

This is a reflection on the earlier days of the Room to Breathe Group, when it was called Open Space and took place on a working day, aimed mainly at professional reflection and development
<https://ysp.org.uk/exhibitions>

Picture the scene: I set off from home sometime after 7am and drive for about two hours cross-country into increasingly rural scenery, with rolling hills, dry stone walls, through belts of rain and onto higher moor land. Arriving at a fairly remote village, I meet up with six other people, the rain has ceased, and I kit myself out for a day's walk amongst people most of whom I have not met before. There are few requirements placed upon participants, other than we must each carry a chair. We set off and after about 200 yards, passing church and churchyard we enter a field, and set up our chairs in a circle. There are mumbblings about the requirement for carrying the chair, how the ground is perfectly adequate, and the weight of the chair is an unwelcome addition. It doesn't take long before one of the participants says "shall we introduce ourselves then?", and the group facilitator nods in assent. "Hah" I hear you express, this is to be a "group experience". By now the weather has improved and the sun is starting to come out. A 4x4 towing a trailer enters the field in which we are sitting to deposit some large prunings from a conifer tree. After these initial impressions are exchanged, including some "placing" of people in the pre-existing relationships they have with each other (if any), we pack up the chairs, lash them to our sacks, with a few participants experiencing some difficulties with securing this "burden". We set off on our walk, led our "conductor", marveling at the scenery, the shape of the hills, the lines of the dry stone walls, the birdsong and the smells. The co-conductor/navigator knows this area well, and we discover later has been a long-time acquaintance and friend of the group facilitator.

We walk on through gates, over stiles, alongside the river Wharfe, turning up through the lovely village of Grassington and after a while out onto the more open moorside. The views and the general ambience are staggering and have a deeply calming effect on the soul. Passing close by is an old lead mine works, and a long-disused lime kiln, we arrive after a couple of hours walking at a relatively flat area, at which point we take a rest and dig out our packed lunches - or "pack-ups" as they say around here. Arranging the chairs in a circle, and all but unconsciously ensuring that we are equidistant from each other, the "group" is constituted. "It's circle time!" I am moved to exclaim.

During the hour in which we sit in this group we explore what it means to be out on the moor this day, I lend an extra thermal layer to a group member for to be sat for an hour in the open air, with no shelter starts to feel quite chill even on this relatively warm June day. I also voice the dilemma I struggle with of my presence here on this day. Others describe their working situations and how the journeying through the landscape has resonances for the transitional stages at which they find themselves. Such transitions include impending retirement, the need to seek new challenges or a new job to follow on from a fixed term contract, the need which at some level we all experience of balancing the internal and external in ways which suit us.

When the hour is up, our facilitator indicates it's time to get moving again and we pack up our chairs and head off in a different direction, taking care not to return by the reverse route. Our navigator skillfully takes us into a sharp defile, a seemingly innocuous depression in the landscape turns into a deep gully with some fantastically carved shapes in the limestone which bounders it. I imagine and wonder aloud what this might be like in the spring with snow melt, where, over aeons, torrents of water have cascaded through causing these glorious natural shapes. I also muse whether with global warming this is ever likely to happen again. Our walk takes us back down towards the river which we rejoin, looking out for unusual birds such as dippers (which we would not see on this day). Eventually we end up in the field where we first sat in a circle at the start of our walk. A quarter of an hour passes as we debrief, and then we retrace the final 200 yards to our cars talking of whether there would be somewhere to get a cup of tea! We bid each other farewell and anticipate meeting again in three months' time.

I feel reluctant to leave this wonderful landscape and having turned the car round, I notice as I'm driving past that the erstwhile village school, which surely featured in Gervase Phinn's

descriptions of his time as a schools inspector in Yorkshire, is now open and serving teas with extended hours during this, the Grassington Festival. I park the car once more and walking towards the watering hole I exchange comments with another participant who readily agrees to join me. Inside we meet up with a third participant, who has travelled all the way up from way down south for this day's walk and enjoy a pot of tea and a scone with jam and cream. Half an hour passes very pleasantly and then it really is time to head off back east.

What I am describing here is an interesting staff development/supervision opportunity entitled "Open Space" and offered by the Tuke Centre in York. I am minded, as I have thought in the past, to think about the opportunities for growth and repair provided by the outdoors. The paradigm within which we work for just about all of our time is one-to-one 50 minute sessions indoors. Are some of the ideas demonstrated by this event translatable into some of my therapeutic work I wonder? Our facilitator, Chris Powell, is the director of the Tuke Centre and trained at the IGA. His skillful managing of the boundaries, complemented by The Great Outdoors which provides concrete examples of boundaries and space in this landscape of fields bounded by wonderful dry-stone walls, ancient and timeless at the same time, has made for a most memorable day. There will be more to come. Open Space is constituted as one walk repeated at quarterly intervals through the four seasons of the year. We each of us, I think, privately wonder what it may be like to sit in a group for an hour in the depths of winter, maybe with a blizzard raging, and whether we will avoid hypothermia!

I guess I should declare why I'm writing this as a "Dilemma". Well for me the central dilemma is around whether I can justify this use of my time, indeed my employer's work time, whether I can legitimately claim travel expenses for such a valuable and yet at the same time self-indulgent experience, and how I will face my staff team and justify to them why this is relevant to me as a practitioner and their manager. There is a slight "get out" for me in that the place on this unique training event was originally booked by another member of staff who decided they could not take up the place and therefore rather than lose the money with no benefit to the service, I magnanimously agreed to step in!

I guess in the sense that a good training event should cause us to look at our practice and ways in which we may improve it, whilst also looking after some quite personal inner needs, this event has already sold itself to me.

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