

No beginning, no end: An ecology of human flourishing

Brendan McCormack and Angie Titchen

Invitation

This paper is a longer version of McCormack & Titchen's (2014) paper. It contains more detail about our inquiry methods. We posted it on our Critical Creativity Blog (<http://criticalcreativity.org/>) to stimulate discussion about the nature, and a new definition of, human flourishing as the ultimate outcome of working within a critical creativity worldview. The paper is for anyone interested in understanding their own and others' flourishing through transformation. Although we are concerned with transformation of self, others, workplaces, organisations and communities towards person-centredness within health and social care practice, education and research, we hope that what we have written here will be of interest to people engaged in creating the conditions for themselves and others to flourish whatever their context, profession or field of practice. By inviting your responses to it, we will be testing out that hope, as well as finding out whether people can recognise their own and others' flourishing within the elements and essence of our new definition.

Point of departure

The unknown of critical creativity as a new worldview for transformational practice development and action-oriented research has been gently unfolding and unfurling over time. So it is with our understanding and embodiment of human flourishing as ends and means of transformational practice development and research within this worldview. In our earliest work (McCormack & Titchen, 2006, p. 241), we explicitly went beyond the moral intent of social justice and equity inherent in the critical social science tradition to self-consciously foreground human flourishing as 'maximising the potential for individuals to achieve his/her potential for growth and development'.

The term 'human flourishing' can be traced back to Aristotle who suggested that '*human flourishing occurs when a person is concurrently doing what he [sic] ought to do and doing what he wants to do*'. What Aristotle suggests here is a moral perspective on our being as agents in the world and which should resonate with us as healthcare practitioners. The argument being that we are effective as a person when the actions we actually take are the same as those we ought to be taking as a moral agent. To do this requires an understanding of what is required of us as practitioners (the evidence that informs our practice) whilst at the same time being in a position to want to do what is the right thing and to enjoy doing it.

Whilst Aristotle's moral positioning of human flourishing is seminal in positioning the essence of practice that is engaged with in a person-centred way, we needed to understand how human flourishing connected with transformational practice development and research. Of course transformational practice development and research has the same Aristotelian moral positioning, but we were also aware that human flourishing in this context, could be understood and conceptualised in a variety of ways. So the work of Heron & Reason was our touchstone. They construed inquiry as action for the purpose of human flourishing and they conceptualised it as 'an enabling balance within and between people of hierarchy, co-operation and autonomy' (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 11). Inspired by Heron and Reason's ideas of inquiry as transformative and restorative of meaning and mystery to human experience and the world as a sacred place, Lincoln & Denzin (2000) reflected:

'We may ... be entering an age of greater spirituality within research efforts. The emphasis on inquiry that reflects ecological values, on inquiry that respects communal forms of living that

are not Western, on inquiry involving intense reflexivity regarding how our inquiries are shaped by our own historical and gendered locations, and on inquiry into “human flourishing” as Heron and Reason (1997) call it, may yet reintegrate the sacred with the secular in ways that promote freedom and self-determination ... We may be in a period of exploring the ways in which ... we can both be and promote others’ being, as whole human beings (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 185).’

As very little was written at this time about the nature of human flourishing and how it can be facilitated, this was our starting point in undertaking our inquiry into human flourishing within our practice development and research contexts.

As we have continued to establish the theoretical and methodological roots of critical creativity, we have inquired more deeply and reflexively into new ways of learning, developing and researching practice in transformational and person-centred ways. We have danced, painted, walked, written poetry and dialogued with silence, nature and words to articulate and blend expressible and inexpressible knowings and wisdom of our body, mind, heart and spirit. In later writings, we have added to our original definition of human flourishing as the ends and means of transformational practice development and research. In our 2008 book chapter entitled, ‘A methodological walk in the forest: Critical creativity and human flourishing’ [based on a real walk in the Netherlands within an international co-operative inquiry] (Titchen & McCormack, 2008), we extended our original definition of human flourishing by proposing that human flourishing involves the human spirit and is inextricably connected to the natural world and to ecology.

Human flourishing is points of light on trees

Light transforms, enables light and death

Young saplings and ancient canopy must both flourish

To maintain the balance of the forest ...

... Human flourishing is an eco-system of balancing life-death-life

Creating conditions for interdependency and the losses and gains of each position

Fragility and strength - Strength and fragility.

Dynamic balance. ‘

(Titchen & McCormack 2008, pp. 64-65)

We showed in that work how skilled facilitators are:

‘co-inquirers, observing, questioning, experiencing and engaging with the concept being investigated, all at the same time. They are immersed in the world, connected to it in all their roles. They are epistemologically and ontologically authentic, that is, their ways of creating new knowledge about human flourishing are congruent with the way they are as

human beings, connecting with others in the world and fostering conditions for the human flourishing of co-inquirers' (Titchen & McCormack 2008, pp. 79-80).

Emerging from dancing on the Giants' Causeway in Northern Ireland, our paper, 'Dancing with stones: Critical creativity as methodology for human flourishing' (Titchen & McCormack 2010) showed how transformational practice development and research could lead to human flourishing in creative, spiritual and ethical senses and that it could be witnessed by others. We discussed human flourishing being experienced when people achieve beneficial, positive growth that pushes their boundaries in a range of directions, for example, emotional, social, artistic, metaphysical directions. And that it could be experienced in diverse ways, such as, deep fulfilment; radiance, being our real selves and through deep connection with nature, beauty and people. We acknowledged that human flourishing occurs when we move with flow from a point of inner knowing to taking right action effortlessly.

The next significant unfurling of our understanding was the result of working with our two colleagues Annette Solman and Val Wilson on retreat in the Grampian Mountains in Victoria, Australia. We used the dancing with stones methodological framework to create conditions for human flourishing through nature, the body, creative imagination, reflection and reflexivity. In our publication arising from this work, we extended our still underdeveloped definition/description of human flourishing as:

'...maximising individuals' achievement of their potential for growth and development as they change the circumstances and relations of their lives at individual, group, community and societal levels. People are helped to flourish (i.e., grow, develop, thrive) during the change experience in addition to an intended outcome of well-being for the beneficiaries of the work. Flourishing is supported through contemporary facilitation strategies, connecting with beauty and nature and blending with ancient, indigenous and spiritual traditions (c.f., Senge et al, 2005) and Dewing's (2008) active learning' (Titchen et al, 2011, p.2).

Being attuned to our personal attributes as persons and how we use these to our advantage is equally important. Alongside our own work, Maureen Gaffney (2011: 6) focuses on this issue and identifies four essential elements of flourishing persons:

- *Challenge*: some call or demand to you to do something, to get over an obstacle, to engage with some life task, to make something happen.
- *Connectivity*: being attuned to what is happening inside you and outside you. Connectivity orients you to the challenge and gets you ready to deal with it.
- *Autonomy*: feeling free to move and to act in pursuit of the challenge. This gives you the energy to get going and sets the direction of travel.
- *Using your valued competencies*: the experience of using your talents, especially the strengths you most value in yourself, to the full.

These four essential elements provide a deceptively simple framework for understanding what it means to flourish as a person. Gaffney argues that the best kind of challenge is one that we 'own'. In the context of practice development and action-oriented research we have identified these as 'critical moments' when we have a choice to grow, develop and transform or not. However, irrespective of the challenge and where it comes from, Gaffney further argues that flourishing requires 'connectivity' or 'psychological attunement' (p 8). Essentially this element is similar to that of reflexivity, i.e. our need to be aware of what is happening inside ourselves (our feelings, emotions, desires etc) in order to feel connected, and to interact effectively, with others. Gaffney suggests that persons need to be able to

survive emotionally in order to be able to flourish. To do so they need to be in a context that is psychologically safe, where they are able to feel good about themselves and where there are close connections between individuals and groups that are important to them. But no matter how connected we may feel, we also need a sense of 'autonomy'. Gaffney highlights the importance of individual freedom to 'act', to express one's creativity, to engage in relationship with others that nurtures our personhood and that makes us feel valued. The fourth element for flourishing identified by Gaffney (2011) is that of 'using your valued competencies'. Quite simply this means "... doing what you were put into the world to do" (p 11).

After seven years of work, this paper, 'No beginning and no end: An ecology of human flourishing' sets out our current embodied, cognitive and spiritual understanding. It was created and written on a seven-day retreat at Dzgogchen Beare, a Buddhist centre in the south west of Ireland. We present our methods, then our findings in the form of a poem with commentary. Whilst we briefly point out the resonances between our findings and key literature in the field, the purpose of this paper is not to engage in a comprehensive review of the literature and to locate our work within it, but rather to express simply and poetically the nature of human flourishing, as we have come to know it directly and experientially. We offer an image and definition of human flourishing.

Our writing in this paper is more inspirational than scholarly and challenges traditional forms of writing that rely on cognition and intellectual argument. Of course, there is a place for that in increasing our understanding of human flourishing and we will be engaging in that elsewhere. But here, by interacting poetic and symbolic forms with cognitive dialogue, we are trying to evoke in you your own peak experiences when surrounded by beauty and vibrant life. We are also attempting to provide conditions for you to have something of the experience that we had; an experience that was not altogether logical and rational. Hence the leaps and bounds that sometimes occur. By presenting images and leaving you to do something with them, we are showing rather than telling. We believe that this is a legitimate way of presenting our inquiry findings so far and of conveying essences that may be lost in the prose of conventional research reports. Although we occasionally show how the elements of our new definition of human flourishing might play out in practice development and research, that is not our main concern here. Again that work will follow.

Critical-creative inquiry methods

We used methods that enabled us to bring heart, mind, body and soul into our inquiry. Through a meditative walk in nature, creative expression through painting, movement, poetry/poetic writing, reflective journals, photography and critical-creative dialogue, we engaged our whole selves in gathering and making sense and meaning from the data. Thus we worked with all our senses, emotions, different ways of knowing (pre-cognitive, cognitive, metacognitive and reflexive), different knowledges and multiple intelligences and the peerless beauty of the landscape. We were also able to tap into the wisdom and loving kindness we experienced together and through formal periods of guided meditation at the retreat centre.

In preparation for our work, we had immersed ourselves in data that had been collected by ourselves and a community of practice developers and action-oriented researchers at a two-day co-operative inquiry workshop in the Netherlands in 2008. With Annette Solman and Val Wilson, we had co-facilitated a concept analysis of human flourishing (attributes, enabling factors and consequences). Returning to this data in 2012, we were struck with how cognitively derived it was even though we had facilitated the use of critical-creative inquiry methods at the workshop. The data were not

resonating with us, with where we were in our experience of human flourishing. Neither did the linear beginning, middle and end concept analysis structure capture the essence of human flourishing for us. We felt that the nature (attributes) of human flourishing is not linear, neither does it have a beginning and end, so we decided to put the old data aside at this point and begin again using meditative, poetic and holistic approaches.

We experienced our methods in the following ways: arriving, entering, connecting, struggling, clearings, managing ego, loving kindness, stormy day and engagement. These ways are presented here poetically just as they were recorded in a reflective journal during the week. We start with the first two journal entries, entitled 'arriving' and 'entering'.

Arriving

Journeying afar

Anticipation of being

Unknown and unknowing

Facing the yet to know



Gentle flags welcoming

Messaging travellers from afar

Bring gentleness and care

Come inside, be here

Overwhelming beauty

Stillness and quiet unknown

Intense anxiety

Be present, be still, be here

Entering

Glistening shimmering stillness

Far away from normal being

Messaging secrets from yonder

Emersing my spirit unseen

Rolling focus of power

Building from within

Holding historical beauty

Secrets of life held still

Everchanging presence

Distances yet to be revealed

Flying, soaring and travelling

Returning to beauty within

Stay present, stay focussed

Emerge into the landscape

Soar like birds

Be free to believe anew

A meditative walk and critical-creative dialogue with self and other

We walked down towards the sea in meditative silence and emptiness, together and alone. Opening all our senses, we noticed what we noticed. Some time later, in the retreat meditation garden we connected, signalling that we were ready to share.

Connecting



Sunshine crispness

Contrasting conflictual beings

Moving slowly and gently

Connecting dark and light

Thoughts of nothingness

Coming and going

Becoming and transcending

Landscape beauty taking me

Opening up closed boundaries

An ecology evolving

Holding present the seemingly odd

Recreating meaning

Shedding light on unknowns

The beauty unknown unfolds

As the winds send messages afar

But near and within

The learning begins

Back at our cottage with expansive views of the sea, we painted the essence of what was emerging for us.



As we shared and audio-recorded insights and excitement, we began to struggle. How could we make sense of what was emerging? How could we describe the nature of human flourishing when it will be so different for each person and context? When there wasn't a way to describe human flourishing discursively?

Struggling

Thoughts hold firm momentary

Fleeting like the soaring gull

Nothingness dominates

Loneliness through separation

The noise of silence so loud

Inner turmoil at large

Stay focussed stay strong

Be present don't fight it

The messages from the flags grow

Be

Embody the contrasts of life

Be still and let it come

And what came was that we should create a moving poem.

Moving poem

Eyes sometimes open and gazing at the sea and sometimes closed, we walked around the large room, speaking out spontaneously.

When no more words came, we stopped. We were ecstatic. We jumped up and down. We knew we had it in our grasp and that the poem would be the frame upon which the description of human flourishing would rest. We were engaged with the whole of ourselves. We knew at the core of our being that we were on the right path, so we flowed effortlessly into editing the poem, revealing deeper insights of understanding.

Returning to the data and the parts and the whole

We decided at this point that we would look at the data gathered on that day with the previous concept analysis work (see left photo below).



Again we felt the incongruence of lists of 'too many words' within the concept analysis and what was being revealed that day. We had definitely moved on since 2008. So we took away the work that no longer served our purpose, leaving only our retreat data and the newly discovered title for this chapter. Feeling a new spaciousness/clearing, we decided to move onto the balcony overlooking the steep cliff and the sea. There we would create a mandala of the parts and the whole of human flourishing.



Creating the mandala enabled us to consolidate the emerging insights from the meditative walk and reflective dialogue. It brought those insights together in an embodied image of our individual and collective experience.

Initially, before editing the poem, we had instinctively felt that each verse of the poem would symbolise a part of the whole ecology of human flourishing. But we had intentionally put that instinct on one side because we wanted the parts/verses to emerge naturally, rather than forcing them. After making the mandala, we shared, dialogued and audio-recorded the meanings embodied within each part of it and in the whole. Returning then to the poem, reading and re-reading in silence and out loud to each other, the verses began to fall into place. Now, through this deeper engagement with the data, we were able to name the parts and their relationships to the whole. The poem itself became our articulation of the 'whole' of human flourishing.

Making meaning through writing and reading out loud

Sitting at each end of the kitchen table, we began to write our responses to the poem and the mandala. The writing flowed that day. Sharing what we each were writing as commentary to each verse, there was a remarkable consistency and coherence.

The next day was very different, as the next two journal entries show.

Managing ego

Unfocussed talk

Circular competing spaces

Needing to escape from it

Desiring and returning to the new

Wanting out

Feeling trapped

In never-ending cycles of talk

Ego wins

Why was it so different, just as the blue sky-sea of yesterday gave way to a raging storm today?

Stormy Day

Weather changing blackness

Winds whistling and stirring

Energies in turmoil

Deep fog blocking out focus

Meditative presencing

Fighting with disconnections

Mind hopping 'monkey mind'

Not present focussed or strong

Irritations frustrations resentment

Clouding the flow of the pen

Words flitting and fleeting

Monkey mind at it again

Give in give up give self

Of permissions to let go

Change space changed place

Letting go

Communicating shared connections

Acknowledging and naming givens

Working with words that matter

Letting come

Embodied knowing for real

Disconnected from cognitive

Mind body divided

New learning of self for self

Stay present

With a dawning recognition that what was happening outside us (the storm) was influencing us inside (the body, mind, heart and soul), we came to see that we were not extending loving kindness to our own selves, despite our knowing that such kindness is essential to human flourishing. Incongruence between our espoused theory and theory in use! The impact of this recognition is captured in the final journal entry.

Loving kindness

Feelings stirred by unshapeliness

Of words that don't fit

Of ego driven desire to own

Letting go to let come

Giving of self as one

Seeing new potentials shared

Sharing of food as friends

Exploring spaces to be

Creating and re-creating space

Words flow more freely

As images and metaphor weave

Dancing images emerge

Entering a space of love

Being conscious of self

Bodily knowing so strong

Breathing through conflicts

Sweeping fleeting thoughts

Dancing brains home seeking

Embodiment of breath

Mind and bod as one

Giving and receiving love

Melta [loving kindness] in awe
 As other and self are one
 Floating through breathable space

Words flow easily freely
 Metaphor dancing as one
 Authentic writing emerges

The ecology of human flourishing

Atunement to the connections between the whole of the planet and the parts of everything existing in and on it, including ourselves, is central in a critical creativity worldview. As is the significance of the life-death-life cycle. However, it was through this inquiry that our ecology of human flourishing was uncovered.

We start by presenting the whole of human flourishing in the form of the moving poem. Then we dialogue with each verse, each of which symbolises an element or one of the parts of human flourishing. We end by offering a definition and symbol of human flourishing.

The whole

The ecology of human flourishing

Rock, tall harsh and strong
 Bounding framing tunnelling focus
 Gentle new growth
 Delicate existence in the rocky landscape
 Respecting the vastness of the total ecology
 Flooding with joy - suffusing every cell in my body
 Honeycombed cells connecting permeable membranes
 Inner world echoes outer

Tangled roots of life and love bursting energy fragrance
 Lily pond holding energies
 Coexistence of beauty strength life and living
 Clarity wind speaking loving kindness
 Wind music grasses fuscias dancing

Ferns bright green holding sun energy

Sacred earth rooted

Hidden gems around each corner

Beauty unfolding with each new step

Candles burning in protected space

Welcoming strangers into the known

Scented white smoke of beauty loving kindness

Growing into light reaching full potential

Riding the winds of prayers, singing life

The unexpected request from afar

Responding generously, appreciating its meaning

Re-entering the space, connecting and reconnecting

Managing feelings of being overwhelmed

Staying focused on the particular, the present, the here, the now

Re-entering the calm place for reconnecting

Holding strong, seeing meaning

Respecting stillness, the quiet, the peace

The beauty of nature and what it creates

Spiralling vortex of shell sculpture

Imbuing meaning of the sacred, its connections with earth

Human flourishing bringing new meaning

White daisies dancing against blue sky.

Daisy faces uplifted towards the sun

Purity

Whiteness

Temple for honouring the space within

For giving, receiving, thanking and respecting

Flowers adorning

Acknowledging the beauty of place

The spirits that hold us, the place that is
No beginning no end
Movement and stillness
In harmony, grace and flourishing

Each verse in our moving poem expresses the meaning of one of eight elements of human flourishing. The title of each verse captures the essence (see Figure 1).

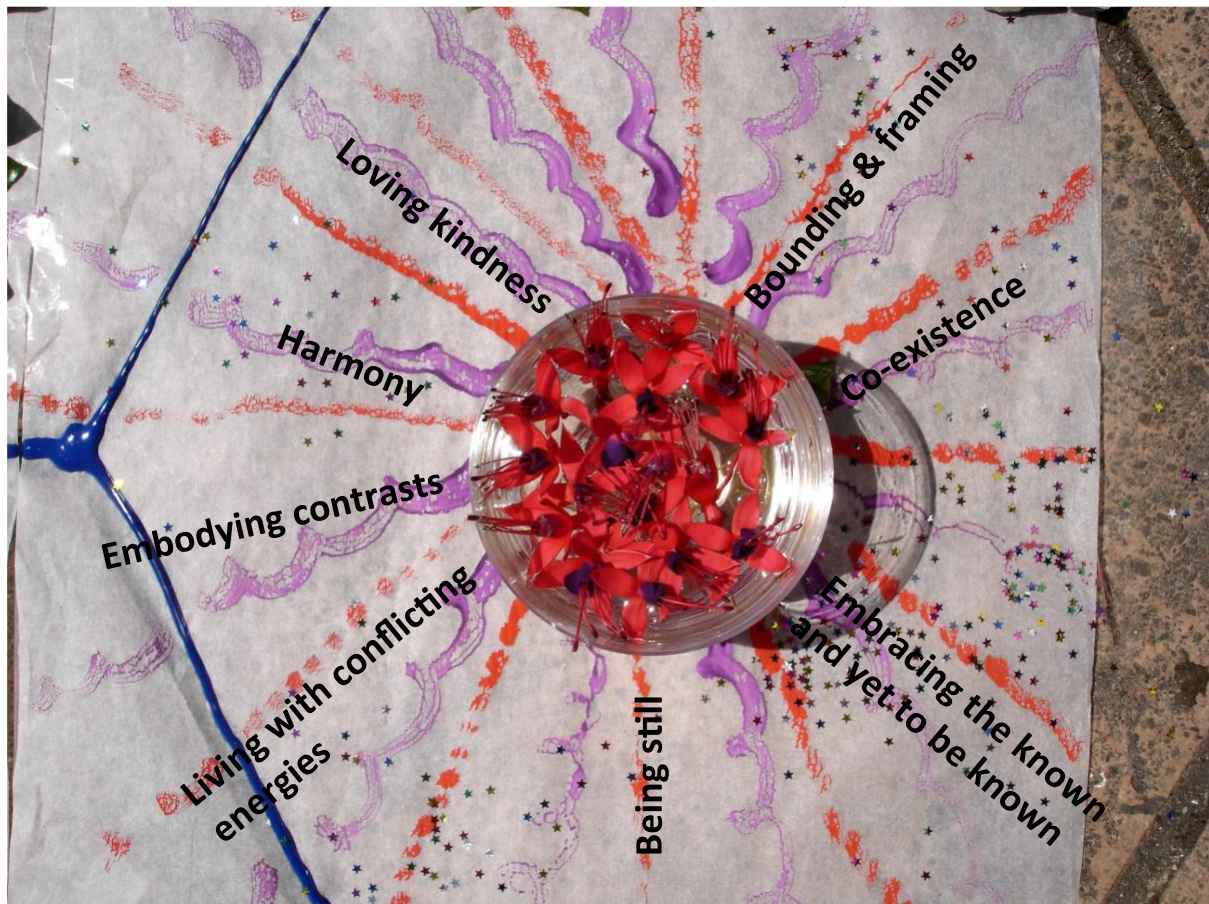


Figure 1: The eight elements of human flourishing

Bounding and framing

Rock, tall harsh and strong
Bounding framing tunnelling focus
Gentle new growth
Delicate existence in the rocky landscape

Respecting the vastness of the total ecology

Flooding with joy - suffusing every cell in my body

Honeycombed cells connecting permeable membranes

Inner world echoes outer



The desire as a person to be and be seen to be strong in our lives is both an essential attribute of persons, but also a challenge that we face in our everyday lives. Being strong is a characteristic of our humanness that enables us to meet the challenges and opportunities of each day and draw on our inner strengths to achieve what we want to and need to. However, being strong and having strength also place significant responsibilities on us as persons as we strive to meet what may at times seem like unrealistic or unachievable expectations of self and others. On the meditative walk it seemed that at first sight the rock of the landscape dominated and framed the environment. It gave messages of 'I am in control', 'I am the powerbase of the landscape', 'it is all about me'! At first the harshness of the rock landscape appeared to create a bounded focus and prevented us from seeing the bigger picture of the landscape – it overwhelmed the foreground of our consciousness.

The theme of 'background and foreground' emerged early in our meditative walk, not unsurprisingly given the vastness of the landscape and the need for framing of particular elements in order for them to be noticed. How we privilege background or foreground is an important issue when thinking about our potential to flourish as persons. In the vastness of the macrocosm, that is, the ecology of our world and universe, we can become overwhelmed by its wisdom when we are trying to learn from it in terms of the microcosm or our human flourishing. By bounding or framing our focus therefore and

placing it in the foreground of our consciousness, we can make sense of the macrocosm by focussing on or tunnelling into a part of it. This is possible because the same messages are contained in the vast and the small – the background and the foreground. The rock dominated landscape created a tunnel through which one needed to travel in order to engage with the total landscape – the macrocosm. Different aspects of the tunnel emerged with each step and turn – around each corner existed a different perspective on the tunnel effect of the rock, with some providing a focused vista to the ocean and others clear directions and a path to follow. So the rock in this context no longer seemed like a barrier and a dominating force in the landscape, but instead it shaped perspectives and recreated meaning and way-finding. It further created linkages between the background and foreground of the landscape and at times created a reordering of background and foreground. This movement between background and foreground can help us from feeling overwhelmed and provide a space for flourishing. For example in healthcare practice or in practice development, the sense of being overwhelmed by the vastness of what needs to be done/changed is very real. Therefore foregrounding particular aspects of the total landscape of practice provides us with an opportunity to focus, to build energy to see what is possible/achievable and ultimately to flourish.

Reconfiguring the rock as a 'frame' of reference for both how we see the landscape and the direction of travel we adopt enabled the subtleties of the landscape to be observed, engaged with and lived. Deep in the crevices of the rock live delicate and fragrant flora that add a beauty and a gentleness to the harshness of the rock face:

Becoming and transcending
Landscape beauty taking me
Opening up closed boundaries

This connection between the dominant and powerful rock faces and the gentleness of the connected flora, illustrates the dynamic nature of human flourishing and the juxtaposition of strength and gentleness in co-existence. Each nourishes the other and each is necessary for the other to have meaning – a meaning that juxtaposes harshness with gentleness, strength with frailty, boundaries with infinity and darkness with light. Such is the connection in the universe; the same patterns in simplicity and complexity. So being attuned to the flourishing of the universe, we can tend our own flourishing in ways that mirror the successful ways of nature and life. For example, the juxtaposition here of harshness and gentleness enabling delicate growth could mean that we too can flourish and grow when our contexts appear barren and unsupportive of life. We need to look for the nooks and crannies and micro-climates where our roots can sink into the nourishing earth.

Embody the contrasts of life
Be still and let it come

Each of these contrasts create a tunnel for our embodied knowing to embrace the unknown, to take risks in new (ad)ventures and to develop new understandings about what matters in terms of being, growth and development. Without these contrasts our minds have the potential to remain unfocused, like butterflies flitting through potentials, appreciating the beauty but not engaging in the full excitement of the possibilities before us. Appreciating the importance of framing and bounding enables an appreciation of wanting to still the mind and zone out the many distractions that get in the way of us flourishing in life and work. Finding moments of stillness and intentionally focussing only on the issues at hand enables growth and movement.

Co-existence

Tangled roots of life and love bursting energy fragrance

Lily pond holding energies

Coexistence of beauty strength life and living

Clarity wind speaking loving kindness

Wind music grasses fuscias dancing

Ferns bright green holding sun energy



In our previous work (Titchen & McCormack 2006) we have argued that in order to engage in critical and creative practices there is a need to appreciate the embedded creativity in the particular in order for new insights and understandings to emerge that may be transformative.

“(the) lily pond is for me [Brendan] a holder of the whole space in that one thing because it holds all the elements and that is what I was reflecting on in the meditative garden – the different elements that are throughout this space, that there are so many conflicting elements that are held in a really healthy, living harmonious peaceful space and it is all manifested in the lily pond.”

It is the case that in everyday life/practice the tangled roots of our particular context can at times appear impenetrable and resistive of change, growth and development. However, like the tangled roots of the lily pond, their beauty is in their connections as indeed is their strength. Gaffney (2011) identifies 'connectivity' as one of the four elements of flourishing persons. Connectivity implies being attuned to what is happening inside and outside of us. Being attuned to these connections enables us to recognise when disconnections are happening and for us to be able to rise to the challenges associated with such disconnections. In the same way the entangled roots of the lily pond create connections that support the life of the pond above and below the surface. The roots provide the nourishment for the lilies to exist, whilst simultaneously creating a mysterious undergrowth below which one needs to enter in order to truly understand and appreciate it. Flowing, lyrical, staccato, chaos and stillness (Roth 1990) energies or rhythms are necessary for our vitality and flourishing. The lily pond holds these energies and so they are all around us. There are other energies, of course, the energies of emotion, life force, positive, negative, low, high, directed, non-directed and so on. To work with them in fruitful ways for our own and others' flourishing, we need to acknowledge the beauty of each energy and see its potential for human growth and for loving kindness. So with chaos, for example, which we can associate with Fay's Crisis, we can be intentional in working with the negative emotions or low energy and rhythms that may be occurring and look for the beauty in this situation that will strengthen our resilience and ability to begin the transformation of chaos/crisis into Fay's (1986) transformative action. Nourishment with accompanying growth emerges from unexpected places when we really pay attention. In the midst of what may seem dead or murky and tangled with no space to move or breathe, the energies required for growth and flourishing springs forth. We just have to see and know it and flow with it.

What appears to be a murky pool is indeed a place of infinite life and death, of connections and reconnections, of movement and stillness, of strength and of weakness. It is these interconnected qualities of persons that enable life, living, letting go and flourishing. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (2008) suggests "... the more one sees, the better one knows where to look ..." The murky lily pond like each person, holds the beauty of life, strength and living. The challenge is to appreciate their interconnectivity in manifesting the elements of flourishing and beauty that exists within each of us. Like John Griffin (2011), we see the beauty in nature as the same as the beauty within our innermost hearts and, if we open to natural beauty, we will be able to connect to our own and others' beauty. So when we find ourselves in conflict with others or with people who we do not warm to or like (all necessary parts of the murky pool!), we can look carefully for the beauty within them and we can imagine that we like them and act towards them as if we do. Alternatively, we can send them on a metaphorical 'prayer flag' (see below) a silent wish for happiness, wellness and safety as a form of loving kindness meditation (Saltsberg 2002).

Loving kindness lies at the heart of flourishing; loving kindness towards oneself and others in the contexts and situations we find ourselves in our work. Speaking loving kindness is like feeling breeze on our faces, hearing the rustle and brushing of grasses and leaves as the wind gusts and lulls. It is something that is sensed more than actually spoken although it can be heard in the tone of voice, in the softness of the eyes and in compassionate acts. Loving kindness warms our hearts as the sun warms the earth and all living things. We can become more attuned to loving kindness when we open all our senses as well as our hearts. When we can love ourselves then we can begin to unfold a loving, kind intention towards those we feel neutral about or do not like.

There are many ways of moving towards flourishing in this way within a critical creativity worldview; we can go on contemplative walks like the one in this poem when we are lucky enough to be in beautiful places, but we can also take intentional reflective or meditative walks in our work environments looking and sensing the things and people of beauty. Just as Angie's experience of being 'empty and thus able to hear the wind music and take joy in it', so we can notice intentional acts of kindness and compassion in our connections with those we are working with to create the conditions for human flourishing – stillness in the landscape, embodying critical creativity and nurturing, flowing and connecting (Titchen & McCormack 2010).



The 'prayer flag' in the Buddhist tradition expresses a generosity of spirit and a commitment to unconditional sharing through love. As the wind catches the prayer flag and blows it, the message of the prayer is shared with all whom the wind touches and so a global condition of kindness is created. The idea of love in caring practices is not new and indeed the work of Campbell (1984) and his concept of 'moderated love' have been articulated in nursing, education and social work practices since the 1980's. However, unlike the idea of love that is moderated through professional boundaries, loving kindness transcends all false divides between persons, and instead is a genuine and authentic attempt to appreciate humanity in all its 'rawness'. The clarity that is brought through the wind messages of loving kindness connects with the humanity of persons. The innate quality of persons to do good is only mediated (not moderated) through particular contexts and circumstances. Like the grasses and fuchsias that dance with the wind, persons can flourish when the right conditions are created and when the right energies are in place. We (McCormack, Titchen and Manley, in press) have articulated the necessary conditions in care environments for human flourishing, including:

- Respect for all persons
- Cultures that value feedback, challenge and support
- Commitment to transformational learning
- Leaders who possess the skills of enabling facilitation
- Organisations with a person-centred vision
- Strategic plans that support person-centred and evidence-informed cultures of practice
- Continuous evaluation of effectiveness
- Equal valuing of all knowledge and wisdom

The conditions of course can only be activated when the right energies are instilled in the climate of the setting, energies that we believe are manifested through a commitment to loving kindness and respect for the interconnectedness of humanity.

Embracing the known and yet to be known

Sacred earth rooted

Hidden gems around each corner

Beauty unfolding with each new step

Candles burning in protected space

Welcoming strangers into the known

Scented white smoke of beauty loving kindness

Growing into light reaching full potential

Riding the winds of prayers, singing life



In ancient traditions, the sacredness of the land and earth are paramount. Having respect for the earth as provider of nourishment, growth and sustainability is a critical element of being human. It is

also the case that for persons to be present in the moment, there is a need for us to be rooted in the here and now. 'Being present' is an important element of authentic and compassionate caring and the practitioner who is 'present' has the potential to engage with the other in what Martin Buber has described as an I: Thou relationship. Within such a relationship, the 'hidden gems' of the each person in relation are manifested, not as ego driven characteristics, but instead as elements of hidden complexity of persons that are yet to be revealed and shared. In her work on 'loving kindness', Salzberg (2002) highlights the destructive nature of viewing persons as 'other'. She argues that otherness creates disconnections between different aspects of self, disconnections between mind and body, and loss of connectedness between persons. Similarly, Boykin and Schoenhofer (1993) referred to the 'dance of caring persons' as a metaphor for the way in which the personhood of connected persons becomes as one, with each giving and receiving from the other. The concept of personhood is a complex one and one that is multi-layered and multileveled. Personhood refers to our deepest layers of humanity. Those aspects of self that shape us as persons – our beliefs, values, needs, wants, desires, hopes and dreams. Many of these elements of our personhood are known to us whilst others remain hidden (to us). Through a meaningful engagement with 'other' the hidden gems of our personhood can be revealed and made known to us. Through the development of connected relationships, the hidden beauty of each person can be revealed and unfolded. This unfolding can create moments of crisis (Fay 1987) that can either create growth and development (flourishing) or a distancing from the known as the conditions for embracing the challenge of the known may not be conducive. Human flourishing is experienced when people achieve beneficial, positive growth that pushes their boundaries in a range of directions (Titchen & McCormack 2010). However the need to be ready for boundaries to be pushed is a key factor in enabling human flourishing to happen. "I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding" (O'Donohue, 1997). On the other hand, we have to be alert to the fact that the river floods when its banks are breached and so we must also respect our limits if we are to flourish in times of crisis.

On talking about her painting of the walk, Angie reflects:

'My mind was empty when I started walking (I was listening to the wind and my own breath). I just followed my body. So in my painting my body wanted to flow. So I created the wave energy blue line. Then after, it came into my mind that this is flow, water energy. The wave flowed into the spiral – symbolising the growth and the flowers, the glorious colours and points and flows of light of fuchsias and hydrangea. I felt a jolt of surprise at each corner. Like looking up just now and seeing the rainbow falling into the sea. This symbolises human flourishing and the awe, wonderment and joy that it creates in me when I least expect it. As I was walking, I saw nature as symbols of the way of being open, receptive and empty in a Yin sort of way. Just being and receiving. Seeing and accepting the call of all these wonderful paths taking us effortlessly to these wonderful revelations and uncoverings. And surprises. Like walking up the track and finding the chimney pots arising from the tussocky earth and the solar panels! Earth houses in harmony with nature.'

This place is about human living in harmony with nature – taking it further – that step further. Like the prayer flags sending their messages of love and kindness to whoever the wind should touch.'

When we move around our workplaces with our eyes, ears, sense of smell, touch and taste wide open, 'hidden gems' emerge. As we rush around at work, our senses are often half shut down. Are we really awake and living each moment as if it were our last? If we do not pay attention we can miss the gems

and the beauty around us. Perhaps we need symbols or signifiers of something on beyond the bustle of the everyday to remind us of the importance of human flourishing and to celebrate it, 'candles burning in protected space'. We have a vision of small reflective pools with one or two or three floating flowers on a busy corner. Such reminders of the connectedness of human flourishing with the beauty of nature that just is, can welcome us back into ways of knowing and being that are integral to being human but which we have half forgotten. We are born with these ways that enable us to know our own flourishing. They are not rocket science! And we can come to know or re-member these knowings and deep contentment in our workplaces.

Living with conflicting energies

The unexpected request from afar

Responding generously, appreciating its meaning

Re-entering the space, connecting and reconnecting

Managing feelings of being overwhelmed

Staying focused on the particular, the present, the here, the now

Re-entering the calm place for reconnecting

Holding strong, seeing meaning



A critical ontological position requires us to be sensitive and attentive to 'moments of crisis' as it is through these moments that we identify a need for change and have the potential to change. Crises

aren't major events in a person's life, but instead are 'jolts' that may alter a particular perspective or cause us to pause for reflection and reconsideration of the direction we are taking. Like the jolt we expressed in the first verse of the 'stormy day' poem in our inquiry methods section.

Weather changing blackness
Winds whistling and stirring
Energies in turmoil
Deep fog blocking out focus

This little verse brings into sharp focus the challenges associated with living with conflicting energies. After two days of glorious sunshine set against a millpond-like seascape, we experienced a turbulent and rapid change in the weather. A storm raged, bringing in a thick soup-like sea mist that not just clouded the awe-inspiring seascape but seemed to cloud our energies and thought processes. We each arose from our beds conscious of our bodies being in turbulence and the energy of the space feeling very different from previous days. Unknown to the other, each of us engaged in separate meditations to try to bring us into the here and now and prepare for the working day. Our writing didn't flow, like Roth's (1990) staccato movement each word felt heavy on the page and sentences didn't appear to make much sense. An energy of irritation hung between us. Later during a guided loving kindness meditation the idea of 'monkey thinking' resonated so strongly with us – thinking that leaps about and is never still. This naming enabled a stillness to emerge and a letting go of our fight with the day. Later we acknowledged that we had been in conflict with the day, trying in vain to emerge from the fog and failing to acknowledge the deep connection between the universe and our bodies. That stillness and letting go enabled the letting come of a new energy (Senge et al, 2005), one that sat within the fog and storm but one that accepted that as a way of being, at that moment in time. This new energy enabled a letting come of a 'flow' that brought energy to our dialogue and subsequent writing, ending the day in a flourishing space:

Give in give up give self
Permission to let go
Changed space changed place
Letting go

Communicating shared connections
Acknowledging and naming givens
Working with words that matter
Letting come

Gaffney (2011) argues that 'challenge' is a key element of flourishing and that without challenge we would languish in the safety of established habits and norms. Challenges aren't always of our own making, but instead can arise from unexpected and unanticipated avenues and directions. Like the unexpected storm, during Brendan's meditative walk, the 'unexpected request from afar' (a request to take a group photograph) jolted him out of his meditative space and caused a sense of disturbance in his mind and body. As the moving poem shows, holding strong in his embodied space enabled him to respond generously to the request, without anger or upset and pick up from where he had ended prior to the request. This management of emotion enabled a reconnection to happen and the possibilities of staying focused to emerge. Salzberg (2002) suggests that to develop focus requires a letting go of negative emotion towards others and to hold strong our sense of being grounded in the space. This is similar to one of the conditions for human flourishing previously articulated by Titchen et al (2011), that of 'becoming the landscape (embodying critical creativity). This embodiment

requires of persons a deep connection with the setting in which they exist. Whilst it is recognised that creating connection with the natural landscape has strong meditative potential for growth and development, connecting with the space we are in through shared values, respect for others, appreciation of the setting and the people within, all help with staying focused and working with the 'here and now'

Entering a space of love
Being conscious of self
Bodily knowing so strong

Being able to move in and out of different spaces and maintain our sense of human flourishing is vital when unexpected requests are made on us (as there are constantly in our everyday working) or when we experience changes in the context of our work. We may intentionally be seeking the gems of this person we are helping when our attention is called for elsewhere. We may feel irritated at the interruption and need to re-frame the request as an opportunity for loving kindness and connection with the other. This movement and management of feelings draws on our emotional intelligence. Moreover, it also needs us to dance with our spiritual intelligence so that we can give graceful care and focussed attention to the person or situation making the request. Being really present for that particular person, persons or situation, can also help us to re-frame the request as an opportunity for holding strong to our values and our response to its challenges as a means of enabling our own and others' human flourishing. This is not easy, but it is something we can strive for. It is an example of the distinction between human flourishing and the flourishing we see in the beauty of life and death in nature.

Being still



Respecting stillness, the quiet, the peace

The beauty of nature and what it creates

Spiralling vortex of shell sculpture

Imbuing meaning of the sacred, its connections with earth

Human flourishing bringing new meaning

As we entered the 'meditation garden' with its natural beauty and stillness, an overwhelming sense of connectedness with the space ensued. We were aware of the vastness of the macro landscape, the hugeness of the ocean that formed the backdrop to the garden and the dominance of silence. This sense of peace and quiet enabled us to be still, to be grounded and to appreciate the beauty of the setting.

As shown in our chapter, 'Dancing with stones', facilitators of practice development and action-oriented research within a critical creativity worldview, are cognisant of the importance of being still in the workplace if they and others are to flourish.

Angie: 'When I was sharing my painting with you, it blew away and you said, I think you can get it and I immediately moved to get it in a saving way. And when I got here I thought, no, this is where it belongs. Where the wind took it. And yes, it is about recognising when something just is and when it doesn't need any more. Enabling human flourishing is about knowing when something is good and right and doesn't need any more. I am quite good at that when I am in this kind of still space, but when I am in the busy space, I know I do too much. I have to transfer this knowing to the busy space.'

Brendan: I think it is a struggle for us all – busy space, busy body. The thing for us is creating the space of nothingness for others that allows for that kind of knowing to emerge or it stays hidden. If we don't take the meditative walks [imaginary or real] then we miss it.'

Creating different and complementary spaces for different purposes is an important consideration in enabling human flourishing. This chapter is imbued with the experiences of working in nature as a frame of reference and a ground for reflection on living human flourishing through the mind and body. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Titchen et al 2011), being in sacred, natural spaces is not always an option for busy practitioners, nor indeed a necessary condition for flourishing. However, what it does highlight is the importance of respecting the significance and importance of different spaces for different yet complementary purposes of being busy and being still.

Respecting stillness in today's busy world is a challenge, but without it we are likely not to reach our full potential. Attunement to possibilities for stillness and for responding to the beauty of nature and artistic expression is key. This happened for Angie who gained further insights into the ecology of human flourishing when gazing in awe at the beautiful shell sculpture arising from a profusion of dancing flowers. In the stillness of this beautiful space, the focus of her attention was constantly drawn back to this sculpture. She was struck by how the sculpture is in complete harmony with nature and yet adds to it because, unlike nature, in and of itself, it is a container of meanings. And that meaning making (both in the artistic creation and in others' responses to it) is the basis of all philosophical thought. It is what makes us human.

Angie: As I looked at the shell sculpture in the meditation garden I saw that the contribution that human beings make to ecology of the universe is knowing what is good and in expressing loving kindness and generosity. We are inextricably connected to the ecology of the earth and the solar system and we have the capacity and knowledge to work with that connection so that we and all creatures on earth can flourish. Connecting with nature in stillness, enhances this enormous potential. And this potential lies in its simplicity ... And so with the painting I wanted it to be simple. I looked at it and said, yes, it is enough and as I said that the wind lifted it up and it floated down into the bracken here and it is cradled and protected with the creation uppermost. I thought, it is a prayer flag!

Brendan: I think your painting is an essence about the dynamism that was present on that walk. The colours and contrasts that create a quality and life that we don't see normally see. There is a lot of energy and strength in it and emptiness. This is reflective of need for emptiness in order to flourish. We don't create emptiness in our work. We constantly fill space with doing. It struck me today is that I need more emptiness in my life. Yeah and how do we create that for others to flourish? Your creation captures that really well – the energy and the empty space. With simplicity as an essence pulling it all together. Holding in perfect harmony the different energies, colours, contrasts and lots of movement.

Creating spaces for quiet reflection and stillness is a real challenge in busy healthcare environments and there is a need for us to pay more attention to the workings of healthcare environments and how they function. However, the 'spiralling vortex of the shell sculpture' reminds us that we need to focus on the movement contained in the whole rather than the busyness of isolated parts. The spiralling shell sculpture appears like a dense solid object resonating beauty by its shape, form and presence in the garden. However, the emptiness of the spiralled sculpture creates a space that enables the entering of the emptiness of the shape and a connection with its inner meanings. Focusing on the empty space reminds us of the need to clear our minds of the busyness of practice and focus instead on the meanings of our practice and the way these meanings shape our everyday reality. Creating spaces for quiet reflection, critical engagement and meaningful connection with others are essential elements of an environment that enables all persons to flourish.

Embodying contrasts

White daisies dancing against blue sky.

Daisy faces uplifted towards the sun

Purity

Whiteness

Temple for honouring the space within

For giving, receiving, thanking and respecting

Flowers adorning



This verse returns us to the sacred aspect of human flourishing. As shown with our writings about critical creativity, we bring all aspects of ourselves as we develop our potential. Letting go into and being attuned to all that is good, beautiful and harmonious, brings us closer to recognising the sanctity of person-centred human relationships. It helps us to experience our greater selves, the more transcendent self that Gaffney describes as the person we are when we are at our best (as opposed to languishing when we are at our worst). For us, experiencing and connecting with the sacred is not the same as having a religious faith or belief or living a life shaped by doctrines. Whilst some of us may have such a faith, what we are concerned with here is more related to a sense of awe and wonderment at goodness, beauty, harmony, compassion and loving kindness – and with honouring them.

Appreciating the purity and delicacy of the white daisies set against the vastness and magnificence of the clear blue sky reminds us of the need to stay focused on the subtleties of practice. The white daisies provide a focus for reflection in a quiet space that otherwise could be overwhelming. These delicate parts of the landscape act as a focus for the significance of the whole, whilst seeing only a small part. The daisies bring a joy and life to the total landscape that, in the daisies' absence, would be less obvious. Similarly, when we think about what we need to do to create the conditions for flourishing in our own practice landscape, we need to pay attention to the 'daisies' that may exist in our setting but that perhaps are not being seen or are yet to be seen. The delicate and seemingly insignificant parts of the workplace may indeed be the vital elements for flourishing – the vase of flowers, the choice of wall hangings and the mood created by light and sound may all be as important as the daisies dancing against the blue sky.

As we continued our meditative walk we noticed a shrine to Buddha and the various offerings from nature (flowers, seeds, fruits) that had been donated in honour of gifts received. The shrine coexisted among a natural wilderness of woods that had been untouched. The large carefully sculpted shrine with its sharp edges and layered elements contrasted with the naturalness of the surrounding environment. Each beautiful in their own way, but each reflecting a different appreciation of the landscape. We know that for persons to flourish, feeling respected and showing respect are key ingredients. Being respected as a person enables growth whilst simultaneously creating the

conditions for the demonstration of respect for others. Throughout the meditative walk, we were struck by the extent of the respect shown for the environment, the setting and the people therein. The natural spaces juxtaposed with the buildings, car parks and other elements of the created spaces:

Angie: ... the gardeners know about juxtapositions in that they know how to 'just enough' manage the landscape and see the art of the landscape.

Brendan: the importance of 'just enough' comes through. The garden is a mix of just natural environment with moments of structure/organised garden. Again it reflects the gentleness of that approach and knowing when it is 'just enough'. Facilitators need to pay attention to that and know when it is 'just enough'.

Angie: Yes, because if we do too much, we kill it.

Observing and appreciating these juxtapositions created a new appreciation of the need for 'contrast' as an element of flourishing. Like the importance of 'crisis', paying attention to elements of the environment that at first sight don't seem to 'fit' is important for our 'taken for granted' ways of knowing:

Embody the contrasts of life
Be still and let it come

In the development of a critically creative methodology for human flourishing we have identified the need for the blending of cognitive and creative approaches to critique. The use and appreciation of art in all its forms, enables connections to be made between the juxtapositions of cognition and creativity. Like the juxtaposition of the natural and humanmade landscape, the embodiment of 'the contrasts of life' creates opening for new understandings, reflections, knowledge and being to emerge. Juxtapositions are important for flourishing because if you stay in the safe zone, the comfort zone you don't flourish, you exist. Like 'Alice's rabbit hole', the context created by these differing and contrasting elements may feel 'dangerous' at first, but embracing them enables new learnings to emerge and the potential for transformation to be realised.

Harmony

The spirits that hold us, the place that is

No beginning no end

Movement and stillness

In harmony, grace and flourishing



We have presented our perspectives on human flourishing set in the context of a critically creative world-view and with a focus on the development of helping relationships in health care practices, transformational practice development and action orientated research. One of the key learnings that emerged for us at the beginning of our writing retreat was that there is no beginning and no end to flourishing and so there was no natural starting point to writing about human flourishing – thence the use of a mandala to shape the form and flow of our writing. This realisation and acknowledgement of a continuous journey of flourishing rather than a prescribed structure resonates with the need to respond to the wisdom of our bodies in decision-making. No matter how much control we may feel over our lives, many internal and external influences shape us and the conditions that enable us to flourish as persons (or not). This is not to suggest a fatalistic perspective of persons, but is instead an understanding and position that recognises the interconnectedness of persons, the environment and the universe. Without an appreciation of these deep connections and an understanding of the need to actively shape our being in the world, then our potential for flourishing may not be realised. There are lessons here too for practice developers and action orientated researchers. It is all too easy to seek out prescribed structures, processes and tools in facilitation practices, as if there is a starting point. For example in practice development work, it is all too common to observe facilitators following a pre-formulated programme of values clarification; claims, concerns and issues; observations of practice and others in order to develop a plan of action. Similarly, action orientated researchers can blindly follow textbook methods in a stepwise non-embodied and non-reflective fashion. Acknowledging that there is no beginning and no end brings dynamism to the practice, a dynamism that is responding to the context and the persons who shape that context and that creates a dance between the specifics of the practice and the vision for transformation.

The spirits that hold us as persons are many, and in this chapter we have worked with the beauty of nature and a landscape shaped and reshaped by millions of years of natural weathering and

environmental change. Like this macro-landscape, the place that is within us is the place that holds the potential for flourishing – our own capacity to be human and to grow and develop. Such potential has no beginning or ending, but is a constant state of becoming. Our unfolding and unfurling of the meaning of human flourishing has necessitated the achievement of a balance between movement (through meditative walking, dance, exercise and writing) and stillness (reflecting, silence, painting and meditation). Each of these modes of being have created new insights, raised new challenges and brought clarity at times of confusion. Being deliberate and intentional in working with each of these ways of being when the need arose has been a significant learning and one that can be easily transferred into professional practice, professional learning, practice development and transformational research. The ‘forcing’ of a method out of context and the application of processes that don’t match the aim of the activity are detrimental to effectiveness. Like the cabinetmaker needs to use the correct tools for different parts of the construction of the cabinet, so too do we need to choose our tools for transformation deliberately, intentionally and with clarity of purpose.

We believe that the experience of writing this chapter has been achieved through living in harmony with natural surroundings, actively striving for gracefulness in times of conflict and being intentional and deliberate with each stage of the work as it progressed. Through these types of engagement we have reached a point of clarity regarding the meaning of human flourishing for us and thus define and symbolise it as:

“Human flourishing occurs when we bound and frame naturally co-existing energies, when we embrace the known and yet to be known, when we embody contrasts and when we achieve stillness and harmony. When we flourish we give and receive loving kindness.”



Do you want to respond to our invitation?

As we acknowledged at the beginning of this paper, each of us will experience our own human flourishing in a multitude of different ways. What we have tried to do in this inquiry is symbolise the elements of human flourishing and distil those elements into an essence (our new definition). What we want to do now is find out whether others' experiences resonate with this essence. If you want to, please respond by emailing us at BMcCormack@qmu.ac.uk. Your correspondence directly with us would be treated with utmost confidentiality and we would seek your permission to use it in our inquiry.

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We acknowledge and honour the contributions that our colleagues within a community of practice developers and action oriented researchers made to our early thinking on, and concept analyses of, human flourishing within the critical creativity worldview and to colleagues, students and friends who critiqued earlier versions of this paper. Your help has been immeasurable – thank you.

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