

# Towards an Openness of Being: The Personal Nature of Learning

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## Abstract

This paper discusses an aspect of my PhD study on understanding psychotherapists' experience of ongoing learning. For this study I interviewed 12 practising psychotherapists living in Aotearoa New Zealand. The personal nature of psychotherapists' ongoing learning and, in particular, the interconnectedness between an individual's life, past and present, and his or her vocational life as a psychotherapist, emerged as a significant phenomenon. Interview data were analysed using hermeneutic phenomenology as the philosophical underpinning. Resonances between hermeneutic phenomenology and psychotherapy practice are explored. I offer a number of participant stories from the interviews I conducted, together with an interpretation of these narratives. Heidegger's thinking about "meditative thinking" and *Sorge* (care) is drawn on, as well as Bion's idea that thinking/dreaming one's lived experience is a principal means by which one learns from experience. This research revealed that, over the course of their professional lives, psychotherapists move towards responding to what is essential for their own learning and that this is often an unconscious process. What matters to the individual begins to emerge and to show itself more fully. This has implications for prescriptive and systematised approaches to learning; the question is posed as to how we attune to the movement of our soul.

## Whakarāpopotonga

He matapakihanga tā tēnei tuhinga i tētahi wāhanga rangahautanga o taku tohu Kairangi: te wheako o te ako haere tonu o te kaiwhakaora hinengaro. Tekau mā rua ngā kaiwhakaora hinengaro e mahi ana e noho ana i Aotearoa, i uiuia e au mō tēnei rangahau. Ko te wheako whaiaro o te ako haere tonu o te kaiwhakaora hinengaro me te here o te koiranga tangata onamata ki nāiane me tōna koirora mahi tohunga kaiwhakaora hinengaro, i kitea he mea tino whakahirahira. I huri ki te tirohanga e kīa nei ko te āta whakamāoritanga, arā te "hermeneutic phenomenology", hai tātarii ngā kohinga uiuinga. Ka tūruhahia he paorotanga

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Thomas-Anttila, K., Smythe, E., & Spence, D. (2017). Towards an openness of being: The personal nature of learning. *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*, 21(2), 149-164. <https://doi.org/10.9791/ajpanz.2017.14>

mai i tēnei tirohanga ki te momo mahi a te kaiwhakaora hinengaro. Ka horaina atu ētahi o ngā kōrero whakaurunga o ngā uiuinga nāku i hiki, me ngā whakamāramatanga hoki mō aua kōrero. I tōia mai anō hoki tā Heitakatirohanga ki te ‘whaiwhakaarohanga hōhonu’ me te aroha me tā Piona whakaaaro e kī nei, ko te whakaarohanga/moemoeānga wheako whaiaro a te tangata te ara matua o te akohanga mai i te wheako. Ikitea i tēnei rangaha, i roto i te roanga ake o ā rātau mahi mātanga ko ngākaiwhakaora hinengaro urupare haere aiki te iho mō tōna ake mātauranga ahakoa he hātepe maurimoe. Ko te mea nui ki te takitahika timata ki te puea haere ake ki te whakaatu whānui haere ake i a ia. He whainga rara tēnei mō te momo whakahau whakahaerenga ki te ako; ko te pātai koia me pehea tewhakahāngai ki te whakanekenga o te wairua.

**Keywords:** hermeneutic phenomenology; learning; psychotherapy; professional development; Heidegger; psychoanalysis; learning from experience; practice-based learning

## Introduction

Having qualified as a psychotherapist, how does one continue the ongoing journey of learning? Using a phenomenological approach, my (Kerry’s) doctoral research revealed that much of the learning that participants most valued was of a very personal nature, found on their own path through life and practice. One’s path is often unpredictable and challenging. I write this paper in the first person; it was ‘my’ research, my own journey of learning. I was accompanied on this journey by my co-authors. My insights sometimes came from surprising sources; what follows is something that leapt out of a book I was reading at the time of working with my data:

“A scientist’s work, cadet, is determined by two things. His interests and the interests of his time. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“We live in exceptional times, cadet.” (Doerr, 2014, p. 154)

## Do We Own Our Own Lives?

In *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), Anthony Doerr wrote about Werner Pfennig, an orphan growing up in Nazi Germany, who has a passion for learning about mathematics and electrical mechanics. He is nurtured and encouraged by Frau Elena, the orphanage mother, who believes he is destined for great things. As a boy he becomes renowned for his skills in radio repair and, as a young teen, he is identified as gifted and sent to a Nazi institute for elite youth where his gifts are developed for the glory of his country. Upon arriving, his bunk master declares “You will all surge in the same direction at the same pace towards the same cause” (Doerr, 2014, p. 137). Werner, who hopes he has escaped from the fate of a grim life in the mines (where his father died) notices that he has never felt such a hunger to belong. As Werner’s story unfolds, and the nauseating brutalities of life in the institute press in on him, we are witness to Werner’s innocence and passion becoming gradually eroded: “Werner is succeeding. He is being loyal. He is being what everybody agrees is good. And yet every time

he wakes and buttons his tunic he feels he is betraying something” (p. 250). When he confides in his friend Frederick that he wishes he did not have to be at the institute, Frederick replies that it does not matter what he wants. “Of course it matters”, Werner replies, “Why else do any of this if not to become who we want to be?” “Your problem, Werner,” says Frederick, “is that you still believe you own your life.” (p. 223). The impact of the de-humanising trauma of life in the institute eventually, and heart-breakingly, creates a chasm between himself and what was once his passion: “Into the stillness come the voices of his masters, echoing from one side of his head while memory speaks from the other. *Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever*” (p. 264).

Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s is not Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017; nevertheless, the dilemma of whether we “own our lives”, or to what degree, and whether our passions are nurtured (by ourselves and others) and are able to be sustained in our work, are certainly relevant, and perhaps central, to an enquiry of ongoing learning. This includes what form our learning is able to take, and whether this is according to our own interests and passions, or according to the interests of an other (an institution, a company, and so on). The requirements of others, including one’s country, culture, family, or employer, impact significantly; the tension between these and the desires and passions an individual may have are negotiated differently for each person, and according to many and diverse factors.

In this paper I discuss an aspect of my PhD study on the topic of understanding psychotherapists’ experience of ongoing learning. The personal nature of psychotherapists’ ongoing learning and, in particular, the interconnectedness between an individual’s life, past and current, and his or her vocational life as a psychotherapist, emerged as a significant phenomenon.

## Resonance of Hermeneutic Phenomenology with Psychotherapy Practice

I interviewed 12 psychotherapists who are practising in Aotearoa New Zealand and the methodology used for the study was hermeneutic phenomenology. This is an approach to qualitative interpretive analysis that is concerned with lived experience and is, therefore, particularly suited to the exploration of personal learning journeys (Lavery, 2003; Smythe & White, 2017; Spence, 2016; van Manen, 2014). An important aspect of this approach is that neutrality in the context of interpreting data cannot exist (Gadamer, 1975/2013); subjectivity is valued (Creswell, 2007). Our “fore-understandings” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 340) and our “prejudices” (p. 283) always go before us, thus the researcher reflects on his or her own experiences and assumptions. In so doing, an openness to the text’s alterity or otherness occurs. The text is then able to show itself in new and different ways.

I chose hermeneutic phenomenology because I find it to be complementary to the endeavour of psychotherapy, in part because it requires “dwelling” with the data and being open to the meanings that emerge from the interactions between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007). Saevi’s (2013) description of residing with the data (material from interviews in the case of this study) clearly and evocatively pointed to this:

The attuned and passive living with the phenomena is a pathic dwelling that

remains attentively open to the suffering of the other. The terms passive and pathic in fact stem from the same origin, and are both attentive to the other's experiential condition. (p. 3)

In the same way that the therapist finds himself or herself in the analytic or therapeutic field, and makes use of the state of reverie to help understand the patient in the room, and him or herself in relation to the patient in the room, so does the phenomenological researcher's dwelling with the data engage the researcher in a way that is beyond the cognitive realm. This dwelling includes an openness to what might be revealed, and to meanings both consciously and unconsciously expressed. The process of interpretation is akin to the state of reverie, in that it requires an unhurried tolerance of the experience of being adrift (Ogden, 1997). Further, it recognises that the researcher is in an intersubjective field with the data/participant. The researcher is not alone and the interpretation is not the researcher's alone; rather, it arises from allowing oneself to be in a meditative/reverie state that is conducive to new insights.

A number of stories from the interviews follow, together with an interpretation of these narratives. For reasons of space I have had to limit the number of participants' stories of learning in this particular paper. This was difficult to do because each participant spoke of experiences of learning that highlighted the link between their personal lives and their ongoing learning. Indeed, it was in being with all of the participants' experiences that the significance of this phenomenon began to emerge. The names in the study are pseudonyms and I have also endeavoured to protect the participants' privacy by excluding identifying information. To the first story:

### A Lifetime of Busy-ness: Learning to Create Space

In this story, David describes his own journey of attending to an aspect of his early life which created difficulties for him in his personal and professional life, and which he then sought to remedy:

When I was young, a very small boy, there was a family joke that I would be staring with my mouth wide open; the joke was: "a fly will fly in, David, close your mouth". I think about myself dreamily looking around at things. Both my parents were very busy people; I was joking with a friend that at least his father never did anything, he was very lazy, his mother was super sort of onto it, but I had both parents who were always onto it, and that has remained a challenge for me that I am over busy, so it's been a great balm to do work where increasingly I've seen the work as a place to create space and also where the creation of space allows something new to emerge.

In telling this story David lets me know how "busy-ness" has particular and long-standing meaning for him. As a child he was expected to be busy, his parents were busy, and it was not alright not to be busy (you cannot just sit there with your mouth open). As an adult, however, after initially having chosen a very busy profession, he realised that this was not what he wanted. In the interview he said, "I got more and more burnt by that sort of way

of working and felt so desperate by the end of the day not to do that. It took me a couple of years before I could leave". A desperation to resist being busy prompted him to change to psychotherapy, a profession which he equated with spaciousness and as allowing room for reflective contemplation. He recognises that when he began practising psychotherapy he did it in a busy way, and had to unlearn the busy-ness. The work itself did not guarantee a less busy lifestyle; it was his own determination to learn how to be less busy that set him on this path.

Here he describes his transition from being a "busy" psychotherapist to one who is able to allow space and let something different occur in the meeting with the client:

About 15 years ago I started to have a sense of this over-busyness in my work, with this instrumental technical approach; it felt unsatisfying and I knew that people, they and I, were caught in the performance, we were caught on the surface. There was so much more inside me that was not happening in the sessions and I sort of knew that it was my busy-ness, my conscious cleverness or knowing that prevented something more from happening. My intuition was that "there's more here and I know I'm not getting to it in myself".

And so I started quite naively, practising suspending thinking, for as long as I could tolerate it. It was nerve-racking and I was barely able to understand what was going on. I would practise and practise, somehow knowing that this is going to work better, and reasonably soon I was getting confirmation, maybe through the experience of a feeling, a connection with the other person, I started to get enough feedback that I'd think, "right, yes, I'm on to it", and I just kept practising that.

It's as if I am constantly meditating. I think it's really a re-affirmation of staying open, that if I can bear it, if I can hold my anxiety, that's all I have to do. It's sort of getting out of my own way, and it's happened so many times that I can absolutely trust it. Of course, sometimes I'm disappointed, as sometimes it all seems to fall flat, and I think that was a waste of time, or I got busy, I had a coffee and started talking, so I'm not pretending it's all straightforward. There are no guarantees, I can't make something happen, I sort of like that, even as I struggle...

David was able to follow a hunch he had, while finding this at the same time very uncomfortable. It seems that as he was becoming more experienced he became more able to let go of his need to be the clever one, the one who provides the answers and to trust that his different approach would yield deeper and more satisfying results. An aspect of this experience is the importance of *intuition*. Fuelled by an inner sense that something was not right and had to change, David became devoted to exploring a new way of being with his clients. This intuition showed the way, but following the way was not easy; it was hard work. In being open to his intuition that something had to change and then finding a way to put it into practice, David was able to challenge a way of being that had been a part of his personal life and professional identity for many years. It was, and is, a struggle; however, it is *his own* struggle, and therefore a struggle that has personal meaning for him. It is not neat and tidy, there is no arrival place, no moving towards something finished or completable, but rather a pressing forward into possibilities, with an openness of being and an always becoming.

## Going with “What Makes Sense”

Ella also talks about intuition when she describes how she chooses which presentations to attend at conferences:

With regards to deciding which presentations I am going to go to, it's usually whatever's preoccupying me at the time. Unless I've specifically gone there because I like someone's work and I like a particular presenter. For example, if I like their writing or their work or I've heard them before and I feel that there is something on offer there. Some people just don't make sense to me and there's no point me going there. I've tried to force myself to do that in the past, and now I go with what makes sense for me.

Ella notes that in the past she tried to force herself to go to presentations that she thinks might offer something important, that she *should* perhaps go to. As time has gone on she has instead become more able to attune to what is right for her, including which learning opportunities will serve her the best. As with David, there is a heeding of intuition, a letting herself be open to what resonates with her. Forcing herself to do otherwise, as a way of being, fades into the background. At the same time, Ella emphasises that what she is describing is a dynamic ever-evolving position: “You're always moving towards where you might be. I welcome my ignorance”. As well as the heeding of intuition there is this sense of letting go into something from a place of not knowing the outcome. There is a “falling towards” or a “letting go into” possibilities. Being open to and heeding intuition, rather than forcing oneself to go against one's intuition, is the direction, yet this does not mean that the direction is clear or straightforward.

## *Sorge* (Care)

If heeding intuition becomes a move towards oneself and a letting oneself be open to what resonates, then it would also seem that care for oneself is most centrally at play. In *Being and Time* (1927/2008) Heidegger suggested that care (*Sorge*) is the very Being of Dasein (the literal translation of “Dasein” is “being there”. Dreyfus (1991) pointed out that rather than Dasein meaning an individual person, Heidegger is referring to a human *way of being*). Further, that “understanding ... makes up a basic kind of Dasein's Being, and that this Being is constituted as care” (p. 363). Thus, central to Dasein's Being-in-the-world is the notion of *Sorge*, or “care”. Additionally, that there is an intrinsic connection between care and a move towards oneself, an intuitive letting go into possibilities, and wanting to have a conscience. Heidegger said it in this way: “in the call of conscience care summons Dasein towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (p. 365).

Larivée (2014) proposed that *Sorge* is at the heart of *Being and Time*, that the human being is not a rational animal but is “rather simply care” (p.124), and that *Sorge* evokes “something like a movement, a drive beyond the self towards something that concerns it” (p. 124). She added that this is an ancient concept that connects to the human soul and cites Plato's contention that the human soul is a *movement*, that most of the time we are occupied with various tasks and projects that distract us from what is essential, however “the soul's movement can re-orient itself” (p. 126). Further, that the care for one's own soul is an

alternative to becoming lost in the activities of the day-to-day. Larivée showed that Heidegger followed Socrates' recommendation to care for the soul, including following the tradition that this consists of each person facing up to his or her particular situation and awakening a feeling of responsibility for his or her self (p. 133). She also showed, importantly, that Heidegger extended the tradition of "care of the self" by suggesting that care is *the foundation for a self* (p. 140), that the soul can take care of itself because it is care. "Caring" (for ourselves and others) thus becomes not a thing that we *do* but a movement that resides within us; if we can clear a space from the day-to-day and cultivate an openness of being to that which is essential then care becomes manifest.

If this sounds improbable or far-fetched it is likely to be because we are often, in our present ways of living, so far away from being able to set aside the strictures we place upon ourselves in multitudinous ways. Heidegger wrote about this in *Discourse on Thinking* (1959/1966), where he suggested that we (individually and collectively) are in flight from thinking, and specifically what he termed "meditative thinking" (*besinnliches Denken*). In commenting on this, Thomson (2001), Bonnett (2002) and Magrini (2014) have written about the ways this plays out in our technologically-minded society, including educational institutions, where responsive and reflective ways of teaching and learning have increasingly become replaced with, as Thomson (2001) described, "education as the transmission of 'information', the filling of the *psyche* with knowledge as if inscribing a *tabula rasa* or, in more contemporary parlance, 'training-up' a neural net" (p. 254).

Webster-Wright (2010) similarly noted that, in the context of organisational learning, human beings may be referred to in a dehumanised manner and the emphasis becomes on how employees "should be" (p. 40). Professional development programmes often aim to align professionals' practice to organisational goals. Webster-Wright has asked the pertinent question: "Is this considered learning by professionals?" (p. 47). This move towards education as the transmission of information and human beings seen as a "cog in a machine" (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 47), rather than individual learners, has obvious consequences for the individual's ongoing learning, even after leaving an educational institution. How do we re-learn how to learn? How do we gradually make our way back to ourselves such that we can attune to the movement of the soul? The following story speaks to a participant's experience of this.

## Learning Together

As a child I was the only reader in my family and I used to bike up to the public library and sit up there and read books. Reading's always been a lifeline for me. There's two layers to that, isn't there? There's the reading and then there's having a place where I can think and where I can speak with others, and for me teaching has turned out to be the place where that happens the most. I get more satisfaction and engagement from teaching and I learn a lot through this. I will read something or think about it, I'm thinking about the class and thinking about the people I'm teaching and who they are and something will begin to come together but then when I'm with the class it will take on a whole new life. It will take on a life of its own because there's this

back and forth process. When I think of those moments of teaching, they're my most favourite because it's not me, it's a two-way process.

Hannah describes reading as having always been a lifeline for her, and then as she became an adult she found that thinking about and sharing what she was reading with others became a way of learning for her. The image of Hannah biking "up" to the library, while being the only reader in her family, is a poignant one, as is her expression of reading being a "lifeline". It seems that books were her companions; they seemed to have been sources of both comfort and knowledge. It is almost as if books were Hannah's teachers and she the apprentice learner, responding to what they had to say to her. There also seems to have been a simple *beingness* in this relationship between her and her books. This learning/being dyad evolved during her life to include others; Hannah brought her books and her thinking about them to others through the medium of teaching. Teaching, for Hannah, is not telling her students about her thoughts in a didactic manner; rather it is engaging with the students even before she sees them and while she is thinking about a particular reading and letting the students' presence inform her thinking. It is no longer just Hannah and her books; others are included. Then, when she is physically with the students in the classroom the "back and forth", the "two-way process" (or is it three?) continues. The books teach, the students teach and Hannah teaches. This life-long way of learning and being continues to come to life and to resonate within her. It does not seem to be taking things too far to suggest that Hannah has found here a way of caring for her soul.

### Learning as Being-With

A similar process is evident in the following story, where the participant Rahel says something important about the very personal nature of learning:

Learning can absolutely happen from our experience. There is that learning from experience and practice and all of that. But it's not only that. There are books, for example. I can lie on the couch and I can also associate to books. For me it's not separate in the way that I am painfully aware that it is for many other people. I experience something and I describe what I experience and I might have an image association and then I think of something and then I start thinking about it and then I might say, "well, you know it's like Winnicott's holding, isn't it?" or something like that. I actually *see* books.

When I just said that I had an image of Winnicott in my mind. Of course I have never met these writers, but when I read I actually hear the author aloud in my mind, somebody is talking to me. Or I might see the word "holding" or "Winnicott" in the way I imagine him. Or a thought. So my thinking as I was reading comes back to me as I think. I know it's not a conversation but it is very similar to when you remember a conversation you have had with someone. It's a bit like seeing a tree and you remembered what the tree looked like, smelled like, how you enjoyed it, but you also wondered whether it was an elm. And then it's remembering that wondering. And then there is a range of practitioners who have written.

Hardly any of the writers I'm thinking of write without trying to convey something of their experience — although not necessarily always of their internal experience — so that's one thing I enjoy a lot. And that relationship with writers — I can dream of Ogden sometimes. This is alive in me.

Rahel seems to have a very experience-near and embodied approach to her reading. She is willing literally to be in partnership with her books; even the way that she describes lying on the couch and associating to books has an intimate feel. The reading becomes a conversation that can be recalled later by words and/or images. Rather than reading being thought of as an intellectual endeavour, the learning by reading that Rahel describes seems to be more of an embodied experience. Reading has the same experiential nature as being in the room with another person. I have included Rahel's story partly because I have noticed that there can often be what I would consider to be an artificial separation made between experience/intuition and reading/engaging in theory, and often a preference for the former, as if this is the "real" learning.

Rahel's story highlights the very personal nature of what we might think of as "learning from experience". Being-with an 'other' may take many forms. Other participants mentioned, for example, being in a dilemma and going to an art gallery to find "which painting speaks to me today" or learning from film and theatre about the internal worlds of others, or how learning from the creative process in one's own artistic practice enhances learning about the therapeutic process. One experienced practitioner spoke about her reading having changed over time from reading to "find the answer to something" to reading to "find more ways to think about things". Important in these examples, I think, is again the very personal nature of learning.

### Learning Through a Cultural and Political Lens

In this section one of the participants, Philip, who works in a Māori community mental health agency, speaks about his life-long interest in the cultural and political aspects of others' experience and how this is, for him, a lens through which he looks as a way of learning about himself and others in his work:

For me, personal trauma is most often political trauma, and wondering about that is very important for my learning and my understanding. When a person sits in the room with me I see webs going right out, across history, and that matters to me hugely in terms of understanding history and its processes, what wars do to us, what people have suffered and struggled, that matters. I think about how people in New Zealand have struggled, the political and cultural impacts, the cultural genocide. I think about what my clients' parents and grandparents went through. This has affected my clients so clearly, and what's interesting is that when there is some understanding about this, people seem to find a meaning and centre in it, and therefore immediately they are not so lost in their own guilt.

What I like about psychodynamic thinking is that there is a history of connecting to the political, to social and cultural processes. For me, that thinking has been very

important, because I've always enjoyed doing philosophy and sociology and politics, together with my psychotherapy training; for me they run together.

As Philip sits with his Māori clients, he is very aware that the often devastating impacts of European colonisation on Māori continue to live on; he sees the “webs going right out”, and the suffering that has occurred. He is also aware that coming to some understanding of what occurred is helpful and brings meaning to a situation where otherwise there may be confusion and lostness. Philip mentions that the cultural and political aspects of people's experience have always been interesting to him; it would seem that this is one of the lenses through which he looks, a way he has always had of learning about himself and others, and his work as a psychotherapist. It was not only being in this workplace that provoked his learning in this way; it already existed in him (although it continues to develop), and in fact, as he goes on to say, this is one of the reasons he loves working there:

I love working here because I can think about this more openly, and wonder about it; the political and the cultural have a scope and an acceptance. Even if it's not always talked about it can be accessed and engaged with, whereas in other areas there is a very strong biological or psychiatric model. Here I have a freedom of thinking, which I really appreciate, and a form of learning too, from my clients. For example, in one situation with a client, I might not have known that the traumatic and paranoid signs were in fact the result of intergenerational processes, caused by the land wars or that his whānau had lost land, and hence his father became a heavy drinker. Yes, my client is psychotic because of his bad attachment issues, or bad processes in his early years, but they are in turn the result of the land loss, how that has affected the situation, so you can trace it back to that.

In this workplace Philip can think and wonder about the cultural and the political, and he experiences this as a “freedom of thinking”, whereby he is able to continue learning about something that resonates in him. He gives an example of a client where this occurs; rather than a single focus on a psychological or psychiatric diagnosis (for example, an attachment disorder) he is also able to think about the political impact on why attachment in this family may have become particularly disrupted and, in this way, stay close to the person's life experiences, to what matters for him, and to what has meaning for them. In doing this, he says that he does not exclude but rather stays close to the principles of his psychotherapy knowledge and practice that resonate:

At the same time, I still believe in what Bion says about “not knowing” because a Māori person could be sitting there and not relate at all to the tikanga, or he or she might be Mormon. I need to be open, I cannot make assumptions, and I need to be wondering “who is this person?” So even though I'm interested in the political and cultural, I actually need to *not* know, not to fix, quite the opposite, and that means dancing on the edges of knowledge, but it helps me stay flexible and hopefully nimble. And at times of course clunky.

Philip's story shows something important about how he has been able to hold to that which is important for him. His interests in philosophy, sociology and politics have run parallel to his education and practice as a psychotherapist. Neither seems more important than the other and he has found a workplace environment and a way of being with his clients that has enabled him to integrate these meaningfully. This begs the question of how it might be for other therapists, who may not have the opportunity to work in places where their interests are welcomed. Has Philip been particularly fortunate, and/or has his ability to think, and to learn in the way he has, meant that he has more easily been able to find a place for himself that is a good fit?

## Reflections and Discussion

The stories in this paper tell of individuals finding a way of learning that resonates with them and, with this, a way of developing an openness of being and a caring for the soul. Most of these therapists have practised for many years and have stories of experience that speak to the complexities and difficulties inherent in "learning to learn". One would hope that a person's living environment, including the political situation in their country, the place in which they live and work, and the relationships in which they are engaged (including with themselves), help rather than hinder learning. However, this is not always the case. At the beginning of this paper I wrote about Anthony Doerr's (2014) character, the orphan Werner Pfennig, his passion for learning, and how in the corrupt and brutal environment of Nazi Germany he was used up and treated as a commodity. His value was measured according to what he could offer to the régime. Werner's Professor Hauptmann mentioned that a scientist's work is determined by personal interests as well as the interests of his time, implying at least some sort of division; a balance that needs to be struck. For Werner, however, there was no such balance. His story is one of a spirit being systematically broken, and external expectations taking precedence every time over his individual needs and desires. At the end of the story, the soldier Werner, aged only 18, with a body failing him, steps on a landmine that had been set by his own army and "disappears in a fountain of earth" (p. 483). It is a shocking yet believable end. One horror follows another until eventually there is nothing left; nothing of Werner's early promise and nothing that feels human. For Werner, there was no possibility that he could follow his passion for learning; the initial illusion that this could be so was followed by a very different reality.

This raises the issue of the ways in which learning can be hindered. Werner's story tells of learning being hindered by a specific political landscape in which the individual counts for nothing. I would suggest that there are other more subtle ways in which learning is hindered, including in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in institutions peopled with those who care and who are committed to the endeavour of learning. One of these relates to the impact of living in our time. There seems to be increasing pressure on individuals to learn and to be in particular ways, that is, a prescriptive approach to learning. As well, there is a denigration of a gentle and meditative way of life in favour of a way of life that is becoming increasingly systematised and technologised. Together with this *external* pressure is the *internal* pressure experienced by individuals to live according to their time and their environment. How easy

is it to follow that which resonates for us? And how can we move ourselves towards a freer way of being in life? How do we both acknowledge and negotiate our contributions to the society in which we live as well as care for our own souls?

Ella described how it took time to stop forcing herself to go to presentations that she thought she *ought* to go to, and instead to heed her intuition and go to those that “made sense” for her. David described a process, over many years, of endeavouring to fit into a profession that was respected but that did not suit him and indeed made him feel “desperate”. He also learnt to heed his intuition, to change his profession and to practice in a way that has come to feel right for him. These experiences speak to external and internal difficulties in relation to learning and which place obstacles in the way of a person’s ability to cultivate an openness of being and thus to learn. Werner’s story shows how the individual has a limited ability to learn in the face of major external obstacles to learning, for example, political and institutional systems which are corrupt in their abuse of power and lose their humanity. This certainly occurs, and in the world of psychotherapy probably more than anyone prefers to dwell on (Casement, 2005; Goretti, 2006; Kernberg, 1996, 2000, 2012).

In addition, there are the more subtle external obstacles created by the impact of living in our time. Heidegger (1959/1966) suggested that one of these is our being “thoughtless” (p. 45) and that thoughtlessness takes place far too easily: “nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly” (p. 45). (This was first published in 1959, 58 years ago. It could be argued that the phenomenon has become more accentuated over time). We are, he proposed, in “*flight from thinking*” (p. 45). By “thinking” Heidegger meant “meditative thinking” and he contrasted this with “calculative thinking”, which he described as a type of thinking which is necessary for planning, investigating, and computing: “Calculative thinking computes. It computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself” (p. 45). Heidegger went on to state that this way of thinking is necessary but that he feared it may come to dominate and to become the *only* way of thinking: “will everything new fall into the clutches of planning and calculation, of organization and automation?” (p. 49). The real danger of this thinking, he maintained, is that it may have the impact of completely overshadowing “meditative thinking” or “pondering”. He described this latter as a natural phenomenon for the human being, who is a thinking and meditating being. It is enough, he proposed, if we “dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now” (p. 47).

In posing the question of how we might attain a groundedness, a down-to-earthedness and a solidity (*Bodenständigkeit*) in our day-to-day living, Heidegger (1959/1966) suggested that meditative thinking demands of us “not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all” (p. 53). Without meditative thinking, he suggested, we throw away our own special and essential nature, that of being a meditative being. He went on to say that our comportment toward technology would become “yes” and at the same time also “no”; how to use technical devices and also keep ourselves free of them, letting go of them at any time, and thus denying them the right to dominate us

and so to “warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature” (p. 54).

Heidegger advocated remaining dependent, not on technology but upon something higher, which he termed “*Die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*” (Heidegger, 1959/1966, p. 54), translated as “releasement towards things”. Inwood (1999) has noted that the term *Gelassenheit* was used by mystics such as Meister Eckhart in the sense of “devout, devoted to God, pious.... for the peace one finds in God by taking one’s distance from worldly things” (p. 117). Although the more modern meaning of *Gelassenheit* is “calmness, composure, detachment, releasement” (p. 117), the translator of *Discourse on Thinking* (1959/1966) clarified that the older and more complex meanings are implicit here. Thus, Heidegger recommended a comportment towards technology which he described as an *old* word, “releasement towards things” (p. 54). He went on to say that releasement towards things and openness to the mystery belong together and give us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a different way, one that incorporates waiting, not expecting, and being in a state of openness.

This brings to mind Gabbard and Ogden’s (2009) discussion of Bion’s idea that “thinking/dreaming one’s lived experience” (p. 312) is perhaps the principal means by which one learns from experience. They also suggested that the therapist dreams himself or herself “more fully into existence, in progressively more complex and inclusive ways” (p. 313). Dreaming, and being with our dreaming, carry a sense of openness, surrender, being with what cannot be known, and engaging with a way of thinking that is, as Heidegger described it, “meditative” rather than “calculative”. Gabbard and Ogden’s “thinking/dreaming one’s lived experience” suggests a very similar process and they make reference to the analyst’s “waking dreaming” in the therapy setting, the analyst’s “reverie experience” (p. 313). Ogden (1997) also emphasised the *intersubjective* nature of reverie. Thus, he stated that the reverie does not belong to the therapist alone, rather that it is jointly created in the room: “a jointly (but asymmetrically) created unconscious intersubjective construction that I have termed ‘the intersubjective analytic third’” (p. 569).

Meditative thinking, *Gelassenheit*, and dreaming one’s lived experience seem to be notions inherent in the stories in this paper wherein participants feel that learning takes place. Heidegger (1959/1966) noted that “the way to what is near is always the longest and thus the hardest for us humans. This way is the way of meditative thinking” (p. 53). Could it be that one of the main “internal” obstacles to learning is what Heidegger is describing here? That finding what is near to us is actually the most difficult thing to do? David’s story certainly captures something of this, in relation to the effort involved, the time taken, the years that pass in gradually coming to what is near. And of course the boundaries between external and internal obstacles to learning become blurred when we acknowledge, as Thomson (2004) did, our having to struggle against “the inertial resistance of ubiquitous social norms which quietly enforce a kind of anonymous conformity (usually with our unnoticed complicity) if we are ever genuinely to repossess ourselves” (p. 447). Could it be that what helps us to find what is near to us, and actually to *notice* our situation rather than be immersed in the “unnoticed complicity”, includes the ability to think meditatively, to dream ourselves into existence, to keep the open open?

## Conclusion

Although the participants in my study spoke about the importance of the activities and places of learning in which they were involved (supervision, personal therapy, clinical practice, conference talks, reading, writing, and so on), their stories of ongoing learning tended to illustrate *what those activities meant for them* in the context of their personal lives. The meanings were by no means consistent amongst the participants. Becoming more experienced and engaging in particular activities and/or places of learning does not seem to produce a universally recognisable clinician or to guarantee that particular learnings have taken place. Interpreting participants' stories from a phenomenological perspective provides a glimpse of a complexity of learning which refuses to conform according to neatly arranged categories, but rather reflects the messy and unpredictable nature of living as a human being. Thus, caution is advised in relation to prescriptive and systematised approaches to learning.

This research has shown that, over the course of their professional lives, psychotherapists move towards responding to what is essential for their own learning and that this is often an unconscious process. What *matters* to the individual begins to emerge and show itself more fully. Further, an understanding of intuition, meditative thinking/dreaming, and openness of being is helpful in understanding how this occurs, including the notion of *Sorge* (care) being the very Being of *Dasein*, a movement that resides within us. Not all learning situations provide the necessary conditions for learning to occur; we live with external and internal pressures that often mitigate against our learning. The importance of connection with others is highlighted as well as honouring and tolerating individuality and difference.

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