



A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

M. Ed. (Adult Guidance Counselling)

Title:

What is it that I seek?

An autoethnographic exploration of my self-care needs as a helping professional.

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis has been composed and compiled by Sinéad Campbell.

Introduction

This work is an attempt to write my way out of a dilemma I've had for quite some time. I say write, but to write I have had to search and research and re-search. I've read and re-read and listened. I've sat, I've stood, I've watched, I've observed, I've thought. I've walked and wandered and wondered. I've written a bit. I've agonised. I've written another bit. Deleted most of it, agonised again and started again. The process of writing about self-care this year mirrors my various attempts to identify sustainable self-care practices for over thirty years. Experimentations this year have been a series of starts and stops, learnings and un-learnings or re-learnings. My hope is that when I get to *The End*, it will also be the beginning of a new phase in self-care as a helping professional, one that is in keeping with my uniqueness, my nature and my interests.

The dilemma under consideration in this thesis is an attempt to better understand how I might care for myself. For some, this topic might be non-sensical. But for others, particularly those working in what they call "relationship-intense fields in which the welfare of the Other (client, patient, student, advisee, mentee, etc) is primary" (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. xix), the need to dedicate space and time to examine one's own needs is very familiar. Professionals working in areas where "enormous amounts of emotional investment" (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. xix) are required, know that self-care is an essential aspect in providing professional services to others.

Etherington (2004) says that "the very act of forming stories requires us to create coherence through ordering our experiences and provides us with an opportunity for reclaiming our selves and our histories" (2004: 9). This current inquiry *What is it that I seek? An autoethnographic exploration of my self-care needs as a helping professional* is a follow-on to a shorter, unpublished piece: *Who do I say I am? Uncovering an identity for oneself in midst of transitions: historical, cultural, social, physical, spiritual and emotional*. (Campbell, 2020). Etherington (2004) suggests that "we are constantly changing and developing our identities...that they are never fixed"

(2004: 15). In *Journeying with Jonah*, however, McBride (2016) asks us to consider our most important identity. He says that while we all have a collection of identities, many of which we inherit or are given at birth, we each have a governing identity. In recent times, I have accepted that my governing identity is as *carer*. This identity straddles both my personal life in a number of roles and my professional life as a guidance counsellor and an educator. I say *accept* because in so many ways I had wanted a *career*, I had wanted something other than what were to me daily and to an extent automatic reactions, roles, functions, activities and responsibilities. And yet, from my earliest memory, the professions that attracted me were always caring professions.

So here I am, trying to figure out how to be a better professional and as part of that trying to figure out a way to better care for myself. I can see how, in the past and sometimes in the present, I too easily succumbed to what Karpman (1968) would call a drama triangle. I have had porous boundaries, with gaps the size of canyons. There are caring responsibilities that I do well, dare I say it, better than others. I can anticipate needs in many instances in ways that feel natural to me. Overall, however, my approaches to self-care, or rather the negating of my own needs have led a life less lived at times. At other times, I've "crashed and burned" (Campbell, 2024, 09/10/2023). I am more conscious than ever, that if I wish to continue to work as a caring professional, I need to create a sustainable structure for self-care, one that will work for me given who I am and given the nature of my responsibilities both personal and professional.

This inquiry is written in a transitional space. In earlier generations, women such as myself would have found their paid employment at an end so as to prioritise caring responsibilities in the home. As it is now, I often feel the need to excel at home, at work, look good and be happy. *Successful* is the word I would love to be able to use when describing all aspects of my life but as life moves on, I see the need to either redefine success or to find a new word. There is also another change which is rarely acknowledged or else easily dismissed and that is the transition from a very rigid and fixed religious and Catholic cultural identity to a loose, vaguely Christian but primarily

secular cultural identity. I have come to understand that being born into a particular society, in a place and time, that as a woman and as a Catholic I have somehow absorbed a certain outlook where serving others to the point where I am depleted of all I have seems to be the only acceptable and appropriate way to live. After all, how many times have I heard that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 13:15). What do I do with this?

Like the inquiry I completed during the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Guidance Counselling (Campbell, 2020), my preference is for a move towards reconciling the traditions and expectations from which I have emerged with a new way of being in the world which affirms those roots but also paves a way which meets my needs as an individual and also as a caring professional. I have found that the effort to keep the door shut to the past is too much and am now more inclined to open the door or take the door off altogether, blending the past and the present.

My body is a constant reminder that I am a woman in my midlife. Every medical examination and procedure reminds of its fragility as does the frequently read comment *gone too soon*, bringing an ever-increasing awareness to finitude in life. I need to resolve my needs, physical, spiritual, emotional in a way which is in keeping with my values and affirms my roots but also acknowledges transition and what that might mean for me. I simply cannot go on as I have done in the past. A new way beckons, a way that must be guided by an inner wisdom and intuition.

Self-Care

In his book on *Midlife Transformation in Literature and Film*, Walker (2012) “considers the midlife transition from a Jungian and Eriksonian perspective” (2012, p. ii). He states that for Jung “midlife is a time for personal transformation, when the values of youth are replaced by a different set of values, and when the need to succeed in the world gives place to the desire to participate more in the culture of one's age and to further its development in all kinds of different ways. Erik Erikson saw ‘generativity,’ an expanded concern for others beyond one's immediate circle of family and friends, as the hallmark of this stage of life” (2012, p. ii). While, Jung and Erikson were most likely referring to those in their late 30s and 40s, in many ways this quotation provides the context for this inquiry as I transition from mid-life to what Cahalan & Miller-McLemore (2017) refer to as Middle Adulthood. Notions of success and legacy are redefined at this life-stage but so too are the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the person at the centre of all of this, needs that must be met in a sustainable way and in keeping with one's values. The role of culture is also examined, particularly as it relates to how one takes care of oneself, what can one take from culture that is useful and what might need to be reframed.

One of my greatest challenges in life has been to reconcile caring for others both personally and professionally while also ensuring that my own needs have been met. I have come to understand that simply signing up to “trainings focused on self-care do not result in more time spent in these activities” (Kerig, 2019, p. 7). Spreadsheets, apps, personal trainers have all come and gone. I am both further away from self-care than ever before but paradoxically I feel closer to an authentic approach to caring for myself. I see this inquiry as a space to further consider my own needs given who I am as a person and as a guidance counsellor and bring clarity to what might be sustainable and useful self-care outlooks and processes, thereby, making way for the next phase of my development as a person and as a guidance counsellor.

Self-care and requirements within the helping professions

Self-care is closely linked to ethical standards and integrity within the regulated psychology professions. The Ethical Framework for Counselling Professionals published by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), for instance, working to professional standards includes “ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work” (BACP, 2018, 6), and requests that

We will take responsibility for our own wellbeing as essential to sustaining good practice with our clients by:

- a. taking precautions to protect our own physical safety
- b. monitoring and maintaining our own psychological and physical health, particularly that we are sufficiently resilient and resourceful to undertake our work in ways that satisfy professional standards
- c. seeking professional support and services as the need arises
- d. keeping a healthy balance between our work and other aspects of life.

(2018, 27)

The Code of Ethics published by the IGC requires guidance counsellors to engage in continuous professional development and also to

engage in self-care to avoid conditions (e.g. burnout, addictions) which may impair their judgement and interfere with their ability to act in a professional manner.... seek support and/or supervision from colleagues when feeling stressed or vulnerable due to professional duties....seek supervision for both counselling work and work as counselling supervisors. (IGC, 2020, p. 3)

The rationale for engaging in an inquiry on self-care as a guidance counsellor is convincing, almost to the point that it shouldn't be left to chance for those working in the helping professions.

Key elements in self care

There is increasing awareness of the role trauma plays in our lives. O'Toole (2024) suggests a number of types of trauma, including individual trauma, collective and community trauma, racial trauma and intergenerational and historical trauma. I am

conscious, particularly in my engagement with members of the Traveller and Roma communities, but also witnessing the current levels of intimidation towards minority sections of our communities on this island, that clients who avail of career guidance, may often experience multiple types of trauma.

Kerig (2019) argues that exposure to others' trauma may lead to "burnout, vicarious trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), and compassion fatigue" (2019, p. 614) and, thereby require dedicated interventions. Kerig (2019) suggests the need to attend to six core elements which provide a self-care scaffold for helping professionals. These elements have been modified slightly to read as follows:

- understanding and knowledge;
- self-efficacy;
- self-awareness;
- self-compassion and grounding;
- resilience;
- prevention, including reflexivity

There is also seventh element, in my view, which ties all of the above together and that is community and connection. These interconnected seven elements frame my understanding of self-care throughout this inquiry.

Self-care and understanding and knowledge

Covey (2005) popularised the phrase *to sharpen the saw*. He states that "effective people constantly renew themselves in the four basic areas of life: physical, social/emotional, mental, spiritual" (2005: 14). Education, understanding, knowledge, information, learning and reflective practice are all essential aspects of guidance counselling. They are central to effective professional practice, not just in supporting clients with careers information and guidance on matters but also in how a professional guidance counselling practice is provided and enjoyed by the practitioner. This importance is reflected in its Code of Ethics (2024) throughout its four principles:

Principle 1: Respect for the rights and dignity of the client.

Principle 2: Competence: Guidance counsellors maintain and update their professional skills.

Principle 3: Responsibility.

Principle 4: Integrity: Guidance counsellors seek to promote integrity in their practice.

(2024, p. 1)

Self-care and self-efficacy

What's interesting about the helping professions, in general, and guidance counselling, in particular, is that we support greater self-efficacy in others. It is therefore, imperative that we lean into our own sense of agency for ourselves on a regular basis. Additionally, "modelling a healthy approach to yourself is a significant aspect of helping others" (Evans, 2013, p. 37). We are more inclined to motivate others as agents of their own care if we an ability to look after ourselves and demonstrate a belief in our "capabilities to exercise control over events that affect (*our*) lives" (Bandura, 1990, 413).

Bandura (1990) goes on demonstrate that "human attainments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy" (1990, p. 411). In other words, it is important to bring a sense of '*can-do*' attitude to how we look after ourselves. He also suggests that self-efficacy is part of a

triadic codetermination, (that) human functioning is a product of the interplay of intrapersonal influences, the behaviour individuals engage in, and the environmental forces that impinge upon them (Figure 1). Because intrapersonal influences, in which self-efficacy is a constituent, are part of the determining conditions in this dynamic interplay, people have a hand in shaping events and the course their lives take.

Bandura 2012, p. 11.

**Schematization of Triadic Reciprocal Determination
in the Causal Model of Social Cognitive Theory**

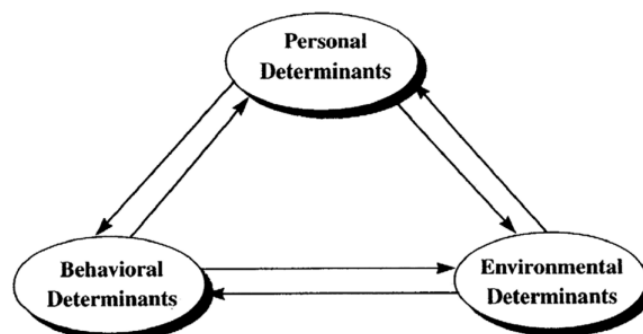


Figure 1: Schematization of Triadic Reciprocal Determination in the Causal Model of Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura 2012, p. 12

Self-efficacy may appear as easy, attainable goals on paper. However, self-efficacy in practice often involves navigating what are complex psychosocial influences. Committed professionals who go out of their way to understand this complexity through studies such as this one can not only support themselves but also support clients through such journeys. Patience, empathy and understanding are required to support those who feel stuck in patterns of behaviour which logically make no sense but are difficult to move away from.

Self-care and emotional awareness

Rogers (1957) alluded to therapeutic conditions necessary for change and one of the conditions he emphasises is the need for the therapists “genuineness in the relationship” (1957, p. 828), i.e. that the therapist should be “a congruent, genuine, integrated person.... freely and deeply himself, with (an) awareness of himself. It is the opposite of presenting a façade” (Rogers, 1957, p. 828). As I have come to see, the façade is too challenging to maintain and eventually leads to poor professional practice and personal failure in terms of burnout. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) suggest the self is “composed of parts, with each part needing nurturing by the practitioner” (2016, p. 162). This inquiry endeavours to work with the parts of me which require care and attention in the hope that by nurturing the parts I may support the whole self.

The desire and need for integrity is, I suggest, closely linked to self-care and emotional awareness. Palmer (2017) states that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, but is rooted in the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2017, book cover). Self-care for me is linked to an authentic, emotionally-aware, wholesome self as opposed to a disjointed, duplicitous self. Self-care, in this regard, is essential not just for myself but for those I work with as “such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good (work) depends (Palmer, 2017, p. 16).

Self-care and resilience

Resilience according to Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) refers to “a person’s ability to adapt in a positive way to difficult and trying situations” (2016. P. 3). I have a what could be described as an innate leaning towards others and caring for them. This leaning doesn’t end at 5pm or when the laptop switches off. It spills into every area of my life and I frequently experience “the agonizing pull between other-care and self-care” (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. 4).

This inquiry aims to observe consistent and determined efforts to engage in practices of self-care, without which, I believe, resilience levels are diminished, leading to a “profound weariness and haemorrhaging of the self” (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. 103) which appears in the form of “fatigue, frustration, disengagement, stress, depletion, helplessness, hopelessness, emotional drain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism” (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. 103). Such scenarios often result in empathy/compassion fatigue and/or burnout. Recovery from burnout and empathy/compassion-fatigue is not easy as I have personally experienced.

Matsopoulos and Luthar (2020) contest that

educators are more likely to show resilience if they have the resources to deal with the stresses and strains that can be an inherent, ongoing part of the (education) profession. These adults must have access to necessary material resources, as well as support and caring (significant invisible resources) within the school system or local community.

(2020, p. 75)

Matsopoulos and Luthar (2020) also note that in reality, very few working in education or other helping roles would encounter such resources.

I am of the view that leaving self-care and resilience to others to arrange for you is not practical and is negligent. As helping professionals, we bear the dual workloads of caring for others in need and also, largely, the burden of meeting our own needs. In other words, other-care *and* self-care are the functions or essential components of guidance counselling. And it is important for clients that they encounter a

healthy helping relationship, (*that*) we model respectful boundaries and shared power, allowing both parties to collaborate on goals and assert needs in appropriate ways.

(Knight, 2015 in Levenson, 2020, p. 297)

As Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) say “we need to acknowledge that what is good for others is good for ourselves” (2016, p. 163). As with compassion, resilience is not a one-off activity. Rather, resilience is “a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (Luther and Cicchetti, 2000, p.2)

Self-care and self-compassion

Compassion and, particularly self-compassion, is central to this inquiry and more detailed information on this topic is provided later in the submission. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) suggest that one of the ways in which helping professionals can nurture the emotional self is by “developing practices that foster self-compassion” (2016, p. 163). Neff (2023) outlines three elements of self-compassion:

- Self-Kindness Versus Self-Judgment
- Common Humanity Versus Isolation
- Mindfulness Versus Overidentification

(2023, p. 193)

and defines self-compassion as “to being supportive toward oneself when experiencing suffering or pain—be it caused by personal mistakes and inadequacies or external life challenges” (2023, p. 193).

Self-care and prevention, including reflexivity

Similar to Matsopoulos and Luthar (2020), Kerig (2019) asserts that in order to create a prevention mindset in the helping professions, there is a need for “a change in coworkers’ interrelationships and larger organizational practices, and not just in the self-care repertoires of individual staff members” (2019, p. 621). Self-care and prevention must be at the heart of every helping profession, from its vision and mission to daily practices, most especially in how staff members treat one another.

However, as much as we would like co-workers and organisational practices to support us, we cannot depend on their support in ways we need it. Additionally, a lot of educational institutions look to guidance counsellors for direction and support on staff and student wellbeing. Reflexivity is often regarded as “a skill that we develop as counsellors” (Etherington: 2004: 19) but it is also about self-care and prevention. Etherington (2004) defines reflexivity as

an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world.

(2004, p. 19)

Self-care and Connectedness

Guidance counsellors are social beings, drawn to work with people. Self-care, however, requires guidance counsellors to seek out a blend of down time and alone time, or as Kahr (2019) calls it “creative solitude” (2019. p. 148). Providing adequate time for family and friends signifies healthy work-life boundaries. Professional supervision, communities of practice and similar services or groups are also important in self-care. Samaras (2011) suggests that we actively engage with critical friends

(such as Group Supervision sessions on M. Ed. Programme). Bolton (2018) also values “a supported process...which encourages doubt and uncertainty, paradoxically gives practitioners strength in the face of contradictory expectations and attempts to control” (2018, p. 15-16).

The IGC facilitates and supports Continuous Professional Development (CDP) opportunities for guidance counsellors. It also provides opportunities for learning and dissemination of research in its publication *Guideline* (2024). It hosts an annual conference as a way to support guidance counselling practice. Guidance counsellors can avail of other opportunities to connect and nourish themselves and their practice, such as the Masterclass arranged by the Adult Guidance Counselling Team at Maynooth university throughout the 2023-2024, including a session on Trauma-Informed Practice (O’Toole, 2024).

As is evident, self-care is not one thing. It is a commitment to a way of life, a way of doing and a way of being in the world. It involves knowing what is enough in terms of caring for others but also an awareness of what is required to care for oneself. Above all, it is a deeply personal concept in that it means different things to all of us, which is why we all need to spend time considering our own personal self-care needs.

Methodology

Who am I and what does answering that question involve? Am I the personal me or the professional me, the advocate me, the mother me, the student me, the middle aged me, the female me, the Christian me? So many parts to me or do I divide them into parts or are they all one? What am I trying to find out in this inquiry? Who is the self that is seeking care in this inquiry? Given who I am, how have I shaped this inquiry and what processes have I followed?

This chapter aims to provide an understanding of the approaches I used in this inquiry but also why I chose them.

Journeying towards an M. Ed. and choosing a topic

I have for some time wanted to complete an M. Ed. as I think it is the minimum qualification one should have as a professional working in the education sector. On a personal level, I feel that by completing an M.Ed. that I will assuage feelings of inadequacy and that I am 'not academic' enough to work in an educational setting. Finally, in completing the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Guidance Counseling in 2020 in Maynooth University, I experienced a form of education which impacted me, my behaviours, thoughts and feelings long after I graduated and I trust that the same will happen again. In that sense, it's like going back to the well for more. As with the Postgraduate Diploma, I bring with me a question that has proven too big for me to resolve alone and one which I neglect and avoid, even during this inquiry this year.

Efficiency versus meaningfulness

I currently work as a Traveller Education Officer in a recently formed Technological University in the west-northwest of Ireland, supporting Traveller and Roma communities into higher education. Initially, in the interests of 'efficiency', I chose a topic that would support my professional development in this relatively new role. I had intended to complete a SWOT analysis of the role of a Traveller Education Officer

which is a new role within the university. As September moved into October, however, I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the chosen topic.

Firstly, I was uneasy about carrying out any investigation which would ultimately require input from Traveller and Roma communities as I feel that, like many others marginalised groups, they have fed into a lot of studies orchestrated by white, settled, corporate employees such as myself. Secondly, there was a part of me that felt that I was trying too hard at being the 'good girl', striving to be more professional in a temporary, part-time role which would end soon after the research was completed regardless of findings. I felt uncomfortable about putting a lot of resources into a very narrow, work-focused research which was neither requested or required by my workplace. In fact, it seemed extreme, unnecessary, and possibly detrimental to my career, the work I was doing and to relationships I had established. I began to see that as the M. Ed. was self-funded and completed within my own time, it would be inappropriate for me to involve my workplace or external stakeholders. In my work, I already complete many reports to support "audit and funding" (Denzin et al, 2024, p.8) requirements. I was also being drawn back to looking at areas of my personal and professional life that required attention, areas which had been neglected too often as the next 'big' work activity came into view.

Self-care emerges as M. Ed. topic

Familiar themes around health issues and self-care arose in September 2023 as I tried to combine work, study and the rest of life. A chance conversation with a Traveller whom I had known some years ago also raised questions about culture for me on a personal level. When I mentioned that I was working as a Traveller Education Officer, they said "I've left all that behind", i.e. being from the Traveller community (Campbell, 2023b, 23/09/2023). The statement ignited fresh questioning for me. Can we leave a culture behind? A culture we have been immersed in all our lives and for generations? The statement brought me back into a journey I have been on with Catholicism for quite some time. I have been more conscious in recent years of how Christian values influenced and sometimes directed work and other aspects of my life. I have found it difficult to disentangle myself from serving others often to the detriment of my own health and enjoyment of life. I mean, are we not all here to serve? Where does

servitude end and self-care begin and where does “individual belief and action intersect with culture” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 11)?

On Good Friday, 2007, I decided that I needed to address my fit with Catholicism or its fit with me. Generally, my main method in addressing such issues is to learn more about the topic and I completed a Diploma in Applied Theology. However, questions remained and, in February 2023, I sought out a spiritual director to help me resolve the issue of my fit with Catholicism. I had just one session with this spiritual director as it wasn't feasible to continue. However, they did challenge me “to get on with life and write my own self-care manual” (Campbell, 2023a, 16/02/2023). This was easier said than done. As 2023 progressed, and with greater clarity around the need to not just take care of myself, but to take responsibility for it, I decided in October 2023 to change the research topic and to write what might become a personalized self-care manual or a version of this.

Selecting a suitable Methodology

Self-care is a topic which fits well with any methodology. However, I needed a methodology which would support the “the intersection of philosophy, research designs, and specific methods (Creswell, 2023, p. 6). I needed a methodology which would not only provide for a practical expression of a personalized self-care ‘manual’ but also allow space for “rethinking of where (*I*) have been and crucially where (*I am*) going and how (*I*) will get there (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 14).

Quantitative inquiry

Quantitative designs which according to Creswell (2023) originated mainly in physiology and psychology during the 19th and 20th centuries, might be an ideal combination for a guidance counsellor in this predicament. I could have, for instance, signed up to an app which would measure all aspects of self-care including sleep, exercise, time spent at work, weight, calories, water intake and so on. It would have been easy to source material on each category, measure the results and analyse findings. However, if there is one thing I know after thousands of hours and euros

spent of various weight loss and exercise initiatives, I don't do well with measurements by numbers. For some, such a process would prove successful but for me, I tend to move in the opposite direction. Perhaps it's something to do with my sense of being

treated as if (*my body*) (defined as achievement test scores) were the measure of "what works" within a particular discourse, just as financial success is used as the measure of supposedly free market, competitive successful enterprise..... the measured and measurable language and discourses of neoliberalism are accepted as correct efficient indisputable universal and even just.

(Denzin et al, 2024, p. 66)

A quantitative study was out of the question, therefore the research had to be qualitative. I might fare better with words.

Methodological Baggage

In a previous role, I had responsibility for collecting bound theses from students after examination boards had agreed results. In the days before digitalisation, these bound copies sat neatly on shelves. Shelves upon shelves of them. Like the librarians, I often wondered where it would all end with a new batch added every Autumn. And what, if any, difference the research made to the world? Over time, I sometimes questioned qualitative research as "scientifically based research that involves the application of rigorous systematic and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programmes" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 8). It sometimes feels like postgraduate programmes are there to teach us research methods to use meaningfully in the future rather than create change in the here and now which is important for me and is in keeping with the ethos of guidance counselling.

I also feel the need to move away from the idea of "research" to inquiry, 'research' being "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 12). According to McLaughlin (2007), Donegal (where I grew up and now live) is

home to some of the most investigated communities in the country. People here quickly grew accustomed to the comments, flattering or otherwise, of the cultural nationalist, the Victorian visitor, the government official and, more recently, the social anthropologist.

(McLaughlin 2007: 9)

Walsh (2020a) considers some of the complexities of anthropological and ethnographic research in Ireland in the late 19th and 20th century in his investigation of “The Skull Measuring Business: Some Murderous Little Facts from the Forgotten Spaces of Anthropology in Ireland”. In 2023, Trinity College Dublin returned the skulls of islanders to Inis Meáin for reburial.



Figure 2: Academics measuring the heads of people on Inishbofin in 1892.

Photograph: Trinity College Dublin

(Galway Advertiser, 2023)

The episode is a reminder of the fact that, as people, we have been probed, measured, observed all in the name of research by academic institutions. It is a reminder of the “colonial legacies of universities and museums *(and of)*.... culturally sensitive material like human remains in anthropological collections that were tainted by colonial

violence and scientific racism” (Walsh, 2020). Walsh (2020a) raises good questions about well-meaning academics “collecting specimens of human activity” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 38), as in Figure 2, and their desire to provide for positive changes as part of “anti-colonial activism in anthropology, geography, and sociology (Walsh, 2020a, p. 212). However, Denzin et al (2024) point out that “the ethics of good intentions has tended to support power for those who construct the research and the furthering of oppressive conditions for the subjects of that research” (2024, p. 31) with the “matter of judgment residing in the scholarly community” (2024, p 38).

I too am often curious about at the mindset of collectors and researchers who recorded stories, songs and folklore from my own family and from the wider community. Academics from renowned institutions in Ireland and further afield often arrived unannounced and anticipated eager and willing storytellers and singers, regardless of the time of day or year. In what was meant to be a folklore collection, Ó Catháin (1985) for instance, takes the liberty of noting various pieces of tittle-tattle in the introduction to the stories. I am continually struck by the collector’s irritation with interruptions to the recordings, despite arriving without appointment or prior notice. Ó Catháin (1985) was amused by my granduncle’s look of displeasure at one of these unannounced visits. Amusement, however, turns to annoyance when efficiency is disrupted. He writes, “without much ceremony I asked him would he tell me a story... though the moment could not have been more inopportune” (Ó Catháin 1985: xvi) as my grandaunt, the only ‘Martha’ in the house, began making tea for Ó Catháin and fellow academics, as she would for any visitor. There was, it seems from Ó Catháin’s writing, no time ‘allowed’ for chat, no pretense at interest in those they came to record. Equally annoying were interruptions to the recordings when another granduncle would give “the Tilley (*lamp*) a thorough good pumping and set it hissing and spluttering as bad as ever again” (Ó Catháin 1985: xxii), not to mention the bleating of a pet lamb that makes its presence known in a number of recordings. It seems that it was a matter of recording, taking and leaving.

Ó Catháin (1985) takes the liberty of including the following commentary on my grandaunt in an *Introduction* to a collection of stories:

When I had it, I always offered Máire a drop of whiskey which she generally accepted, taking a small glass from the dresser, wiping it and gently placing it on the table beside me. I would fill the glass and Máire would return from the far end of the kitchen to reclaim it and then drink it down at the dresser with her back turned to me. When pressed, she would accept a second drink, this time placing her empty glass on the very corner of the table before retreating once again. Once emptied this time, the glass was wiped and replaced on the dresser and Máire's drinking was over and done with for that occasion.

Ó Catháin, 1985, page xxi

I wonder if this person had been Ó Catháin's mother or sister would the passage have been included? "Informed consent" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 30) weren't words that were used then but the passage speaks for itself in terms of sensitivity towards those 'observed' and 'used' by the collector, even though the objective of the visit was to record stories and songs. The collector's ability to move into position and take control when it suited them rather than those who were 'participating' is also evident. Collector or diluter, friend or foe, academic or gossip, researcher or raider? A lot depends on one's lens and I find that my lens is often quite sensitive in this regard. It is, therefore, important for me that I choose a methodology which is respectful of me as researcher and of me as 'subject' and that I am cognisant of power-relations within research. I require a methodology which does more than supply a frame. The methodology also needs to provide an active support to this inquiry. At this point, I sourced Denzin et al (2024) for direction.

Paradigmatic 'Fit'

Denzin et al (2024) state that "qualitative research means different things to many different people" (2024, p. xxxix). The postpositivist tradition which emerged from the 19th century "represents the thinking after positivism, challenging the traditional notion of the absolute truth of knowledge.....when studying the behaviour and actions of humans ... (*and holds*) a deterministic philosophy that causes (probably) determine effects or outcomes" (Creswell, 2023, p.8). Postpositivism is also, however, "reductionist in that the intent is to reduce the ideas into a small, discrete set to test"

(Creswell, 2023, p.8). Once again, I didn't want to produce research that was "reduced to the technical execution of particular methods" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 15),

Instead, I was drawn to carrying out a qualitative inquiry, seeking "to discover and describe narratively what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 33), an inquiry in keeping with my own interests and which "implies an open-endedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation, freedom, resistance" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 15). Denzin et al (2024) assert that inquirers approach "the world with a set of ideas, a framework (ethics, theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways" (2024, p. 20). These are brought together under the umbrella term *paradigm*.

Constructivist Paradigm and Self-study

While acknowledging that, "boundaries between the paradigms are shifting" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 80)", my understanding of the world strongly aligns with a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm suggests that "the social world cannot be apprehended independent of perspectives and interestsof the researcher" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 52). Constructivism as outlined by Denzin et al (2024) is a place where realities can be constructed, co-constructed, deconstructed and or reconstructed. Meaning-making activities are at the heart of these constructions. According to Denzin et al (2024), these realities have, therefore, a subjective, local, specific, experiential, interpretivist and consensual focus. As each individual constructs their own reality, it is accepted that multiple realities exist. The quality of the inquiry is determined through the level of "trustworthiness and authenticity, including catalyst for action" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 77) generated by the inquirer. Epistemologically, knowledge is, therefore, constructed through "our lived experiences and through our interactions with other members of society (where the) inquirer and inquired into are fused into a single entity.... (with) co-created findings" (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 82).

It follows, therefore, that those such as myself who align with a constructivist paradigm are likely to use what Denzin et al (2024) describe as hermeneutics and dialectical processes (e.g. interpretations, metaphors, comparisons, conversations, interviews, observations, discussion). The knowledge created fills “in the gaps between theory and practice” (Guba, 1996 in Denzin et al, 2024, p. 87) and provide deeper understandings. Values are “inseparable from the inquiry” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 89) and “multiple perspectives of the same data” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 95) are generated. The paradigm lends well to self-study as it is accepted that “we are shaped by our lived experiences, and these will always come out in the knowledge we generate as researchers and the data generated by our subjects” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 83). I find that the link between our lived experiences and the knowledge we generate particularly attractive as integrity and integration are themes within this inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

In the Call of Stories (1989), Coles points out that narrative requires good storying which in turns requires “me to be a good listener..... we have to pay closest attention to what we say..... their story, yours, mine – it’s all we have to carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 13-14). Hermeneutical and dialectical processes naturally lead to the use of narrative inquiries such as the one provided in this inquiry: “if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 17).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) concur with Mary Catherine Bateson’s assertion that “all of us, lead storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 8). This inquiry requires learning that occurs, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) when the inquirer is “ambiguous, shifting, meeting difference; allowing difference to challenge assumptions, values and beliefs; improvising and adapting to the difference” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 9). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) go on to link experience and narrative together: “Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (2000, p. 19), leading to “braided compositions woven into and through field experiences” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 24).

Autoethnography: an optimal approach to this inquiry

Autoethnography, for me, is an approach to narrative inquiry which provides a space to consider the ideas and tensions mentioned above, including the “personal, vulnerable, reflective, self-conscious, self-reflexive, and narrative voice (Berry, 2013 quoted in Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 54). The word autoethnography can be broken into three parts: *auto* or *self*, *ethno* or *culture* and *graphy* or *writing*. In other words, this inquiry involves writing about myself through a cultural lens.

I first encountered autoethnography while completing the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Guidance Counselling in 2020 and have since witnessed the enduring impact of the “autoethnographic way of life (*as*) a continuous process of research into one’s being and meaning and thus methodological as well as ontological” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 68). It, therefore, continues to work its magic long after the submission date. It doesn’t sit on a shelf. It is an enduring and active inquiry. While it is a snapshot of a moment in time, it’s never outdated. It leads to a “state of mind, an ongoing attitude to life and work” (Bolton, 2018, p. 1).

This is partly because autoethnography is able to do something that is almost impossible to achieve using other methodological approaches. Paradoxically, it brings both the *big picture* and *the smaller details* together in a way which provides us with spaces to observe, examine and reflect on the

problems of being alive and facing serious existential and moral questions related to mortality, loss, belonging, loneliness, love, adversity, violence, racism, discrimination, and complicated feelings ...(*which*) affect all people – researchers as well as non-researchers.

(Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 50)

Autoethnography supports an understanding of compassion and self-compassion, key themes of this inquiry, and attempts to “bring vivid and resonant frames of understanding to one’s anguish and pain (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 69).

This might sound dramatic. And it's meant to be dramatic. Bochner and Ellis (2016), who pioneered evocative autoethnography in the 1990's, describe it as "a theatre for investigating some of the most serious questions of existence as a living being" (2016, p. 51), serving the "needs of the culture of the time" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 44). As a guidance counsellor working with the "flesh and blood person who is alive, active, and feeling" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 57), I am "obliged to acknowledge the self-interests, values, political ideals, and emotions" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 57) that I bring not just to inquiry but also to my work.

Ironically (given my initial desires for efficiency), autoethnography can be regarded as an efficient form of inquiry as it is both "a method and a text" (Etherington, 2004, p.140). It places storytelling at its core which means "that some of the conventions of academic reporting have to change" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 51). Readers become part of the autoethnographic experience as they "feel the truth of first-person accounts, and thus (are) more fully immersed and engaged – morally, aesthetically, emotionally, politically, and intellectually" (Bochner and Ellis, 1996 in Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 52). Autoethnography is, therefore, "reflexive, dialogic, relational, and collaborative" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 58) and provides for an "interpretative/imaginative/humanistic inquiry" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 30).

Autoethnography allows this inquiry to engage in

a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis.... (where) ... the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge.

(Moustakas, 1990, p. 9)

Methods used in this inquiry

I used a number of methods in this inquiry throughout the year, methods that, as I say, take me 'out of myself' and into places where I can think anew, reframe my outlook on life and on what my needs are. The primary method was observation or oscillation as I came to see it. Negative Capability is described by Hirsch, von Bülow, and Simpson, (2023) as "radical in its acceptance of what is, in the present moment, without recourse to defensive routines" (2023, p. 396). It

contributes to the capacity to live with and tolerate ambiguity and paradox, and to 'remain content with half knowledge' (Gittings, 1970: 43, in Hirsch, von Bülow, and Simpson, 2023). It implies the capacity to accommodate change in a non-defensive way, without being overwhelmed by the everpresent pressure to react. From this perspective (*it*) involves seeing at every point, day by day, moment by moment, what is actually going on, in contrast with what was planned for, expected or intended.

(Hirsch, von Bülow, and Simpson, (2023), p. 399)

This approach to the year provided me with what Milner (2011) might describe as "an exploration which involves doubts, delays, and expeditions on false trails, and the writing of it was an essential part of the search (2011, p. xxxiii)". The idea of observing and "discovering one's true likes and dislikes, for finding and setting up a standard of values that is truly one's own and not a borrowed mass-produced ideal" (Milner, 2011, p. xxxiv) was refreshing, exciting and spoke to a strong determination I have at present to avoid at all costs the purchase of yet another 'programme' promising transformation.

I used a variety of journals to capture my thoughts and learnings. Learning journal entries provided the majority of insights and tracked this inquiry from September 2024. However, other learning journals related to other courses, personal diaries throughout this year and earlier diaries, and work journals also provided insights into the inquiry as it progressed throughout the year.

Central to the inquiry were Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. While I read a copy of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (1521, 1736), I primarily used a compact text by Maher (2020) entitled *Pathways to Decision*, a book that “I had sitting on my floor hoping I’d read it someday” (Campbell, 2023, 14/11/2023). I have found that Ignatian Spirituality Exercises complemented oscillation of thought and a reconciliation of conflicts in self-care. Daily practices such as reading scripture and meditation (*lectio divina*) and the Daily Examen (See Appendix 1) provided a “wide focus” (Milner, 2011, p. xxxv) and allowed a space for curiosity, fascination and inquiry. I experimented with various situations and decisions using Maher’s outline of the Discernment of Spirits (2020, p. 44-45) (See Appendix 1) and Decision-making using the 4 D’s (2020, p. 88) (See Appendix 1).

Sacred Space (Irish Jesuits, 2023, 2024) provided for a regular practice of *lectio divina*, which included reading scripture or reflections on scripture following by meditation. This was generally followed by journaling. Ignatian spirituality places great emphasis on regular practice and I found that the exercises were simple enough to engage with and, also, over time I could see how they gently began to reframe my outlook on life and on the experience of living, day-to-day to begin with, but later hour-by-hour and sometimes even moment-by-moment. Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are “meant to be done... preferably with the support of an experienced person who is familiar with the dynamics and movements of Ignatius’ methods” (Maher, 2020, p. 19). I, therefore, attended six sessions with a Spiritual Director throughout the year as a support during the inquiry.

The story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) became a reference point early on the inquiry. Macnamara (2019) summarises the scene saying that “Mary sits passively by Jesus’ feet and is praised, while Martha, weary from her multiple exertions, is left not only to do all the work but also to remonstrate and sulk” (2019, p. 596). I identified quite a lot with Martha and felt I had an ally with her by my side. I was also curious about Mary. How did she manage to just sit there and how was that choosing “the better part” (Luke 10:42b)? Gilbert (2010, 2014) promotes the idea of experimenting with various techniques, such as chair work, letter writing and so forth. I found it

extremely challenging initially to still my body, never mind my mind. As an experiment, I decided to invite Martha into the meditation with me, to provide a focus and be a support for me and see what it might be like for another busy person to meditate. Later, I invited Mary to join us around Christmas time. I did, at some point, try to meditate without them and also tried to bring Jesus into the meditation. However, these options didn't work and I reverted to having Martha and Mary present in meditations. Although imaginary, they have become companions not just during meditation but also in life where I can ask *what would Mary say about that?* or *what would Martha's view be on this?* Mary is always to my left and Martha always to my right. It's, therefore, physically possible to turn to the right or left and seek counsel. Oddly enough, I find that I no longer feel alone, that somehow, the three of us share the trials of finding balance and time for work, for fun and for solitude.

Over the last number of years, I have become more aware of certain Inner Critics, particularly those who aim to destroy whatever self-confidence I might have had. There are voices that keep me stuck, procrastinating, whose views and suggestions are fear-based. I am also conscious at times of breaking away from the voices of the Inner Critics and seem to be able to consider more adventurous viewpoints. Having tried to unsuccessfully mute or ignore the Inner Critics over the years, in recent times, I began to simply *listen* to what they are trying to tell me. I have had a sense that perhaps they felt alone in their work, trying to keep me on track, which might not be easy at times. And perhaps they could do with some buddies, some Inner Champions with whom they could share the work of seeing me through life. My son helped me compile a list of the Inner Critics one November evening (Campbell, 2023, 15/11/2023), offering key insights into Inner Champions such as *Routine* which sought to provide pillars of practice to the day, thereby reducing the need for procrastination. Seven Inner Critics and Inner Champions (quite biblical!) were brought out from the shadows and out of the silence (see page 33 below).

While it took some time for the Inner Champions to find their voice, the experiment has worked. Allowing for different identities to be themselves rather than suppressing parts of myself that might be at times too adventurous or impulsive and at times overly

cautious and negative has opened up new possibilities for living. There were other experiments prompted by Gilbert (2010, 2014) Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT), many of which are detailed later.

An attempt was made to create a dialogue between the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions as a thesis submission to the inquiry. However, it proved too difficult, despite much effort. During the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Guidance Counselling (2018-2020), notes were compiled at the end of each Group Facilitation session with a view to summarising the main discussions and learning but also to provide continuity between monthly sessions. This inquiry uses a similar approach, in that, notes from 'sessions' with the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions, facilitated by Martha and later with Mary present as an observer, became four reflections on the inquiry on self-care. The reflections are seasonal and are provided through the lenses of the Inner Champions, the Inner Critics, Mary and Martha.

	Inner Critics	Inner Champions	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Traits, characteristics, functions</i>	<i>Traits, characteristics, functions</i>	<i>Name</i>
 Diamond	Perfectionist. Overthinking. Professionalism. Doing it right. Not getting it wrong. What does 100% look like? If it's not 100%, it's useless and you will be exposed for the fraud you are.	Life is all a journey. Let life carry you where you need to go. What does your inner compass say? Go with it. There is no end piece, just a moment in time when like the artist, we put down the brush and move on. So, move on.	 Explorer
 The Pit	Despair. Hopelessness. What's the point? Why bother? Don't bother! Glass half empty. Victimhood. Moan, moan, moan. Terror. Doesn't like change. Stay under the duvet. Protect, protect, protect. Stay hidden.	Yes, I can. What needs doing? Go do it. Advocate. Radical. Activist. Loves a challenge. Loves change, looking at things differently. Change can be hard but we can do it. Out in the world.	 Challenger
 Destroyer	Punish-her. Whipper, flogger, judgemental, beating, punching, get a move on, don't stop, keep going, you useless pieces of s***. Regrets, rumination.	Compassion, I do patience well. I am good at knowing what is soothing. I listen and empathise. I try to understand but not necessarily change.	 Compassion
 Procrastinator	Procrastinator, trapped, stay where you are, don't move, guilt, guilt, guilt. Don't begin. You are not able for it. "It's nothing", minimising.	Love of the ordinary. There is value in the ordinary, predictable, pillars of the day. The sun rising, the sun setting. Meal times, down times, work times.	 Routine
 Catastrophiser	Catastrophiser (cliff-edge), disaster, everything will go wrong, vigilance, stay alert, watch out, worse case scenarios played on a loop.	Meadow-girl. Faith and trust. Freedom. Wings. You are able to deal with what comes your way.	 Meadow-girl
 Aloney	Alone. I don't even support myself, so, who else would be bothered supporting me.	Relationships. Community. Vulnerability. Friendships. Colleagues.	 Connected
 Imposter	Stupid, ignorant. Don't expose me, will bring shame to my door. What would you know!! Bog woman, ignorant, stick with what you have. Imposter.	Wise, scholarly. Able to grapple with many questions - a matter of information and understanding. All kinds of wisdom not just academic but also experiential, intuitive wisdom.	 Wise, scholarly

Ethical considerations

I chose autoethnography purposefully as it has the least impact on others. That isn't to say that it doesn't impact others, but I have tried to minimize this. I have focused on particular contexts and avoided many others where people may be identified.

Denzin et al (2024) said that “ethical considerations are believed to be played out within the personal core of the researcher” (2024, p. 61). The most person at risk in this inquiry is myself. I have had to reconcile the need to grapple with real questions in professional practice while also being conscious that, as quite a private person, I am revealing vulnerable aspects of myself. I have found it particularly uncomfortable to put my interests in reconciling different tensions with regard to my religious beliefs out there. This isn't the first time for me to express a particular religious leaning, having completed a placement for a Theology course on a higher education campus before. I am, therefore, familiar with this discomfort to some extent. Also, I am conscious that guidance counselling and the role I have as Traveller Education Officer often advocates for those who feel the need to hide their identity on in higher education. It would be disingenuous of me to, therefore, hide my own identity or identities and this process supports some understanding of cultural discomfort.

As a guidance counsellor and a narrative inquirer, I work within

the space not only with our participants but also with ourselves. Working in this space means that we become visible with our lived and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as much as do those of our participants. This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes the secret stories public. In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self.

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 61-62)

Recent years have seen a move towards increased authenticity and an acknowledgement of our vulnerability as humans. Brené Brown (2018) says that by

choosing to own our vulnerability and do it consciously means learning how to rumble with this emotion and understand how it drives our thinking and behaviour so we can stay aligned with our values and live in our integrity. Pretending that we *don't do vulnerability* means letting fear drive our thinking and behaviour without our input or even awareness which almost always leads to acting out or shutting down.

(Brown, 2018, p. 24).

Taylor (2024) also questions the therapeutic profession's desire to

always ensure that we separate ourselves from those we help. We are the professionals. As a psychologist, it is not advisable to also be seen as the victim - because then - what sets you apart from the victims you help? You are just the same as themvulnerable. (2024, p. 10)

However, inquiry of this nature is as Denzin et al (2024) say is

expected to reveal the conditions under which one questions the self, invents new ways of forming relationships, and constructs new ways of being. This form of self-governance involves examination of ways one can change oneself (as person and/or as researcher).

(2024, p. 70)

And this is type of work has never been as important as it is now for guidance counsellors working in a world where it's challenging to figure out what truth is and who one can trust.

A Year of Trial in Self-Care

This section is divided into four seasonal reflections. The reflections provide insights into group sessions with the Inner Critics and Inner Champions facilitated by Martha (who also provided notes for each session), with Mary joining as an observer and contributor in Semester 2. The reflections are designed to “attend to the transfer of learning, encouraging clients to apply what they have learned in the group to their situations outside the group” (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005, p. 289). The sessions and reflections are, therefore, “intended to set change in motion, but not necessarily to complete the process within the confines of the scheduled (*session but will*) ... continue to unfold long after the sessions stop” (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005, p. 289).

Autumn

Facilitator: Martha

Context and Introductions

The first facilitated session took place online on Friday, 13th October 2023 at 6pm. The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions were all in attendance, although each logged on individually. The session was quite tense to begin with and there was some resistance to having an external facilitator present. Some of the Inner Critics felt that they could have managed the session themselves. There was a general lack of clarity about the purpose of the session and a sense of weariness. The session took place at the end of what had been a demanding ten-day period, involving two trips to Dublin from Donegal, a third trip to class in Maynooth and a lot of travelling within the northwest in between times. In acknowledging this grueling schedule, the group appeared to reach some common ground.

The session began with introductions, which took some time as there were fifteen in total, seven Inner Critics, seven Inner Champions and Martha (facilitator and notetaker). As time moved on, some of the tension began to lift. It became apparent that this was the first time for a number of the Inner Critics and most of the Inner Champions to have a chance to say who they were. For some it was quite a revelation as they were constructed “in relation with others” (Benson, 2019, p. 3).

Working together

After a short break, the conversation moved to understand what Benson calls a “common need or interest that can be expressed as the group purpose” (2019, p. 4). The M. Ed. required the completion of an inquiry by the end of June 2024. A number of the Inner Critics (*Destroyer*, *The Pit* and *Catastrophiser*, in particular) felt that *Challenger* and *Explorer* had hijacked their slot at the M. Ed. Group Supervision session on the afternoon of 9 October 2023 in Maynooth. The Inner Critics had planned to update all present on efforts to progress the thesis, i.e. the submission of a report or SWOT analysis of their current role as Traveller Education Officer. However, before they could do this, the Inner Critics claim that *Challenger* and *Explorer* announced that the topic had changed to *Self-Care for the Helping Professional*, citing numerous examples of this being the agreed and preferred topic of inquiry since late 2022. The Inner Critics were aggrieved that the process was undemocratic. *Challenger* and *Explorer* agreed that it was a less than ideal to announce topic as they did. However, they also felt that the Inner Critics left them with little options as, hitherto, they dominated conversations and all decisions, including a dearth of decisions when required.

Martha broke the group into pairs (one Inner Critic with one Inner Champion, e.g. *Diamond* with *Explorer* and so forth). The pairs were asked to consider the need to identify suitable processes which might support a better working relationship if the M. Ed. is to be completed this year. The group were to refer to their notes from the Creative Facilitation course they were attending, with particular reference to information on the idea of *process* when working with others in group settings (www.trainingfortransformation.ie, 2023). They were also to consider Beard’s (2018) idea of *collective democracy*.

Following this activity, the group acknowledged that the year ahead might be as Benson (2019) says, “emotionally and physically felt” (2019, p. 5) and that there was a need for a process which would “facilitate group interaction and goal achievement (*and*).... work with the two core experiences of group life - the urge to be separated and the need to belong... the need to be dependent and in relationship with others”

(Benson, 2019, p. 5). There was a sense in the room of the need for *Hope and Healing in a World that is Hurting* (O'Toole, 2024) as a lot of accusations and insults had been aired, mostly by the Inner Critics aimed at the Inner Champions. The Inner Champions on the other hand, employed different tactics to get their way, including manipulation, passive aggression and impulsive decisions offering little opportunities for varying views. Both sides, however, acknowledged the need for reconciliation of sorts at this time, a space for relational trust to grow “built on movements of the human heart, such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive” (Palmer, 2017, page xxv).

Self-care: Personal Insights

It was agreed that self-care had been an issue of personal concern for considerable time. The group had recently reminded an outsider of *Clais*, an Irish word for ditch or hole, but also refers to a middle-aged woman who had ‘let herself go’. Extraordinary efforts at regaining the fitness levels of their twenties in their forties had resulted in injuries and directed more effort towards the likes of “slimming as a positive intervention in the “care of the self”” (O'Toole, 2019, p. 10). The curtains came down on so-called slimming groups the year before after a simple enough question was asked: “What is it Sinéad, what is it? Is it the scones?” (Campbell, 2022, 24/05/2022) or being told that “we all have a lot going on but what do we want from this class, to get bigger? I don't think so.” (O'Toole, 2019, p. 16). The solution seemed straightforward, move more and eat less. Sometimes that would mean eating “substances constructed from novel molecules and using processes never previously encountered in our evolutionary history, substances that can't really be even called ‘food’” (Van Tulleken, 2024, p. 4). Even the Inner Critics could bear no more the “moral and gendered tales, characterised by multiple stories of “success” and “failure,” “before” and “after,” and morality tales centering on “good” and “bad” eating patterns and behaviour” (O'Toole, 2019, p. 14).

It seemed to the group that Western culture has developed finely-tuned systems to develop and sell products which create health issues and yet the culture also berates those who succumb to these systems. As Schwartz (2021) says, “we think we should

be able to discipline our primitive, impulsive, sinful minds through willpower. Countless self help books tell us it's all a matter of boosting our ability to control ourselves and develop more discipline" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 10-11).

Each 'failure' at losing weight drove the Inner Critics pure crazy! The Inner Critics, in turn, drove all the rest mad trying to satisfy the growing "discontent with substandard performances" (Bandura, 1990, p. 409), making more

..... plans....(*more*)lists of what I 'should' be doing

Do enough.

Be enough.

Rest enough.

Eat enough.

Sleep enough.

Work enough.

Walk enough.

Enough! I've had enough.

(Campbell, 2022, 13/06/2022)

The Inner Critics and Inner Champions agreed that the weeks had a similar pattern, try hard all week at everything – work, home, exercise, commute, eating, water (little sleep though) and then crash on Friday, picking through the cinders for the rest of the weekend, often looking a bit like this:

Feeling a bit depressed this Saturday morning, sat up late seeking reassurance in predictable, easy feel-good films, drinking wine and eating crisps. Struggling. Have given too much of my life to work, yet again, and now have to come back from that somehow. Too invested in it... getting fatter every week and can't find a way to turn the corner on it this time. No more 'weight' programmes. They just derail my own efforts. Emotional and tired.

Life is very samey somehow. All work and then some rest at weekends just to make sure that I can work again the following week. No walks. No garden. No outside. And if not now, when? Need to start dinners for this weekend and am still sitting here. Feel very lost somehow.

(Campbell, 2022, 09/07/2022)

As was mentioned at Group Supervision, it was a matter of a continuous “crash and burn” (Campbell, 2023, 09/10/2023), having

..... ploughed my life this way

Turned over a whole history

Looking for the roots of what went wrong

Until my face is ravaged furrowed scarred.

Enough. The job is done.

(Palmer, 2018, p. 24)

It wasn't sustainable, i.e. “capable of being sustained orusing a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). A new approach to living beckons, one free from “a mind-set that cares about weights and measures more than meaning” (Palmer, 2017, p. xxi),

Professional Self-care

A discussion on professional self-care followed. It was agreed that a “qualification, per se, will not guarantee that we become successful, flourishing” (Kahr, 2019, p. 53) guidance counsellors. This work is, according to Kahr (2019)

certainly not for the faint of heart ...(and)... demands not only an indestructible strength of character but, also, a tremendously sensitive skin sturdy without being steely and sensitive without being soppy the capacity to be both substantial and tender, as well as robust and soulful at the very same time.

(2019, p. 11)

A somewhat paradoxical skillset such as this requires “constant nurture and support” (Kahr, 2019, p. 39) throughout one's career if one is to not just survive

but we must also thrive in order to derive true satisfaction from our work. In doing so, we not only bring comfort and fulfillment and meaning to ourselves and to our families but, above all, we become models of hope and inspiration for our (*clients*), who scrutinize our very state of being with much intensity.

(Kahr, 2019, p. xiv)

Kahr (2019) talks about Erikson's (1950)

conflict between generativity and stagnation. The healthy, creative, productive person with a strong ego structure will be able to become highly generative, producing rich and rewarding achievements.

(2019, p. 84)

Walker (2012) refers to Erikson's outlook but also to Jung's viewpoint where he asserts that

we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

(Campbell, 1976, in Walker, 2012, p. 9)

And if we don't find a new way of living out our values in later life, we “must pay for so doing with damage to his soul. (Campbell 1976, in Walker, 2012, p. 9)

Integrity

It seems that the word integrity, from the Latin *integritās*, had made its way into several discussions between the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions in recent years and months, alongside many discussions on values. While it was noted that the IGC's (2020) Code of Ethics requires guidance counsellors “to promote integrity in their practice” (IGC, 2020, p. 1), the session was more concerned with the word in relation to its meaning as

the state or quality of being entire, complete, and unbroken,” as in *integer* or *integral*. Deeper still, integrity refers to something in its “unimpaired, unadulterated, or genuine state, corresponding to its original condition

(Palmer, 2008, p. 8)

In other words, Palmer makes the point (which the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions strongly agree with) that “when we understand integrity for what it is, we stop obsessing over codes of conduct and embark on the more demanding journey toward being whole” (Palmer, 2008, p. 8). If embraced, integrity means that guidance counselling, “*cannot be reduced to technique. ... (that it) ... comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*” (Palmer, 2017, p. 10) (author’s italics). This in turn “requires self-knowledge” (Palmer, 2017, p. 3) and opening up spaces where “we must talk to each other about our inner lives” (Palmer, 2017, p. 12). Palmer (2017) himself says that this is “risky stuff” (2017, p. 12) because, of course, identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials” (Palmer, 2017, p. 13). Integrity offers a space for vulnerability also as “wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life” (Palmer, 2018, p. 16).

Developing a sense of cohesion and wholeness

While there is insufficient space to account for the variety of discussions which took place in relation to the group’s need to develop a sense of integrity, a summary of agreed insights and actions is provided below. It was felt that cohesion was essential if the group was to complete the M. Ed. this year. By cohesion they meant

the attraction that members have for their group and for other members. It is experienced at interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intragroup levels. The members of a cohesive group are accepting of one another, supportive, and inclined to form meaningful relationships in the group.... more inclined to express and explore themselves, to become aware of and integrate hitherto unacceptable aspects of self, and to relate more deeply to others.

(Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 75)

Cohesion would require a certain amount of what Keats called *Negative Capability* or “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Hopkins, 1984, p. 85). In other words, a lot of observation, wonderment and curiosity while avoiding desires to make judgements.

Some strong feelings were voiced in relation to Schwartz’s (2021) Internal Family Systems. The group felt that they simply couldn’t warm to Schwartz and perhaps needed more time to understand his “grandiose” (Schwartz, 2021, p. 3) theory. But essentially, they weren’t looking to change the Inner Critics. Rather, over the years they had come to see that the Inner Critics were in fact fearful and lonely and felt the burden of carrying all the responsibility and worries of life. The Inner Champions, by taking their place alongside the Inner Critics, created a much more secure environment for growth and development and, by shouldering more responsibility, they allowed the Inner Critics some breathing space to consider their roles more fully.

Schwartz’s *parts*, on the other hand, involve Exiles, Managers and Firefighters and qualities when “people access their Self and call them the 8 C’s: compassion, curiosity, calm, clarity, courage, connectedness, confidence, creativity” (Brenner, Schwartz, Becker, 2023, p. 1292). The group disagreed with Schwartz’s (2021) assertion that “we need a new paradigm that convincingly shows that humanity is inherently good and thoroughly interconnected” (2021, p. 3). Humanity may be interconnected, as shallow that may be at times. However, it can’t be described as inherently good as we find ourselves time and again

feeling stuck about many things, including how to respond to the world's nonstop saga of suffering: the ongoing carnage in the Middle East, the endless episodes of ... killings..., the racism deep in the DNA of my native land, our collective blind eye to radical economic injustice and climate change...

(Palmer, 2018, p. 111)

On it goes, “Man's inhumanity to man” (BBC, 2024) as Burns wrote in 1784! Furthermore, Schwartz (2021) also writes that “the time has come for a new view of

human nature that releases the collaboration and caring that live in our hearts” (2021, p. 3). The group said that two-thousand years ago Christianity was a “new view”, with very similar objectives.

Compassion-focused approach

A lifetime of attacks on the Self had left their mark on the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions in terms of “an absence of any sense of personal worth. As Corry & Tubridy state, “the mind at war with itself does a better job of inflicting maximum pain and is more of a threat to itself than any outside agent” (2001, p. 18). The Inner Critics, as we said earlier, shouldered much of the responsibilities in keeping the Self on track. When the Self failed, the Inner Critics came out in force and “attacked ...mercilessly. That attack would trigger a part that felt totally bereft, lonely, empty, and worthless.” (Schwartz, 2021, p. 16). This would lead to one of two things. Firstly, the need to avoid punishment and criticism might, according to Bandura (1986) lead to increased output with a view to achieving success. Secondly, for the Inner Critics, it would lead to the ‘activities’ and states portrayed by O’Toole (2024) in the Freeze area at Figure 3.

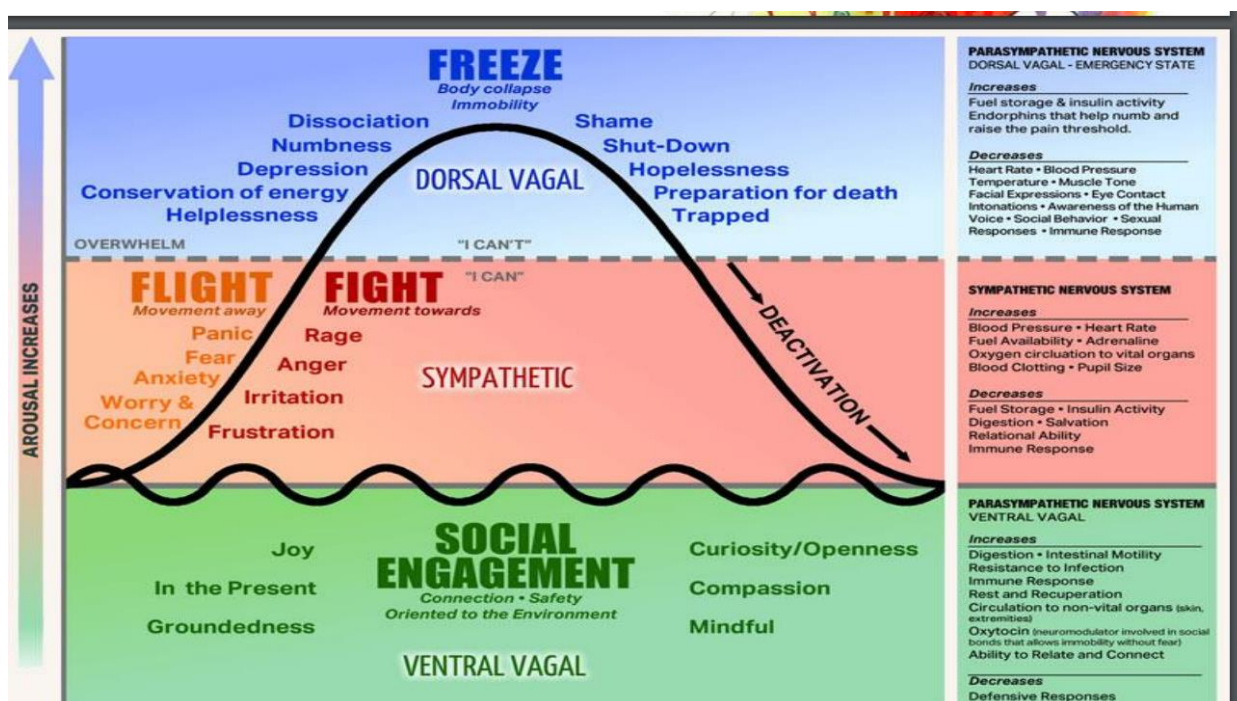


Figure 3: Flight, Fight and Freeze (O’Toole, 2024)

There was a brief discussion on emotional regulation and how Gilbert (2010,2014, 2022) suggests three main types of emotional regulation: threat (insecurity, danger

sensed, self-protection, protection of others), drive (doing and achieving) and soothing (safety and contentment).

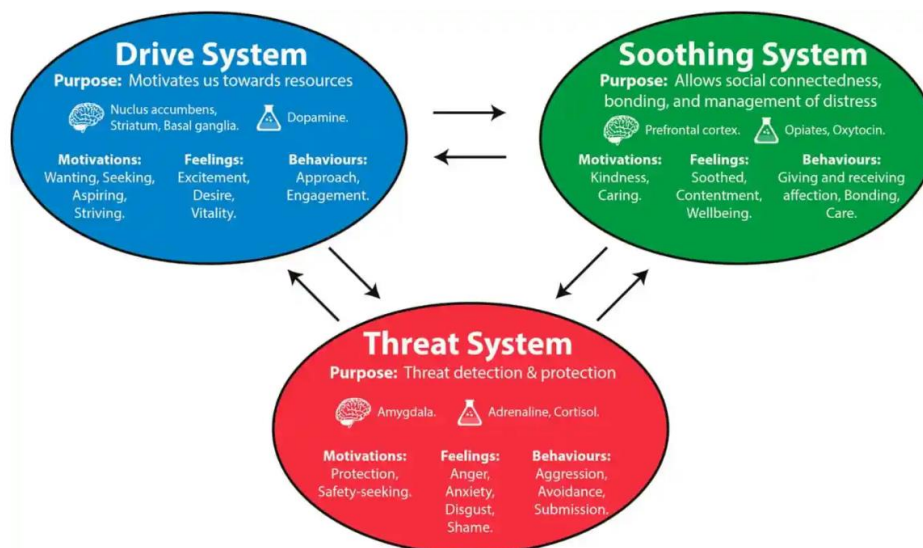


Figure 4: Compassion Focused Therapy: Interaction Between Three Emotion Regulation Systems

(questpsychologyservices.co.uk/compassion-focused-therapy, 2024)

The threat system overrides all others if activated, as survival is at stake. It seems that the body also carries unconscious memories of times when soothing was not available in the face or aftermath of threat. Individuals can often sense a conflict between emotions, motives and strategies, struggling to ‘feel’, tolerate or express their emotions. In seeking “coherence, familiarity, predictability in their self-identities submissive or aggressive self-identities can resist change” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 32). If as Gilbert (2010) states, emotions of contentment and safeness (as opposed to safety-seeking which is “linked to the threat system” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 49)) were more strongly associated with lower depression, anxiety and stress” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 5), it is in our interest to divert our attention from threat to contentment and safeness using mindfulness or other practices.

Punishment, Gilbert et al (2013) claims, is not a good change agent while compassion and self-compassion is. Gilbert (2010) also links service to others with feeling good

while evidencing a lack of value to others as one of the symptoms of depression. Martha suggested therefore that, as part of the inquiry this year, the Inner Critics and Inner Champions, work on *service to one another* over the coming months with a view to decreasing the Drive and the Threat Systems and increasing the Soothing System, as suggested by Gilbert (2010, 2014, 2022). Identifying the traits of the Soothing System might take some time, given the prominence of the other two systems to date. Increasing observation, oscillation including meditation and journaling might be a good place to begin. The group agreed to meet again in mid-January 2024.

The Autumn session ended with an extract from *The Ponds*, by Mary Oliver (1992) as they moved off towards the dark months of Winter.

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled—
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.

I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.

I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing—
that the light is everything—that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and falling. And I do.”

(Oliver, 1992)

Winter

Facilitator: Martha

Observer: Mary

Overview since previous session

The second session was due to take place in mid-January. However, due to adverse weather conditions (RTE, 2024), the session was moved to the last Friday in January 2024. Winter was coming to an end and there were small but significant signs of light coming back into the day. Quite a lot of time had elapsed since the Autumn session. There were, however, mixed feelings about whether a lot had happened since the October session.

The Inner Champions continued to plough their efforts into work with frequent statements such as “a monumental day’s work on all fronts! So happy this evening. If only every day could be like today. Just need to apply the same level of work to thesis now (Campbell, 2023, 28/11/2023). The Inner Critics tried to maintain a ‘balance’ of sorts and *on the same day* wrote “so disappointed with myself this semester. Don’t think I’ve achieved anything at all in the last few months” (Campbell, 2023, 28/11/2023). The journal entries followed a familiar pattern of

typically report(*ing*) four times as many bad events as good events suggesting not so much that we experience more negative than positive events (we don’t), but rather that negative emotional events remain more vivid in our minds”

(Gaffney, 2012, p. 67).

The Pit, Destroyer, Catastrophiser and Procrastinator were particularly active and equally exhausted expending “far more energy trying to avoid or escape a bad mood than trying to create or prolong a good mood” (Gaffney, 2012, p. 66), often beginning the day “since very early, with a list of things to beat (*ourselves*) up with. So difficult!”. (Campbell, 2023, 12/11/2023). Many attempts were made to distract efforts from engaging with the course, especially in the days before sessions at Maynooth, such as “feel very lost today and torn about Monday. Just don’t want to go. Need more sleep. Such self-loathing and self-doubt these days, awful” (Campbell, 2023, 08/12/2023). A disorientating and deeply moving incident in January 2024 (involving

others which we won't go into here on ethical grounds), highlighted a need for the Inner Critics, in particular, to have greater trust in themselves and in others.

Sleep disturbance and the lack of sleep continued to be a challenge for the group. Years of insomnia and sleep disturbance, always on, always vigilant, was part of normal life for the Inner Critics and The Inner Champions. *Destroyer* pointed out to the room that little had changed since 17 November 2017, when seeking a quick-fix at a visit to a herbalist was instead met with the statement "no amount of herbs will help, until you change your lifestyle and get enough sleep" (Campbell, 2023, 15/12/2023). *Routine*, however, contradicted this by reminding everyone that they were now more accepting of disturbed sleep, of not trying to change it but rather developed a greater awareness around the need for routine and an understanding of what worked best to get good sleep. *Compassion* reiterated Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison's (2016) challenge to helping professionals to lose "one's innocence about the assertive need for self-care" (2016, p. 5) and ask oneself "how much sleep deprivation should the practitioner endure to adequately prepare to help the client..... the next day?" (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2016, p. 7).

Other challenges included the pain of "our culture relentlessly assault(*ing*) our souls with noise, frenzy, consumerism" (Palmer, 2018, p. 138) from October onwards. The Inner Champions had quite a time holding *The Pit* back from saying out loud that ".....every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should! (Dickens, 2013, p. 6). Eventually, *The Pit* succumbed to a headcold just before Christmas to make sure that it really did become a celebration to be endured rather than enjoyed. And birthdays! Three birthday celebrations and Christmas in five weeks. How much cheer could one body cope with in the darkest days of winter.

Several attempts by the Inner Critics were made to lay down some 'New Year' resolutions for Spring, identify some "prescriptions ...from the outside" (Maté, 2019, p. xi). For *Diamond*, it was excruciatingly difficult to let go of the idea that instant

metamorphosis back to the body of a twenty-year-old was not possible ...if only *Destroyer* would do their job. All that was required was more effort, surely. *Explorer*, however, reminded *Diamond* that this year was an experiment in looking at what Maté's (2019) "transformation from within" (2019, p. xi) might look like, transformation that might bring "healing – the coming to integrity, to wholeness – of what is already there..... and a quest for truth" (Maté, 2019, p. xi). Like Milner (2011), *Explorer* found that there was "a lot to be learnt about the unrecognized parts of oneself from observation" (2011, p. 91) and that "the real response to self-care have been the pieces (we) have started to catch" (Campbell, 2023, 16/11/2023).

Each of the Inner Critics and Inner Champions agreed that they found it challenging to think as a group member having had a lifetime of thinking about their own agenda. However, the group felt that the concept of oscillation or negative capability as Keats wrote, "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Bion, 1984, p. 126) was working well as it began to build a picture of what the world looked like from the various perspectives, including those of the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions. It was observed that the Inner Critics found it difficult to step back while the Inner Champions found it difficult to take the lead. Anxiety, fear, bewilderment, a sense of failure with what has been achieved this semester and a general dread of the future were also evident during the session. All agreed that they felt very exposed at the thoughts of revealing their thoughts! In other words, there was a lot that was the same as before, but chinks of light were appearing as new practices began to form.

Compassionate practice

Martha was curious to know what, if any, efforts the group had with attempting to decrease the Drive and the Threat Systems (Gilbert, 2010, 2014, 2022) and increase the Soothing System. One of the most startling revelations for the group had been to realise that eating and drinking were not soothing activities. They were in fact part of the drive system. While they had long recognised the link between emotions and food, they had always viewed eating and drinking as attempts by the body to soothe the system. But they could now see that it was an attempt by the Drive system to secure

resources in the event of a threat. This revelation changed everything because the group realised that they needed to identify, develop and promote soothing activities given that they had very few they could rely on at present. There was also a realisation that the Inner Critics were particularly adept at anticipating and identifying threats, peddling hard to engage the Drive system at full speed when required. The group decided to have a deeper look into compassion as a “cornerstone” (Stalker & Hambly, 2023, p. 63) to self-care.

The group had embraced Gilbert & Van Gordon’s (2023) suggestion that a “key part of skilful compassion is having clarity as to its functions and definition (2023, p. 2398). The Dalai Lama, they learned, defines compassion as “*sensitivity* to the suffering of self and others, with a deep *commitment* to try to relieve it” (in Gilbert, 2010, p. 3). *Connected* was particularly interested to see that compassion can be extended towards others *and* towards oneself. One can also receive compassion from others *and* from oneself. As Gilbert (2010) states “feeling cared for, accepted and having a sense of belonging and affiliation with others is fundamental to our physiological maturation and wellbeing” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 4). *Challenger* noted that “the courage we bring to suffering is crucial ...*(and that)* ...courage is not a form of fearlessness. It is the ability to hold one’s caring intention in the face of fear” (Gilbert (2022), p. 11). Compassion, according to Gilbert (2022b), 2022) requires “wise and courageous responses and actions” (2022b, p. 261) as “suffering *by itself* can be associated with increased distress and depression” (Gilbert, 2022b, p. 260). Compassion is, therefore, an active rather than a passive engagement with suffering.

Endeavouring to soothe the system

Meadow girl acknowledged that, while the mind was still quite busy, the body had slowed down and was much calmer. As Martha was aware, the group had found it extremely challenging initially to settle the mind and body over the busy Winter period. Often, they would find themselves feeling “like a wild horse being tamed, that familiar feeling again and not sure if I want to be tamed” (Campbell, 2023, 13/11/2023). As a result, the group invited Martha to meditate with them in December 2023. *Routine* remembered that at the first meditation where Martha was present, Martha had stood

...inside the doorway, holding a wide wooden bowl. The bowl appears to be empty. She has an anxious look on her face. She is either waiting for someone to come or worried about something.

(Campbell, 2023, 15/12/2023)

As Winter progressed, the group asked Martha to sit with them. By the time the January 2024 session arrived, Mary was also a regular participant at the meditations. Martha always sat to the right and Mary to the left.



Figure 5: The Holy Trinity

Rublev, A. (2024)

The three of them together formed a much more formidable container, a kind of Andrei Rublev trinity (<https://www.stthomasderry.org/rublevs-trinity-explained>, 2024), which was able to offset mindless chatter. Conversations also developed at this time between all present: what was it like *being* Martha?; what was it like *being* Mary?; Was there such a thing as *bad doing* or *good doing*?; Was it better *to be* than *to do*?; What did Martha do when she *wasn't doing*?; What did Mary do when she *wasn't being*? They had invited Jesus into the group but for whatever reason that didn't work out. Neither did a return to the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions by themselves. The triad provided stability and the meditation sessions worked well for all involved, once Martha and Mary were present.

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises

Although Mary met the group quite often at meditation sessions, she was interested in hearing more about the journey that the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions were on. *Explorer* explained some of the background to the inquiry to Mary. Mary also heard about a ‘chance’ conversation with their tutor concerning Ignatian spirituality. A “book that’s been sitting on the floor here which I was meant to have read... called *Pathways to a Decision* (Maher 2020)” (Campbell, 2023, 14/11/2023), had led the group towards a framework which greatly supports self-care and, it seemed, also addresses the group’s spiritual needs.

Catastrophiser had been drawn to the title of the book, *Pathways to a Decision* (Maher, 2020). Crippled by indecision for quite some time, even about the simplest things, *Catastrophiser* had wanted to find a rubric or a guide which supports easier decision-making. *Wise-Scholarly* interjected, wanting to share that Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (Ignatius, 1521, 1736) were developed by St. Ignatius, who defined *spiritual exercise* quite broadly as “any manner of examining our conscience, of meditating, contemplating, praying mentally or vocally, or finally of performing any other spiritual works, as we shall afterwards declare” (1736, p. 2). The group were quite taken with this definition as it gave them options. They also liked “the Ignatian paradigm for education ... experience, reflection and action. for Ignatius it would be ‘I learn, therefore I am’” (Maher, 2020, p. 69). *Wise-Scholarly* could see themselves in that quote. Ignatius, according to *Compassion*, was ahead of his time because he saw how emotions and experiences are our teachers, if only we would become more aware. Ignatius (1736) said that “when we are mov’d, greater Reverence is demanded of us” (Ignatius, 1736, p. 2) than “acts of understanding... reason, and of the will” (Ignatius, 1736, p. 2).

The group explained to Mary and Martha that, as part of the inquiry, they were following several spiritual exercises as outlined in Maher (2020) (See Appendix 1).

They had initiated several regular practices beginning with *lectio divina*, a combination of scripture or other spiritual readings with an opportunity to experience

a 'deeper brush', a way to go to those deeper places; perhaps to shed baggage we no longer need, perhaps to pick up some life-giving luggage for the journey of life. The prospect of going into the deep can make us nervous. Sacred Space, though, accompanies us in that experience. It acts as a kind of navigator for the journey.....

(Irish Jesuits, 2024, p. 7)

However, it was suggested during a Group Supervision session on 11 December 2023, that perhaps it might be better to use the idea of "twenty minutes of kindness twice a day so as to ensure that *lectio divina* and other soothing practices didn't move into the Drive Zone" (Campbell, 2023, 11/12/2023), a tick-the-box activity rather than a healing process and the group agreed that this had been a useful modification.

Repetitive practice and decision-making

Martha was curious to hear more from *Catastrophiser* about decision-making. *Catastrophiser* explained that key to Ignatian spiritual practices is repetition. The more often we engage in them, the more we see "where our hearts were stirred" (Maher, 2020, p. 7), the more comfortable we feel in our own space rather than a space we might think we should be in.

Wise-Scholarly interjected again to say that it would seem that Ignatius (1736) used his family tradition, specifically the family crest which had two wolves on its crest to develop a particular 'formula' in self-awareness. He used the idea of a bad wolf and a good wolf to discern between a good spirit (which aligns with the true self) which has our best interests at heart and a bad spirit (which aligns with the false self) which damages our peace and sense of ourselves. For example, trust would align with the good spirit and cynicism would naturally align with a bad spirit. (Appendix 1 has further examples). Discernment, like compassion, is therefore, an active process where we consider how we are 'feeding' the good spirit (trust) or the bad spirit (cynicism).

Catastrophiser feels that learning to *discern* may help reduce the need for constant vigilance, as well as make better decisions.



Figure 6: Ignatian Family Crest

(<https://sjjtoledo.org/wolf-and-kettle/>)

Connected was also keen to see how discernment worked. A large part of guidance counselling is about self-awareness and a belief that “change begins from the inside out” (Samaras, 2011, p. 19). Guidance counsellors also need to be mindful that “as important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our (work) – and living – becomes” (Palmer, 2017, p. 6).

Routine, naturally, was most interested in the repetitive nature of the practices. At this stage, they had become accustomed to the Daily Examen as a

way to review the day, helping us to make reflection part of our busy lives. By taking time to reflect on the complex and often hectic experience of our day, we see things differently. This is the paradox: taking time to look back allows us to

appreciate the experience more. Often, we see things we have missed, realise the importance of small moments of light, and come to appreciate the gift that is each day.

(McManus, 2024, p. 2)

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions said that they had briefly looked into decision-making, which involves four steps: finding peace and quiet, finding out information which will support a decision, making a decision and acting on the decision (See Appendix 1). The group said that they have been flexing their 'decision-making' muscles using the processes of discernment and decision-making to decide on small things, daily things that come up. They are anticipating several vacancies for which they are qualified over the coming months and will soon have some big decisions to make in terms of their career direction. They hope that by Springtime they will be comfortable enough "sifting through our impulses, motives, and options" (Nouwen et al., 2013, p. xvii) in "ordinary life" (Nouwen et al., 2013, p. xviii), which will mean that they are in a better position to try out Ignatian decision-making processes with bigger decisions.

Spiritual Direction

By the time the Winter session took place, the group had asked Mary if she could elaborate on the line "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). Mary suggested a series of six sessions of Spiritual Direction with the group and arranged to meet them after their morning session with Martha, which she sat in on. The group were a bit apprehensive about having someone tell them what they should believe in and very afraid that they would turn into a *Holy Joe*. But Mary assured them that "from an Ignatian perspective, it is better to speak of spiritual accompaniment than spiritual direction, and to call a spiritual director, a spiritual 'companion' (Moons, 2020, p. 20). From her perspective, she said that Spiritual Direction or Spiritual Accompaniment involved listening

to the other without fear and to discover the intimate, divine connections within your own stormy life history. It means to help others discover that their questions

are human questions, their search is a human search, and their restlessness is part of the restlessness of the human heart.

(Nouwen et al, 2011, p. 11)

The group felt more at ease when Mary said

You seek answers to what cannot be fully known” I don't know either but I will help you search. I offer no solutions, no final answers. I am as weak and limited as you are... Together, we form community. Together we continue the spiritual search.

(Nouwen et al, 2011, p. 11)

They all agreed to meet back after Easter 2024 for the Spring reflection, preferably with a final draft of the inquiry for review. The group ended with the reading of a poem by Seán Dunne (1994).

Sisters

Martha

Her mind a packed picnic basket,

A woman so busy she calls

Boys by brothers' names and longs

For hours alone in olive groves.

Her dreamy sister hunkers near the low-

Voiced visitor whose talk she'd follow

If goats were gathered and basil plucked.

Mary

To sit in silence and listen

As pots chortle and oil in urns

Warms near a sunlit doorway- An act more simple than frisking

Crumbs from aprons, or arching

A fine finger in trails of dust:

And yet like this to enter history.

(Dunne, 1994, p. 52)

Spring

Facilitator: Martha

Observer: Mary

Overview since previous session

The Spring session took place after Easter on 16th April 2024. The group felt that they had gone from “peacock...(to) ...feather duster” (Palmer, 2018, p. 96) since the last session, having left the January session full of themselves, full of thoughts that a submission would be easy, that they’d have all sorted in no time at all, draft submission ready by Easter. But that had been, in hindsight, a very familiar trap where *some success* was logged internally as, *move on, you’ve sorted that now*, sabotaging any possibility of finishing what had been started. The Inner Critics and Inner Champions came to the conclusion that they were on a hamster wheel of sorts, that when things were going well for them, they always managed to create a situation where they plunged themselves back into feelings of “shame and self-criticism and/or self-hatred and find it enormously difficult to be open to the kindness of others or to be kind to themselves” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 13).

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions had, at the end of 2023, touched on how emotions guide our motives. The Inner Critics, in particular, were rather taken with Gilbert’s (2010, 2014, 2022) three main types of emotional regulation: threat, drive and soothing as the types provided an understanding for what were sometimes inexplicable behaviours. The group liked CFT because it recognises the complexity of the human being. They particularly liked Gilbert (2010) because he acknowledged that “we are not “unified selves” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 30) and that “although we often think of ourselves as somehow whole and integrated individuals this is an illusion” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 31). This was the group’s story!. Finally, a realisation that there are many “different potentials within us and it is really how we cultivate them and integrate them that is the challenge of life journeys” (Gilbert, 2022a, p. 25). *Compassion* was delighted to have found a therapy to help the group in this work as “what enables us to cope with our multiple (helpful or destructive) potentials for thought, feelings and deeds.....open up and explore new potentials within us and integrate them into our sense of self.....is compassion” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 38).

Wise-Scholarly outlined what the group had learned about CFT since the previous session. They now understood that CFT is a “multimodal” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 5) psychological model or system of psychotherapy. CFT incorporates techniques from cognitive behavioural therapy with concepts from evolutionary psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, Buddhist psychology and neuroscience (Gilbert, 2010, 2014, 2022). The group wondered if there anything that isn’t part of CFT after hearing that it integrates

knowledge from different disciplines, from anthropology through to genetics, philosophy to neuroscience, because knowledge of the human mind, and how to help it, does not reside in one discipline or one school of therapy

(Gilbert, 2022, p. 3).

Compassion-focused Therapy, Evolution and Biopsychosocial

“We could read about this topic for the rest of this year” said *Procrastinator* and *The Pit* who were both taken with Gilbert’s (2010) many insights into the complexities of shame, which supported greater compassion for themselves as group members, instead of the usual blame game. *Compassion* provided an overview of an evolutionary and biopsychosocial model for shame, adapted from Gilbert (2002) (see Figure 7 below).

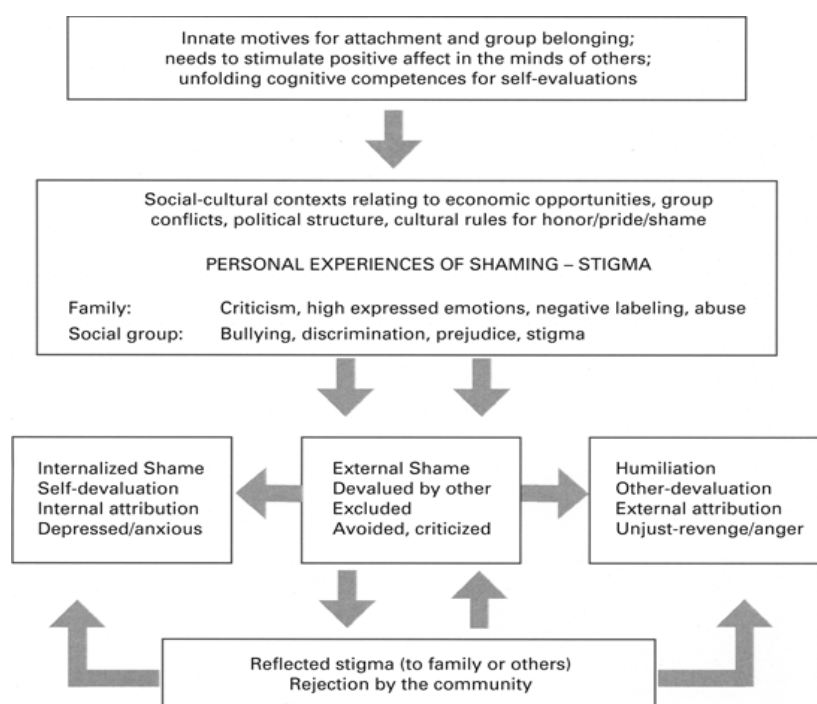


Figure 7: An evolutionary and biopsychosocial model for shame (Gilbert 2010, p 84).

The group were struck by the breadth of study that Gilbert (2010) had engaged in attempting to support those who “can cognitively or logically generate “alternative thoughts” but hear them in their head as cold, detached or aggressive” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 15). The Inner Critics and Inner Champions knew exactly what Gilbert (2010) meant. No matter what they did, the narrative was generally *do more, not good enough, it's a load of rubbish, try harder, who'd read that....* On and on it went.

Martha wondered about how the group was getting on with standing “back from (*their*) thoughts, feelings and problems and treat (*themselves*) with more compassion and kindness, as well as using insights, logic, problem-solving exposures and “mind training”” (Gilbert, 2010, p 16). Once again, *Compassion* spoke and noted that the group members had embraced the system and were attracted by its flexibility and the choices it offered *each* of the group members. Gilbert (2010), they said, acknowledged that our brains developed over many millions of years “in a series of stages.... many of which conflict” (2010, p. 29) from an “old brain that has various emotions and motivations that we share with other animals” (2010, p. 29) to the new brain which has the “abilities of thinking, reflecting, observing, and forming a self-identity” (2010, p. 29). We can, said *Wise-Scholarly*, conclude that the physiology we have inherited is inadequate, that “our brains are actually difficult and tricky; they are not well designed” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 60). However, Gilbert (2010) importantly asserts that while much of what goes on in our minds is not of our design and is “therefore *not our fault*” (2010, p. 62), it is our *responsibility* to find a way through our difficulties and challenges. This changed the Inner Critics’ and Inner Champions’ sense of agency in themselves and opened up possibilities of being able to address thoughts, feelings and behaviours that negatively impacted in their lives, without blame and without shame.

The group noted that CFT and Ignatian practices complement each other. *Explorer*, was interested in how Gilbert (2022) sees that we need to distinguish between what we want and what we need. Part of this work is

coming to understand and live a meaningful, values-focused life that enables us to be flexible in how we respond to its challenges. Flexibility and function are important for all systems, including our minds and bodies”

(Gilbert, 2022, p. 15).

Aloney also liked how CFT linked in well with Ignatian practices as it too supported “the importance of guided discovery, and helping people discover their own intuitive wisdoms, strengths, and solutions” (Gilbert, 2022, p. 16). *Routine* provided a few examples of how the Inner Critics and Inner Champions had integrated CFT into their daily practices.

- They began to converse with the right hand (Martha) and the left hand (Mary) when considering various options or small decisions, i.e. what would Martha (right hand) say to this? What would Mary (left hand) say to this?
- They tried out a variety of letter writing scenarios such as writing letters to and from others with whom there may have been unresolved issues or indeed to oneself in an attempt to resolve particular conflicts or questions or deal with shameful events that couldn't be easily verbalised.
- One of the most successful interventions identified by the group which supports all of the characters was what they call 'refill' or pitstop. This is where one or more of the group members, for example *The Pit*, says that they are all out of courage. An imaginary Gilbert (2022) or someone else comes along, opens an imaginary cap or top on the head and pours courage into *The Pit*. Others might like a top up of energy, wisdom, and so on. The group members have put this into use on a regular basis to great effect.

Martha was delighted to see so much progress had been made on supporting an opening up to caring for ourselves and others and allowing others to care for us as part of the healing process within CFT.

Losing and finding our way

Experimenting with CFT was a feature of Spring for the the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions. But so too was a retreat back to a “peddling hard” approach to work. On the other hand, *Compassion* took the view that so many things at work were new to the group as it was a new role for them and for the University. Everything took longer to complete this time than it will again.

The group were also conscious of the need for rest and processing, as “one cannot be simply a distant, disembodied or objective observer” (Friel, 2024, p. 132). They often felt moved in good and in bad ways to stories that were “emotionally demanding listening to narratives of social injustice, inequality and powerlessness” (Friel, 2024, p. 137). The Inner Critics and Inner Champions often find themselves conflicted about education. On the one hand, there is nothing like the wonder of education and the confidence it provides. But there is also the threat that it will dilute individuality, culture and identity. Conversations relating to the “Inishbofin skulls” which were finally returned from Trinity College Dublin to be buried with other family members (Walsh, 2022), the session with a student at Maynooth University whose project involved looking at indigenous knowledge and education and employment (Campbell, 2024, 12/02/2024) and a training session on race equality highlighted, yet again, the unfairness of life and of the education sector which can at times, knowingly or unknowingly, destroy communities and ethnic minorities.

At times like this, *Compassion* reminds the group of the need to move to the riverbank and watch the current as

being present helps to view emotions as they are: fluid, transitory, temporary states which can be observed and considered but not reacted upon. (*We*) found the images of the undercurrent and of watching the undercurrent from the riverbank very useful ...(as an)... approach to (*our*) predicament. (*We*) have choices and (*we*) choose to engage in certain emotions or (*we*) don't. The greater (*our*) self-awareness, the greater (*our*) ability to choose particular emotions. Hayes (2016) suggests that psychological flexibility and understanding of oneself must include compassion and love and this is critical if one is to engage with others in a compassionate and understanding workspace.

(Campbell, 2019, p. 7)

Explorer said that they had mixed feelings about Spring. Firstly, they had a feeling that all was lost, that the group had abandoned all efforts in self-care in springtime. On the

other hand, there was a sense of connection with a journey that hadn't begun this year but rather had been a movement for some time. It was inevitable that the terrain would be mixed. As Drennan (2021) says,

Travelling can be adventurous, creative and an opening to something new. It can remove restrictions, but it can be risky in some conditions. Travel can evoke tension until we have arrived at the desired destination, calling for patience and the willingness to wait. Travelling can be a formative experience, facilitating growth and freedom as we learn more about ourselves, but it can also be a frustrating experience.

(Drennan, 2021, p. 12)

Being and Doing

Other work was underway at this time also. Martha told the group that she could see that they were slowly beginning to challenge their assumptions on the value of being and doing. As mentioned before, the group had viewed Mary as the someone who "sits passively by Jesus' feet and is praised, while Martha, weary from her multiple exertions, is left not only to do all the work" (Macnamara, 2019, p. 596). However, since getting to know Martha and Mary through these sessions and through meditation sessions, the Inner Critics and The Inner Champions could see that both Martha and Mary are involved in both being and doing.

Patterson (2017) and Macnamara (2019) suggest that middle adulthood is a place where where the group often "feel the press of obligations...love of God and love of neighbour are completely intertwined" (Patterson, 2017, p. 121). In coming to know Martha over the months, the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions say that they have become more compassionate towards frequent feelings where, like Martha, they "are worried and distracted by many things" (Patterson, 2017, p. 120). The invitation that is being extended to Martha and to the group is towards a "finer level of discernment: What is it time for *now*? "There is need of only one thing" (Patterson, 2017, p. 120).

Similarly, the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions have broadened their understanding of Mary's choice which is "not the right one in all times and places, but she is attending to what is most important at this moment. Martha's practical wisdom and service are still essential to the community that depends on her. But for now stillness and listening are called for" (Patterson, 2017, p. 120). The group consider if they, like Mary and Martha have entered a new stage in life where they are "being invited to discern a shift in vocation" (Patterson, 2017, p. 121).

In terms of self-care, the group now feel that particular patterns of behaviour in life to date, such as, peddling at full speed followed by 'crash and burn' approach, an all or nothing outlook is an "habitual way of living into ... vocation is not what is needed at the moment" (Patterson, 2017, p. 121). Rather, a new way of living is brought into focus as they turned to Mary for guidance. Ignatian spiritual exercises supported the group's "process of maturing into our own unique individuality ...*(and that)*... when we own our specific individuality, our purpose in life, everything else falls into place" (Maher, 2020, p. 22).

The group also came to understand *doing* better. After all "but for Martha, the visitor might never have stopped in the village nor entered her house" (Macnamara, 2019, p. 597). Jesus' last words in the preceding text were to "go and do" (Luke 10:37). Ignatian spirituality would say that embracing "life in all its fullness and goodness" (Maher, 2020, p. 21) includes "gratitude ...by serving others and using the gifts" given to us (Maher, 2020, p. 21). It is, perhaps, suggested that *doing* is followed by the *being, sitting and listening*. Macnamara (2019) says that "listening ..is .. the first step for discipleship" (2019, p. 601). In other words, disciples *do* but disciples also *listen*.

The group recount their experience in using Ignatian practices in reaching a decision about whether or not to apply to a permanent role with a higher salary for which they had the necessary qualifications. They had anticipated the vacancy and had used the time since January to discern what to do. As with the previous year, in applying for the current role as Traveller Education Officer, once the group tapped into their unique

interests and gifts and sense of vocation, the option became clear. The group found it so refreshing to finally have a system or process for decision-making which is not an 'economic' tool but rather one that asks the heart what it wants.

An entire week of the groups' Easter holidays was lost writing up a useless pile of words called Methodology which were binned. Precious days when the ground normally beckons the group into its arms. This year, however, with an inquiry underway, the garden had to make do with onions and garlic and a few small beds for lettuces. There was relief in just making the decision to leave any significant efforts in the garden this year. Overall the session ended in regret, disappointment that self-care was as elusive as ever, almost, and overall a sense of lostness and tiredness. No rest in sight.

The group ended with a short verse from John O'Donoghue (2007).

For Freedom

As a bird soars high
In the free holding of the wind,
Clear of the certainty of ground,
Opening the imagination of wings
Into the grace of emptiness
To fulfil new voyagings,
May your life awaken
To the call of its freedom.

(O'Donoghue, 2007, p. 48)

Summer

Facilitator: Martha

Observer: Mary

A long, slow end to the year

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions didn't know quite where to begin with Summer. It is sometimes portrayed as "a time of intense ... activity when we feel confident, energised and engaged in our workplace or in our studies" (Campbell, 2024a) but this year, it had been a strange mix, a bit like the weather. The season extended beyond May, June and July, with a late harvest in August due to the lack of sunshine (RTE, 2024a). The group often felt that all they were doing was wandering through a place McCormack (2015) calls "challenging territory in which learners have to live with confusion and doubt and the loss of certainties and identities on the road to new learning and new possibilities" (2015, p. 211). *Compassion* and *Routine* had been busy placating the rest of the group and encouraging "tolerance for ... this ... process of confusion and vulnerability" (McCormack, 2015, p. 211). The group had anticipated time for thesis in May and June but with each new meeting or event, hope turned to dread to paralysis. Apathy was everywhere, spreading like a treacled river on the group's path forward (not that this was visible at work, mind you, where it was business as usual and even better than usual at times). The Inner Critics admitted that they had reverted to their old ways. *Procrastinator* employed the *minimiser* effect. "Sure, you will get it together in no time" (Campbell, 2024, 23/08/2024) was a common encouragement from *Procrastinator* who made sure that no time emerged as a good time. And in hindsight, the clue was in "you" will get there, not "I" will get there which the group had insisted they use this year as part of the inquiry, moving from a stance of laying blame to accepting responsibility. The result of this was that the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions ground to a halt, as if frozen solid in a state of terror as time disappeared through their fingers like fine grains of sand, right before their eyes. The Inner Champions reverted to familiar patterns where they "handed the steering wheel over to the Inner Critics" (Campbell, 2024, 15/05/2024) at the beginning of May 2024 and, in truth, didn't get it back for the rest of the inquiry, at least not for any length of time to be effective.

The situation was further complicated by various work projects finishing off before Summer. There were family illnesses, family funerals, State Examinations and teenagers on holidays. By the middle of June 2024, despite the long days, light was fading on the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions ever submitting anything. The group, in conversation with their tutor (Campbell, 2024, 14/06/2024), were reluctant to give up on the inquiry. Yes, they could throw a report of some kind together or a reflection of some kind, but what was the point in that? But most of all, having been together on the journey this year, the group strongly felt that they were “inseparable from the inquiry and outcomes” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 89).

Mary observed that this time last year neither she nor Martha nor the Inner Critics nor the Inner Champions had existed, and for some time they had struggled with one another but here they all were defending the group from annihilation for the sake of efficiency. Now, isn't this constructivism in practice, she asked? *Wise-Scholarly* acknowledged that there was, as Denzin et al (2024) states, “the interplay of parts... (*seeking*)... the essence of wholeness” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 88) and that this was an unfolding process, one which was in keeping with the idea that “the processes of interpretation” (Denzin et al, 2024, p. 104) were as important as the methods used in the inquiry. All agreed with Palmer (2018) when he said that “writing is not about filling (*our*) head with ideas, then downloading them to the page.writing is an unfolding of what's going on inside (*us*) as (*we*) talk to (*ourselves*) “ (2018, p. 4). The group desperately wanted to unfold their thoughts onto paper but, for all the reasons known and unknown, writing something useful proved to be very difficult.

An extension to the submission date was sought and granted until end-August 2024. The Inner Champions placated the Inner Critics with words like

It's good for us to know what it *feels* like to be in that position where we have to ask for help and support over and above what others need. Isn't this what our job is about? Making sure students ask for what is available to them? And besides would the Inner Critics or Inner Champions ever advise a student; *No, please go and flog yourself until your half-dead and throw us in something any piece of software could have written*. Because, here's the thing, the inquiry is

about self-care. Therefore, care of the self must be a priority, over and above submission deadlines. Otherwise, the inquiry is inauthentic and false. Logically, this was correct, but it didn't stop the feelings of shame, failure, weakness and regret all the same and a dread of *yet* another Summer without a proper rest.

(Campbell, 2024, 16/06/2024)

This was all part of the learning this year. Another few weeks of distractions of different kinds, including holidays and various appointments. The group resumed work on the inquiry in mid-July, alongside work and family life. There was much reading and much writing, enough for twenty submissions on a wide variety of topics but alas no submission for an inquiry on self-care in sight and it was coming up to the end of August. In a message to a fellow M. Ed. Student, *The Pit* described a typical attempt at writing, as follows:

I am frozen here in fear, reserving my energies. I want to cry. But I have to write. I'm too tired to write. I'm too anxious to rest. Maybe cry. I try a meditation but Mary and Martha are nowhere in sight. I ask Gilbert to come with an urn full of potions and I lift the cap on my head. I'm all out of hope and courage and I need a refill. Gilbert happily pours into my head from on top. Hope and courage begins to fill from the feet up through the body. I wonder how he's able to lift the urn and the hope and courage and pour and smile and laugh. I hope he doesn't spill it. And after a while I ask him to add in a dollop of wisdom so that I will be able to find the reading I need rather than go through a library full of allsorts. I go for a walk. I have a shower. I go out for a coffee. Still want to cry if I think about it. But Gilbert is there watching me to see if his experiment with the potion or mix of hope and courage and a dollop of wisdom is working, so I sit and I begin.

(Campbell, 2024, 08/08/2024)

The Swamplands

Hopes of a dialogue, drama or interview between the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions as the inquiry's submission faded but not without a fight. *Catastrophiser* clung to it as the only way forward. *Procrastinator* continued to minimise the amount of work left to do. The Inner Champions edged their way forward ever so slowly. Or did someone mention wading through the swamp? Mary, who normally "remains placid" (Macnamara, 2019, p. 602), noted that it had been excruciating and exhausting for her to watch it all play out, so she could only imagine what it was like for them. The Inner Critics and Inner Champions felt aggrieved that they were the ones at the desk looking out at the best days of the year disappearing into the dampness of Autumn. They were rightly stuck! Too much time and energy invested in preparing a submission that wouldn't work and too little time to prepare an alternative. A conversation with a course colleague reminded the group of "the value they placed in challenges and perhaps they made things challenging if they felt that something might be easy" (Campbell, 2023, 23/08/2024). The Inner Critics, exasperated, finally and forcefully admitted that they "didn't want to *do* self-care, didn't want to *read about* self-care, didn't want to *be engaged in* self-care and most certainly didn't want to *write about* self-care" (Campbell, 2024, 23/08/2024). They could write about any of the other twenty topics they had been looking into on the side. Martha wondered if it might be the case that the Inner Critics were concerned that "their very existence was perhaps threatened if the issue of self-care was resolved" (Campbell, 2024, 23/08/2024).

Eventually, Mary interjected, "Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:35-41). *Challenger* remembered the session in Maynooth in March 2024 where the question asked was "do (*we*) trust (*ourselves*) enough to do this inquiry? Do (*we*) believe in (*ourselves*)?" (Campbell, 2024, 11/03/2024). Sometimes, storms come like the one they had in January 2024, asking the group have trust and faith. Now the storm that was here was clearing a new path, asking the group to trust, to have faith that they can make it to the end and press send. But it wasn't easy.

Paradox and containing the tensions

The discussion turned to the ability to hold tensions. It seemed that a new way or a new path for the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions lay somewhere in the middle, neither right nor left, neither top nor bottom, but a place where the group could be, together, in the suffering or in the joy or in the peace. *Connected* remembered years ago “reading a piece that said that real charity was about giving away what you wanted to keep not just the things you were happy to give away” (Campbell, 2024, 23/08/024). Surrender was similar, it was only meaningful if we surrendered something that means something to us. Then *Wise-Scholarly* remembered reading that “surrender means that a chosen field of experience enfolds us, as we embrace it” (Morwenna Whitaker and Atkinson, 2023, p. 25). So here it was! Their final lesson of this inquiry, they hoped.

Mary brought the conversation back to the idea of containment. Palmer (1980), she noted, had said that, “the contradictions of life are not accidental” (1980, p.4). He goes on to say that “the cross is also a symbol of contradictions whose very structure suggests the oppositions of life to walk the way of the cross is to be torn by opposition and contradiction, tension and conflict” (Palmer, 1980, p. 30-31). The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions recalled Morwenna Whitaker and Atkinson (2023) writing about how autoethnography works with paradox and tensions between “contrasting but complementary poles” (Morwenna Whitaker and Atkinson, 2023, p. 24), such as making the “familiar strange and the strange familiar” (2023, p. 9), the oscillation process of losing and finding (2023, p. 10), surrender and catch (2023, p. 25), “embodied, practical activity into textual, theorised reconstructions” (2023, p. 24), “engagement and reflection” (2023, p. 27), finitude and transcendence (2023, p. 28), “staying and moving” (2023, p. 32), “wandering and wondering” (2023, p. 35).

How had they missed this? They should have remembered this from before. In the ebb and flow of autoethnographic practice, resistance gives way to surrender which in turn gives way to “the rational and reflective or analytic capture of experience, knowledge gained, of theorized understanding” (Morwenna Whitaker and Atkinson, 2023, p. 27). *Explorer* wondered if this meant, as Palmer (1980) says, that “there seems to be a need for each person to build up a false sense of self, of difference from others, before

the spiritual struggle to become part of the 'hidden wholeness' can begin. Deeper still there is the paradox that not until the false self dies does the true self come into being" (1980, p.34).

The cross, which had always been a challenge for the group, now offered the solution. The "way of the cross" as Palmer (1980) puts it is recognising "that the heart of human experience is neither consistency nor chaos but contradiction" (1980, p. 41), that "our human nature ...resists living the contradictions, and wants to avoid the tension that comes from being torn between the poles" (1980, p. 43), that "by resisting, we become so worn down, so flattened out, so drained of energy and emptied of fight that the only thing left is to accept!" (1980, p. 45). This leads to a place "beyond acceptance" (Palmer, 1980, p. 48) to a confident, hopeful, joyful living of who we are in community with others. Palmer (1980) notes that the final stage of his way of the cross is liberation. He makes the point that we need to reclaim the word salvation, "a difficult word to use these days because it has been so discredited by certain narrow-gauge versions of Christianity" (Palmer, 1980, p. 51). The root meaning of salvation, Palmer (1980) says, is "wholeness", that

To be saved is to be made whole, to be able to enter the unity that lies beyond all of life's contradictions..... to realise that we are in the contradictions and the contradictions are in us and that all of it is held together by a "hidden wholeness." It is to be able to be anywhere with anyone, in freedom and in love. To be whole is to know one's relatedness to all of life, to the dark and the light, the evil and the good, the strange and the familiar".

Palmer, 1980, p. 52

Could it be that some good might be coming of this? The room was quiet for some time as the group absorbed it all. It was time for a break.

Harvest

Time was running out. After the break, the Inner Critics and Inner Champions announced that they couldn't proceed with the dialogue they had planned as it would

possibly take another year. They wanted to remain in the inquiry and in the submission somehow, but they were simply worn out trying. They longed for evenings where they did something other than go back into the office. They longed for weekends to do something other than stare at a laptop screen. They longed for sleep. They longed for routine and acknowledged a newly-found love of ordinary things.

At this point, Martha, noting the despondency in the room, invited the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions to pair off as they had done in their first session, *Diamond* with *Explorer* and so on. Each pair was to

Describe what we have learned about caring for ourselves following a year of inquiry into self-care.

Feedback was recorded by Martha and is outlined below.

The group as a whole acknowledged that Ignatian spiritual exercises, including spiritual direction, provided an anchor for an inquiry which listened “to what’s going on in our hearts and (*interpreted*) the ebb and flow of our feelings, desires and thoughts..... (*so that we could*) ... get in touch with who (*we*) really (*are*) and what (*we*) genuinely (*want*) out of life” (Maher, 2020, p. 16). Compassion framed the inquiry throughout the year and provided a safe enough space to “bring the ‘observer’ and the ‘performer’ together, unifying them in terms of their intention and sense of purpose, (*bringing*) about a state of inner peace, love and oneness with oneself” (Corry & Tubridy, 2001, p. 19). Corry & Tubridy (2001) add that

forgiveness and acceptance are the travelling companions of compassion. They merge to create heart energy and the consciousness of softness, where there is no place for shame, guilt or atonement.

(2001, p. xii)

Routine (who simply loved bullet points) was particularly excited that the group, after years of trying alone, together had developed a number of daily practices which provide them with pillars of self-care throughout the day and that, through daily

repetition, these activities created a soothing effect as well as a sense of security. Some of the daily practices include:

- A practice of twenty minutes of kindness, twice daily (Campbell, 2023, 13/11/2023) has been established, often using Sacred Space (2023, 2024) or other spiritual readings or audio.
- Daily journaling.
- The completion of a Daily Examen (Maher, 2020) every evening which helps reframe the day before sleep.
- Simple practices like lighting a candle to signify a time of focused work or study or meditation and by extinguishing it, the group can say that they have now finished work rather than leaving it open to return to the laptop.
- As strange as it might seem, the group learned how to sleep better as the inquiry progressed. They could see the value of sleep in that the quality of work and relationships significantly improved with adequate sleep. Sleep was no longer competing with work and other commitments. Rather, it was needed to feel alive. Writing simply couldn't happen when exhaustion set in.
- A regular walking routine was established. Walks now involved walking for pleasure and to feel alive, not to lose weight and not to count steps.
- Instead of a system of 'rules and punishments', the group developed a system of 'choices and freedom' to choose what was needed at that time (e.g. if they noticed a craving for carbohydrates they thought of Figure 8 and considered if it was hunger, thirst, tiredness, boredom, fear and offered alternatives such as sleep, rest, walk, water or just carbohydrates). As Winnicott says, "the main thing is that (*the group*) feels that (*they are*) living (*their*) own life, taking responsibility for action or inaction, and able to take credit for success and blame for failure" (1986, p. 27).

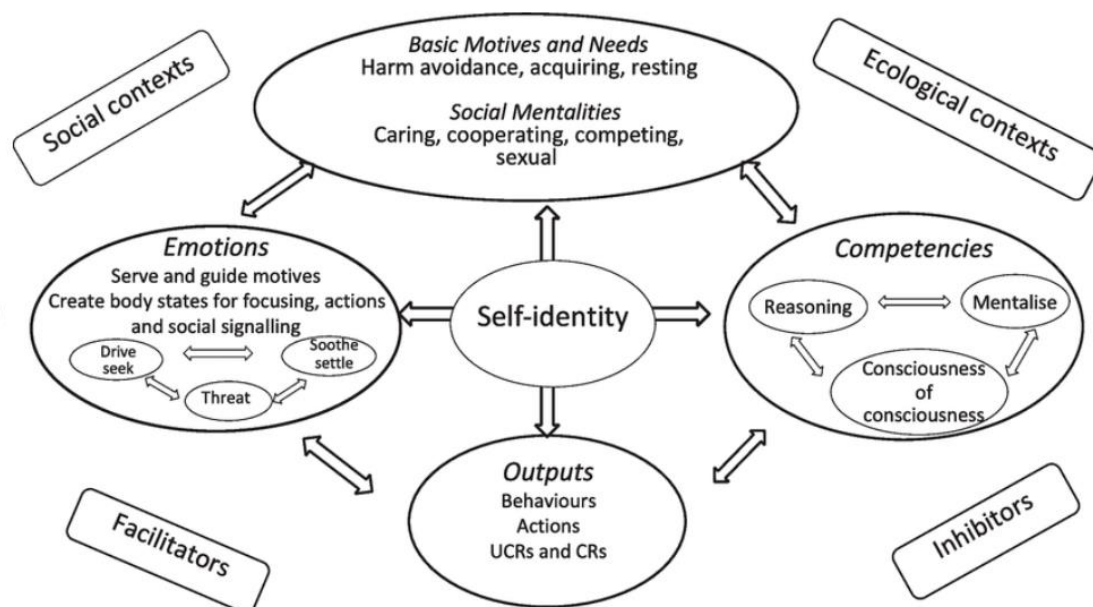


Figure 8: Four basic psychological functions. Gilbert (2022)

Compassion also noted increased engagement between the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions as well as increased levels of compassion towards others. It was particularly useful to have the idea of being filled with compassion, courage, wisdom and so on and of being able to access a ‘refill’ when feeling depleted of these. *Idiot*, who like *Aloney* rarely spoke, had a transformative experience as they now saw that “every gap in understanding provides an exciting challenge. Ignorance is held, and a research programme is devised. The stimulus for the work done is the existence of the gap” (Winnicott, 1986, p. 14). *Idiot* had finally found a purpose, a reason to exist and to belong. *Meadow-girl* noted a general increase in self-awareness within the group, increased trust and faith in themselves and in others and as a result a greater sense of freedom. The group felt that choosing an inquiry such as this was courageous in itself, regardless of the outcome.

Discipleship, Vocation and Calling

Martha asked the group where they now stood with work, overwork, endeavour and so forth. The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions said that Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (1736) provided a pathway towards understanding

Where have I come from?

Who am I?

Where am I going?

How do I get there?

What do I really want along the way?"

(Maher, 2020, p. 28)

As such, the group found that the daily practices, regardless of religious outlook, could be modified and used as a career guidance tool. Frigerio (2024) also mentioned the link between Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and guidance counselling recently while remembering a conversation with the late Ronald Sultana where they joked that St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits was the “father of career guidance”. The questions outlined by Maher (2020) above are commonly asked in every guidance counselling session.

Frigerio (2021) also speaks about calling “defined as the thing that provides a sense of purpose in attracting someone to a particular job or field of work” (2021, p. 29). The group agreed that they had had some experience of this over the past year, in particular, in being better able to align their interests and values with a role that felt more like a vocation than a job. Also, the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions felt if Catholicism had influenced their ideas of meaningful work, serving others, and purpose in life which resulted in a lack of self-care and a “neglect of other life domains and burnout” (Frigerio, 2016, p. 7), then it stood to reason that it might be worthwhile looking at the ideas of discipleship and vocation more closely.

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions were coming to the same conclusion as Denzin et al (2024), where he says that “a certain identity is never possible; The ethnographer must always ask, (and here he quotes Trinh, (1991)) “not *who* am I?” but “*when, where, how* am I?” (1991, p. 157). The inquiry could have taken many routes, such as gender influences, educational influences and so. However, the group chose to inquire into self-care through its Christian identity, forged like this inquiry, “in and through relationship and practice” (Cahalan, 2010, p. 4). A supportive community had been formed between the Inner Critics, Inner Champions, Martha and Mary. The group noticed that throughout the year they had become more engaged with the wider community and began to understand what Palmer (1981) meant when he said that “the spiritual life, the inward life, the life of prayer faithfully pursued, will bring us back and back again to the public realm” (1981, p. 27). The group, especially *Alony*, was relieved to learn that they didn’t need to be everyone’s friend or colleague. There were other kinds of relationships. It was possible “to be a neighbour, not just to kin and friends, but also to the stranger and the enemy” (Palmer, 2010, p. 4-5).

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions learned that discernment is like a muscle that is in need of exercise. The group exercised their “discerning” muscles and used the four D’s espoused by Maher (2020) throughout the year, beginning with small decisions and moving onto decisions which considered future career directions and learning how to ‘discern’ a sense of vocation. Cahalan (2010) notes that the word for “vocation comes from the Latin word, *vocare*, which means ‘to call’ (2010, p. 27). Cahalan (2010) defines Christian vocation as

the response to God's call and the Spirit's charisms manifest in adult life commitments in relationship to three aspects of the self: (1) how I live, (2) what I do, the service I offer to God in and for community; (3) who I am, the sense of self as it relates to my personal, historical, cultural, and social contexts. Our baptismal identity and call to be a Christian disciple is lived out in and through the particular callings that constitute our vocation.

(2010, p. 28)

Cahalan's description of vocation mirrored, in many ways, the group's desire for wholeness and unity of purpose in both their personal and professional lives. Vocation is a way of being and doing in the world. By the end of the year, the group said that they had a much stronger understanding of their vocation, of their unique gifts and how, through a process of discernment, they had come out of an apprenticeship of sorts into middle adulthood where there was now a need to "master the foundations" (Campbell, 25/08/2024).

The Inner Critics and the Inner Champions often feel that the work they do, particularly in the house and outside, is unseen. But this year, by stepping back from the usual tasks, it became very clear what the group did, despite the fact that they berated themselves every year for not doing enough. Conversely, this led to the group's realisation that in fact they don't need to worry about everything. While it is often said that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13), the group had come to the conclusion that giving up their life for others wasn't what they were called to do. They no longer needed to worry about doing enough. If they engaged with their "calling" through listening and discerning, then that was enough. No more crashes, no more burns, Enough would be enough. *Explorer* said that this realization was already having an effect on them by turning down various tasks which "are not ours to do" (Campbell, 2024, 27/08/2024) and reassessing others. All agreed that it was quite powerful.

From Swamplands to Snail's Pace

One of the main learnings for the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions this year was understanding their place in life (discipleship and vocation) but also space and time. *Routine* often used the mantra from the Book of Ecclesiastes: "There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven" (3:1-11).

In July and August 2024, in particular, *Meadow-girl* brought the group into a space in the garden where they could really begin to understand their own nature and their preferred pace in work and in life. By getting the group to observe themselves (as part

of this inquiry) in nature, they came to see neglected sides of themselves and aspects of nature that could serve as oases when needed. In the words of Wordsworth (2024),

Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your teacher.

Meadow-girl was particularly taken with some of what Stuart-Smith (2020) has observed, that “our sense impressions are not passively recorded, rather we construct experience even as we are undergoing it” (2020, p. 14). *Sensing* into picking blueberries or podding peas, became a quiet methodical, meditative space, where the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions experienced “a suspension in time an *in-between* space which can be a meeting place between our innermost, dream-infused selves and the real physical world (*which*) Winnicott called a ‘transitional’ area of experience” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 16). As August drew to a close and with all that had happened all year, the Inner Critics and the Inner Champions came to know what they had probably known all along but didn’t know if it could be accepted; that they had a pace of their own, a pace closer to a snail’s pace, that covers a lot of ground but slowly and thoughtfully, a way of doing things that was their own way and that it was ok to *do* and *be* in ways that were particular to them as much as it was for anyone else to resonate with their own pace and their own ways. “What is it that we seek? To *be* and to *do* and to be present while we are being and doing so that we live” (Campbell, 2024, 31/08/2024).

The group had gone over time. What a year, in hindsight! Martha said that she would write up the notes and send them on as *partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree* and they would see what came of them. In the meantime, they had prepared a feast in the garden, a harvest fare, no less! The group ended this year as they had ended both years of the Postgraduate Diploma, with the words of Derek Walcott.

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

(Walcott: 1989)

Appendix 1: Sample Ignatian Spiritual Exercises

(Adapted from Maher, 2020)

Sample of Daily Examen (Maher, 2020, p. 64)

STEP 1 2 minutes	"Be still and know I am God." Pray for light so that I see and hear what God wants.
STEP 2 2 minutes	Thanks to the Giver of gifts for: 1..... 2..... 3.....
STEP 3 4 minutes	What spoke to me of God? Traces of God's presence? Love, kindness, generosity, peace, patience, joy, self-control? What lifted my spirits? Where did that lead me?
STEP 4 4 minutes	Signs of God's absence? Apathy, lack of consideration, meanness, agitation, impatience, gloom, self-indulgence? What dampened my spirits? Where did that lead me?
STEP 5 3 minutes	Sorrow and renewal. Tomorrow ... pitfalls to avoid? Forewarned is forearmed!

Ignatian decision-making: the four D's (Maher, 2020, p. 88)

DESIST	Stop what you're doing, find a good space Equilibrium like weighing scales
DELIBERATE	Reflect on feelings, think about reasons, gather data
DECIDE	How am I feeling? What am I thinking? Choose. Bring choice to God.
DO	Time To Act

Discernment (Maher, 2020, p. 44-45)	
<i>Good spirit: friend, good wolf, true self, encouraging</i>	<i>Bad spirit: enemy, bad wolf, false self, discouraging</i>
Love	Selfishness
Joy	Sadness
Peace	Agitation
Patience	Impatience
Kindness	Unkindness
Generosity	Self-centredness
Faithfulness	Unfaithfulness
Gentleness	Coarseness, Loudness, Pushiness
Self-Control	Self-Indulgence
Calm	Turbulence
Considered Decisions	Impulsive Decisions
Response	Reaction
Truth	Untruth
Just	Unjustness
Hope	Despair
Trust	Cynicism
Optimism	Pessimism
Respectful	Disrespectfulness
Ordered Life - Focus and Goals	Disordered Life - Going Nowhere
Freedom	Compulsive - Addictive
Service of Others	I Come First - Narcissistic
Community	Egoism - Me centre stage
Humility	Inflated Pride
Part of Solution	Part of Problem
Life Enhancing	Life Impoverishing
Integrity	Fragmentation
Goodness - God	Absent Goodness - The Enemy

Authenticity	Inauthenticity
Sense of Humour	Rigidly Serious
Perspective	Lack of Perspective
Flexible	Rigid
Compromise	I Did It My Way
Grateful	Entitlement
Appreciative	Taking For Granted
Affirming And Encouraging	Begrudging And Discouraging

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