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### ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

#### No beginning, no end: an ecology of human flourishing

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#### Abstract

In this paper we explore 'human flourishing', a concept that we articulate through embodied creative methods of inquiry. In contemporary organisations, the recognition that persons need to exist in contexts that enable their potential to be maximised and realised has promoted a greater focus on identifying conditions that can help people to flourish in the workplace. In helping relationships in a variety of health and social care organisations, we seek to create the conditions for human flourishing. We do this work in our transformational research, development and facilitated learning practices, which are located in a critical creativity worldview. For the past eight years, we have been exploring this worldview philosophically, theoretically and methodologically. In addition, we have been helping others to utilise methods that are consistent with a critically creative methodology and to reflect on the experiences of doing so. The goal of critical creativity is 'human flourishing' and so in this paper we present the results of an embodied and creative exploration of that concept. We set out the methods we used, the metaphors that have emerged through our creative inquiry and the meaning of these metaphors in the context of contemporary literature and perspectives. The paper is framed through a poem and photographs that, together with dialogue, offer an holistic and symbolic perspective of human flourishing. Each section of the paper explores a particular verse of the poem in order to unfold what we describe as an ecology of human flourishing with no beginning and no end. As an outcome of our inquiry so far, we offer a definition of human flourishing and invite readers to engage in inquiries of their own flourishing at work.

**Keywords:** Critical creativity, human flourishing, person-centredness, practice development, action-oriented research

#### Introduction

The unknown of critical creativity as a new worldview for transformational practice development and action oriented research has been gently unfolding over time. So it is with our understanding and embodiment (enactment or internalisation) of human flourishing as ends and means of transformational practice development and research within this worldview. In our earliest work (McCormack and Titchen, 2006, p 241), we explicitly went beyond the moral intent of social justice and equity inherent in the critical social science tradition to self-consciously foreground human flourishing as 'maximising [through helping relationships] the potential for individuals to achieve his/her potential for growth and development'. In this paper we present the out-workings of a creative and inductive critical inquiry into human flourishing carried out by the two of us that builds on and extends earlier work we have undertaken with others. We present an overview of the methods used as well as the

eight elements of 'an ecology' of human flourishing that emerged through the use of these methods. We end the paper with a newly formed definition and image of human flourishing as a synthesis of the essences of the presented characteristics.

Although we are concerned with transformation of self, others, workplaces, organisations and communities towards person-centredness within health and social care practice, education and research, we hope that what we have written here will be of interest to people engaged in creating the conditions for themselves and others to flourish whatever their context, profession or field of practice. We occasionally show how the elements of our new definition of human flourishing might play out in practice development and research, but that is not our main concern in this mainly theoretical paper.

Our writing in this paper comes from the wisdom within our bodies, hearts and spirits, as well as from our minds and scholarly activity, and thus challenges traditional forms of writing that rely only on cognition and intellectual argument. By interacting poetic and symbolic forms with cognitive dialogue, we are trying to provide conditions for the reader to have something of the experience that we had; an experience that was not altogether logical and rational. Hence the leaps and bounds that sometimes occur. By presenting images and leaving you to do something with them, we are showing as well as telling. Moreover, we have deliberately not packed the paper with reference to, and discussion of, the literature on human flourishing as we feel it would detract from our intention for this paper. That work will come later. Overall, we believe that this is a legitimate way of presenting findings from our inquiry as it is an authentic representation of the methods used.

### **Background**

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

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

*'We may... be entering an age of greater spirituality within research efforts. The emphasis on inquiry that reflects ecological values, on inquiry that respects communal forms of living that are not Western, on inquiry involving intense reflexivity regarding how our inquiries are shaped by our own historical and gendered locations, and on inquiry into "human flourishing" as Heron and Reason (1997) call it, may yet reintegrate the sacred with the secular in ways that promote freedom and self-determination... We may be in a period of exploring the ways in which... we can both be and promote others' being, as whole human beings' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p 185).*

As very little was written at this time about the nature of human flourishing and how it can be facilitated, this was our starting point in undertaking our inquiry into human flourishing within our practice development and research contexts. As will become clear in your reading of the paper, for us, spirituality and sacredness are not connected with any religion or doctrine. Rather they are concerned with a search for meaning and working at the edge of the known. In tune with many ancient and creative traditions, we respect the mystery in human experience and in nature and seek wisdom from, and in connection with, the natural world.

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

*'Human flourishing is points of light on trees  
Light transforms, enables light and death  
Young saplings and ancient canopy must both flourish  
To maintain the balance of the forest...  
...Human flourishing is an eco-system of balancing life-death-life  
Creating conditions for interdependency and the losses and gains of each position  
Fragility and strength – strength and fragility.  
Dynamic balance.'*

(Titchen and McCormack, 2008, pp 64-65)

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

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

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

Over these years, we found resonances beyond our touchstone, that is, the work of Heron and Reason. In particular, the writings of philosopher, John O'Donohue (1997) and his articulation of the deep connections between spirituality, the natural world and human flourishing rang true to us. In addition, we recognise something of Maureen Gaffney's (2012) elements of flourishing, identified through a clinical psychology lens and Peter Senge et al.'s (2005) work on presencing from business/management and systems theorist perspectives and their introduction to Theory U or leading from the future as it emerges. We discuss these resonances in this paper.

After seven years of work, this paper, *No beginning, no end: an ecology of human flourishing* sets out our current embodied, cognitive and spiritual understanding. It was created and written on a seven-day retreat at a Buddhist centre in the south-west of Ireland. We present our methods, then our findings in a freeform poem with commentary. We present the poem verse by verse. The poem in its entirety is offered in an extended version of this paper (McCormack and Titchen, in press).

We offer an image and definition of human flourishing.

### **Critical-creative inquiry methods**

Locating our inquiry within a critical creativity worldview, we drew on the following philosophical assumptions: creative imagination and expression creates synergy between cognitive and artistic approaches to critique; transformational development and research are person-centred; and the blending of these assumptions occurs through spiritual intelligence (McCormack and Titchen, 2006). Thus, we used methods that enabled us to bring heart, mind, body and soul into our inquiry. Through a meditative walk in nature, creative expression through painting, movement, poetry/poetic writing, reflective journals, photography and critical-creative dialogue, we engaged our whole selves in gathering and making sense and meaning from the data. Thus we worked with all our senses, emotions, different ways of knowing (precognitive, cognitive, metacognitive and reflexive), different knowledges, multiple intelligences and the peerless beauty of the landscape. We were also able to tap into the wisdom and lovingkindness we experienced together and through formal periods of guided meditation at the retreat centre. Drawing on these critically creative ways of being, we engaged systematically and intentionally in a series of inquiry stages over the seven-day retreat:

1. In preparation for our work, we had immersed ourselves in data that had been collected by ourselves and a community of practice developers and action-oriented researchers at a two-day co-operative inquiry workshop in the Netherlands in 2008. These data were a preliminary concept analysis of human flourishing (attributes, enabling factors and consequences)
2. Meditative walks and creative expressions (for example, paintings, symbolic photographs)
3. Poetic writing in meditative space and speaking out words from deep within us. There was no attempt to use a particular poetic form or style
4. Reflective dialogue
5. Meaning making (constructing the mandala)
6. Collaborative writing

These stages and the methods are fully described elsewhere (McCormack and Titchen, in press).

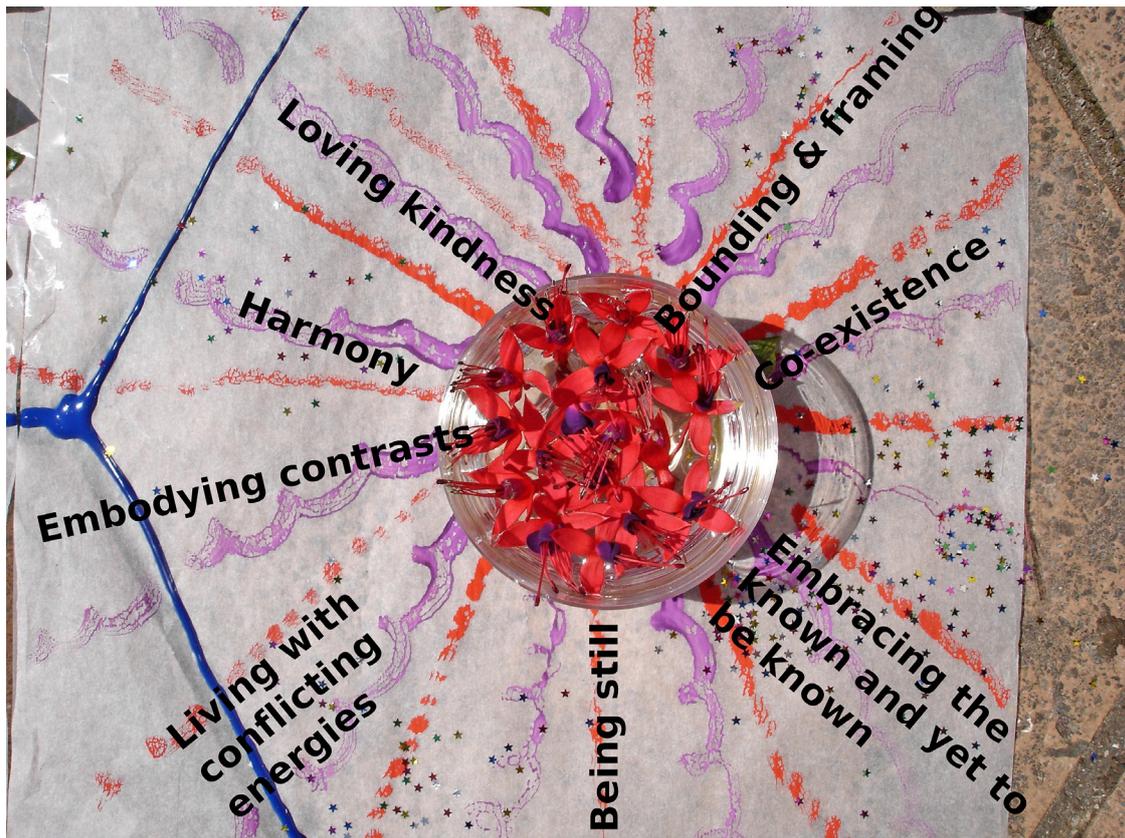
Although it may appear in the next section that the meditative walk was the dominant method, it was not. It was through 'dancing' or improvising with all the methods that we came to understand, more deeply and symbolically, the material that first surfaced on our walks. This 'dance' breathed life into our expression of the ecology of human flourishing.

### **The ecology of human flourishing**

Contemporary ecology is not only concerned with the study of the interconnectness of eco-systems and with the dynamic flow of energy and matter in the natural world, but also with the science of human social interaction with the environment. We use the term here somewhat differently to mean

the study of the different elements of human flourishing and the interconnectedness between them and with the natural world. Moreover, we have blended this big idea about ecology from science, first, with wisdom from ancient traditions that focuses on the mystery inherent in that interconnectedness and, second, with creative traditions that offer meaning through creative imagination and creative expression. Thus, we represent the whole ecology of human flourishing and its interconnectedness in the form of a poem. We dialogue with each verse, each of which symbolises one of the eight elements of the total ecology of human flourishing. The title of each verse captures the essence of each element (see Figure 1). Each element is expressed also through our symbolic photographs and creative expressions.

**Figure 1: The eight elements of human flourishing**



## Bounding and framing

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



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

The theme of 'background and foreground' emerged early in our meditative walk, not unsurprisingly, given the vastness of the landscape and the need for framing of particular elements in order for them to be noticed. How we privilege background or foreground is an important issue when thinking about our potential to flourish as persons. In the vastness of the macrocosm – that is, the ecology of our world and universe – we can become overwhelmed by its wisdom when we are trying to learn from it in terms of the microcosm of our human flourishing. By bounding or framing our focus, therefore, and placing it in the foreground of our consciousness, we can make sense of the macrocosm by focusing on or tunnelling into a part of it. This is possible because the same messages are contained in the vast and the small – the background and the foreground. The rock dominated landscape created a tunnel through which one needed to travel in order to engage with the total landscape – the macrocosm. Different aspects of the tunnel emerged with each step and turn – around each corner existed a different

perspective on the tunnel effect of the rock, with some providing a focused vista to the ocean and others clear directions and a path to follow. So the rock in this context no longer seemed like a barrier and a dominating force in the landscape, but instead it shaped perspectives and recreated meaning and way-finding. It further created linkages between the background and foreground of the landscape, and at times created a reordering of background and foreground. This movement between background and foreground can help stop us from feeling overwhelmed and provide a space for flourishing. For example, in healthcare practice or in practice development, the sense of being overwhelmed by the vastness of what needs to be done/changed is very real. Therefore, foregrounding particular aspects of the total landscape of practice provides us with an opportunity to focus, to build energy to see what is possible/achievable and ultimately to flourish. Gaffney used a similar idea when she raised the importance of persons 'using their valued competencies', which is one of her four elements of flourishing.

*'Flourishing means feeling that you are using your valued competencies, and so doing what you were put into the world for... Using your valued competencies is not just about using some aspect of your intelligence or talents, it also means using the most important lessons you have learned in your life, including what you learned from your mistakes, or from your experiences during bad times. In fact, part of the experience of being at your best is the realisation that there is as much to be learned – and sometimes more – from the setbacks in your life as from the successes' (Gaffney, 2012, pp 11-12).*

So although the rock (as a metaphor for a potential barrier, or a mistake or bad experience) may appear overwhelming and dominating, drawing on multiple intelligences, intuitive knowing and presencing (Senge et al., 2005) enables a reorientation of the rock from that of barrier to that of a frame of reference.

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

*Becoming and transcending  
Landscape beauty taking me  
Opening up closed boundaries*

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

*Embody the contrasts of life  
Be still and let it come*

Each of these contrasts create a tunnel for our embodied knowing to embrace the unknown, to take risks in new (ad)ventures and to develop new understandings about what matters in terms of being, growth and development. Without these contrasts, our minds have the potential to remain unfocused;

appreciating the beauty but not engaging in and working through the potential before us. Something that Senge et al. (2005) argued as a critical factor in being present and being open to potentials. Appreciating the importance of framing and bounding enables an appreciation of wanting to still the mind and zone out the many distractions that get in the way of us flourishing in life and work. Finding moments of stillness and intentionally focusing only on the issues at hand enables growth and movement. As Gaffney (2012) says, paying attention and not getting distracted are crucial to our flourishing.

### Co-existence

*Tangled roots of life and love bursting energy fragrance  
Lily pond holding energies  
Coexistence of beauty strength life and living  
Clarity wind speaking lovingkindness  
Wind music grasses fuscias dancing  
Ferns bright green holding sun energy*



In our previous work (Titchen and McCormack, 2008) we have argued that in order to engage in critical and creative practices, there is a need to appreciate the embedded creativity in the particular person, situation and context, for example, in order for new insights and understandings to emerge that may be transformative.

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

It is the case that in everyday life/practice the tangled roots of our particular context can at times appear impenetrable and resistive of change, growth and development. However, like the tangled

roots of the lily pond, their beauty is in their connections as indeed is their strength. Gaffney (2012) identifies 'connectivity' as one of the four elements of flourishing persons. Connectivity implies being attuned to what is happening inside and outside of us. Being attuned to these connections enables us to recognise when disconnections are happening and to rise to the challenges associated with such disconnections. In the same way, the entangled roots of the lily pond create connections that support the life of the pond above and below the surface. The roots provide the nourishment for the lilies to exist, while simultaneously creating a mysterious undergrowth below which one needs to enter in order to truly understand and appreciate it. Flowing, lyrical, staccato, chaos and stillness (Roth, 1990) energies or rhythms are necessary for our vitality and flourishing. The lily pond holds these energies and so they are all around us. There are other energies, of course – the energies of emotion, life force, positive, negative, low, high, directed, non-directed and so on. To work with them in fruitful ways for our own and others' flourishing, we need to acknowledge the beauty of each energy and see its potential for human growth and for lovingkindness. By lovingkindness, we mean love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity as we have experienced in our companionship and in Buddhist meditation practice (cf. Salzberg, 2002). So with chaos, for example, which we can associate with Fay's (1987) crisis, we can be intentional in working with the negative emotions or low energy and rhythms that may be occurring, and look for the beauty in this situation that will strengthen our resilience and ability to begin the transformation of chaos/crisis into Fay's transformative action. Nourishment with accompanying growth emerges from unexpected places when we really pay attention. In the midst of what may seem dead or murky and tangled with no space to move or breathe, the energies required for growth and flourishing spring forth. We just have to see and know it and flow with it.

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

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

There are many ways of moving towards flourishing through lovingkindness and beauty within a critical creativity worldview; we can go on contemplative walks like the one in this poem, when we are lucky enough to be in beautiful places, but we can also take intentional reflective or meditative walks in our work environments, looking and sensing the things and people of beauty. By being empty, we are able to hear the 'wind music' (mentioned in the verse on page 8) and take joy in it. Hearing this music is a metaphor for noticing intentional acts of kindness and compassion in our connections with those we are working to create the three conditions for human flourishing – stillness in the landscape, embodying critical creativity, and nurturing, flowing and connecting (Titchen and McCormack, 2010).



The 'prayer flag' in the Buddhist tradition expresses a generosity of spirit and a commitment to unconditional sharing through love. As the wind catches the prayer flag and blows it, the message of the prayer is shared with all who the wind touches and so a global condition of kindness is created. The idea of love in caring practices is not new and indeed the work of Campbell (1984) and his concept of 'moderated love' have been articulated in nursing, education and social work practices since the 1980s. However, unlike the idea of love that is moderated through professional boundaries, lovingkindness transcends all false divides between persons, and instead is a genuine and authentic attempt to appreciate humanity in all its 'rawness'. The clarity that is brought through the wind messages of lovingkindness connects with the humanity of persons. The innate quality of persons to do good is only mediated (not moderated) through particular contexts and circumstances. Like the grasses and fuchsias that dance with the wind, persons can flourish when the right conditions are created. The conditions of course can only be activated when appropriate energies are instilled in the climate of the setting, energies that we believe are manifested through a commitment to lovingkindness and respect for the interconnectedness of humanity.

### **Embracing the known and yet to be known**

*Sacred earth rooted  
Hidden gems around each corner  
Beauty unfolding with each new step  
Candles burning in protected space  
Welcoming strangers into the known  
Scented white smoke of beauty lovingkindness  
Growing into light reaching full potential  
Riding the winds of prayers, singing life*



In ancient traditions, the sacredness of the earth is paramount. Sacredness in these traditions includes embracing the unknown rather than fearing it. Having respect for the earth as provider of wisdom, nourishment, growth and sustainability is also a critical element of being human and a perspective that is reinforced in O'Donohue's philosophical and spiritual perspectives (O'Donohue, 1997; 2010). Drawing on the philosophy of Hegel and Celtic spirituality, O'Donohue argues that the wisdom needed for meaningful engagement with others is provided by the beauty of nature and our presence in it. He suggests that for persons to be present in the moment, there is a need for us to be rooted in the here and now. 'Being present' is an important element of authentic and compassionate caring and the practitioner who is 'present' has the potential to engage with the other in what O'Donohue has called, *anam cara* or soul friend to whom intimate intricacies can be revealed and what Martin Buber has described as an 'I-Thou' relationship (Buber, 1937; 2004). Within such a relationship, the 'hidden gems' of the each person in relation are manifested, not as ego driven characteristics but instead as elements of hidden complexity of persons that are yet to be revealed and shared. In her work on lovingkindness, Salzberg (2002) highlights the destructive nature of viewing persons as 'other'. She argues that otherness creates disconnections between different aspects of self, disconnections between mind and body, and loss of connectedness between persons. Similarly, Boykin and Schoenhofer (1993) referred to the 'dance of caring persons' as a metaphor for the way in which the personhood of connected persons becomes as one, with each giving and receiving from the other. The concept of personhood is a complex one and one that is multilayered and multileveled. Personhood refers to our deepest layers of humanity. Those aspects of self that shape us as persons – our beliefs, values, needs, wants, desires, hopes and dreams. Many of these elements of our personhood are known to us while others remain hidden (to us). Through a meaningful engagement with 'other', the hidden gems of our personhood can be revealed and made known to us. Through the development of connected relationships, the hidden beauty of each person can be revealed and unfolded. This unfolding involves revelation of aspects of our inner selves that can create moments of crisis (Fay, 1987) that can either create growth and development (flourishing) or a distancing from the known as the conditions may not be conducive to embracing the challenge of the known. Human flourishing is experienced when people

achieve beneficial, positive growth that pushes their boundaries in a range of directions (Titchen and McCormack, 2010). However the need to be ready for boundaries to be pushed or, in other words, embracing the yet to be known is a key factor in enabling human flourishing to happen. *'I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding'* (O'Donohue, 1997). On the other hand, we have to be alert to the fact that the river floods when its banks are breached and so we must also respect our limits if we are to flourish in times of crisis.

When we move around our workplaces with our eyes, ears, sense of smell, touch and taste wide open, 'hidden gems' emerge. As we rush around at work, our senses are often half shut down. Are we really awake and living each moment as if it were our last? If we do not pay attention we can miss the gems and the beauty around us. Perhaps we need symbols or signifiers of something beyond the bustle of the everyday to remind us of the importance of human flourishing and to celebrate it – 'candles burning in protected space'. We have a vision of small reflective pools with one or two or three floating flowers on a busy corner. Such reminders of the connectedness of human flourishing with the beauty of nature that just is, can welcome us back into ways of knowing and being that are integral to being human but which we have half forgotten. We are born with these ways that enable us to know our own flourishing. They are not rocket science! And we can come to know or remember these knowings and deep contentment in our workplaces. The other side of this element, embracing the yet to be known, links to the wisdom of the body. The body has the capacity to attune to a situation and pick up significance, way before critical consciousness has seen the significance (cf. Gendlin, 1993). For example, when we reached stage 3 of our inquiry process, it felt natural for us to move while constructing the poem. In such ways, we experienced the 'something more' unfolding at the edge of our thinking about human flourishing that resonates with Gendlin's direction or felt sense of an unfolding future. This felt sense is a transitional stage to an even deeper-seated awareness of collective interconnectedness. Both promote our flourishing.

### **Living with conflicting energies**

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



A critical ontological position requires us to be sensitive and attentive to ‘moments of crisis’, as it is through these moments that we identify a need for change and have the potential to change. For us, crises, as described by Fay (1987), aren’t always major events in a person’s life, but can also be ‘jolts’ that may alter a particular perspective or cause us to pause for reflection and reconsideration of the direction we are taking.

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

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

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

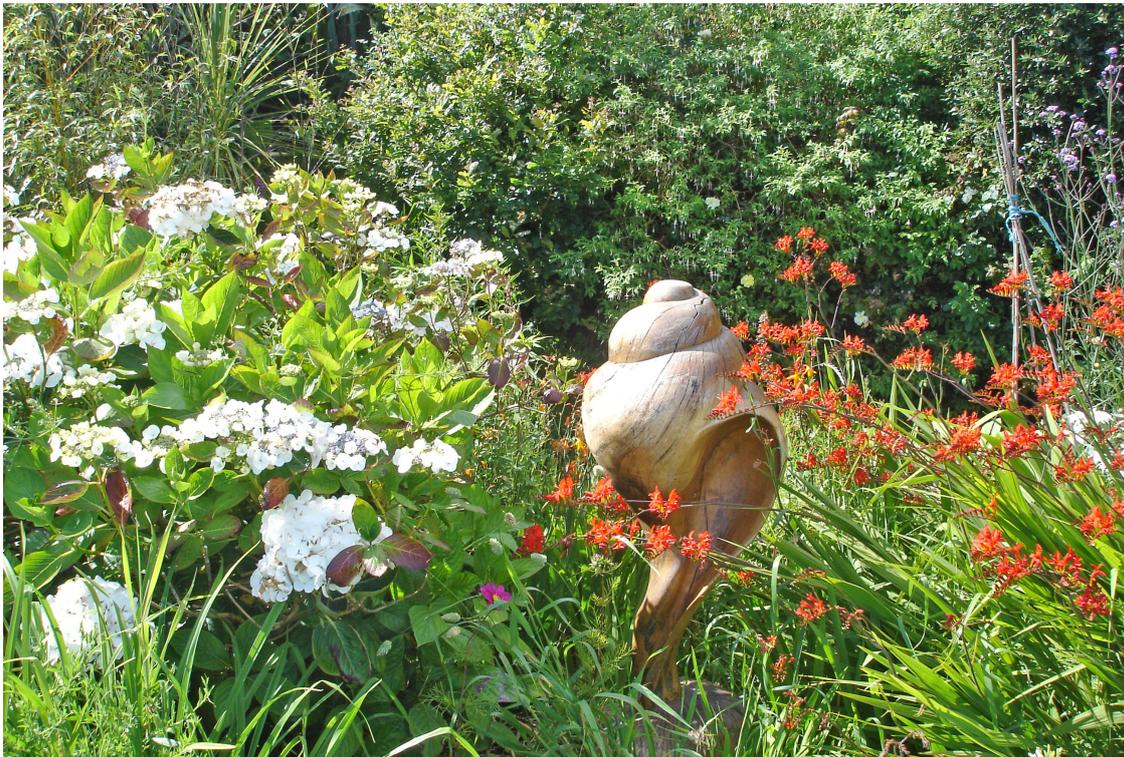
Gaffney (2011) argues that ‘challenge’ is a key element of flourishing and that without challenge, we would languish in the safety of established habits and norms. Challenges aren’t always of our own making, but instead can arise from unexpected and unanticipated avenues and directions. Like the unexpected storm, a request to take a group photograph during Brendan’s meditative walk jolted him out of his meditative space and caused a sense of disturbance in his mind and body. Holding strong in his embodied space enabled him to respond generously to the request, without anger or upset, and pick up from where he had stopped prior to the request. This management of emotion enabled a reconnection to happen and the possibilities of staying focused to emerge. Salzberg (2002) suggests that to develop focus requires a letting go of negative emotion towards others and to hold strong our sense of being grounded in the space. This is similar to one of the conditions for human flourishing previously articulated by Titchen et al. (2011), that of ‘*becoming the landscape*’ (embodying critical creativity). This embodiment requires of persons a deep connection with the setting in which they exist. While it is recognised that creating connection with the natural landscape has strong meditative potential for growth and development, connecting with the space we are in through shared values, respect for others, appreciation of the setting and the people within, all help with staying focused and working with the ‘here and now’.

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

Being able to move in and out of different spaces and maintain our sense of human flourishing is vital when unexpected requests are made on us (as they are constantly in our everyday working) or when we experience changes in the context of our work. We may intentionally be seeking the gems of this person we are helping when our attention is called for elsewhere. We may feel irritated at the interruption and need to reframe the request as an opportunity for lovingkindness and connection with the other. This movement and management of feelings draws on our emotional intelligence. Moreover, it also needs us to dance with our spiritual intelligence so that we can give graceful care, as described in critical companionship (Titchen, 2004) and focused attention to the person or situation making the request. Being really present for that particular person, persons or situation, can also help us to reframe the request as an opportunity for holding strong to our values and our response to its challenges as a means of enabling our own and others' human flourishing. This is not easy, but it is something we can strive for. It is an example of the distinction between flourishing as human beings and the flourishing we see in the beauty of life and death in nature.

### **Being still**

*Respecting stillness, the quiet, the peace  
The beauty of nature and what it creates  
Spiralling vortex of shell sculpture  
Imbuing meaning of the sacred, its connections with earth  
Human flourishing bringing new meaning*



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

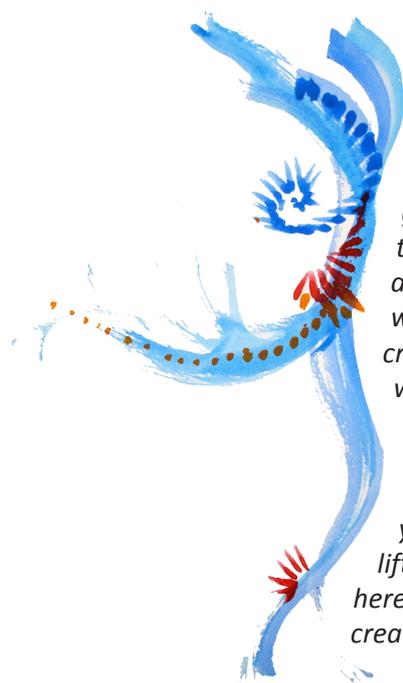
Titchen and McCormack (2010) have argued that facilitators of practice development and action oriented research within a critical creativity worldview are cognisant of the importance of being still in the workplace if they and others are to flourish. This is further illustrated in the following dialogue:

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

Brendan: *'I think it is a struggle for us all – busy space, busy body, busy mind. The thing for us is creating the space of no-thingness for others that allows for that kind of knowing to emerge or it stays hidden. If we don't take the meditative walks (imaginary or real) then we miss it.'*

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

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



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

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

Creating spaces for quiet reflection and stillness is a real challenge in busy healthcare environments and there is a need for us to pay more attention to the workings of healthcare environments and how they function. However, the 'spiralling vortex of the shell sculpture' reminds us that we need to focus on the movement contained in the whole rather than the busyness of isolated parts. The spiralling shell sculpture appears like a dense solid object resonating beauty by its shape, form and presence in the garden. However, the emptiness of the spiralled sculpture creates a space that enables the entering of the emptiness of the shape and a connection with its inner meanings. Focusing on the empty space reminds us of the need to clear our minds of the busyness of practice and focus instead on the meanings of our practice and the way these meanings shape our everyday reality. Creating spaces for quiet reflection, critical engagement and meaningful connection with others are essential elements of an environment that enables all persons to flourish. We suggest that these insights about the element of being still could inform those who want to work with Senge et al.'s (2005) sensing and presencing as precursors to realising or manifesting the future or embracing the yet to be known discussed above.

### Embodying contrasts

*White daisies dancing against blue sky.  
Daisy faces uplifted towards the sun  
Purity  
Whiteness  
Temple for honouring the space within  
For giving, receiving, thanking and respecting  
Flowers adorning  
Acknowledging the beauty of place  
Connections from afar*



This verse returns us to the sacred aspect of human flourishing. As shown with our writings about critical creativity, we bring all aspects of ourselves as we develop our potential. Letting go into and being attuned to all that is good, beautiful and harmonious, brings us closer to recognising the sanctity of person-centred human relationships. It helps us to experience our greater selves, the more

transcendent self that Gaffney (2012) describes as the person we are when we are at our best (as opposed to languishing when we are at our worst). For us, experiencing and connecting with the sacred is not the same as having a religious faith or belief or living a life shaped by doctrines. While some of us may have such a faith, what we are concerned with here is more related to a sense of awe and wonderment at goodness, beauty, harmony, compassion and lovingkindness – and with honouring them.

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

As we continued our meditative walk we noticed a shrine to Buddha and the various offerings from nature (flowers, seeds, fruits) that had been donated in honour of gifts received. The shrine coexisted among a natural wilderness of woods that had been untouched. The large, carefully sculpted shrine with its sharp edges and layered elements contrasted with the naturalness of the surrounding environment. Each beautiful in its own way, but each reflecting a different appreciation of the landscape. We know that for persons to flourish, feeling respected and showing respect are key ingredients. Being respected as a person enables growth while simultaneously creating the conditions for the demonstration of respect for others. Throughout the meditative walk, we were struck by the extent of the respect shown for the environment, the setting and the people therein. The natural spaces juxtaposed with the buildings, car parks and other elements of the created spaces:

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

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

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

Observing and appreciating these juxtapositions created a new appreciation of the need for 'contrast' as an element of flourishing. Like the importance of Fay's (1987) crisis, paying attention to elements of the environment that at first sight don't seem to 'fit' is important for our 'taken for granted' ways of knowing:

*Embody the contrasts of life  
Be still and let it come*

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

## Harmony

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



We have presented our perspectives on human flourishing set in the context of a critically creative worldview and have touched on the development of helping relationships in care practices, transformational practice development and action orientated research. One of the key learnings that emerged for us at the beginning of our writing retreat was that there is no beginning and no end to flourishing and so there was no natural starting point to writing about human flourishing – hence the use of a mandala to shape the form and flow of our writing. As you have experienced our mandala, you may have seen how each element melds and blends with the whole and with each element. Another way of looking at this is to see each element as bounding and framing the whole of human flourishing. In other words, we foreground each element (micro) in turn, so as to tunnel in to understand human flourishing (macro). This realisation and acknowledgement of a continuous and connected journey of flourishing, rather than a prescribed structure, resonates with the need to respond to the wisdom of our bodies in decision making. No matter how much control we may feel over our lives, many internal and external influences shape us and the conditions that enable us to flourish as persons (or not). This is not to suggest a fatalistic perspective of persons, but is instead an understanding and position that recognises the interconnectedness of persons, the environment and the universe. Without an

appreciation of these deep connections and an understanding of the need actively to shape our being in the world, then our potential for flourishing may not be realised. There are lessons here too for practice developers and action orientated researchers. It is all too easy to seek out prescribed structures, processes and tools in facilitation practices, as if there is a starting point. For example, in practice development work, it is all too common to observe facilitators following a pre-formulated programme of values clarification, claims, concerns and issues, observations of practice and others in order to develop a plan of action. Similarly, action orientated researchers can blindly follow textbook methods in a stepwise, non-embodied and non-reflective fashion. Acknowledging that there is no beginning and no end brings dynamism to the practice, a dynamism that is responding to the context and the persons who shape that context and where listening to, and acting on, the wisdom of the body creates a dance between the specifics of the practice and the vision for transformation.

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

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



*‘Human flourishing occurs when we bound and frame naturally co-existing energies, when we embrace the known and yet to be known, when we embody contrasts and when we achieve stillness and harmony. When we flourish we give and receive lovingkindness.’*

### Reflective pause

As we have highlighted in this paper, human flourishing has no beginning and no end, but instead it is always a state of 'becoming'. In this paper we have represented human flourishing as a 'human ecology' – as it is our contention that human flourishing happens when persons interconnect with their physical, social, spiritual, creative and natural being through meaningful and intentional practices. We have presented eight elements that make up this ecology and have distilled these elements into an essence – our new definition. We acknowledged at the outset of this inquiry that each of us experiences our own human flourishing in a multitude of different ways and so it is important that each of us learns what works best for us in enabling us to flourish.

Our co-inquiry of ourselves is inductive and tentative and so we recognise the need for, and the importance of, further inquiries that test out these elements and the definition in a variety of contexts and using a variety of engagement processes. There is a need for further research that exposes these elements to rigorous inquiry and draws on reflective and phenomenological data to explore further how human flourishing manifests itself in a variety of contexts. There are also interesting questions to be pursued. For example, questions about whether people need to access or use all the elements to flourish themselves or enable others to flourish, or, whether all individuals have their own ecology due to the complexity of being human in an infinite number of environments. Given our experience in this inquiry (and in our work), some people might be interested in exploring whether some kind of connection with nature and beauty is necessary for human beings to flourish.

Our definition can also be challenged as setting out conditions, enablers and consequences of human flourishing, rather than its attributes or what it actually is. We therefore see our definition as a start and acknowledge that further inquiry is required. If others consider that concept analysis is a potential approach for this further work, our experience of using Rodgers' (1989) concept analysis framework in a co-inquiry of human flourishing (Stage 1) may be helpful to them. We found that the cognitive work required to identify the enablers, attributes and consequences of human flourishing seemed to get in the way of accessing the deeper meaning of the work, despite our use of creative methods as part of our process. We felt that inquiry had ended up only being a dry list of words.

So, our prayer flag for you, our reader, is our hope that you might undertake an inquiry into your own flourishing as part of your practice, education, transformational practice development or action oriented research. You may wish to work alone, but you may find that working with others in a co-inquiry would be more enriching and enhancing of your flourishing through the inquiry itself. We encourage you not to start out with our as yet incomplete definition, but rather to find your own embodied and embedded experience of human flourishing and then compare it with our definition to find similarities and/or differences. You might wish to use some of the inquiry methods we present here or create your own. In either case, you may find the posts on our Critical Creativity blog ([www.criticalcreativity.org](http://www.criticalcreativity.org)) give you ideas and courage to set off on a potentially transformational journey.

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