processes more deeply. It proved pivotal, in many ways. During the first morning circle, as time moved towards the pre-organised programme, the group considered the idea of dialogue. When Vivian announced his intention to move to another space to engage the set work, one of the group (a psychotherapist!) asked "What if you didn't do that? What if you just sat down again and stayed here?". Which is what happened, and thus began a remarkable experience of Dialogue, true to the Isaacs model.



Isaacs (1990?) described Dialogue as "a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that comprise everyday experience". When the key organiser heard the challenge, and, somewhat confused, sat down, we all surrendered some of our old certainties, and embarked on the "Initiatory Crisis" as individual leadership began to surrender to the group. By the third day we were in chaos, and the "Crisis of Suspension": the willingness to let go had given way to profound uncertainty and doubt. Some members of the group began to experience near-psychedelic experiences, and for others, emotional "unfinished business" flared up. The successful negotiating of this "make or break" period was largely due to the high trust within the group, as well as some deft interventions by therapists or experienced facilitators. The apparently disconnected diversity of experiences in the room defied easy understanding, so we gave up trying. This freed us all to a deeper curiosity and acceptance, not only of each other and the group, but also of ourselves. It became a lot more fun – and, at times, very emotional. Isaacs wrote of this:

*People gradually realise that deeper themes exist, behind the flow of ideas. They come to understand and feel the impact that holding on has had on them, their organisations, and their culture. They sense their separateness. ... Such understanding brings pain – both from the loss of comforting beliefs and from the exercise of new cognitive and emotional muscles. ..The "crisis of collective pain" is the challenge of embracing*

*these self-created limits of human experience.*

*(sourced on Internet – date unclear)*

One can see this process paralleling the journey of individual therapy when an early crisis, often felt viscerally, is the uncertainty about whether one **can** make the necessary movement beyond familiar habits and identity. Having engaged will in “staying in the room”, the second challenge is often about who we **will** be without the usual structures and habit that we identify as ourselves. Then, the liberation of disidentification (I am my habits, skills and personality AND I am more than these) brings us to a crisis of limitation: I may be more than my identifications and personality, AND I still have to be on the ground, in the world, and responsible.

For the Wananga group, a daybreak ceremony late in the experience was - surprisingly – attended by most of the participants. It led to a spontaneous venture outside, where the mists were rising from Lake Taupo, and beyond, the fingers of dawn were caressing Mount Tauhara. We returned quite changed, many of us wondering at a greater sense of purpose or vocation.

*The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The key ... is to begin by shifting our attention from the problems of community to the possibility of community..... our wisdom about individual transformation is not enough.. so one purpose is to bring together our knowledge about the nature of collective transformation. A key insight in this pursuit is to accept the importance of social capital to the life of community. This begins the effort to create a future distinct from the past.*

*(Block, 2008)*

Wananga participants set up a Stewardship Learning Community (SLC), committed to further developing their understanding and skill at powerful collective processes, and exploring them in a series of similar Wananga (2003 - 2008). The insights impacted “ordinary” Hpx Gatherings, and stimulated the “Tauhara Dialogues” in response to contemporary concerns like Genetic Engineering (2004) and Climate Change (2007). The GE Dialogue not only stimulated a follow up, 6 month later, but also led to ongoing regular informal breakfast meetings between leading GE research scientists and prominent anti-GE activists (not to mention their stunning cover of Bowie's Jean-Genie at the Gathering celebration evening!). The Climate Change dialogue, arguably, failed to attract the necessary leaders of industry to achieve sufficient diversity. Nevertheless, subsequent meetings were held in Auckland and Wellington, and some significant ongoing relationships developed, notably with prominent media commentators.

These projects elaborated the theme of old friends coming together to share and generate change-making, with targeted invitations to bring strategic others into a crucible of potential change, a movement from the outside in. Hpx participants had often generated new projects in the wider world – some very prominent,

such as the Essentially Men programme, the Women's Gatherings or Earthsong EcoNeighbourhood, others more local and private. These had been witnessed and grown within the now twice-yearly events. But, the second decade of Hpx is marked by a particular outreach of ideas and creativity from the Gathering members - local Transition Towns, Enviroschool projects, ReGeneration, NZ Eco-Show, the Great Fathers Trust, the Outlook For Someday Film Challenge, standing in local elections, and more. It was as if the initial container had become too small, and the phenomenon was beginning to break out. This was not a missionary crusade of social activism; rather, individuals who been immersed in the culture took the understandings of relationship, questioning, "holding space", embodied spirituality and practical ritual, respectful listening, and a myriad of other skills into the wider world where their personal interests, concerns and passions were being stimulated, mirrored and called forth.

*It's given me some skills, some personal growth, I'm more informed. I've taken some of the forms from Heart Politics into other groups. It has helped me to be calmer and more centred with people, in a group. When I want to be "holding the space", being authentic, talking from my heart, and being aware of the group, I've got somewhere to reach back to.*

*(Anthea O. Interview: Feb 2017)*

What had begun as a service provided **to** activists and change-makers was increasingly enabling and drawing service **from** within them.

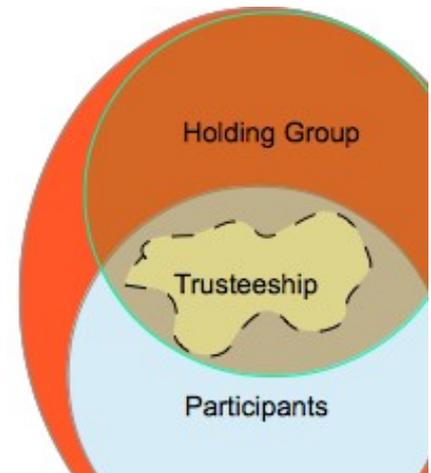
Chazan (2001) suggests: "*the group, by its nature, has potentially more to offer than the therapeutic dyad*", referring specifically to the group therapy environment. Hpx Gatherings are not established for this purpose, and yet appear to achieve aspect of this. Chazan would note that there is, in any group, tension between the separateness of the individual and the belonging of the group. As they navigate this, the group is both container and enabler for individuals' building mature capacity for self-other awareness. This echoes Foulkes (Dalal,1998), who saw individuals as nodes in a social network of conscious and unconscious communication. Illness occurs when the communication becomes blocked. For Foulkes, the group would ideally resolve this, and this was the case with Hpx.

These had been heady and exciting days, but not without multiple challenges. For Bion (1961), the third assumption of groups is that it may be there for flight/fight purposes, and in this period of Hpx such tensions were strong. There were those between who was and wasn't part of the SLC, the right and wrong way to hold process, and unclarity about power and authority: who "owned the brand"? Internal tensions within the group echoed those between the group and the Tauhara Trust over management styles and charges. Hpx could no longer remain at Tauhara and offer attenders places at prices less than it would cost to stay in a motel – something few activists can afford to do, and certainly not with their families for several days at a time! The Co-ord Group had faded away, following an unsuccessful attempt to establish

regional co-ordination, and a process had evolved whereby a “Co-ordinating Trustee” would work with several members of the community to ensure a successful event.

The various containers – physical, emotional, cultural and institutional – in which the gatherings had evolved were threatened. The SLC was well-represented in the Hpx Trustees group at this time who decided that, following a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration in 2010, complete with a live band, to cancel the next Gathering, and that the Trustees would disband. As Bion wrote: *“The crux of the matter lies in the threat of the new idea to demand development, and the inability of the basic-assumption groups to tolerate development.”*

But the Trustees’ decision did not take into account the commitment of attenders, nor the passion of those who had been in the Holding Group. The notion emerged of Trusteeship being an aspect of the gathering itself, held in common by those attenders who chose to take it. From *invisible pillars* to *cloud trustees*: an evolution was underway.



### **Thinking Like Water: OVERFLOW**

For the first time outside Tauhara, a (small) Gathering was held in Auckland. Plans were made for a Summer Gathering in the Kauaeranga Valley, in the hills behind Thames. Meanwhile, the SLC began a series of retreats at a centre in Hamilton. Block’s (2008) *“future different from the past”* was underway. A complex process of differentiation took place with a minimum of distress for all parties: goodwill was not lost.

The two Kauaeranga Gatherings challenged and extended the group, which had now been displaced from its original home, and had to some extent been disowned. This was a liberating, exciting, time and, with tipis and marquees deep in the National Park, edgy and wild-tinged.

The first event attracted 90 registrations, even though the Field Education Camp could not offer the familiar comforts. The preparatory group was cut-off by floodwaters, the caterer’s car was nearly swept away fully-loaded (!), and the media issued warnings that travellers should “stay away from the Coromandel”. Organisers feared the worst, but, as the storm cleared, and the rivers abated, they discovered that 89 people had made it to Thames, that two orientation circles had been held the night before in different venues, and that most of the gathering was in the Kauaeranga Hall being served breakfast by the caterer! The two sub-groups then joined together at the Camp. The second Kauaeranga Gathering, with Deep Ecologist John Seed and Project Lyttleton’s Margaret Jefferies, was an altogether calmer affair, which, perversely, showed up the limitations of the venue, and the Hpx diaspora continued.

Gatherings had a strongly ecopsychological strand around this time: surely wandering in the wilderness requires this. The creative potential of inner and outer nature, Berry's (1988) idea of consciousness as Earth dreaming itself was continued by guests that included Mary-Jayne Rust and Susan Murphy - and Franca Fubini, who introduced the social dreaming matrix to Hpx (interestingly, Foulkes, mentioned earlier, is said to have introduced the term "matrix" to psychology). These, along with child development academic Jenny Ritchie, Tuhoe sociologist Tracey McIntosh and poet Gerri Power, were guests at the first full Hpx Gatherings ever held in Auckland. Huia, on the edge of the Manukau Harbour, is on the sheltered side of the wild west coast. Its indigenous story is one of the displacement of a settled, peaceful group who eventually returned under the protection of another, whilst the colonial story includes the nation's greatest marine tragedy. The venue itself was divided by a road to the beach, and the largest meeting space was insufficient for a comfortable meeting of the whole group. As the Gathering prepared once again to find a new home, a key member of the co-ordination team relocated to the UK for his Masters in Psychotherapy. Having recently worked on the event that featured Mary-Jayne Rust, he was a natural choice for her to invite to take a key role in the Edge of the Wild Gatherings with which she was very involved. Thus Heart Politics processes set root across the world.

Meanwhile in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Gatherings had attracted a number of new attenders, some taking advantage of a "visit for the day" invitation creating a strong locals and children presence. Presenters with particular focus on child development and creativity attracted younger families, and some of these joined the organising Holding Group bringing greater focus to matters of education, child and family development, parenting, and ideas around home schooling and unschooling entered the frame.

Since 2015 Gatherings have been held at Port Waikato. Here, a combination of facilities, accessibility, natural environment, and bi-cultural heritage works well. The watery context continues: the Port Waikato settlement is near the mouth of the Waikato, the country's longest and fullest river. The Waikato (Maori: "flowing water") begins, like the Gatherings themselves, in Taupo, at the centre of the North Island. Curiously, an earthquake 17,000 years ago diverted its course: it previously shared a rivermouth with the Kauaeranga River at Thames in what is now the estuary of the Waihou. The flow of the gatherings has continued to mostly follow the story of the Waikato.

Like the Kauaeranga, Port Waikato offers another edgy and potentially dangerous environment, rich with wildlife and human stories of resilience and rogues. Bodies have been buried on the wild, west coast beach just minutes away (albeit with an excellent cafe, which has become somewhat essential in choosing Gathering locations!), and the choppy water where the river meets the sea expresses a challenging transition.

The group is experimenting with new forms to enable participants to "cross the bar" to integration early in the piece, processes which Rosalie S. hails as making it more difficult for attenders to experience pseudo-

community (Peck, 1998) once they have heard and felt themselves and others speaking out their purpose and intentions for being there. Anthea O. echoes this:

*I value democracy, and thinking about democracy, ..... and most of society ... feels a bit same-ish. I feel the Heart Politics experimentation - how to value equally, how to hear equally and how to listen across difference - creates a learning environment: and its really valuable, both as modelling and as immersion .....*

Anthea's expression "both ... modelling and immersion" echoes various communions as already observed - the individual/collective themes of Chazan and Foulkes, the inner/outer aspects of Wilber, Downing's Myth/Science, and the Nature/human nature continuum of Berry (1999) and Fisher's radical ecopsychology (2012).

This third decade of Gatherings has been turbulent and sometimes troubling. Old friends, places and certainties have fallen away. Some of our icons, heroes and inspirations have gone on to other things. Some have died. Meanwhile, "We've 100 years of therapy" (Hillman, Ventura, 1993) and social change, and the world in which we have been Gathering has changed almost beyond imagining. The very notion of activism, of healing – whether social or psychological – is under consideration:

*In the highly contrasting new-paradigm, post-modern world-view of chaos, complementarity and participative consciousness (Skolimowski, 1994), our very foundational notions of 'explanation', 'understanding' and 'truth' are 'up for grabs' - which, of course, has very profound implications indeed for the practice of any healing art.*

*(House, 1999)*

A time to regroup, to review, reconsider, tap into some old certainties, and attend to the children seems appropriate, and reassuring. But in a chaotic, post-modern, post-truth world, it may be tempting to look back to an easier, simpler time and an edge may be lost. The therapist must remain attentive to a client's embodied expression and involuntary processes, so what might the present location tell us about Hpx?

Although the turbulent waters are not far away, the Port Waikato venue is out of sight of both river and sea, up a steep sided valley. The camp is older style. It is in good order, and was not caught up in the wartime process that subsequently saw many private camps subsumed into national education infrastructure. This centre remains under the ownership of an educational trust. A shallow stream meanders lazily through the grounds - although its scoured banks suggest that it can get strong and angry sometimes. There is a comforting, familiar "time-out-of-time", late 1950s feel, as if a bullnosed Bedford bus might at any time wheeze up the narrow road to disgorge children, dressed in baggy, overlong shorts, and gingham dresses, out into a process colour landscape. This is a less dramatic environment than that reflected in Taupo's legends of warrior mountains, the floods of the Kauaeranga, or even the treacherous Manukau bar and, to

date, Gatherings have been similarly more comfortable.

Recent Gatherings have been contained, family-centred and more heart than politics. Recent keynote participant, Barry Coates, brought concerns about the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and, whilst important, to some Gatherers this seemed like a world away from the joyous necessities of children, relationship building, sharing stories and resting up between busy years of toil and responsibility. After more than 25 years, a vision is still being explored, as Dale H noted:

*I found that the vision that I had, of what a society could be like, was possible and has happened for me in many contexts. So that is an extremely satisfying thing for someone to realise in one's life, to have a dream, and then to see that dream, with others, be realised. Its very satisfying in that sense.*

Anthea O affirms the importance of the space:

*Its the modelling – people who are clear what they are about, and know how to talk and organise and be active in what they care about. You don't usually see more than bits of that, but in Heart Politics you see a lot more of that – it's an emotional maturity. So I get to see these people doing what they do, and I get to practice.*

*(Anthea O. Interview: Feb 2017)*

The pillars support this essential process. However, whilst pillars support the roof, open up space and let light pass, they can also cast shadow. The shadow of open space process can be that everything seems optional, and of equal value. In such a flatland (which, for Wilber (1998), involves repression of or dissociation from our inner world of value and meaning) environment, choices are predominantly self-interested. In this isolation, broader, collective issues or topics are felt as overwhelming and to be avoided, or defended against as something that an individual cannot effect and therefore need not engage. At worst, the topics themselves can become a dark entertainment:

*They're selling postcards of the hanging, they're painting the passports brown*

*The beauty parlor is filled with sailors, the circus is in town*

*Here comes the blind commissioner, they've got him in a trance*

*One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker, the other is in his pants*

*And the riot squad they're restless, they need somewhere to go*

*As Lady and I look out tonight, from Desolation Row*

(Dylan, 1966 – 50 years before Trump)

### **Thinking Like Water: OCEAN**

Slaughter (1998) notes how flatland casts individuals and cultures, now severed from meaning, into an ecology rendered lifeless, reduced to “a collection of objects” (Berry, 1999), just stuff to be used. This has not happened to the Gatherings, but recent feed-back to the Holding Group has suggested that something has been lost. This may be reflected in the lesser responsibility being taken for Gatherings, with one Holding Group member noting that organisation largely depends on 3 or 4 people. This is not sustainable long-term, and creativity is at risk.

Creativity requires an ebb and flow, a tidal tension that moves through the space between. As Cynthia Lennon noted: “*John needed Paul’s attention to detail and persistence; Paul needed John’s anarchic, lateral thinking*”. Perhaps Open Space requires the pillar of a keynote to help bring it focus and definition, just as Open Space allows particular concerns and perspectives to be enrolled in and deepen the wider narratives of participants’ concern, strengthening and differentiating both big and small picture perspectives. Kalsched has noted what Heller (2012) describes as “*the postmodern fascination with and near idolatry of the in-between spaces*” with a “*reluctance to leave the realm of potentiality and enter reality, to exist.*” In this realm, creativity becomes focussed inward, and “*heedless of the ordinary and the concrete... one remains unaware of the withdrawal ... caused by this splitting of the imaginal and the literal, which leaves the individual lost in the ether – or perhaps the underworld – where some may say it is tracking the pulse of the soul.*”

It may be that in choosing keynote presenters, the Holding Group had to differentiate something within themselves, and, by extension, the keynote differentiates something within the Gathering. For Mindell (2012) the tension and even conflict between the possibility and the reality is “*the missing power of transformation*”. He suggests that by being able to tolerate this process enables an emergent paradigm where “*conflict itself is the fastest way to community*”.

The differentiation experienced through the years of displacement has, perhaps, yet to be realised in the latest of flowering Gatherings. Wilber (1998)

*Instead of seeing that differentiation is the necessary prelude to a deeper or higher and emergent integration, it was seen, in all cases, as a disruption, a division and destruction, of a prior harmonious state. The oak was somehow a violation of the acorn. And in this confusion... all true critical edge was lost, because the cure for the actual dissociations that had indeed beset modernity was mistakenly thought to be a regression to a state prior to all differentiation*

whatsoever.

(Wilber, 1998)

The earlier years were marked by what was often perceived as a sometimes bitter argument between “Heart” and “Politics”, with dismissive attitudes in both camps, in an effort “to fix what we do not understand” as Hillman (1997) noted of therapy. Perhaps, having moved on, a third position was seeking to emerge that, to the extent that it has, illustrates Martin Luther King's (1967) observation on love and power – relevant, surely, to reflections on “heart” and “politics”:

*What happened is that some of our philosophers got off base. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites - polar opposites - so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love..... Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.*

First-timer Cam, walking his family's talk on extended tour as “The Loop Crew” in a zero carbon decorated coach, observed this potential through the power of connection:

*I realised all these people were a supportive network I could draw on – 40 new people! But then I realised that each of them had a network too – WOW! 1600 people right here. What couldn't that do?*



He also realised the power of listening to his embodied experience.

*I used used to put the sense down to my anxiety, or awkwardness, but now I have experienced that my heart tells me what right or wrong for me, but, after having been very analytic, rules-based, mind-focussed, I'm realising that my heart will tell me if I'm unwell, and what is the right thing for me for my own well-being. And how my heart speaks with the heart of another, to help someone else in their healing through my deep listening.*

He expanded on this as a way of sensing and receiving feedback from a wider awareness of self and the world, which Abram (1993) explored, drawing deeply from his own experience and the work of Merleau-Ponty. Cam concluded that if there was more of this “deep listening” and awareness, the world would “be a very different place”.

In therapy, self-realisation requires more than awareness – it also requires will, action, intention and purpose. Likewise politics requires more than concern – it requires self-awareness, self-critique, and willingness to be visionary. Herrero (2016), referencing a favourite Heart Politics' quotation attributed to Margaret Mead (that it “only” takes “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens to change the world”), points out that the quote, these days, also needs the addition of “organised”: *there is a risk that all those mavericks, rebels, disruptors, contrarians and challengers, without an organized platform and clear long term strategy became ‘useful idiots’*. A political term invented in the Marxist movement to describe the manipulated people who serve a cause but are cynically used by the leaders. The global change, a survival seeking to emerge, requires a politics informed by self-awareness and relationship, a psychology animated by an interbeing with planetary systems, and individuals inspired to give voice, stand for and evolve their small and precious understanding and expression of the systems that form and inform us.

*"It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story"*

(Berry, 1988)

Where a client is unable to metabolise their feelings, they remain powerless and confused. Therapy involves creating a new story that risks stepping beyond earlier, vitally necessary self-protections such as disassociation, and, by making a new story through metabolising trapped feeling, releasing energy to be more useful in the service of individual life (Casson, 2004). Likewise, social change metabolises the emotion held in the collective which can be understood as feedback from a whole ecology of human and more-than human intelligence (Bateson, 1972; Abram, 1993). By integrating the experience, reflecting upon it, and responding in a way that seeks to work with and support our understanding of what makes healthy systems thrive – a process which involves often powerful exchanges between beings, and from which arises relationship, vitality and flow (Mindell, 2002), and Mind (Siegel, 2011).

Gatherings might ask “How are we being inspired – by self, other and world? What are our gifts - for self, other and world? How are we being affirmed - by self, other and world? What are our edges – in self, other and world? How are we being challenged - by self, other and world? How are we being changed – and to what are we changing?. What is the world asking for now – and how do we hear it? Where is this

beginning to happen – and what are we seeing? What is our part in this? How will our future look different to the past?” To ask questions is powerful, and makes change:

*STRATEGIC QUESTIONING IS POLITICAL because it is a process that encourages people to find their own way through the rapids of change. It is political because it leads to strategies for change. It is political because it can (move) beyond dogma and ideology ... into fresh perspectives on common problems. It is political because it is a way of transforming your attachment to your own goals and opening up options that are common goals.*

*(Peavey/Hutchinson, 1997)*

If we read that again, replacing “Political” with “Therapeutic” at each time, we can see how therapy, in its quest for wholeness, leads inevitably to relationship and co-operative action. Heart Politics as healing: personal, local, collective, inclusive, global, self and world.

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