EPISODE TWO:
FROM EVALUATION AS BULLYING TO EVALUATION AS INSPIRATION

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO OF A WOMAN IN A PICTURE FRAME FILLS THE SCREEN. SHE IS MID 20S, SHORT BOBBED SLIGHTLY UNTIDY HAIR, DARK KOHL MAKEUP ROUND HER EYES. WEARING A SLEEVELESS PALE SILK DRESS AND HIGH HEELED SHOES SHE HOLDS THE STANCE OF A BOXER, HER TWO FISTS CLENCHED IN FRONT OF HER AT CHEST LEVEL. ONE FOOT IS DIAGONALLY IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, HER DRESS HITCHED UP ON THE LEFT TO REVEAL A BARE KNEE.

MADELINE - There's that word again. **Bullying**. It keeps reappearing. Dyed in the wool. Just as it is always there as I construct my working world, so it is here.

I'm surprised you're not used to it by now; it's been around long enough

As I've been sitting here, my questions to myself are also still here, rolling around in my head.

Who am I? What am I doing? Why am I doing these things? What am I doing them for? How am I doing them? Who am I doing them with? What is going on here?

More importantly, can I let you in on what I think I know?

Well, you're going to have to try. Start with this, what is this Episode about?

MADELINE - Alright. This episode takes you inside the evaluation professional, the one who has to deliver on evaluation contracts, get a feel for a project, nose around and ask questions, facilitate meetings, hear and examine all perspectives, and give those who employ me a decent idea of what to do next. You should get to know Madeline - professional evaluator - and Madeline - professional facilitator, and see me striving to ensure that **the values that hold me together** can hold the work together too. What I want to do here is not to talk evaluation theory, nor facilitation theory, but add to the body of knowledge about what happens in practice, by examining my own. This means being forensic in my examination of **what I bring** when I am both evaluating and facilitating, exposing how **who I am and what I do** live and breathe within one another.

I'm not sure I know what you're talking about when you say 'how who I am and what I do live and breathe within one another.'

MADELINE - What I'm trying to get at are the real processes I work with, ones that tend to resist easy formulae or models, and that are challenging to describe. Borrowing from Gormley (2000) I am not interested so much in a 'biography' of my work but in capturing

the **lived, inhabited, embodied nature of my work**. Or borrowing from Helen Wyber (personal communication) and Saville Kushner (2000, p. 144), reveal the in-consistency, a kind of internal coherence in an inconsistent and shifting context, necessary to work in what Schon so aptly refers to as the swamp (1991, p. 42).

Look, my hunch is that the exposure of what really goes on, what the real processes are, will frighten people, indeed frightens us all, rubs our noses in the what we all really fear, which is that we are not entirely in control, and we do not know, and that we are all actually holding onto chaotic processes, constantly having to find a point of balance and clarity. That there is no technique, only the courage to keep asking the 'right' questions and hold the multiple responses in sight as we search for the simplicity that reflects, illuminates and to some extent explains the complexity.

So it's messy and confusing and really difficult to explain? Yeah but you have to try, it's no good you knowing it, that won't get you through this

MADELINE - I know. Over the last five years, I have written several pieces about the way I do my work, and the processes that I go through when I do it. It's tricky writing up this kind of thing, as it can be really boring, and the detail very difficult to bring to life when you need so much explanation of context. The nitty-gritty, often referred to as 'thick description', which is often the most interesting when you are navel-gazing, is almost impossible to communicate with anything resembling the vitality and thrill you had when first thought it, or tried it out. It all becomes about as appetising and tasty to others as a dead fish, or as Judi Marshall puts it, 'grey like overworked pastry' (2004, p. 15).

But tell the story you must, account for your learning you must, or you fail in this 'soft' business of action-research. I tell you, this work is anything but soft, it requires the rigour of understanding the significance of startling detail, wrestling with it, lining it up in a messy and changing context, finding the confidence to read how it fits with anything else, working out how to tell the story to others in a way that helps us to see. What Schon might call the artistry of wading through the swampy lowlands (1991, p. 42).

Yes, and you also know that you are determined to do something that is useful. This self-reflection business is not that interesting if it doesn't trigger off the resonating questions for others as well as for you. So, tell me first, how you got into the evaluation business, give me some context

MADELINE - Well, when I started this research, I wasn't working really as a paid evaluation professional. I was working in and with networks working on peace-building and human rights, for large UK NGOs and development agencies.

I had also spent four years as a facilitator for the Alternatives to Violence Project, known as AVP. AVP is run by volunteers, and takes the form of three experiential workshops on Alternatives to Violence. It operates both in prison, and in the wider community.

I came to AVP because I was sick of watching our ability as a human race to demonise others to such an extent that mass murder is possible. I sat in front of the unfolding news from Rwanda in early 1994, devastated, depressed, swamped by waves of killing, bloated bodies, mutilation, and thought, I simply must do something, I must put something of myself into **standing up, being counted**, refusing to countenance that this

can ever be anything but utterly destructive of the **connections and love** we need to live good lives.

Tell me a bit more about AVP. What drew you to it?

MADELINE - AVP is something that grows from the individual. It begins with me, with you. You start as a participant, and you stay one. The project has three levels of workshop. The first two are facilitated by others who have done the workshops, and who are unpaid, volunteers. The third prepares you to work in that team of three or four volunteer facilitators, who you may not have met before, to run a workshop for others.

But you never cease to be a participant. The organising centre of a workshop is a book of exercises, which we have experienced as participants and learn how to understand and handle as facilitators (See AVP Basic Manual). A team is made up of three or four to give breadth of experience and knowledge, and sufficient support for a large group and ourselves.

And what does AVP do, I mean, what is it trying to do?

MADELINE - One central idea is that we all have knowledge of alternatives to violence in our lives but that none of us are experts and all of us can learn from others. We come together as a group of equals intending to share ideas, help each other, and learn.

A second central idea is that we are all capable of good and right action, and that the way to develop our capacities to act with kindness and love is to focus on them and practice them. We have all used those alternatives many times, even those of us categorised as 'violent'. The emphasis is on alternatives, not violence. On the power of the positive, not an examination of the bad or negative. On something the workshop calls Transforming Power.

A third idea is that we must **make our community**, and **create connections** between those who are marginalised and those who live comfortably. The project has its origins in US prisons, and the Quaker practice of active non-violence, and I wanted to give my time to working with those who are imprisoned. I take the view that we are responsible as a community for the prisons we create, and we cannot simply 'dump our rubbish' into walled-in secure houses. We must make the effort to transform things.

Just a minute, is that the Transforming Power that Bill Torbert talks about?

MADELINE - No, it's a different take on the phrase Transforming Power. In my first workshop as a participant, it was rather mysterious, and knowing that the project has its roots in the Quaker / Friends community, I wondered if it was a disguised way of talking about God. It was the part of the workshop that made me queasy. It was difficult to communicate, to talk about. The workshop manual gave hints, suggested ways of speaking to it. But it was clear to me that if you hadn't got it, you couldn't really speak to it.

Over the years it is the part of the workshop that has become most important. One of the indicators for me that I have gone beyond technique and exercises and tools is my ability

to speak about this transforming power in ways that are absolutely mine. I know what it means. This is not the same as Torbert's transforming power in action inquiry.

It is a great phrase. Transforming power. It carries multiple meanings. The power to transform, and the transformation of power.

The power to transform. For me this means finding personal power to transform moments of potential violence, into relationships in which love and compassion find their feet and form. This power comes from within, and from an acknowledgement of the nature of connection with the other. It is located in the transforming power of love, understood by me as the connectedness that allows us to see beyond, into that good place we all have, however much our behaviour might show otherwise, and speak from it and to it. It is a power that transforms fear, often the well-spring of violence. And a power that transforms power relations, the what-happens between me and others. I repeat, this power comes from us, from the I and also from the we. It is not something I do alone, I cannot love alone. I must be connected, joined.

OK, so what has AVP got to do with you being an evaluator? What's the link?

MADELINE - Sorry, yes, this is where I met Mark Bitel. He was coordinating the AVP London Prisons project, and he encouraged me to become a facilitator. He then started a Masters in Evaluation, and suggested we do an evaluation of AVP.

We were very concerned that our work would be measured against recidivism rates, or indeed violent incident rates, in the prison population with whom we were working. Such criteria fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the AVP project. He got together a group of AVP volunteers, and we began a laborious process of **developing our own criteria** which we see as being appropriate to the work.

Mark has become a really pragmatic evaluator. He was then heavily influenced by Guba & Lincoln's (1989, 2001) work on fourth generation evaluation, and through my involvement with the AVP evaluation process, I joined him in his appreciation of **evaluation as a process of negotiated standards of judgement,** with and between participants, stakeholders, and evaluation professionals.

Hang on, what do you mean by 'evaluation as a process of negotiated standards of judgement'?

MADELINE - Well, we worked hard to understand what we wanted to be judged on, and we included in that process what the prisoners we worked with wanted it to be judged on. We designed our questionnaires and process accordingly. We developed a list of criteria we thought were important, then we interviewed prisoners and got them to prioritise the criteria they thought were important, and then because we couldn't all be present in the same room, when it came to coming to an agreement, between us we represented the prisoners' views, and advocated for them. Gradually we came to a consensus.

We were all learning as we went along and we spent many hours discussing, reading, refining, and understanding. Actually it was Mark who first said to me, 'you always ask the difficult questions, ones the rest of us would prefer to sweep under the carpet, or

skate over.' It is Mark I have to thank for bringing this to my attention and I have developed and inquired into my question-making practice as a result.

The AVP evaluation report was part of my application to join this doctorate programme (Bitel *et al.*, 1998), and Mark and I then worked together on the Action Research Project which is the subject of Episode One. In many ways the second process owes much to that first one.

That's great, I now have a better idea of what brought you here. So let's get a bit deeper into the work, **what kind of work do you actually do?**

MADELINE - Good question. In practical terms, evaluation in the field I work in may well not be recognisable as such by American evaluation schools, or even university-based public programme evaluation here in the UK, such as that Kushner does so regularly. Evaluation in the international development sector has its own dynamics. The professionals in this field are largely unconnected to public programme evaluation work, and most are not educationally-trained evaluators. Those who do the job are often people who have left active programme implementation work, like me, and who are hired because of their practical expertise, like me, or knowledge of context. Although we are contracted as evaluators, in the development sector people tend to use evaluation as a way of bringing in, or at least discussing, change. They are most interested in recommendations.

I am a newcomer, tho', and I tend to work on small contracts, evaluating small projects. I mostly get work through word of mouth. For instance, I have done two jobs this year: one evaluating five years of work done by a network in Sri Lanka; the other a joint peace promotion project in Latin America, bringing together a European government, five development agencies, and various local partners. The budgets are small and the complexities seem to be endless.

Actually in many ways I'm a reluctant evaluator. I resist descriptions of me as 'expert' or 'knowing', which tends to be a reason given for employing evaluators. My expertise is seen to be in complex joint working set-ups, and in peace / human rights / social change projects. So far my portfolio of work has some common factors: I am evaluating projects that are quite small in financial terms, and I do not do financial auditing; I am asked to work in conflict-areas in other parts of the world; the projects often involve coalitions of different actors at different levels; these different actors may well come from two or more different cultures and language groups; the projects' goals are political, social change goals that have **strong values at their core**. See what I mean.

I do, I do. Before we go on, can you explain what the bullying has to do with this? In your title you talk about evaluation as bullying, what do you mean by that?

MADELINE - Early on in the research, I identified my distaste for much that comes under the very loose heading 'evaluation'. This is quite a good explanation of what I mean, an early attempt at an abstract:

SHE PICKS UP HER NOTEBOOK AND READS OUT LOUD

This research stems from being bullied as a child, as a teenager, as an adult professional. This is where the urge to action comes from in me. It is the defining experience, the place where the energy lies.

I notice the way bullying is disguised as 'inspection' or 'measuring value-for-money' in the service of 'modernisation', carrying threats of budget cuts, closure, sackings. I see Chris Woodhead try to 'turn around failing schools' by shouting and imposing and bullying educators into better practice, I see social service professionals named and shamed, and I recall being made to stand on my chair at school for failing to eat my dinner.

This research is about using questions in the service of transformation. Questions are the tools of my trade: evaluation; mediation; consensus-building. The practice I seek to improve on. Questions open and expand our minds. Or they lock us into circular and reductive responses. They lie at the heart of inquiry. They hold power, world-views, they channel attitude. They open worlds or they blind us. They can be used to badger, interrogate, denigrate, and damage or they can be lovingly crafted in the service of transformation.

In this research I wish to show how my approach to evaluation – rooted in the values of respect, love, fairness and art – can inspire us to improve our own practice, reflect creatively on our work, in our work, to become connoisseurs, great learners, artists. In this way I use the energy released by my response to bullying in the service of transformation rather than confrontation or punishment.

The research is about how we can design criteria for evaluation that value growth and individuals and human complexity, which reveal subtlety and context, which inspire us to greater things. How we release the enabling, transformative and generative energy that comes through engaging people in the search for their own indicators of success, and through that search foster a dialogue about the impact of our work. A dialogue through which we all enhance the way we notice what we do and the effect we have on the world around us.

Abstract, first attempt
12th February 2001

MADELINE - In many ways my research focus has not changed, just become more refined, and at the same time more expansive. The core determination I have to hold myself **accountable** as an evaluator **to my values**, and to my belief that **inspiration and art** are more generative than problem-solving approaches, holds now as then.

Given that is where you start from, if you like, what influence does that then have on how you go about your work? What does it mean when you say 'I am an evaluator'?

MADELINE - Actually, Saville Kushner is one of the few evaluation writers I have come across who gets anywhere near what I think about myself in the work.

SHE OPENS KUSHNER'S BOOK AT A MARKED PAGE AND READS

MADELINE - Kushner describes an evaluator in the following way:

> *'Through a unique combination of an unusual mobility which the evaluator enjoys in moving between stakeholders, the unusual licence to ask questions of purpose and value, a training in or, at least, an unusual exposure to ethical issues, and an unusually privileged position of substantive impartiality, through the unique combination of these as part of the evaluator's warrant she has the opportunity to portray society and its programs from novel, or sometimes just multiple perspectives. Evaluation, at its best, sees programs in ways denied their participants.' (2000, p. 40).*

This definition, in its essence, holds for me a picture of myself in what I call my **shape-changing and embodied practice** of stretching across spaces, asking probing questions and seeking out the myriad perspectives that make up the complex whole of a project. This is what I do as an evaluator, just as I do when I am working as a network coordinator, a mediator, a facilitator or a political lobbyist.

I know that I have a facility for being alongside those I talk to, somehow I include them in my space, and that allows me to gain insight into their worlds in ways it is difficult to put into words. **That embodied understanding feeds my in-sight** (vision of the within of another) which I then hold in balance with my intellectual and creative capacities. My choice as an evaluator is increasingly to attempt to tell a complex story of many perspectives, and in the process of doing so, to test out with those I talk to, the assumptions I and they are making about the project and its influence. As an evaluator my intention is often to show those involved what they cannot see by virtue of their placement in a project. Maybe to give them the distance to see the inside.

This involves **examining the complex knot** of a piece of work, **holding onto threads**, following them, referencing back. Again I hear the 'ah yes!' in my mind as I read this description of Kushner's about the way he ranges across a piece of work. In my practice I, like Kushner, see evaluation concerning itself

> *'with all perspectives and aspects of program experience.' (p. 39)*

He seeks out the data trail

> *'backwards in time into peoples' life experiences; forward in time into educational outcomes; across the system to colleagues and their organization,'* (*p. 39)*

down the system and up it again. He tries as far as possible it seems to worm his way into the fabric of a programme, while at the same time holding on to a revealing, if fleeting, distance, allowing him to

> *'momentarily stand aside from society's praxis, and through acts of cognitive discipline, assume an impartial perspective.' (p. 27)*

Wow, that sounds very impressive, how does that work? How do you interview people, or design questionnaires that give you that spread?

MADELINE - I don't. I have found in my work that I tend toward conversation and dialogue as my prime ways of teasing out often complex issues. I tend to fail when I work with interview protocols, or a set of unchanging questions. I started thinking that this was methodological laxness, or failure on my part. Yet Kushner gives a stamp of approval to emergent methodology, insisting that you cannot learn how to do it other than by doing it and reflecting on it. He claims that an interview is a methodological mirror of the interviewer, that is, it reveals not only the interests of those being interviewed but the person who is interviewing.

> *'It is too limiting to characterize the interview as a strategy for asking questions – it has, rather, to be seen as a personalized instrument, an expression of how the interviewer sees the world – how, in fact, an interviewer values people and why.' (p. 83)*

He calls it his main methodological approach,

Wait a minute, a 'methodological mirror of the interviewer'?

MADELINE - yes, because it reflects his person, her values, his interests, it sort of defines not only her but the shape of the evaluative act she is undertaking. And while each act is new, there is consistency in the way she goes about it, and consistency in what is revealed by it. In a sense he is saying that you have to be in relationship with your interviewee and that way you will know what to bring into the conversation. That relationship will reveal to you what needs to be asked and known.

AGAIN SHE PICKS OUT A MARKED PAGE AND READS FROM THE BOOK

> *'The relationship between evaluator and program participant is one of dependency. The data the evaluator needs to generate extends beyond the descriptive and merely informative into the speculative, the judgemental – the metaphysical – and these are only accessible through interaction.' (p. 37)*

MADELINE - I see it as a kind of humility, and recognition that I must earn my access into peoples' thoughts, ideas and feelings. I am dogged in **pursuing uncomfortable questions**, but seek to do so in ways that do not make people reluctant, fearful, or resentful. I try to keep tick-boxing kinds of questions in check, and work with open questions that tend to be more revealing of the personal perspective of the interviewee. Throughout I test my assumptions and understanding, acknowledge my limitations, and remain humble about my ability to know.

This effort from Kushner to make a relationship with participants is not just a method, a way of getting respondents to relax and thus provide more meaningful data. It is at the heart of what he means by 'personalizing evaluation'.

Kushner's thesis is that we would learn something qualitatively different about public programming, and policy-making, if we chose to read programmes through those who cross in and out of them, rather than read the impact of a programme on categories of people, by working through the lens the programme has established. This is methodologically distinct because it needs to be in order to serve a broader political agenda of reading public interventions differently.

We would also place ourselves in a position to reveal more effectively the paradigm that such interventions are born from, and begin to question the rather utilitarian notion that evaluation is about making programmes work better through examining programmes, holding the programme as the main focus, without any reference really to the chaos and drama of people's real lives.

I'm not sure I've got the concept of personalising evaluation. Doesn't this just mean everything is subjective?

MADELINE - According to Kushner, programmes firstly box and capture people in defined places, through definitions such as teacher, pupil, end-user. Definitions that the 'described', at the receiving end, do not necessarily recognise as being primary definitions of themselves, and possibly neither like nor agree with. This is then how the evaluation is defined. You go round interviewing 20 end-users, rather than Brian, Sally, Deepa, or Alejandro etc. Their role as a 'pupil' or 'teacher' is what becomes important, because that is what is important to the programme. But this obscures the fact that benefiting from a programme is often a fleeting and inchoate experience in most people's –end users' – lives. They are only ever 'end-users' or 'pupils' in a programme's 'mind', not in their own. This way the programme itself becomes prioritised, and the people somehow are held to be accountable for the success of the programme, how effective the programme is in some way depends upon their playing their roles effectively. The programme subtly ceases to be accountable to those who access it. This is politically important, because it reflects our tendency toward social engineering in all projects, making people somehow fit into society in ways determined by public policy.

And this goes right back for me to the **suffocating norms of community again**. Kushner embraces, rather than erases, the danger and drama of the individual and their unique lives and it is this which excites me. It loops me back into the questions I wrestle with about the **individual in community**, about reclaiming vitality and originality and creativity which emerge through **holding the one and the many in relation to one another**. I am delighted, genuinely delighted to hear such an eloquently constructed argument in favour of working outwards from individuals when it comes to assessing the worth of programmes.

Can you give me something more tangible, an example or something?

MADELINE - OK, this bit of writing may help. When I first read his book I was on a train. And I was writing, of course.

SHE READS FROM HER NOTEBOOK AGAIN

> I'm on a train as I am writing this. I am conscious that I have deliberately avoided engaging with a woman who positively encourages me to sit next to her as I get on the train. Normally I get seduced by desire for contact, or am overwhelmed by the proximity of another, their desire to engage with me. Those porous boundaries again. I determinedly resist shape-changing today. She is sitting in front of me and has now managed to draw the man next to her into conversation about his work in the same way she would have done to me. He has been squeezed into talking. He works for Cadbury's and she is doing a PhD. He will talk, because she is insisting, asking questions, desperate for contact. We are now on the flavour of Cadbury's products. It is impossible not to hear it, to listen to it. What

would she make of your book, I wonder? I wonder if she would, like me, be nodding her head in agreement, thrilled to find the personal at the centre of academically-approved enquiry.

She is now talking about the isolation of her work: 'there is nobody there to ask me questions'. I would have asked her questions, I think, probably to avoid having to answer any myself. She is working on a Bengali dictionary; it has all been a strategy to open a space for her to speak long and passionately about her work. Isolation. I can't not listen. It is such a pull. She is entering the realm of the self, the private, the secret interior.

Now she starts confessing to her deepest fears. Her worries about looking after her ageing parents. This is pitted against her desire to leave the country. The chocolate man says he is 60, and suggests to her that maybe her parents don't want her to look after them. She is asking him to tell her what to do. Confessional. All personal history laid bare. It is an extraordinary conversation. It dips and swerves between desperate uncomfortable-ness on his part, his coughing, clearing his throat, too polite to tell her to shut up, and her eagerness to be a child.

So, this train woman, how might she 'evaluate' her journey home? On the dreadfulness of the rail network? The time it has taken her? The delays she has encountered? She might do if asked by the rail network to comment on service. But she might just as well 'evaluate' it on the opportunity she has grasped to talk out her fears with a captive audience, a complete stranger, only made possible because of the length of time we had to wait for the train to leave the station. If I ask her about a memorable rail journey, she might tell me about the off-loading she has done about her most important and un-containable fears, about the death of her parents and about her being trapped and witnessing their decline at close quarters. She might find that this unplanned moment has liberated her from her guilt, and allowed her to contemplate emigration or exile.

The point of this for me is that the responses we get as evaluators are extremely dependent on the questions we choose to ask, and the perspective we start from. It matters more than we can know in what frame people have encountered the things we are evaluating, and how their broader lives are panning out.

This woman's experience of this journey is unique, and very personal. As is mine. This space, this daily journey to and from London not only delivers me into a huge urban metropolis from a small country town, but provides me with a space to read, to write, to sleep, to look out of the window and practise mindful awareness, to talk to the occasional stranger, to read headlines on the Daily Mail and Telegraph (papers I would never buy through political conviction) to listen to others' conversations, to muse on the meanings of half-understood exchanges down telephone lines, to absorb the extraordinary differences and samenesses. It is much more than a vehicle, than transport. Does this kind of appreciation matter to those running the railways? It's hard to say.

For those running a programme, the programme takes up their working life. For those who encounter it, 'users', or in development terminology 'beneficiaries', the programme may merge into or touch their lives only intermittently. They do not define themselves through it.

> This is how it is too for us network coordinators. We are paid to give all our attention to the network, who is participating, how they are interacting, what we are doing together, how it is working, what the relationships are like, and how we can mediate and transform the potential of conflicts. Yet those we call participants have broader lives and what they do with this network or that is only a tiny part of their existence, and almost certainly they interact with it in ways unimagined by those tied to the logic of programme design.

MADELINE - Kushner's approach to evaluation I think appeals to me most in its anti-universalising tendency. His emphasis on individual and personal experience rejects the latent authoritarianism present in the kind of program interventions which lump us all together in policy categories (pupil, poor, benefit claimant) and scrub out our idiosyncrasies and our individual potential. He claims that 'one challenge to authoritarian government is the undeniability of the individual concern – the requirement that policy take into account individual differences and the plurality of meaningfulness.' (p.41) This resonates beautifully with my determination to thread together a community in which we can all realise our potential and aspirations.

> I think I understand that a little better. So when you say, I am an evaluator, you are carrying this picture of yourself into your work, giving a privileged voice to the perspective of those who in some way are the objects of attention in any programme. Does that mean you shove all the others into the background?

MADELINE - Ok, back to basics. This is the first question I ask myself when I start a job.

Who do I think I am?

The question intentionally has a double-meaning. It carries the inquiry that I always hold when I do a piece of evaluation work, held either consciously or not so consciously during the work. A kind of evaluation of myself. **Who am I in relation to this work?** I am all my professional experience rolled up, I am my values and my keenness to 'do good' I am a perceptive questioner, these kinds of things. It also carries the question I know occurs in the minds of those 'to be evaluated', and often in mine: Who does she think she is? What does she know? Who do I think I am? What can I possibly know about their world and work and commitment? The responses I have to the double question, who do I think I am?, who does she think she is?, interconnect in the set of **standards** I think I have **created for myself.**

> Interesting, tell me about the standards

Look, it's a place of privilege, to be asked to poke your nose into the work of others. It needs to be held and worked from a value-base of appreciation, care, understanding and helpful critical insight. Maybe evaluation as I do it can be described as valuation [the act of valuing] – holding something, turning it, touching it, examining it, perusing its beauty and the effort that went into giving it form, feeling the craft in the many hands that made it, noting the flaws in shape and process, sensing what kind of another thing it could be if it could be remoulded - and valuation grounded in an ethical standpoint – that I am invited in to 'know' the work of others, and I must not be rude with such an invitation, but must act with care. I must also fulfil the real expectation of providing **thoughtful critical insight**, the kind only an outsider can bring. My personal ethics mean that such insight

must be communicated in such a way that it can be used to complement and motivate those doing the work to find news ways, other ways, sometimes better ways of doing more. My intention is to be **inspirational, not judgemental**.

While this is the first time I have expressed it like this, I believe I have begun to work more clearly with this framework in mind over the last year. I guess these are my quality controls, and I measure myself against them when I work as an evaluator. This connects to what Senge & Scharmer describe as the 'interior condition' of the intervenor. (2000, pp. 246-7) I hold these interior qualities as being those that affect the way I listen, question and make sense of the data I gather when I work. Judi Marshall states it like this.

> *'Looking inwards (which includes this life reflection and is far more than that) is essential to bringing attention to how I look outwards and act.' (Marshall, 2001, p. 439)*

The way I hold myself to account in this relates to the extent to which I manage to engage critically and inspire critical engagement in others. This phrase 'critical engagement' highlights the **difference between inspiration and judgement** for me. It suggests a keen eye on the issues at stake, and an engagement with what can be done by those who have to do the doing. I would feel that I had failed if my efforts resulted in 'critical dis-engagement', a failure to engage with the human striving at the heart of the work, and a rejection of the important reflections necessary for moving on. Evidence of this critical engagement for me is when my questions provoke not just critical responses, but ideas and energy for what to do next.

Yes, but isn't that just avoiding doing the difficult bit, which is criticising people, and making unpopular comments and recommendations?

MADELINE - Well, some of my motivation for working like this is that I do not want to be the enemy. I want to be felt to be an influence for good. I don't want to walk away with the 'who does she think she is?' question ringing in my ears from those who actually do the work. This may sound obvious to some, odd to others. I know there is a part of the very broad church that is the evaluation community who are committed to 'telling it like it is, warts and all.' In fact I believe that many people who hire others to do evaluations think that 'objective' really means 'critical'. Some may think that the very point of an evaluator is to be 'the enemy', to pass judgement. I however work from the premise that **my values will influence everything I do**. As such, I think my values are forces for good, and **I want them to influence the work I do.**

For instance, I am highly attuned to the traps of laying blame for failure. It may feel good, but it doesn't do much good. It makes some feel vindicated, but does little to generate possibilities for improvement or change. People get blinded by blame, deafened by it, brought up short and diminished by it. Those in 'the right' and those in 'the wrong'. Such certain slapping of responsibility for fuck-up makes all feel there are no escapes, and no redemption. I have seen this in my work as a mediator, how blaming others instead of communicating with them drags us deeper into a dark place. How did we become so determinedly unforgiving of human frailty?

Touché, good question. So, can you walk me through a piece of work, give me some idea about how all this gets done, put into practice?

MADELINE - I can try. I have a diary of a recent evaluation that I can cull snippets from to illustrate what I mean, if that will help.

OK, good.

MADELINE - On paper my work appears to be simple. I must read the background documents, talk to all the relevant people, visit the field, write a first draft, maybe run a feedback workshop, then submit a final report with conclusions and recommendations.

Firstly, I always ask those who have hired me what issues might be uppermost (they are usually not spelled out in the Terms of Reference, or TOR) and sometimes they tell me, sometimes not. I trawl what are largely dry written reports on progress for unspoken, hinted-at things.

After reading the documentation, I generally have a sense about what the main issues are. There might be something that I simply cannot get a grip on, however much I read the documents, and this 'something under the surface' will often turn out to be real, not just my inability to understand. I like to imagine this as me sensing what Stake calls the 'mood and mystery' of a programme, what Kushner believes to be a radical aspiration of evaluation (2000, p.36).

I start work with questions in mind, and a guideline for conversation, when I talk to relevant people. I don't have a questionnaire as such.

SHE READS A PIECE FROM THE DIARY

> DIARY OF AN EVALUATION
> Funnily enough the first person I interviewed in this piece of work started by telling me he was nervous. He had recently been sent a questionnaire for some other evaluation and it had taken him and a colleague six hours to fill in. When I told him how I intended to work, that I had questions in mind, and that if responses to those didn't emerge through our conversation, I would ask them directly, he relaxed and laughed. When he told me that he thought the programme I was evaluating had a tendency to be highly demanding of the time of people like him, and that he was mightily relieved it would not take six hours, I relaxed and laughed. This conversation had immediately thrown up a very important issue. He saw this as an unnecessarily demanding programme, and my presence there 'evaluating' it was yet more of his time demanded. I paid this serious attention. It affected the way I engaged with all others I talked to.

MADELINE - As I continue to hold interview-conversations with people, singly and in groups, the responses I get refine the questions in my mind. Very often the most important issues whoosh to the surface, and make themselves known very rapidly. As I hear and rehear the same issue formulated by different people, the question that prompts it begins to get refined. When I work, I always have an eye on the future, as most evaluation Terms of Reference are explicit in that they want a view of future

potential, and recommendations for further work. The refined questions are often designed to push people to formulate proposals from their critiques.

This comes, I think, from the belief that the way forward is in their hands not mine. A lot of the fear around evaluation seems to be connected to loss of control or ownership to an outsider, the 'who does she think she is?' question rears up here. What I think I can do is place the possibilities in a broader context, allowing all to see a larger more complex picture than they might otherwise. The **spaghetti, the many routes through** the story, is an image I hold in mind. Especially given the kinds of projects I am asked to work on, with their complicated relational and structural set-ups. This often requires me to help them negotiate, and to mediate.

SHE READS A SECOND EXCEPT

> DIARY OF AN EVALUATION
> Given the number of different actors, or players, in what is quite a small programme, I am going to have to do a bloody good job of negotiation and mediation if there is to be any future at all. A feedback workshop is sitting there inside the TOR, the purpose of which has never been entirely clear to me, and has got no clearer as I have got deeper in. First up it is partly high-jacked by the donors, who want it to serve another agenda. They're coming all the way across continents especially for this workshop, and my feeling is they want to bypass the programme managers and talk directly to those in the field. The programme managers want two separate workshops, precisely to avoid this. The local people will baulk at this, this programme is already 'over-demanding' of their time. I'm sure this is all intended to allow them to avoid taking on the central critical issue, by splitting things up. I get surer every day.

MADELINE - As I get deeper in, I begin to find myself working and reworking next stages, thinking and writing and planning and redoing, until I have a clear picture in my head of what will generate the best possibilities. During this time I tend to keep checking out my assumptions with a variety of stakeholders, asking them if my perceptions seem reasonable. Then I am likely to find myself needing to facilitate a meeting of sorts between those with serious interests not only in the programme, but in what I am likely to say in my report.

AGAIN SHE READS FROM THE DIARY

> DIARY OF AN EVALUATION
Part of the task I have set for myself in this job is to make sure that the agenda that I design for the workshop has everyone's agreement, and will be held in a spirit in which I can place the very real and challenging questions that have emerged, and ensure that constructive debate can take place between the relevant actors. In this case I have had to ensure that I have at least talked to all parties before the workshop (despite the most demanding lot only arriving at 10pm the night before), explained my perceptions and outlined what I think is needed, made the necessary changes to enable all to feel the agenda reflects their concerns, and have a spoken commitment from all parties that the workshop will be a place to raise issues with a constructive view to the future. I often find I am working within the confines of a timetable that I have neither designed nor have

much control over, with people arriving and leaving at odd times, and I try to respect the working demands that interfere with my planning. This is no exception.

Sounds pretty challenging, like a lot of potential for serious arguments between people

MADELINE - I think I may be unusual in that as a facilitator I am pretty comfortable with the expectation of conflict in a workshop. My years of working in prisons, as a mediator, and with highly-charged teams of facilitators lead me to expect it, and I have no fear that things will ever get out of control. I really enjoy the real difficulty, mess and joy of human interaction, and am at home with improvising and responding in the moment to complex dynamics. That doesn't mean to say I always get the balance between order and freedom right.

SHE CHOOSES A LAST PIECE AND READS IT ALOUD

> DIARY OF AN EVALUATION
> I believe I made certain errors of judgement about the best way forward during the workshop itself. I held to a notion of how to proceed which held the conflict too tightly, or skirted it too widely. I was conscious that I didn't really know anyone quite well enough to give me confidence, but I should have trusted their abilities more. I am also aware as I work that there are four native languages present in the room, and varying degrees of fluency (I am working in both Spanish and English, translating at times for the English-speaking Germans, others are translating Spanish to German, still others a native language to Spanish) which can and do provide us with hilarious confusion at times.
>
> However, I get to where I want to in certain important areas. One is to make sure that all the people who have shared their perceptions with me see them reflected in the report back I give. This is vital, this seeing your-self in the whole, this knowing that what you have to offer is acknowledged. Two is to make sure that the contextual map we are working from is their map, not mine. I have drawn the map from all the information they have given me, and they make minor additions to it, but agree that it is an accurate reflection. Lastly, the serious conceptual disagreements about the programme, between the funders and the programme people, are clearly on the table, and the local people can see that this is being taken seriously. A meeting the following day allows relevant staff members in the middle of such disagreements to say clearly they will resign if these issues are not sorted out. And from what I understand, even before the report is written, they have set dates to work on sorting them out. The agenda remains in their hands, not mine.

That's really helpful, gives me a much clearer idea of how you work. I'm intrigued by the way you seem to really enjoy the possibility of a good row, or at least you don't seem fazed by the idea of people getting into conflict when you're facilitating. Can you give me a bit more background on that?

MADELINE - Funny that. It wasn't until I was reading Patricia Shaw's (2002) book that I realised that a significant part of the way I work is tied up with my theatre practice. She writes about discovering for herself the revealing nature of improvisation, the relational nature of drama, and the importance of responsiveness for the way things evolve.

This is the world I grew up in, learned my craft in. I most often worked with new plays, which required substantial amounts of improvisation. I was always at my most liberated and creative in improvisation. I felt natural in the skin of another, especially when complex human emotions were required, and unafraid of the in-the-moment responsiveness that is essential for improvisation to succeed.

Improvisation, which has resonances with what I do in my work, is sensing, being alive to the moment in front of you, and almost handing over your agency to the dynamic field created by the improvising ensemble. For me, what is helpful is being reminded of my love of being at the edge of chaos, which is what improvisation feels like, and recognising that part of what I used to see as my inability to 'stick to the plan', when facilitating or working as an evaluator, is really a commitment to working with the processes of human relating and interaction. It is the craft and artistry I developed while working as a professional actor that allows me now to **work with the chaos and conflict of human interaction with energy and passion**.

Shaw puts it nicely when she describes arts practitioners as having 'an acute sense of the paradox of being 'in charge but not in control'', (2002, p. 117), a phrase that captures much of what I experience when doing evaluation work, and what I am striving to communicate here. This is not about power or direction but about a level of confidence in reading and responding to the contextual fabric.

Schon also talks about a kind of artistry in action.

> *'..in each case the practitioner gives an artistic performance. He responds to the complexity..in what seems like a simple, spontaneous way. His artistry is evident in his selective management of large amounts of information, his ability to spin out long lines of invention and inference, and his capacity to hold several ways of looking at things at once without disrupting the flow of inquiry'. (1991, p. 130)*

Most of all, however, I think that I **see myself as a participant in the process**. I believe I am employed because I speak, ask questions, offer opinions, and have some experience to offer. My preference as an evaluator is to work formatively, with the project, not parachuted in at the end of it. On the whole, this is because I am much more at home, more comfortable with the messier business of what Shaw calls the 'everyday life' (2002, p.145) of any given work, 'working as part of loose webs of relationship' (p.146) and understanding ambiguity, and changes over time from a position inside the conversation, not one who receives the narrative after the conversation is over.

This approach is much more akin to Shaw's temporally strung out conversation process rather than the 'workshop' approach described above, or any number of system change approaches (Open Space, Future Search, etc) It avoids the snapshot approach in which you look at a project in a three-week period live, making up the rest from documents and narratives. It is not like thinking systemically in the sense of attempting to 'bring the whole system into the room'. It is about paying attention to the process of change, the dynamics at play, rather than the written narrative of it, what Shaw calls 'responsively weaving stories' (2002, p. 149)

The truth is, I have never seen myself as a 'neutral' evaluator or facilitator when I work, and I do not seek to pretend I don't have opinions, or ideas. Again this mirrors Shaw's understanding of herself,

> *'I intentionally participate in the chat…I ask questions, voice opinions, make suggestions, interrupt people, show my responses.' (ibid., p. 151)*

In this sense I get over the 'Who does she think she is?' question, by explicitly identifying myself.

But from what I understand from what you say about yourself, you don't like to participate, to be in the group.

MADELINE - Yes, well, no, I mean, by participant I don't mean member. Like Shaw I might be in there, but I am also out here, **a part of the process, and apart from it**. Like Kushner (2000) I am critically distant while being emotionally proximate. Like being an actor, you're both the part and not the part. I am not sitting on the fence, I am stretched across it.

Ok, but what does this look like, how can you be participating in a group that you're facilitating?

MADELINE - This is how I see the facilitator-participant role that I so often take on. The facilitation of the AVP workshops demands that you hold everyone in mind, and most especially yourself. The workshop only has power if you open yourself, make yourself vulnerable, speak for yourself. You must be fully in, **and** hold the boundary steady for others. This is my embodiment of others at work.

The Action Research Group -I was **both participant and facilitator, in** yet reflecting **on**, actively helping us to broaden and narrow our objects of attention while bringing in my experience of working as a network coordinator.

Does that clarify things a bit?

Yes, let me see if I can summarise for you; make sure you're happy with the impression I have got of your work as an evaluator. Then there is space for you to add anything that you feel is important and we haven't yet covered. Is that alright?

MADELINE - Good luck! Rather you than me. Just to say, this practice, this valuing of the work of others, and participating in it through critical engagement, is what I have taught myself how to do. I began with an understanding of myself as someone who is ever-curious, sniffing out the things that don't quite add up, sensing the issues that can be surfaced with a decent inquiring question, helped by a peculiar connection to my context and environment that allows me to know something of my context through other senses.

Marshall's words for the way she works come somewhere near to what I know of my work

> *'I work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more knowings.' (2001, p. 433)*

I understand what she means when she says of herself

> *'mostly my inquiring is a compelling aspect of being inquisitive, curious and open to testing self and others' (ibid., p. 434)*

Right, so this is what I have managed to pick up from our conversation. Firstly you got into this evaluation work because you were keen to spread a practice of evaluation as continually negotiated standards of judgement, criteria against which all those with a stake in a project wish it to be judged. In particular you wanted those often denied the opportunity to influence those criteria to have the chance to have some influence. You will often be dogged in seeking out the views of those who have least access or room to be heard. You are a reluctant evaluator, as you don't like to be seen as the enemy or to be judging the worth of others' work. What you can offer is critical insight, through critical engagement. As you work as an evaluator, you keep in mind the person, the individual, the person working for the project, the person interacting with the project, and yourself, as much as any institutional set up that is in place. You put your effort into trying to bring a whole complex picture together, guided by what presses to the fore, while acknowledging the inevitable limitations of your perspective. You seek to be a force for good, to be useful, to help people in their work.

You have developed a series of interconnected standards against which you test yourself, a sort of set of quality controls. These include constantly asking yourself to justify yourself against theses controls.

As a facilitator you see yourself as a participant in a wider improvised conversation, and are at ease with the often fiery and challenging dynamics of people in heated debate about things that they feel passionately about. You will prepare but not plan much, tending to work with the idea of being in charge but not in control. In this way you respect the dynamic and changing nature of human relations.

So, is there anything I've missed, or anything else you would like to add?

MADELINE - Well, yes, it's really more about where I go next I think, and the inquiry, the big question that is around for me at the moment when it comes to doing evaluation at all. There is a word that keeps returning as I do my work. It is spoken often and weaves

in and out of evaluation conversations, in workshops and meetings, in Terms of References and research findings.

'Accountability'

Whereas Judi Marshall will overtly state 'this is an inquiry for me' (2001, p. 435) about something like this, my tendency is to notice something that catches my attention, again and again, and start to begin to articulate what worries me about it. I will begin conversations with others, and see what happens. It often means I talk a lot, and ask difficult questions.

The question that has firmed up in my mind recently is: to what or to whom do I /we believe we are accountable?

This question allows me to begin from a different place when I do evaluation. If I wish to help people set their own standards of judgement, criteria against which they wish to be judged, then it is important to inquire into this question. The responses to this question may be many-layered, and may change as a piece of work progresses. I, for instance, ask this accountability question of my self when I work. One response is that I hold my values as one set of criteria: am I acting with compassion? Am I giving all those involved an opportunity to engage? Am I able to offer critical insight that allows people to sense better possibilities out of where they are now? Do I feel comfortable with how much I am being paid? Can I do what they want on less? Whose money is it? Could it be better spent? Am I being asked to say the things that others will not, things that others are not prepared to be accountable for? Is this appropriate?

In working with advocacy groups, or networks, the responses to the question highlight the changing and negotiated nature of the criteria for judgement about the worth of the work they do. Accountability to the donors or funders means one thing, accountability to the poor or the most threatened means another. Accountability to internal organisational values may mean something else, and maybe less defined, more assumed than explicit. Accountability to one's own values may conflict with some or all of the above.

I sense mostly that the negotiated nature of such criteria is not well understood. This may well be a product of the kinds of managerial systems that the sector has incorporated into its practice, and which tends to cloak its reality.

The most common experience for me is that a project will have defined its action under the following terms: Mission, aims, objectives, strategies and activities, for which it requires indicators and often impact assessment. Five year strategies are not uncommon. In conversation with those who are responsible for 'delivering' (another common term), there is often a confusion around these terms which emerge quite quickly, with a kind of haziness around what the difference is between aims and objectives, whether the mission is really a statement of values, what impact means. It becomes worse when indicators are demanded, as people do not readily understand and may confuse activities with indicators. There are many planning manuals in the development sector, many of which seek to clear up such confusion by inventing new ways of saying the same thing.

There are also many manuals that construct and present evaluation tools, using the above model as its starting framework. This is indeed what we thought we were doing in

the Action Research Group, looking for tools, and we put some together. I was very unsatisfied with that bit of the process, and I think now that is because none of this tells us much about to whom or to what we see ourselves as being accountable. It is mostly about what we will do and why, and how we might measure that 'what', but it leaves us without much guidance about how we understand the worth of our action, and how different actors in that accountability spectrum might understand its worth differently.

One way I am extending my influence as a result of the networks evaluation project is in this commitment to encouraging discussion and redefinition of the accountability question. I am really not interested in use of tools, but in holding conversations with people that get at this accountability question. This allows them to understand the range of people, values and process they feel accountable to. This notion of 'changing the conversation' (Shaw, 2002) is a really helpful one. The intention is that they can articulate that for themselves and be able to trace it, see it, articulate it and defend it in their working environments, something that tools do not do. It allows them to be the architects of their own standards of judgement, and the evidence they need to support their claims, not the implementers, or users of tools.

I can trace the effect this question is having on me and others in small ways. These are my reflections from four separate professional engagements during a two week period recently. They show me that the way I hold the question not only in my head, but openly in conversation with those I am working with, begins to affect my relations and the relations of others to their work.

> <u>One – Meeting on NGO Management Practice</u>
> I am sitting in a room full of people, come to hear the results of a five year research project into the development aid chain, and the effects of new management approaches. Tina and Jenny are people I respect. Tina came a couple of times to our Action Research Group and Jenny has had me in to talk about doing action research to her action research crew at Action Aid. I didn't realise the project had been going on so long.
>
> They presented their findings to a room of donors, NGOs, consultants, academics. The first finding, and possibly the most shocking one, was that almost no-one was prepared to be quoted. Everyone wanted anonymity in order to speak frankly. Particularly small African NGOs who depended on larger NGOs or northern governments for funding.
>
> I sat with a small group of other consultants and independent researchers, and mused over this fact. Another woman was also very disturbed by it. How is that in a sector supposed to be committed to equality, dignity in development, human rights, participation, partnership and empowerment, that people are too fearful or reluctant to be accountable for their views, or have internalised a practice of criticism without responsibility? As someone who prides herself on speaking out, I am really shocked by this widespread demand not to be counted. I suspect there is a subtle paternalism at work here, where small poor 'partners' will never criticise their paymasters, however much empowerment goes on. The donors simply have to acknowledge that their money puts them in a powerful position, and that projects that 'empower' people and don't change that aspect of things will not have a noticeable effect on such relations. There is also a political game at work. These partners are people who are prepared to take enormous risks in their own work and lives, to hold their own governments to account, to change vested economic and power relations in their

own contexts. For this they need money and resources. So the last people they want to upset are those who provide them with the resources to do their work. There is probably more pragmatism, less fear.

Anyway, I started thinking again about accountability. This was another finding. What effect what Tina and Jenny had dubbed 'the new managerialism', the log-frame, indicators, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation world of northern donor NGOs and governments, was having on accountability. They claim that such procedures have devolved accountability downwards, with partners having to use imposed inappropriate language and methods to account for their work, at the same time as rhetoric of partnership and empowerment is rampant. I started to talk about what I understood accountability to mean in our little group, most especially for me. I acknowledged that I get paid well for what I do, often out of programme or project budgets, but that I am contracted by donors. There are few quality standards, and often the Terms of Reference are poorly thought out, over-ambitious and undoable in the time or cost frame. I often ask myself the question 'to whom or what am I accountable here?' I tried to raise this as a real issue in the group, and listed some of the ways in which I hold myself to account, against my values, and my practice. Interestingly this little group of independents didn't seem that interested in critiquing their own practice, only that of others. In fact they were a bit self-satisfied for my liking.

Two – Meeting with Development Workers on Networks and Evaluation Tools

This accountability question seems to have been a bit of a feature this week. On Monday I went and talked to a group of network / forum workers. A client of Eleanor's, had been led by Eleanor to our research on networks and evaluation, and we had already had one long conversation about the tools in the report. I had begun to feel uncomfortable, as I am not much of a believer in tools, and certainly don't subscribe to the idea that we can just take them out of a 'tool-box' (very common language in training manuals in development practice) and use them. I don't see myself as a construction engineer, or fixer. I had tried to talk about the important questions we were asking ourselves about the nature of networks, and how you can look simply at some of the characteristics, and find ways of tracking what happens over time. When we ran out of time, I offered to go and speak to the group that she was hoping would use some of these evaluation tools.

I had spent the weekend reading Patricia Shaw's book, *Changing the Conversation in Organisations,* and had found myself gaining increasing confidence about my unique approach to working with evaluation and networks. I began to think about myself as someone with a facility for asking the 'right' questions in the moment, and as someone very comfortable 'being in charge but not in control' (p. 117). As someone very at home in the process of making conversation, and someone who gets a kick out of changing those conversations through asking probing and insightful questions. All very in tune with what Shaw does, although not the same. In fact mostly I was finding myself thinking, this validates what I do, this gives me the kind of validation I need.

Thus I went to my meeting with Monica's colleagues without a presentation, even though she wanted me to present tools. I did have an intention. One was to raise the question about 'to whom or to what do you feel accountable?', which is key if you are approaching

the topic of evaluation. It gives you a steer, tells you which criteria are most important when it comes to judging your work. Often in networks, this question is really complex, as while networks are the sum of their members, they are often funded by others (which is where the evaluation drive often comes from). But without criteria, you can have as many tools as you like, they don't do you much good.

Everyone came to the meeting with a pen and paper, and no-one wrote anything, except Monica. They all participated whole-heartedly in the discussion, and we highlighted main issues, looked at some interesting differences between networks, and some interesting practice.

One of the most interesting sections of the discussion was around what we mean by 'democracy' in networks, or democratic practice and decision-making. This took the form of a long discussion about accountability, participation, and representation, all vital aspects of the democracy question. Most of the people there said that very often those most concerned or interested with the loose organising topic of their Forums or Networks would be those who regularly put themselves forward to be representatives. Part of the conundrum is how to get those who aren't participating to participate in some way. Attempts to encourage nominations of others often fail to generate more interest. Few want to institute more formal membership and voting structures, as these are networks, not political parties, and membership is loose, non-binding.

Linda who coordinates the Network of Networks talked animatedly about the training they do for those being representatives. They place emphasis on the responsibilities being a representative entails, the way in which they must consult those they seek to represent, separating out personal opinion from more widespread consensus, and the way in which they are expected to feed-back to those they seek to represent. The intention here is for more vibrant accountability, a process that goes beyond elections and voting, and they provide a framework within which any representative is expected to work, so that all can be clear of the rules. I have been reflecting on this as a possible helpful procedure for the networks I have come across, who often start thinking in more formal 'representative democracy' terms when the tensions around inclusion and exclusion start to emerge.

<u>Three – An international NGO</u>

On Wednesday I had another job. I have been asked to help do a review of the last four years of the work of one team. Mainly this consists of interviewing a few external players. I was asked to participate in a morning's team meeting away from the office. I had received two-three page reviews from each of the staff, the afternoon before. Again, with the confidence I gained from reading Shaw's (2002) account of her learning to use her unique way of being and working in the world, I decided to do something loose, centred on a question or two, and a conversation. I asked one team member to start to tell me about a piece of their work that they felt reflected what was best about the work done by GAP, and the rest to listen out for claims they were making about their work, and the evidence marshalled to support the claims. We talked together for about ten minutes, and I delved deeper into the detail of their claims and the evidence as we talked. Then we split into threes and fours and had conversations around the same questions as others talked about a chosen piece of work. We then came back together, and people were invited to share

what issues had come up for them, again through the process of a conversation, rather than feedback.

Again I had gone in with some intentions. I wanted to move away from development managerial language around objectives, aims, indicators, etc. I thought it would free them to think. I used the language of the doctorate, and my supervisor, (claims, evidence, standards of judgement) simply as a way of shifting energy. I was and remain very keen for the team themselves to set the criteria and the questions that need to be asked about their work. In the final conversation core criteria against which they wanted to be judged emerged very clearly, and as they did I highlighted them, and underscored them as important. I also wanted the team to feel revitalised, and capable of defending their considerable expertise and output, instead of undermining it by sidelining much of it as 'process' work. I offered them ways in which they could use their own criteria to educate those who would otherwise judge them according to other criteria. Finally, I again raised the question about accountability, and had a very interesting response which illuminated how this team see their accountability line shift as work shifts from one context to another. When we all left, after having been fed lovely food by our Ethiopian hostess, we wandered off in groups to the tube. When we were all again huddled waiting for a train, it was clear people had continued the conversations, and were much energised. They said it had given them a lift, that they never talked like this in team meetings, they felt more confident. I had really enjoyed myself.

What I notice about my work here is that I am carrying a set of criteria against which I judge my influence. One is the desire to validate and appreciate the expertise, knowledge and good work that people are doing, and I find that engaging people in talk about what they do and how they do it gives them energy and confidence. Evaluators are so often considered to be experts in judging, something I resist, when what I see generally is people prepared to be very self-critical, very judgemental of themselves. They don't need my help to deepen that. Another is a commitment to opening up space for conversation, by asking different sorts of questions to those normally asked. This allows people to think differently, more deeply and more refreshingly about their work, and to test those thoughts out with others. I see my role as placing questions in the air, drawing attention to helpful responses to those questions, and how those responses might help to shift the thinking about the what, why and how of work. I see my function as an outsider to provide alternative framings, critical insight, and bring what are often subtle processes to the attention of those in them.

<u>Four – Lunch with Pauline Wilson</u>

I then went and talked to Pauline Wilson, who has been using the paper on networks to help guide her in her work with three social change networks. She said that what the paper had done was to help her to think clearly about the differences between networks and other organisational forms, and thus what we need to be paying attention to in terms of the process when we are evaluating. This she finds much more useful than tools, because it allows her an entry point into the work, from which she and they can find other ways of looking critically at the work done and the structure needed to get the work done. It also allowed her to see the kind of things networks might want to be judged against, rather than give her tools to use without understanding the real reason why we might do evaluation at all. She talked about a network she was working with who were in the throes of wrestling

with structure and form in order to respond to the inclusion – exclusion question. I told her about the Networks of Networks accountability practice, and she seems keen to know more. I must find out.

MADELINE - What's interesting about reading these notes is how the question keeps re-emerging, and how if I pay attention, in the same way Marshall (2001) does in her 'inquiry as life process' I begin to know how important it is to keep it in mind.

Sorry, and there is one other thing. Another aspect to this changing of conversations lies in the very language we use and choose to work in. In further reflecting on this relationship of tools to action, I am struck again by the way in which we have tied ourselves up in language that both obfuscates, and in some way determines the way we do our work.

Many who have talked to me over the last year or so will have had a conversation on this topic with me. I think it started with Tigre.

Tigre?

Tigre is one of my most treasured Colombian friends. The name means Tiger. I met him because the office had asked him to drive me around Bogotá one particularly stressful visit. He's a one-off, a true artistic spirit, with the political convictions only a Latin American of our generation can have. Someone who has gone through the romance of revolution, and come out believing in social transformation through more creative approaches. On our first meeting he told me about the video project he had done with street-dwellers in Bogotá, called '¿Porqué me tienes miedo?' (What makes you afraid of me?) He had street kids approaching passers by with a video camera, intent on engaging highly fearful Bogotanos in conversation about the nature of their fear. I was really touched by his utter faith in the power of human connectivity. He rides around in an old car, with the windows open, and talks to those who beg at the traffic lights. Most, including the majority of international development professionals and the UN staff in town, do exactly the opposite. They have drivers, blacked out windows. Locked doors are the norm. When I travel in rural Colombia, I feel safest with a nun, as they have the kind of moral authority in the regions the Army could only dream of. In Bogotá I like to be with Tigre, as he knows those, respects those, whom others ignore and fear. As such I have had the privilege to meet some fantastic people living in the poorest barrios of the city.

Over many years, we have talked about the language of development, and how that language influences the development of development. We have become more interested and animated by words which touch on and reveal the social fabric required to make any development sustainable. Love and compassion feature heavily, art and creativity too. We have started to look critically at the kind of project language we seem to be obliged to use.

The project language

Aims Objectives Targets Strategies Tactics Impact Strategic Allies

These are the words that most development projects and programmes are infused by. This includes the project proposal designed to provide breakfast and one meal a day to those forced from their homes by the strategies of war; the project intended to reconstruct the social fabric in a land shattered by the relentless polarising force of conflict and fear; the project determined to challenge powerlessness and poverty in terrain dominated by old-style caudillos, strongmen, military juntas. Yet these are words lifted wholesale from the logic of military planning, imported as so-called efficient planning processes, and have a hidden link to making any project more measurable, even 'evaluable' (a truly hideous invention of a word) and therefore somehow justifiable.

However, these are words that don't get discussed, are never, in my experience, up for discussion. The more I have thought about these words, and the way in which they are boxed into logistical frameworks, the more I have come to despise them. We all analyse and reanalyse the political environment, the complexities of organisation, and the planning model we will use, the outcomes we think we will achieve. The content, under the heading 'aim' or 'objective' is discussed and re-discussed, often revealing serious confusion about what the terms mean. Planning and evaluation manuals are full of explanations about what they mean, other words are often substituted to help people understand what they mean, but the use of the terms themselves is generalised.

I feel constrained by a kind of suffocating blanket of unquestioning conformity to such logic, and I want to 'do battle' with it. Interesting that I find it hard to come up with imagery that is not constrained by such logic.

People talk about strategies, tactics, they identify allies and enemies, targets and impact, and it all looks much like a war game. These are not just words. They carry meanings and to my mind the meanings are seriously at odds with what most of the people I know are involved in development for. I would argue that such words serve to obscure and often 'disappear' the real value base behind much of our work. If, as Maturana says, 'the names we give to what we see guides our doing,' (A day with Humberto Maturana, September 6 2004) then we are in serious trouble.

Words such as love, compassion, care, nurture, personal responsibility, talent, energy, art and creativity are rarely, if ever, seen or spoken, except in the bar or the informal spaces. Certainly not love. They are often the real motivating forces for people, but they are invisible.

In adopting this language, a project's aim has become to provide 'food security' for 'female-headed households', for instance. 'Food security' actually means having enough to eat and be healthy on over time, and to not be constantly scrabbling around for enough for the family. 'Female headed household' is mainly a single mother struggling on her own to work, pay the rent, look after her kids, etc. 'Female-headed household' is a social research description that no woman forced to move with her family to the city from her rural home because her husband has been tortured and disappeared, who may have been raped herself in the process, would ever use. Widow, rape victim, sad, tired, poor, these might be some of the words she would use, and might be some of the words which would help us to see the complexities more clearly. The categorisation depersonalises,

and in that depersonalisation we obscure and demean the experience, and we often cease to see it or hear it at all. Unlike the 'beneficiary' of the project. Her life is only too real to her.

When did we find ourselves so taken with the dream of military victory that we clutch such damaging language to our breasts, and beat our drums of victory over misery? Our log-frames of intervention are poor squares of cause and effect, where a leads to b and inevitably to c, where x creates y and we all trot along to the marching band. No deviation envisaged here, no invention or circularity and spiralling and whooshing back. All aims targets objectives strategies allies are marshalled in boxes for ticking and crossing. Here we go, step by step, no dancing freeform, no improvisation, no uncertain outcomes or curious play, no tentative claims, no humility, no fringed hula-hula skirts. Slim-line strategic-thinking gets the money.

In the middle of this polemic I come across van Manen's wise words.

> *'the language of objectives, aims, teacher expectations, intended learning outcomes, goals or ends in view is a language of hope out of which hope itself has been systematically purged.' (1997, p. 122).*

This resonates like a chiming bell for me. It calls to me, asks me to look again at my interest in love as a language that is missing from our work. He talks of 'hope' and it is this that I partially mean when I talk of love.

> *'To hope is to believe in possibilities. Therefore hope strengthens and builds.' (p. 123)*

He asks, 'how does "having measurable objectives" differ from "having hope"?' (*ibid*.) and answers himself in a similar way to the way I would: that the language of aims and expectations easily insinuates itself. Van Manen calls it 'degenerating' into a language of desire, want, prediction and certainty. I see what he means when I look at the 'unintended outcome' box. This box has been added on to the logical framework approach, to allow processes that are not measurable to be valued somewhere. That extra column in our log-frame is in some way a container for the human spirit of hope, fighting for space, determined to uncover, regenerate the idea that many things unintended are important, valuable, and meaningful to those who experience them. He suggests that the language of planning closes teachers to possibilities, to a broader view. This goes wider than teachers, I think.

He rightly places such language in the category of 'administrative convenience' (*ibid*.). But he calls out, alerts us to the way in which 'the administrative and the technological influences have penetrated into the very blood of our lifeworld.' (*ibid*.). His language suggests a poison, a replacement, a virus. It is that serious.

Kushner puts it like this:

> *'This is a society thoroughly imbued with the ideology of progress and political/scientific authority; saturated with inauthenticity through its intolerance of incompleteness. We live in a world where there is no longer a Plan B.' (2000, p. 32)*

His conclusion too is that possibility has been erased.

What would happen to our projects if we renamed, reworded our intentions? What might those other words be, and what effect would different words have on the project itself? If we were to ask questions of ourselves in our headings, and not just in our thinking, we might find that we start to talk about compassion and love and dignity and women struggling to make ends meet. We might also rediscover our political voice, something that has also been 'disappeared' as we have become more dependent on government funding and more reluctant to challenge the status quo. We might start to talk again about a radical commitment to changing the world order, and be upfront about it in the work we are doing. We might start talking about hope and love.

Tigre and I wanted to reword the project he was working in. He was responsible for a popular kitchen, providing meals for displaced kids – kids driven from their homes by political violence – who had pitched up with their families in the slums of the city. The project talked about nutrition, which meant calories and vitamins. It talked about food security, getting enough to eat every day. It was circumscribed by a desire to deliver food. And to report on how many meals were provided, how many kids fed.

Tigre had encouraged local women, part of the community to come and cook those meals, be around the canteen, teach the kids to wash up, decide on some things. The food used was leftovers from supermarkets, donated at the end of the day. They organised the menus, shared out the food. He knew that the love those women offered those kids was what made them eat the food (their mums often went without) and helped them to rediscover warmth rather than fear and abandonment. We talked about writing the word LOVE into the project. We talked about the evidence we would need to show this was important. He showed me a card from a very small boy made for Angela, the main kitchen person, for Mother's day. It said, thank you for your smile. I said 'that's evidence'. He told me about a young teenager who came to him crying, saying he had gone out and attacked and robbed someone, it was the only way he could provide for his family (dad drunk, mum disabled, kids too young). There's precious little you can do in such circumstances (no work, no welfare, no food). Tigre told me he gave the boy a big hug, and held him. The boy knew at least he wasn't alone. This too was evidence, I said.

It didn't go down too well with the donors, ironically a Colombian Catholic Church organisation. The organisation began to cut costs, and the way it did that was to contract out. The canteen was to get a delivery of ready made food every day in throw away containers, using plastic disposables. Gone were the laughs in the kitchen, the women helping the kids wash their plates and put them away, mopping the floor and talking about their lives. All in all it was cheaper. It also failed miserably, and has now gone, as has Tigre. He still spends his weekends up in the barrio, and I send him money to do things that help keep the love together. Theatre, books, places to meet, support for small travel costs, this type of thing.

The importance of the role of those women is the kind of thing that would probably fit into the unintended outcome box. I have always been suspicious of any planning model that needs to add on a last column for 'unintended outcomes', especially as such a column is often as full as any intended outcome box, and the one with the most interesting information in it. A model that has so much richness outside its framework is one that cannot be working very well. Such a framework tries, but clearly fails, to rule out

uncertainty, but its positivist logic of cause and effect requires us to label this an 'unintended outcome'. This is what evaluators are confronted with.

We are also confronted with a demand 'to demonstrate impact'. Sorry, I might be ranting a bit now, but impact is the word I think I dislike most, out of all of them. Again it is one derived from the military, and serves us ill in what is an uncertain business. If we were less arrogant in our frameworks, and more willing to accept that what we are largely doing is trying things out, then we might start asking more reasonable questions.

'What are we trying to change?' 'what are we going to try out as a way of changing things?', 'how might we do it, with what money and time and energy and talent?', 'who else has some energy and ideas and creativity who can help us, and who might stand in the way and why? And how will we know, can we know, what changes we are contributing to?' are questions that hold open the notion of possibility, and the truth that we cannot be sure of where our actions will lead. The words 'trying' and 'trying out' are more accurately what we are likely to be doing in a complex, changing environment full of the messy stuff of humans. They acknowledge the unknown, and the potential for learning. They acknowledge the frailty of our condition as acting subjects in a confusing web of inter-dependence. They expose the nonsense of insisting on SMART objectives (Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound), introduced into planning I believe to encourage us to think in realistic steps, efficiency and best value for money, but whose effect has been to contain, reduce, limit our dreams of how to make a better world. In the process all those words that express our human values have got lost, been erased.

Maybe we have taken our gusto for planning and mistaken it for control of outcome? I resist planning because it is hog-tied to this fantasy of control. Maybe we think because we plan this means we must know how to predict and control the effects of what we do? What makes us think we know, or makes us terrified of not knowing?

Kushner would argue that in some deep way we design our societies, and thus our social interventions, to prevent us from confronting our ultimate fear: mortality. He forces us to consider the paradox of how our desires to be perfect, effective, with perfect programs, is a way of avoiding the inevitability of death.

> *'The difficulty we have of confronting the reality that programs will most often fall short of their desired goals is partly conditioned by our reluctance to concede failure – which is itself a condition of a collective denial of mortality represented in that notion of 'social death' .' (2000, p.26)*

This is somehow translated by all of us into a notion of protecting and engineering society, the place we have constructed within which to feel safe, protected from death. Kushner quotes Dollimore, suggesting that fear of failure simply encourages greater desire for social control, something that feels live as we live through New Labour's obsession with targets, curbing anti-social behaviour, which indeed shows us that they 'fear that society is endangered.'

> *'Social programs are vehicles for the cooption of people into ideal, even utopian, political states, that is, states which too often represent the denial of complexity and shortfall.' (2000, p. 26)*

This means for me, as an evaluator intent on bringing to the fore the complex nature of work done to advance what Reason & Bradbury call 'human flourishing' (2001b, p. 1), that I am operating inside a deadening framework.

Van Manen's most profound insight is that all this encourages or leads us to see 'the past as present and the present as past.' (1997, p. 123). Does he mean by this that this kind of language encourages us to a process of constant evaluation, seeing the present through the eyes of what has been, with the past ever-present as an ethereal presence, while at the same time living the present in the past, as a constant projection, with our attention on what our greater goal might be, a triple-jumping over the present?

Most distressingly, van Manen outlines the danger of constantly evaluating and striving for change.

> *'inherent in such living ..is the danger of always treating the present as burden, as something that must be overcome. There is little dwelling in such living.' (1997, p. 123).*

Maybe this is the crux of it for me, the reason why I am such a reluctant evaluator? I think the present is where we co-create life and community together. It is in the present that we are alive and acting.

END OF EPISODE TWO

Writing Interlude Four

Question and response, stuck in the mire of 'writing up'

When it comes to making sense in the written form, I know several stages occur. I put all the things I have on the page and give myself hints and headings about what they might mean. I move them around, regroup them, lose them, find them again. I glimpse something, something telling, and when I do, what I write becomes as clear and interesting and complex and simple as a piece of music. Then I fill in around it with the boring tedium of report language. The sentences get overlong and dry as old toast. I sink gradually into a sort of mushy, murky place, without inspiration or light. Then I stop. Pull out.

I read an unrelated book, or listen to a drama on the radio, or swim.

Then another beautiful moment of understanding and appreciation happens. Something sparks, I whiz down a connecting hyphen, and I can see where to start again. I return and write like an angel. I know what all those books about writing mean when they talk about taking flight. I make a plan, I introduce a structure, I start numbering, and heading……then the light goes out once more, and I grope, flail, make words appear, write tosh. I think it's something to do with introducing order before it's ready to be ordered.

Suddenly I might remember, an earlier thought, a clear place. I go back to it and the rush begins again. At this point I will probably find that I have forgotten to breathe, and my head will feel faint and light-heavy. These moments of passionate, 'got-it' writing are the places of real understanding and learning and they rustle against the skin like an expensive shirt. Thrilling, luxurious and momentary.

At this point, what do I have?

Mush and crispy bits, a sort of lurching journey through doughy, chewy, unreadably tedious slops, interspersed with lovely flavours and sensuous smells. There are the 'Paragraphs 1.1.1' and the 'It can be saids' and the 'In conclusion we might says' interrupted by whooshes and spurts of glorious, brimming language bursts that reach into my heart and mind and find that oh yes button, that G spot of truth or understanding, and I can feel it like the zing of harmonics on a newly-tuned guitar.

I look closely. It's a mess. I have to do something else, be somewhere else, be someone else. Reordering just gets me another wrong size. My friend tells me the line between writing up and throwing up is very fine indeed. This is the nearest I get to slumping despair.

At what feels like the very last moment before the deadline, I hit the place where I've got the signal. It all makes as much sense as it is ever going to with this amount of information and data. I take what there is and I re-write, tighten, explode paragraphs, surgically remove the living core, and the whole surging mass begins to take on spare, beautiful form, has an

armature, limbs, flourishes of décor, colour and breath. And it will be as done as it can be, without starting from a totally different time and place and person.

This, if I slow my heart rate down and think again, is how I unravel, re-string and pattern just about all my learning. This is how my mind, heart and instinct work together in all my inquiring efforts. This is the process I go through every time I start here, with this question, this piece of work, this report, this emotional tangle, and want to end up somewhere else. This, oh yes, is the way it always goes. A draw, an urging, a something strange, mush and slops and tasteless junk, light and dazzlement and shortness of breath, plunging, sleeping, groping and slipping, then a kind of spare, simple clarity. It's a painful and colourful and extreme process that eventually, and seemingly impossibly, always gets there in the end, and within more or less the required time-frame. And then it all begins anew.

Phew.

I wrote this about the struggle that I was going through in writing up an evaluation report after my visit to Sri Lanka to evaluate the work of an environmental network / movement. I wanted to get something down that I recognised as the real process that I go through to get out the other end. I've put it in here because I want to reveal just how coherent and messy my processes are, and how 'writing up' is a process that includes much not knowing, desperation, creative flux, sensing, and in some real sense tracing the very tied up and complex threaded nature of any project. Action, people, context, reaction, resources, time and history all interconnect, affect and are affected by each other.

In the writing of this I learned that this process has some form. It tends to follow a pattern, which I forget about when I'm in it, especially when I am reaching 'slumping despair.' But actually, I go through this process every time I have to start from one end of writing up and arrive at another in any piece of paid evaluation work. Jack Whitehead might formulate this differently. He has a helpful way of talking about data records, the totality of the data that you have collected, out of which you choose evidence, which you then present. I think it is the process of being able to see, sense, feel and inhabit the evidence that seems to take me so much time.

You would probably never know this was going on when you read the 'final product'. A quick skim through Working Paper 121 would tell you nothing of the drama of creation that went into it. There is simplicity in the text that was very challenging to reach. This may seem overdramatic, especially when talking about evaluation reports, when this is often deemed simply to be 'writing up'. But I know in my bones what van Manen is describing in words when he reports how his students experience phenomenological writing,

> *'the writing remains painful, difficult, disorienting. More than once seminar participants told me that the words just would not come; it was like trying to find their way through darkness; a strange solitary experience, like writing in the dark.' (2002, p. 2)*

This may be because it is a highly attuned reflective process when it is working well. It connects us to ourselves and the subject of our inquiry by externalising some inner meaning.

> *'Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalises what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world.' (van Manen, 1997, p. 125)*

At the same time subtle forces are working upon us. In my case I think this is because it allows me the distance from myself that writing provides, while at the same time operating in a space (temporal, physical) that seems utterly connected. van Manen puts it like this:

> *'A peculiar change takes place in the person who starts to write and enters the text: the self retreats or steps back as it were, without completely stepping out of its social, historical, biographic being.' (2002, p. 3).*

He describes a process in which the writer writing is no longer quite the same self.