

"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves -- goes itself; myself it speaks and spells."
Gerard Manley Hopkins.

CHAPTER 4: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – REGAINING IN PLAY WHAT WE’VE LOST IN WORK

1. Preamble to this chapter

In her classic article that Richardson (2000) herself refers to as an “affectionate irreverence” (p. 923) to traditional qualitative science, she observes the problem of qualitative research not being read. This observation has been widespread in social sciences, and has also been echoed among South African academics, as discussed in Chapter 3. Without duplicating this conversation, I find it necessary to briefly elaborate discuss on this in approaching the current chapter. It was in a similar spirit of irreverence that this dissertation was written in general, but it finds its climax in the current chapter. What you are about to read is therefore a story, or elsewhere translated as “data with a soul” (Brown, 2010). Stories thus reflect the important attempt of this research to study play, *playfully*, and form a key reflection and representation of this research. Not only that, but in both my writing it as well as you reading it, we also participate in analysis, interpretation, as well as representation, in line with the ontology and epistemology discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

According to Richardson (2000), where quantitative research offers summaries and tables, qualitative research buries its meaning in the entire text. Richardson laments this and makes an important observation:

Qualitative work could be reaching wide and diverse audiences, not just devotees of individual topics or authors. It seems foolish at best, and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst, to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a difference to anything but the author's career. (p. 924)

The overarching objective of writing a story then is to make the research findings interesting, engaging, life-like and readable.

This chapter, together with the next, replaces the usual and more traditional chapter with its results, analysis and discussion and should therefore be read in tandem. The self-observational data, participant observation data, artefacts, journals and interview data that have been my focus can all be seen as ways to “gather the stories” that collectively make up the substance of the results in this research. The current chapter was written in a style and format that has been termed creative non-fiction (Denzin, 2006; Huss, 2008; Richardson, 2000), also discussed in Chapter 3. In creative non-fiction, actual events, experiences, characters and dialogue are blended into a fictional plot with fictionalised characters. This allows for the main themes and observations from the field research to come to life.

The creative non-fiction contained in this chapter tracks the flow of a workshop, facilitated by me and another facilitator, and attended by a group of mainly accountants. The other facilitator, Helen, represents a close colleague and friend who offered to assist me in this research and has not only been a source of encouragement, but also became a valuable subject throughout the research process. This colleague and I have been working together, and facilitating workshops together, for close to four years. The inspiration for the participants in the workshop was taken from one or two real life counterparts who are members of two actual teams with whom I recently worked, many of whom I also interviewed. Other characters in the story includes my wife, Anne-Marie (real name), as well as a nephew, Joshua (pseudonym). All of these characters, with exception of Anne-Marie⁹ and myself, were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and to steer away from assumptions. In addition to achieving anonymity and protection of privacy, creating such composite characters also assists with flow and substance.

While therefore basing all the characters on real life research subjects and while, at the same time, painstakingly attempting to incorporate reflections that are accurate for these individuals, the workshop setting, plotline and dialogue, this story does not claim to be actual. It does however claim to reflect *typical* scenarios, characters and responses, from the very specific viewpoint that I purposefully took in this inquiry.

⁹ Since this does not merely represent a story, but is largely based on real life events combined and synthesized into a story, I deemed it unnecessary and futile to anonymise myself or Anne-Marie.

In addition to facilitating a play-based workshop, as the main character, I am also reflected as a researcher. This research, in a big way, has been my work. By approaching it playfully, I attempted to bring an additional layer of insight about play at work. The story chronicles some of my struggles in this, and this research process is reflected in the journal entries I make throughout the process (called journal jots). I want to alert you to the fact that including such journal entries was a deliberately chosen approach. On the one hand, this provides a small reflection of how fieldwork has been conducted. On the other hand, and much more important in this chapter, it offers an opportunity to explicitly link the story to some of the themes discussed in Chapter 5. These themes are woven into the text dynamically and naturally, and I therefore also caution the reader not to expect a one-to-one translation of the themes in this text. Themes emerge from a collation and synthesis of data, and they seldom appear in neat boxes in reality.

But, before the story that is at the heart of this chapter gets spoiled by the preamble in much the same way that play gets spoiled in overthinking it,

let us start with a story...

...not so long ago...

...in a land not so far away ...

... when I re-discovered play...

2. Regaining in play what we have lost in work

2.1. Day one of the workshop

“Good morning. Let’s begin!” I enthused, hoping that a broad smile and a radiant personality would outbalance the unusual session our participants were about to have. I continued with some preliminary introductions: “Helen and I have been asked to facilitate the next two days for you. We are looking forward to have a great, meaningful time with you, and are thankful for the opportunity.” (Always create a positive expectation at the start of workshops!)

The lady, who was sitting opposite me on the other end of the open u-shaped arranged chairs, sat up as she heard her name. With her large eyes beneath thick-rimmed purple glasses, her wild curly brown hair and gentle smile, Helen comfortably

conveys both an artistic nature as well as a deep compassion, which are both pretty very evident at first sight. Her relatively small and almost childlike physique covers an assertive spirit that never shies away from fighting for matters of principle and integrity. We've known each other for close to four years, and I was happy to count myself as a colleague and friend.

Seated at the ends of the u-shaped configuration, we flanked the six participants, most of whom we met there for the first time. We were all sitting fairly close to each other without the comfort of our desks, which Helen and I had moved to the walls when we arrived an hour or so earlier. This lack of tables inevitably invites some complaints at the start of workshops, but we were creating an environment, a playground if you like, that we hoped would resemble a casualness rather than formality. See, I haven't heard table complaints at a family braai, where tables are also absent. Context dictates expectation and habit, and of those three, environmental context is the one with handles on it. Nevertheless, while I continued with the introduction, some participants were still clutching notepads and pens, ready to take down any notes from what wasn't meant to be a lecture.

“Before we get into more in-depth introductions, I want to start by telling you a story.”

The farmer, the tree and the fireplace

There was a farmer who lived in a land far away. His farming activities weren't big, just enough to provide for his family, and perhaps a little extra to trade for clothes, soap, and on a good day, some cheese.

One year, a drought hit this land, and the farmer barely made a harvest. He was very disappointed that he had to eat into their savings in order to survive for another season. He went to bed that night, sad and disappointed, and prayed that it would be better the next year.

Then, he had a dream in which he saw a large tree, just outside of a town that he knew he didn't recognize. In the branches of the tree appeared an angel that said to

him: “Come to this tree at the eastern entrance of this town, and dig. Buried here, you will find the treasure to your heart’s desire.”

The farmer woke up, tired and annoyed. He brushed off the dream and went to work on his field the next day. And so he did, dutifully, for the rest of the ploughing and planting season. By harvesting time, the drought had not ended and the crops were again a bitter disappointment. He prayed for mercy and went to bed, and that night, the farmer had a dream that he remembered from a year ago. In the dream, an angel said to him: “Dig under this tree at the eastern entrance to this town. Buried there you will find the answer.”

The farmer woke up tired, annoyed and angry. He brushed off the silly dream that only fed false hopes and not hungry tummies, he told himself. The next day, and every day after that for the next ploughing and planting season, the farmer dutifully went about the business of the farm.

By the time he got the donkeys and ploughs ready for action, the drought had not passed, and the crops were worse than ever. The farmer prayed for forgiveness, and that night, the farmer again, had the dream. This time, he woke up determined. He could no longer ignore it.

The next day, the farmer started his investigation and interrogated every traveller he could find. He described the town from his dream, the eastern entrance and the tree. Finally, after a few days of intense research, he received credible word about the whereabouts of the town – two days’ travel to the north on the other side of a treacherous mountain pass.

The farmer packed some dry bread, a filled water-skin and a shovel, while his wife hid a piece of cheese in his one backpack. Off the farmer went. While mostly living off the land, the farmer crossed the mountain passes without injury or incident. He saw wild life, birds, smelled flowers, and along the way, felt a slight lift to his sorrows, heartache and worries. On the fourth day of his travels, the farmer reached the town late at night, and immediately started digging under the tree, accompanied by only the moon.

Early the next morning, a local merchant came to the eastern entrance in order to set up shop, and saw the mess someone was making underneath his favourite tree. With an insincere smile, the visibly irritated merchant questioned the farmer who then explained about his dream.

“All this digging because of a dream?” the merchant ridiculed. “For three years now, I have had dreams about a treasure buried underneath the fireplace of a farmer who lives a few days’ travel south of here. Don't bother with silly dreams, sir!” The merchant nearly sang the last words in a sarcastic melody and with that, he went back to his business.

The farmer decided to head back immediately to his farm. He was lucky enough to catch a ride with a traveller for some part of the way, and could recover some sleep. Out in the mountain, the farmer saw the moonlight, a sunrise, drank water from the rivers, and, for the second time, felt his spirit lift. After all, he did have a treasure to look forward to. The farmer got home just before sunrise four days later. He immediately went over to his fireplace, hurriedly cleaned it out, and started digging with his shovel. Shortly after he cleared away the crust and dug only a few inches deep, the shovel made a hollow thump, as it slammed into something hard.

The sun’s rays burst through the eastern windows when the farmer dug up, much to his delight, a small treasure chest. When he opened it and looked inside, it looked like sunrays were also shining from his eyes.

* * *

Stories aren’t something you dissect. You realise that over-analysis kills it. The symbolic power it speaks with is gentle, suggestive, and tentative. Back in primary school, stories marked the times when classwork stopped. Yet, if I reflect on what I recall most from my life, it is the stories. Here, I was hoping to signal play-time. I was, so to speak, winking at our participants and inviting them to kick off their shoes, to sit on the carpet, and to breathe out.

By the time the story was told, none of the participants were holding notepads and most of them responded with nodding smiles, as if they knew its meaning. A brief interaction revealed those meanings to be “looking for the treasure, closer to home,”

“you have to dig in a few wrong places,” “don’t ignore your dreams,” “shit happens,” and “needing to cross mountains.” Even though these meanings differed, I was sure our participants did know its meaning. The meanings were subjective and relative, but every bit as real.

I jotted down a few notes about creating play spaces before moving the conversation along. “The reason I tell this story is because stories allow us to imagine something new. It taps our creativity and promotes freedom of thought.” I then adopted a slightly more business-like tone (whatever that is), and said: “In work throughout our organisation, we are starting to see that the same imagination and freedom is necessary when we want to solve problems and create new opportunities.” In a big way, that was why we were there, I explained before turning to the attractive lady in an orange dress suit, whom we had met a couple of weeks before, to elaborate on the purpose of the workshop.

Journal jot:

Creating play spaces, play cues, and removing analysis and right and wrong

Negotiating for play

“Thanks for the invitation, Catherine. This is Helen,” I said, as we sat down in her office.

“Nice to meet you, Catherine,” Helen said politely before Catherine extended a hand and gave her a firm handshake.

“Likewise.” Despite the formality, Catherine conveyed warmth and friendliness. On top of that, her presence was intensely professional and she communicated confidence and competence. With the bright red suit she wore, pinned-up brown hair and prominent yet stylish make-up, her Julia-Roberts-like appearance makes me want to get to the point quickly.

“It’s great to work with managers and leaders that look at team development proactively,” I said, sounding a little fake to myself.

It was a little more than four weeks earlier that Catherine contacted us to request that we facilitate a team session for her team. We officially met her a week later for a

formal briefing. Three weeks of prep, while flying by in a flash, felt like a luxury that was infrequently offered to us.

“I like to be prepared,” Catherine said with a dry smile while signalling for us to sit down around a small table at the end of her desk. As I sat down in the chair closest to her, Helen instinctively pulled her chair around the end of the table to prevent sitting off to the one side.

“I did bring Helen up to speed about our telephone conversation, and I think the main brief is pretty clear to us, but let’s just confirm...”

I briefly rehashed what Catherine requested over the phone and suggested that we talk in more detail about the team dynamics and expected outcomes, as well as the workshop style and approach. From time to time, Helen interjected questions such as “what would really make these two days meaningful to you as the leader?” and “what space is your team in?”

Catherine was heading a leadership team, responsible for the finance and accounting of our company headquarters. She sat up straight, spoke quickly while drawing diagrams on a notepad, and in about twenty minutes, we had a good understanding of her team challenges and dynamics accompanied by a couple of neat sketches. She also introduced her team members one by one, briefly describing their role and history in the team. There were veteran as well as new members, they were battling with staff shortages and Catherine was concerned about the tremendous pressure everyone was feeling. In addition, she was frustrated with their inability to pull together, or to *gel* as she put it, where the “whole could be more than the sum of its parts.”

“It feels like everyone is off into their own corners, doing their own thing. And I know that...I really believe we can all help each other.”

Catherine’s team had recently gone through a large-scale *restructuring*. Processes were *re-engineered* and people were either *retrenched*, *reskilled* and moved into different jobs or sent on early *retirement*. The implementation of these people movements was progressing according to plan. The problem, Catherine explained, was that the processes and systems were nowhere near ready.

“It sounds like you were promised an upgrade from a row-boat to a motor-boat. Now you’ve dropped some of your paddlers, but the engine hasn’t arrived,” Helen surmised.

“Sorry guys, I don’t mean to complain.” Catherine covered her face with both hands. Leaders are not allowed to complain, says the corporate culture. Leaders are supposed to be the beacons of light, the examples of optimism. A small crack had opened up in the steel exterior of Catherine’s professional demeanour. But it was short-lived. In a flash, she plucked her hands from her face, as if removing a mask, and the crack was gone. I wondered which expression was really the mask.

“We need to solve these problems, but we need some help. So I’m hoping this session can help us break through some of the obstacles. But I’m looking for something fresh, something different, creative and fun,” Catherine brought the briefing back on track. “We need you to shock us out of our normal ways of behaving, just a little.” Both Helen and my faces lit up with a mixture of delight and surprise at the drastic metaphor Catherine was using.

Catherine took her next cue from our response and clarified with a smile: “No electrifications, though, or anything unsafe! Just something different - an opportunity to get to know each other, and to address some important issues. Remember, we are a bunch of finance nerds.”

The self-deprecating humour wasn't too uncommon. I once saw a group of accountants wearing T-shirts that read:

“I was ~~called~~,
I was ~~told~~,
I was tricked
into becoming an accountant”

The group nevertheless wore those T-shirts with honour. Despite calling themselves “nerds,” there remained a pride behind Catherine’s comment. At the same time, this was an admission that she was at the end of her rope. There was other stuff that they were good at, and the people stuff, ironically referred to as the soft stuff, was just a little too hard. Catherine was looking for help and she had a hunch that it lay in

different engagements, creative engagements, laughter, fun, and connection. What masquerades as creativity, team building, and learning are really the expressions of a need for play. I made a note about this and thought that, while not having the language for it, Catherine could just as well have said: “I want you to help us play more.”

Journal jot:

Creativity, learning, strategy, team building = acceptable expressions of a need for play

Helen and I walked out with a list of important ideas that Catherine wanted to achieve: agree on and prioritise business priorities, agree on focus areas, enablers and obstacles, bond, come together as a team, honest “crucial conversations,” re-energize for the road ahead and, last but not the least, have fun. Catherine was also very receptive to an approach that brought a slower pace, time to connect, reflect, heal, and balance “right-brain” and “left-brain” styles.

“You know,” I later said to Helen while walking back to our offices. “I’m really encouraged by leaders who invite play, humour, fun and creativity into workspaces that are dominantly analytic, administrative and goal-oriented.”

“I think they realise that a part of the answer lies in connecting with what makes us human,” Helen replied.

“Sure, but I have a concern about it.”

“About being human?”

“That too,” I laughed. “Super heroes think beyond that.”

“Whatever you say, Batman,” Helen mocked while citing my childhood infatuation with Batman which I shared with our team during a show-and-tell session some time ago. I welcomed the tease as a signal of kinship.

Jokes aside, I continued: “What concerns me is that most people, leaders and managers, designate the creativity, the play, the laughter and fun, to workshops. We can play, we can laugh, but we need to create special events for it.”

“And then translation back into the workplace never happens?” she more said than asked.

“Precisely!”

“Well, maybe they need the playground. Maybe they need it to be separate in order to be safe. Perhaps our offices restrict us in our suits and ties, and what if there is something sacred about a separate geography?”

The question of geography and play momentarily resonated with me. It does seem that play attracts itself to different geographies. Is there a geographical imperative? A boardroom, a bedroom, a bar and a park-bench, engage us in different ways. Yet, there is an optimist in me that wants to believe that any place can inherit playground properties. Perhaps facilitating play is an act of alchemy that turns ordinary workshops and workplaces into magical worlds of imagination, possibility, and wonder – worlds of play.

“Ok, Ghandi!” I interrupt my own thinking while making a mental note to jot this down later. “You might be right about playgrounds and safety. But let’s go and grab some cappuccinos and get back here to finish the work.”

“Or let’s be back here to play with work.”

Journal jot:

Bringing playgrounds into workshops and workplace – safety to play

Playgrounds and players

“Thank you all being here,” Catherine welcomed her subordinates. This remains good etiquette, whether they had a choice in being there or not. People not wanting to be at our workshops were about as many as those who are afraid to go to the dentist.

“I know it’s difficult to take two days out of our diaries, but at times we have to say no to what appears to be urgent and focus on what is really important,” she continued in familiar fashion. The claim on the well-poised rationale for team

development has become stock-standard in management lexicon.¹⁰ The principle remains sound: not everything that screams for attention is necessarily our highest priority. It also bears an interesting relationship to play, which is often defined as unimportant, discretionary and trivial. However, in recent years, play scholars have largely succeeded in effectively arguing for play's importance to work and workplace,¹¹ and I was also starting to see its urgency.

Catherine positioned the two days in accordance to the discussion we had with her a few weeks before while emphasising the need to “pull together,” “reflect on current reality” and “find a way forward.” She also sneaked in the important idea I was hoping for: “While speaking to Jacques and Helen, I also realised that it is important for us to have fun in the process. So hopefully we will also think differently, do some creative work and engage our ‘right-brains.’ You know, as accountants we need to sometimes get over ourselves a little.” The group seemed to enjoy Catherine's shy modesty.

“Thanks to the two of you for your preparations,” she said while turning to us with eyes of expectancy. “I'm looking forward to seeing what you have in store for us.”

Smiling broadly, I accepted the speaking turn back with a brief thank you. The smile was more than mere politeness or habit. I found it interesting that Catherine pinned the creativity and play on us, while she explicitly requested it. Being *right* is important in corporate life, and our ideas indeed feel less exposed if supported by “experts.” I also smiled at how the session has now been framed as a performance by us as the facilitators.

After a telepathic moment between Helen and myself, we both knew it was time for her voice to enter the workshop. It was also time for other participants to step up to the microphone, and I knew Helen would be sure to hand it over to them quickly. Helen usually stresses the importance of “disappearing as a facilitator,” but also realises that facilitators need to establish rapport with the group early on. Establishing that this would be a collaboration between two co-facilitators was

¹⁰ The urgency/importance distinction were popularized by Covey's (2004) “Seven habits of highly effective people” and is widely used in the organization for which I work.

¹¹ See discussion in Chapter 3.

important in order to eradicate wrong assumptions. Although, we have never called it this, it was about counter- balancing the assumptions about a pecking order in a company immersed in it. We needed a level playing field, and this included breaking down walls between the participants and us.

“Thanks, Catherine. I really commend you for the care you demonstrate to your team, and thank you on behalf of both of us for the opportunity share the space with you over the next two days.”

Then, jumping up, she explained to the group that we would be doing some introductions through an activity. The activity required every person to interview the person sitting next to him/her with a few introductory questions before introducing that person to the group. I was already busy flipping open the pre-prepared flipchart that Helen had written up in the morning, revealing the three questions.

- What is the story behind your name?
- What is one thing very few people know about you?
- If you dug up a treasure in your fireplace, what would you want it to be?

The questions were a simple play cue that invited people to open up, become a little vulnerable by reciprocating, while also playing a role of interviewer, interviewee, and then introducer. People quickly got into conversation and the buzz that filled the room was reassuring. I walked over to the facilitators’ table where a digital music player was hidden in-between some coloured pens, crayons, sticky notes, magazines, paint, clay and bunch of paper shapes. By pressing *play*, some lively guitar music from Jesse Cook supported the warm bustle in the room, and I quietly marvelled at the ubiquity of the word play in our everyday language.

Helen and I superficially ran through the questions ourselves in order to participate authentically. Since we’ve done this many times, I was convinced we could wing it without participants realising, but Helen wouldn’t allow that. I smiled and obliged. With a little bit of spare time, I jotted down a few thoughts about introductions, participation, audience, and participative safety.

Participant introductions symbolise an important moment in workshops, one in which ownership slowly but surely spreads through the room and the session becomes

collaborative. Although it's common for participants to still expect the "performance" to come from the facilitators, something changes when participants have been co-opted into the performance, when the boundaries that separate performers and audience shift. It is also the difference between vicarious play and participative play. Perhaps, and I am speculating, by becoming true participants, people open themselves up to the same criticism that they level against the performers. We put down the red pen and make it safer for others, because, if it is safer for them, it is safer for us. Perhaps safety to participate is not something that precedes participation at all, but rather follows it.

Journal jot:

Play and mutual vulnerability

Sharing something few people know about you opens up a door to mystery, humour and fun, as well as depth and real self-disclosure. I have learned from previous workshops that this process can differ significantly from group to group. Some engage and some express more reservation, while aspects like depth, humour, seriousness and significance all vary. It nevertheless remains fascinating. One person studied optometry before changing to accounting. What a mistake! Another has been retrenched three times. Not something everyone puts on their CV. One participant lived in Australia for a while. Living in a sports crazy South-Africa, the reason why this was kept a secret is obvious. Some friendly bantering and mockery broke out for a moment. Another person confessed to being a real fan of Harry Potter and was reading the series for a third time. You got to be kidding me! A children's series? I wondered if I should admit that I'm a big fan of The Chronicles of Narnia and was beat by other people admitting that they too liked Harry Potter.

But one memorable day, it got REALLY interesting, when a mischievous female participant admitted to having had a breast enlargement procedure, or "boob-job." The group sat in silence, stunned for a moment at the revelation and unsure about how to break the ice. How does one break the ice that freezes up during an ice-breaker? And then I heard myself saying before I could think: "Well, compliments to that doctor! Let's give her a hand!" The group clapped, laughed, and here and there, people searched the eyes of close colleagues or friends to exchange glances of disbelief and amusement. This was, interestingly, followed up by another colleague

who shared that she had a nose-job when she was in her early twenties and consequently managed to get rid of the nickname “witch.” The whole session for the next three days was marked with deep connection and sharing, with some people refusing to leave after the last day. But the exercise ended in disappointment for me, as I was sort of expecting the guy in the silky shirt to admit that he was into Celine Dion. It didn’t happen. And I didn’t get to confess that I hum to Beyoncé, often.

While making a few notes in my journal, I wondered. What creates this kind of safety? What promotes the courage? And does the playful, different, out-of-ordinary situation we create, the playground, have anything to do with it? I realised that there is power in participative play in that it draws us out of our caves, entices us to share in environments that are mutual, reciprocal, and safe. We drop our guards, reach out, and in it, we get a sniff of the aroma’s authenticity and an accepting community. But aromas are not the meal. There was still work to be done.

Journal jot:

Dropping our guards, authenticity and community.

Meet the players

My journaling was interrupted when Helen asked the group to round off their conversations. She then signalled that we would start with the introductions on the one side and then carry it through to the other end, after which we would also introduce ourselves.

To Helen’s left, sat a slightly stocky yet bubbly middle-aged lady. Minette provided Human Resource support to Catherine's function, and although the team saw her as an important member, it became evident that she saw herself as an outsider. She wore a knee-length skirt with a colourful blouse and soft make-up. She was paired up with Prevasni, an Indian woman that I judged to be the same age as Minette. Prevasni was tall with strong facial features (the guess on her age was later confirmed by Helen, who couldn’t resist the temptation of checking the identity numbers on the attendance registers). She wore a beige dress-suit with a black blouse and, of the ladies in the room, wore the most jewellery from what we could see. Prevasni came across as reserved and rather critical. Throughout the workshop, I

felt like I had to work hard to keep her on board by mincing my words and keeping instructions snappy and clearly motivated.

Minette was introduced by Prevasbni, as a person whose name meant “love” and “wished for,” something Minette was proud of. Minette was wanting to dig up a treasure of a magic soup-bowl that would never get empty, “so she can cure worldwide hunger.” I couldn’t help feeling a little sceptical at the beauty pageant cliché. The idealism was however broken when Prevasbni added that Minette kept the secret of being a social smoker. Minette giggled unstoppably as Prevasbni disclosed what apparently slipped out before Minette could stop it. We laughed and gave her a hearty round of applause as a warm welcome. Minette introduced Prevasbni while speaking with lively, friendly eyes and despite a thick Afrikaans accent with an over-pronounced “r,” always maintaining a gentle tone. Prevasbni apparently didn’t know the meaning of her name, but Minette did report that she inherited it from her grandmother. It therefore made her think about the legacy she wants to leave behind. Prevasbni didn’t keep any secrets, but Minette did get her to admit that she was into late-night snacks.

Next up in our U-shape, we had Catherine who was paired up with Alister. Catherine introduced Alister first. Apparently, Alister’s parents gave him the name because they liked it. He therefore liked to do things that, well, he liked. Catherine reported that Alister did Google the name later on and found out that it was a delineation from the name Alexander. He liked the association of “The Great,” he added while Catherine spoke. Alister’s little known quality was that he sang in the school choir in high school. Alister passionately nodded while Catharine rounded up the introduction by saying that the treasure he wanted was nothing else but a pot of gold. The reason being that he could then buy any other treasure people could come up with.

Alister, an extroverted and energetic guy, spoke a polished, British accent that came quite unexpected, in contrast to a fairly characteristic Coloured accent I had come to expect. While aware of how he defies this stereotype, he later joked: “I’m a Coloured, not a Capey,” He was probably the youngest in the group, still with a few years lead over Helen and me. In the years that we facilitated together, Helen and I were not only the youngest facilitators in our team, but also mostly the youngest in

any workshop setting. It was comforting whenever we had people who shared our youth.

Catherine, while looking a little more comfortable than earlier the day, was now leaning back into her chair while Alister introduced her. He informed us that the boss' name meant pure, "which must have been obvious to her parents," he improvised (always suck up to the boss). Alister, at the cheer of the group, revealed that Catherine had earned South African colours in debating when she was thirteen. With Catherine smiling humbly, Alister concluded that she was hoping to find a packet of grain that would grow regardless of the weather conditions. While not revealing what she meant, bobbing heads all around acknowledged the wisdom. Despite the ever-present professional polish, it was good to see that Catherine was enjoying what she was learning about her team. "It's strange that we don't know these things about each other," she reflected after the exercise.

Our final pair was Mpho and Leon. Mpho introduced Leon with a thick voice and heavy African accent. Dressed in brown pants and a white shirt, Mpho's leather jacket was draped over his chair and his brown pointed shoes were shining. When he spoke, he normally sat up straight while using his arms and hands wildly. Despite occasional difficulty with Mpho's accent, his communication was functional, and while I missed a word here or there, I seldom found it difficult to understand his meaning. Leon's name, Mpho reported, was a family name handed down to the eldest son in their family line. Mpho proceeded to tell us that Leon was a keen fisherman who made his own flies. I thought I noticed the faintest echoes of a smile appear around Leon's mouth and eyes as Mpho spoke about his hobby. A smile from Leon up until this point in the day was something novel. In terms of treasure, Leon was with Alister – it must be gold! A few of the ladies berated the shallowness in playful boos, and Leon rebuked them for betraying their profession. By now, the smile on Leon's face was no longer a hint. He was enjoying the interaction and was sitting up straight while his arms were still folded tightly in a kind of self-hug.

We learned from Leon that Mpho is a Tswana name that means gift. Mpho felt that children were always a gift, and when we grow up, we need to become a gift to others. Mpho was hoping to get the location of a thousand cattle in his fireplace,

because of his two sons who still needed to pay lebola¹² someday, Leon explained. On the unknown qualities, Mpho was running low on answers. After Helen and I refused to give in with gentle prods and pokes, Mpho proudly confessed to being a Sundowners soccer fan. He then added, with a touch of embarrassment, that he drove a VW before switching to BMW many years before. This together with the fact that his teammates only a few moments earlier realised that he was Tswana, counted as a triple score on that question. I announced that Mpho was the clear winner.

Then, Helen and I got our turn. I introduced Helen as a colleague and friend, whose name appears in Greek Mythology as a woman over whom men fought wars (Helen, as a Jew, hated conflict, but still found the idea of men fighting wars over her greatly appealing). Helen's unknown quality was her appetite for television soap operas and she was looking for a paid world tour that included Vietnam, Israel, Brazil and ended in Israel. I was introduced as the guy who likes his name because it is French (and everyone knows about the reputation of French lovers), still idolised Batman since childhood and would like to get the treasure of a completed masters dissertation in that treasure chest.

Navigating through our heads into our heart

With the individual introductions completed, Helen and I spent the next few minutes introducing the workshop style and approach. I drew two columns on a chart and wrote "left" and "right" at the top.¹³ I then took differently coloured pens and wrote words such as "analytical," "logical," "practical," "facts!" and "organised" and "planned" on the left and drew something that was supposed to be a human brain at the bottom of the column. After one of the participants pointed out that it looked more like tumour than a brain, I handed the pen over to Helen and asked her to deal with the right column before I killed our participants with bad art. Interactively with our delegates, she started writing down the words "creative," "emotive," and "relational" after which delegates insisted on the word "fun" being added, and Minette felt strong about "intuitive" appearing on the list.

¹² Lebola is a term that refers to the payment the groom makes for the bride and is present in many of the native Southern African cultures. The payment has traditionally been in the form of cattle, but has since been substituted for hard cash.

¹³ The ideas presented here comes from a practical synthesis of Herrmann (1996) and Springer and Deutsch (2001) that is commonly encountered in our organisation.

“Who would like to draw a symbol to accompany the little tumour that Jacques drew?” Helen offered. Minette quickly volunteered and drew a big heart while calmly ignoring the demands from Alister and Prevasni for the heart to cross over into the left column.

The two contrasting columns, commonly known as left-brain and right-brain theory,¹⁴ speak for themselves. Where do we spend most of our time? What is the balance? Is there value in balance? How do we synthesise and move away from an either/or? These simple and clear ideas find almost universal appeal with people accepting the logic without protest. The need for play, framed in this way, is self-evident. And most of our participants and sponsors find it intuitively appealing.

Helen and I nodded at each other, as if we both were thinking that it was time to get some momentum. It was time to wrap up the introductions. We knew the players, we had the rough markers of a playground. As she got up to introduce participants to our play material, I used a few moments to capture some ideas about holism and integration.

Journal Jot:

Play as holistic integration: left-brain/right-brain; thinking/feeling; mind/ body

“So we are going to do a number of different things over the next two days,” Helen started while holding up some coloured pens, crayons, scissors and a magazine while I waved a few paper shapes and sticky notes in the air. “The aim would be to enjoy an experience that deepens and enriches our conversation and decision-making.” Helen had a way of stating things with simplistic clarity.

“But in order to stop talking and start walking, I want to introduce you to the first activity. With the materials Jacques will hand out to you in a moment, draw a road sign that you believe will help us navigate the workshop. So for instance, if you believe we all need to rather go to Hawaii for these two days, perhaps you want to draw an airport sign.” While she spoke, I quickly got up and started spreading A3 pages and crayons out in the room and on the tables that lined the walls. For play to

¹⁴ The ideas of left-hemisphere and right-hemisphere integration (Springer & Deutsch, 2001), although somewhat differently represented in literature, is accepted as corporate common sense in many places.

happen, we need to move beyond awkwardness with our play tools, or toys, if you like.

There were the usual few comments about not being able to draw and people asking us to repeat the instruction a few times over, but in a less than a minute, our participants were up and about. Most stood at the tables while Minette and Mpho decided to spread themselves out on the carpet. After about 10 more minutes, we had six road-signs up on the wall.

Mpho was quick on the draw and put up a “give way” sign that suggested we should be accommodating to the views of others and not all try to have our own way. I wondered how often he battles to gain acceptance for his own ways. Prevasni put up a minimum and maximum speed sign, signifying that we need to maintain a good pace, not too slow and not too fast. She still seemed a little distant and withdrawn, and her comments felt like a subtle suggestion to us as facilitators. From the well-drawn car and bus on Catherine’s sign, I guessed that her children give her plenty of practice in drawing. She mentioned that the team should all be “on the bus,” adding that rules on a bus are different from rules in a car. She verbally coloured the red and blue sign further with words and phrases such as respect, pulling together, alignment, and same direction. Alister spoke about decisiveness and making sure we get clarity on direction. His sign had a fork in the road to emphasise this. He then broke out in a little MBA speech about focus and the success of a company like Apple Inc., before Leon interrupted him by putting a stop sign up above the road-fork. In more passion than Leon had spoken with the entire morning, he called for the team to use the time to stop running beside the bicycle.¹⁵ They should stop, even if they lose speed initially, to get on. From Leon’s levels of engagement up to this point, I wondered if he was doing any running, and also whether he was looking forward to getting on the bike. Finally, Minette’s sign had a crossed-out blow-horn with ‘church ahead’ written underneath it. She suggested briefly that it is important to lower the noise levels and to get in touch with what is important.

¹⁵ Another metaphor commonly found in our organisation, is that of running besides the bicycle. This refers to the inability or unwillingness to stop inefficient practices in order to reassess and adopt more efficient processes, even if they are at hand.

It was clear in how our participants conveyed their road-signs that not all the signs related specifically to the question we asked about navigating the workshop. Some seemed to speak to general team conditions and others were probably expressions of frustrations felt outside of the workshop context. But where once I would have tried to shape answers to fit our questions, in either an act of resignation or possibly wisdom, I have given up on ‘tight precision’ or ‘correctness.’ When we speak through play, the symbolism draws on greater needs than correctness. The signs on the board gave us a good platform, and Helen and I added a few words such as “time management,” “equal airtime,” “cell-phones on silent” and “choice” on a chart to round off the conditions we would like to create for the workshop to proceed.

While navigating workshops effectively is important, I’m learning to appreciate warm-up exercises, ice-breakers, and moments of play as a tuning of our internal compass. An imbalanced magnetic field that emphasises analysis, cognition, and correctness above intuitive, felt sense, and looseness, pulls the needle to a kind of false north. The problem with false north is difficult to see, at first. It’s not evident in our small steps. But if we walk in it long enough, it pulls us off course. If we want to return home, there is wisdom in aligning that compass with other cues from nature, perhaps the stars, or the shadow of a fixed object. In corporate life, many of us know that we have been walking for too long in a slightly distorted direction. In retrospect, we don’t like where we end up. That was why we were there. The very reason a session like this was necessary had to do with finding north.

Journal jot:

North, navigating through head and heart

From courage to play to courage to say

After the morning warm-up, we started our group on the activity that would take us until after lunch. Helen led the exercise, and in latching onto the symbolism of the morning’s story, asked our participants to draw a roadmap that represented their journey as a team. She drew a few additional suggestions and clues from the group, which I captured on a flipchart: droughts, dreams, treasures, hills, valleys, lifts along the journey, broad or narrow stretches. We decided to break the group into two sub-groups of three to avoid creating too many passive players. By alternately numbering people from one end to the next, we had Minette, Catherine, and Mpho in a group that

gathered to our left, leaving Prevasni, Alister and Leon at the other end of the room. After allocating two flipcharts to each group, I handed them some of the crayons they used earlier and Helen reminded them to use symbols, pictures, and colours instead of words as far as they could.

On the backend of drawing the road-signs, both teams quickly engaged. Yet, when the activity grows from individual to group, from solitary to interactive, there is another reservation that arrests the group until one person makes the first move that spoils the unblemished white piece of paper with a mark that sticks out like a pimple. After the big spoil, others find it easier to get involved and in about thirty minutes, we had two masterpieces that could easily line the classroom wall of any kindergarten - rich in symbolism and layered with the stories of the two groups. Accompanying the sketches, we had thick shared meanings that emanated from the rich conversations in the various groups.

Looking at the art pieces, we saw rocks, detours, forks, droughts and floods, lightning. On the one sketch, we had Leon spread out over the road, like road-kill. He was very amused with this addition that he himself was responsible for. There were also a few other graves on the sketch, representing people that were lost in restructurings. Alarmingly, there was also a fat man standing off to the side, laughing at the agony. Minette drew a cloud with a silver lining and Prevasni added much of the detail. On the other team, Mpho and Alister were together responsible for drawing a few men that urinated all over the road, much to Catherine's disapproval. I wondered at the role of play to rebel and break rules. I made a mental note to return to this later. Additionally, this group decided to draw Catherine at the steer of fully functional horse-wagon that was then dismantled as the sketch evolved. Mpho was busy fixing the one wheel while Alister was trying to hitch a ride that didn't come.

We spent much of the time before tea discussing both the process and content of the activity. Catherine expressed her frustration with trying to lead, but having a broken wagon. The conversation started feeling a little stale. We were going through the motion, but much of what was said lacked conviction. The emotion that was reflected in the sketches remained on the sketches, and the group ended up drawing up a list with possible issues, from structure, to broken processes, to staff shortages, and more.

“Something’s amiss,” Helen finally objected. “Listening to you earlier, it doesn’t feel like you are talking about the same issues that you drew. When you drew those pictures, what was it that you were really burning to say?”

The group fell into silence. A few people started shuffling around, and Alister asked for Helen to clarify what she was asking, which she said she would do, but wanted others to speak first. The discomfort grew a little more, until Catherine finally broke.

“I agree. These are not the real issues. The problem is that we are all working as individuals, and in fact, few of us really want to be here. How many of us are waiting for another ride?”

The silence in the room confirmed what the crayons were saying. Then, she added: “If we can’t stand being here, what do we expect of the people we are leading?”

That is what it takes. A moment of insight that confirms what is visible and tangible for everyone to see. Yet, so often, the disconnect between what we know in play and what we can say in conversation still persists. The natural ability to bring thought and word into synthesis with intuition and felt sense is a skill obtained with difficulty. Play however offers an opportunity to bridge the divide. Play becomes purposeful.

The uncomfortable silence returned for a minute or so. It felt longer. The group, at a pace that felt slower and a tone that felt softer, started agreeing to some of the root causes. People were burnt out, disenchanted, demotivated and uncommitted. I marked off the characteristics of burnout and engagement¹⁶ in my mind while the root causes were spoken into confirmation. Work had taken more from this team than it provided. They were depleted.

“I guess that, to prevent more rotten apples, we need to heal the tree first,” Alister suggested.

“We need to be bought into the journey,” Prevaashni brought the metaphor back.

¹⁶ These concepts loosely translates to classic constructs in engagement and burnout, as can be found in the review of Schaufeli, Taris, and Van Rhenen (2008).

“We’ve lost the love.” Leon’s use of the word love caught me slightly off-guard.

“How do we fix it?” asked Mpho. A few people started giggling and it took only a moment before Mpho linked it back to the sketch of him fixing the wheel. He then burst out laughing so loud that it sent the rest of the group into a crescendo of giggles and gotchas. How much of it was purely on account of Mpho’s sketch, and how much actually related to a needed relief remains open to debate. But for a couple of minutes after that, it seemed like the group could talk about the difficult issues with a bit more openness. Fun and humour, positive affect for that matter, if we disallow it to become a complete distraction, actually offers a useful outlet to speak about difficult situations without getting caught up in defensive seriousness.

After a few minutes of conversation, the group returned to Mpho’s question regarding fixing the problems. In both humour as well as action-planning, there is a kind of relief that offered some good, and potentially some bad. We escape the current dilemma, we laugh, we find a relief, but we return to a problem that is unaltered. Unless, of course, relief is essential in returning to problems with a fresh perspective and greater motivation. For now, fresh perspective and motivation depended on something physical. Much to our and the team’s relief, it was time for lunch. As the group left, it felt like something significant had shifted, and I knew we could expect more frankness and honesty through the rest of the day.

Lunchtime interlude and informal social play

Both play, as well as the courage to step up, own up, and name what is difficult to name, has been doing its work to clear the interactions of the usual masks, boundaries, facades and walls. I scribbled a few notes in my journal before joining Helen in some of the janitorial duties she already started.

Journal jot:

Naughty play, jokes and breaking rules – play allows for a testing of boundaries

Honesty and courage in play – the precursors for authenticity and community

We quickly made best of cleaning up loose scraps of paper, putting written flipcharts up on the wall to have a visual memory board of the conversation so far and then discussed the sessions after lunch. We needed a slight adjustment to our plans for

the afternoon. Helen suggested we spend some time talking about “possibility” by connecting to pictures of a positive immediate future. I agreed, and in a snap, we revised the session plan of talking about roles, responsibilities, and short-term deliverables to incorporate more of the team’s realisations. We agreed to use a technique of creating a magazine article and front-page story by framing it in terms of “possibility.”

Over lunch, we took a few moments to align with Catherine on our suggested adjustments and only then got round to what lunch is really for. I wolfed away at the chicken schnitzel, baked potatoes and creamy spinach, while Helen nibbled peacefully at her specially prepared plate of steamed vegetables.

The group was sitting close by, enjoying some of the unwinding and joking with each other about the different sketches. Mpho was ordered to “fix it” whenever he said anything, and Alister was ridiculed for abandoning the conversation every time he changed the topic. Alister, on his part, referred to the food as road-kill a few times but was abruptly silenced by Minette and Prevasni who threatened to send him off hitchhiking to another table.

“How much of the “work” gets done when people are not trying to do the work?” Helen asked in reference to the conversations taking place. The work, we understood, was about clarity, depth, understanding, and enough distance so that we could then engage more meaningfully. The DNA of school breaks when we are sent off to the playground runs deep within our veins. The group was still busy playing. Play was busy working.

Journal jot:

How informal social play also gets the work done

The big-brain-contest and purposeless play

The group was a little tardy in returning to the room. I have met very few groups that didn’t indulge the opportunity to rebel against facilitators, like school children that need to be policed by their teachers. Acting out those teenage years can come as such a liberation. Prevasni called us slave-drivers while Minette, in sympathy with us, helped bringing the group to order.

In continuing my musings from lunch, I thought about how play does not always need to have a purpose. Sometimes, we play just for play's sake. We lift the mood, we boost the participative energy, we break the ice, lubricate the conversation and we also just do it – for the heck of it. For many groups, that impromptu play is also the most memorable. At the same time, my history in facilitation testifies to a habit of almost always positioning play in ways that link to our process. More recently though, I resorted to simply saying: “Hey guys, there's no big reason why I'm doing this, I just thought it would be quirky and fun. Make of it what you please.”

So, as a quick energiser, I said to the group: “Hey guys, for no big reason, let's play a word and story game! If you need to have a reason, let's write it down as a creativity exercise.” Helen and I quickly devised a word game with the few moments that our participants' lingering bought us. Experimentation was part of play, and those few inefficient moments were essential to experimentation.

The game worked like this: we sat in a circle and took turns, each person latching one word onto the previous word to build a sentence. By doing so, we would create a story. I explained it quickly, had to then explain it again, and after people still failed to get it, Helen suggested we “get into it” and then started us off with the theme “a cat and mouse...” So we started building the story. In the end, the cat wanted to catch the mouse, and the mouse outsmarted him, until Alister turned it around and the mouse became supper. Prevasni seemed to come more alive and the others enjoyed it as well.

After the brief warm-up, I suggested a topic closer to work: “One day at the office...” And so it began. “*One day at the office, the boss called in his secretary.*” By now, we had almost gone around the circle twice, and the story was starting to pick up speed. “*The boss, who was a slave-driver, rudely requested his hot secretary to fix the wheel of his car.*” It was Alister that of course said “wheel,” and everyone knew that the joke was again on Mpho. There's that fine line where “fun with” becomes “fun off,” and by now, it was apparent that Mpho stopped enjoying the joke. The story nevertheless continued.

“*The secretary, who had ...*” It was my turn, and with Mpho in mind, I decided to turn the story on Helen for the next round of fun. I added the word “*big*” with

raised eyebrows and a confident smirk as I turned to her. Secretaries and bosses are a frequent source of sexual humour and I was confident that my suggestive addition did an adequate job in setting Helen up. But, without a flinch or a moment's delay, Helen added a word that had the whole group in stitches with Prevasni announcing the score out loud: "Helen ONE, Jacques ZERO." Helen had added the word "*brains.*"

Helen's joke won the admiration of the group, and I took it on the chin. There is a sort of contest that play often stimulates. Even in an activity that is seemingly cooperative, there are pockets of fun that lie in outsmarting, outwitting, and outmanouevring the opponent. When this happens in ways that are inclusive, non-threatening and avoid that risk of "fun off" instead of "fun with," I find that it actually signals affinity, kinship and acceptance. "I like you, therefore I play with you." I appreciated Helen, and with that thought, I started plotting my revenge. Images of frogs in Tupperware came to mind.

Journal jot:

Competition and cooperation - can competitive play can lead to better cooperation?

Glueing together possibility

If we believe in the possibility of a treasure under a tree or in a fireplace, if we really believe it, we are left with what some call a creative tension - a kind of dissonance that compels us to dig. But how do we come to believe in those ideas or pictures? What gives pictures of possibility power over pictures of the present?

While loosely connecting the next activity and conversation to "stories" and "treasures," we launched into a piece we were hoping would connect our participants to a possibility they could all believe in. With the group again divided in two, we handed them magazines, crayons and coloured pens. The instruction: produce a magazine front page with a cover story that tells of the success of this team in six months' time. On a separate page, they could write out the article heading and bullet the main success factors that assisted them in achieving this. As I spoke, Helen wrote the questions on the board: "What future possibility would excite and engage you?"

At the price of a few destroyed magazines, a messy room with off-cut papers lying everywhere, and 30 minutes of lively conversation, the teams were ready to

present. Despite our attempts to encourage openness and experimentation above analysis and correctness, Alister and Prevashni got their team to reject two drafts before settling on their third attempt. A slightly disengaged Leon, who was the third member of the trio, spent much of the time floating between the two groups.

We took another 30 minutes to consolidate themes into a list of enablers and obstacles, concepts that look good in a strategic document. We then closed the exercise by asking each participant to share which aspect of the future possibility inspired him/her the most. This latter part, although I deem it as far more necessary and productive, seldom ends up in strategic documents. Playful experimentation with our collective and individual possibility does not document well. I've learned to accept this.

There were pictures of a 4x4 on a dirt track, a meditating lady in white clothes, a happy family on a rollercoaster, a financial graph with dollar signs written all over it and a man in a suit doing an air-punch in celebration. I like the idea of an air punch and my mind wandered to some of my own disengagement with both my work as well as my studies. The idea of an air punch, success, "take that, sucker," with an unrestrained ability to jump up high in defiance of gravity, spoke a thousand words.

I often find the feedback after people had spoken in groups a little abstract. I sometimes want to bed the comments down in action. And then, I am reminded that it carries emotive power. And that emotive power is visible as people share and listen from their own perspectives. It is as if participants glued some of those ideas onto themselves. Grounding and anchoring them to action will come. Underneath the symbols are layers of meaning, self-images, aspirations, ambitions and hope. They are like dreams about treasure. Dismissing them would be folly. And talking about treasure, I glanced down at my watch and saw that it was time for coffee and the home made biscuits I came to deeply appreciate about our current venue.

Ending the day on a high

Our group was greeted with a rearranged room when they returned. The U-shaped chairs were replaced by six tables, slightly spaced out, and covered with newspaper. On each table stood three paper cups with water, two small paper plates, six different colours of paint and two brushes of varying thickness. The roll of toilet

paper we left at each station made Alister wonder if there was something they needed to be afraid of. A few of us smiled, more for Alister's endless thirst to crack jokes than for the quality of the humour.

Helen, leading the exercise, asked the delegates to gather around the tables. As each person moved towards the spot corresponding to where they had been sitting, I again marvelled at the power of school-year conditioning.

"You're allowed to go to any desk you want," I pointed out. A few members looked around for a moment while realising that they've been called on predictability and on being "stuck in a comfort zone." With Prevasni saying, "That's okay, we are accountants after all," the group managed to ignore me and returned their full attention to the materials in front them.

"To end the day, we are going to paint," Helen started. She explained that, whereas crayons and coloured pens are a little more 'definite', paint is more 'fluid'. And where collage utilises things we find on the outside, painting allows for an expression that comes from the inside.

"Much of the stuff we did since this morning involved group work, and this exercise is also a return to more personal, reflective ideas," Helen continued. I handed out a few pieces of cut-off cloth and Helen suggested that people play a bit with the medium before we start the actual exercise.

"Mmm," Catherine sounded in a way that makes you wonder what's coming. "There really are days that I find it difficult to explain to my kids what I do at work." She waved a brush in front of her face while staring down at the paint and cloth at her station before continuing. "While today could be easier to explain, I'm not so sure they would understand," she added while eyeing her brush with a humorous curiosity. Some members looked up and a few laughed out loud at Catherine's dilemma.

"Well, can you imagine doing our kind of work?" Helen shot back with what could either be boastfulness or self-deprecation on the part of the facilitators. More people laughed, with Prevasni admitting that she surely is glad she doesn't get paid to do this, because she really felt that she sucked at it.

“So what’s important is that we suck with confidence,” Helen said, while holding up a brush like a master swordsman to the amusement of both myself and the group. Quite a few people repeated the catch phrase “suck with confidence,” and it became a phrase we often referred to during the rest of the workshop. With that, everyone found themselves being drawn into painting what they felt about the day so far, in accordance to Helen’s instruction. I walked around with a jug of water and an empty bin for the used water from the painters’ desks while Helen pressed play on the iPod to allow Enya to soak the room with their watery Celtic sounds. The painters were allowed a few moments to share their art with a neighbour before they were told that the main painting exercise we were about to get into, was to paint a bandana.¹⁷

“What comes to mind when you think about bandanas?” Helen asked. The picture of a cowboy and a pirate immediately jumped into my mind.

“Domestic worker,” came the answer from Mpho.

“Okay, so maybe we can think about service,” Helen safely bends the symbol. “What else?”

“Artists...,” “bikers...,” and “Jack Sparrow,” came more answers from Minette, Leon and Alister respectively.

“Yes, bandanas are about rebellion,” was Catherine’s contribution.

“Rebels with a cause,” added Leon while bobbing his head in determination.

“Adventure,” said Alister. “Yes!” I agreed internally. The very word “adventure” puts a flame in my eyes and I can feel my chin lifting.

“And it’s about who you are,” added Minette.

“So we’re going to take these ideas of service, cause, adventure and identity, and pour it into a bandana. So here’s the instruction. While keeping today’s conversations in mind, and specifically in thinking about your team possibilities,” Helen contextualised and then slowly proceeded: “Make a bandana as a statement of your individual contribution to that possibility.”

¹⁷ Bandana is a term used in South African for a headband.

I opened up the pre-written flipchart that stated, “Make a bandana that reflects your individual contribution to your team’s possibility.” I then added the words “service,” “cause,” “adventure” and “identity” to the chart, underlined the word “contribution,” and then drew something that was supposed to be a thumbprint, but looked more like a whirlpool.

Helen handed them some paper to experiment and plan on and announced that they had 30 minutes to complete it. We were approaching the end of the day and still needed to round things off. While sitting with my journal, I felt preoccupied by the idea of suspending judgement, experimentation, trial and error, and play’s power to promote these. My thoughts drifted to my procrastinator tendencies and I realised that my inability to play with my research writing has paralysed me for too long. I didn’t know how to bring play into the work of my research, but I felt that this idea of potentially “sucking with confidence” held some clues.

Journal jot:

Play and suspending judgement: suck with confidence!

In the meantime

While our participants were happily flowing with Enya’s “Sail away,” I walked over to the corner of the room pensively. I wanted to build something that would allow the wet bandanas to be hung on. DIY wasn’t my strong suite, but I had an idea. By using two open screws, normally used for paintings, I managed to fix a 3 meter line in the one corner of the room. I stood back, and with both hands on my hips, appreciated the piece of DYI that looked somewhat like a makeshift laundry line. In the meantime, Helen took her turn in refilling the water cups before we used the few in-between minutes for a chat.

“This reminds me of the T-shirts we made during that Khula session out in Parys,” Helen said. In the early days of our own team, we had team breakaways that we initially called “bunker days” - days of learning and experimentation that were aimed at providing us an opportunity to share, learn, and relax. We did away with the war metaphor after a while and opted for “Khula days,” after an African word for learning. Over the years, this remains one of the best ideas that we nearly implemented. I think back on the ones we did have with fondness and nostalgia.

The day Helen was referring to was a fun outing to Parys. We painted T-shirts, competed in all sorts of obstacle-course games and rode quad-bikes. My team was given blue and red as the colours we had to use and some team members suggested that we use water as our symbol, because of its vitality and versatility. “Water can be destructive,” I added in a slightly deepened voice. After I found a connection, we settled on a wave symbol that we painted on the front of our shirts.

“I also remember you cheating in all those activities and games,” Helen recalled.

It was true. I remember the activities and games being poorly structured; either too easy, or semi-impossible, or just unclear. Revision: this was only true for the first few games, but by then, my mind was made up. For the rest of the day, I tried to find every loophole to every game possible, and made sure that everyone except the facilitator saw me. It was part of the fun. But my teammates disagreed. We got penalised in the one game when I got caught and lost the contest with a small margin.

“What did you enjoy most about it?” I asked.

“I enjoyed being outdoors, and the physicality of it! Similar to the Khula day in Pretoria, when we played volley-ball.” We both laughed aloud at the recollection. Helen was terrible at volleyball, but participated after I practically begged her. We also played games and competed in contests.

Kicking off our shoes, running around on the grass barefoot, screaming our names out loud, and throwing balls and hula-hoops all over the place. It was crazy and fun, I thought.

“It was quite liberating!” said Helen. “Healthy competition and getting a little whack. Those times really made us into a family.”

On that, we agreed to look more at some physical and perhaps outdoor activities for the next day and turned our attention back to our group with their bandanas.

Taking a standing before we can take a walk

About twenty minutes into the activity, most of the bandanas were already pinned up on my washing line. Prevaashni was still busy adding a few finishing touches and Alister, Leon and Mpho were standing off to one side in conversation.

“Okay everyone, we’ll give those of you who are still wrapping things up a few minutes, and as soon as you are all done, let’s huddle together over at the bandanas,” Helen announced after checking with Prevasni how much time she still needed.

Prevasni quickly rounded things up on her end and Minette took the last minute to draw two flowers onto hers. As a final activity for the day, everyone would declare the contribution they wanted to make to their team possibility. “While we stand and share these ideas, also remember that you are taking a stand in making known your contribution,” Helen concluded before we handed the process over to our participants.

Catherine’s shield. Catherine was up first. She stood up to the washing line, pointed to a bandana with definite lines in the form of a shield and colourful strips around the edges before saying: “Today has forced me to think more pertinently about how I lead this team.” While much of the conversation during the day had been fun and light, it was now instantly serious. Catherine explained that the shield represented her resolve to protect the team from outside politics and ensure that they have the necessary tools, focus and opportunity to perform their work. There was more than just performance ethic in Catherine’s message.

“We all want to do the best work we can,” she continued. “We want to make a difference. No one comes to the office hoping to get sucked dry.” I heard Catherine swallow hard, her eyes full of sincerity. “I want for us to go home and offer more to our families because of our work, not less, and certainly not despite our work.”

I have often heard and read about the concept negative or positive work-home interference, where home stress interferes with our ability to work. Catherine was speaking about a sort of positive work-home interference, where work actually adds to the emotional and psychological resources we have to give at home. I thought Catherine’s vision was inspiring.

The colours that spread out from around the shield were fireworks, the celebration of each individual’s contributions. “I would want for all of you to be able to do great, satisfying work. And I hope that I can have a more active and visible contribution to help you do that, and to recognise you for it more often. I want you to know that I have your back.”

The team was visibly moved. Mpho gave a few short claps with his big hands and Leon and Minette joined in.

Mpho's vuvuzela. After a few heartfelt thanks, Mpho stepped up to the line and pointed to a spiral of some sort, with a large yellow circle behind it. The yellow circle was the African sun, and the black spiral with red and blue shades, was a Kudu-horn. “Kudu horns were used in the old days, to call the people from the village to come and attend the tribe meetings,” Mpho explained, while freely borrowing from Zulu culture. Alister made a comment about noise and Leon added something about soccer games and vuvuzelas.

“Don’t joke,” Mpho’s eyes were big and his gestures elaborate as usual. I could imagine him being one of those tribe leaders as he commended his colleagues for seeing the link between vuvuzelas and kudu-horns. “In Zulu, vuvuzela means ‘making a welcoming sound.’ My contribution is to be more open, and to welcome more feedback.” Mpho then turned to Prevasni and concluded that, “we must all learn from each other so that we can grow, and I want to learn from all of you.” We thanked Mpho, and just before Helen prompted the next person to share, I winked at Minette and added that Mpho’s Kudu horn fell outside of the restriction that Minette put on her “no noise” road-sign.

Leon's smiley face. Leon started off by apologising for his poor artistic skills and Catherine and Minette had to remind him to “suck with confidence” before he stepped a bit closer to the washing line and pointed out the large smiley face. Besides the black and yellow he used in the smiley face, there were a few green and blue smudges on his bandana that represented an attempt to beautify the background. “I have not been happy for some time now,” Leon said while looking at the ground and slightly rocking back and forward. “I think that I have laughed more today than I have laughed in the past few months.” He apologised for his negativity and explained how he is really angry at a system that has put him under tremendous stress – a system that, “has no name, no face.”

“I don’t know how I am going to do it, but I will find a way.” And while turning to Catherine, he looked up for the first time since he started speaking and then said, “Catherine, I want you to know that I have your back too.” Everyone was clapping

this time around and Alister put an arm around Leon's shoulder for one of those awkward-looking man-hugs that is more of a side-ways-shove than a real hug.

Alister's synergy. Quickly stepping away from Leon, Alister took centre stage and explained the symbolism behind his bandana. He had five yellow cylinder shapes, or silos, he explained, that together formed the equation $1+1=3$. Hanging over the silos was a black rectangle with a brown stem that represented the hammer, "necessary to break down communication barriers." Around the edges of Alister's bandana, were four differently coloured lines, supposedly arms with interlocking hands in each corner. Alister explained that he will "endeavour" to involve the other team members more in the process improvement work for which he carried the responsibility.

"Is the hammer not to just beat people into submission?" Catherine's joke with the joker was widely appreciated by the rest.

Minette's apple vine. Minette, after taking a non-verbal cue from Prevasni, stepped up while playing down the importance of her comments as, "I really only play a support role in the team." She was back on track after Alister charmingly and melodically reminded her that they really can't live without her. Minette's bandana had a big red and yellow apple in the middle with branches and leaves, thorns and flower buds covering the background. In fact, Minette's piece looked far better than the others' from an aesthetic point of view. I wondered for a moment, but doubted if Helen would share similar judgments that I competitively leaned to, and decided to put in some effort to dismiss my own arbitrary system.

"Apples," Minette explained, "symbolise a source of health and nutrition, on the one hand. On the other hand, apples are also the fruit of a tree." She continued by linking this to helping the team foster productive relationships and enabling their performance. She apologised for the HR processes that aren't always working and promised to look more into filling the vacancies "and managing some of the poor performers that are pulling the region down."

Prevasni's rainbow. Prevasni was up last. For quite some time, perhaps since Mpho and Leon had spoken, Prevasni had withdrawn from the conversation. So by the time we got to her, I was grateful that she stepped up to the line of bandanas

without hesitation. She pointed to the only bandana left. It had a rainbow, a pot of shining gold and a smiley sun in the one corner. There were also patches of grass, colourful dots (flowers perhaps) and a stickman wearing a green suite. This was a solid attempt by any accounting standard, I thought to myself.

“Similar to Catherine’s and Alister’s, the different colours in the rainbow represent all of us. Today, ever since this morning, I saw the colours again. Sometimes, back at the office, it feels like black and white all the time. The colours fade.” Tears welled up in her eyes and, without losing her composure, she continued with a voice that was also fading: “I started believing bad things about people in this team, and today reminded me that we are all in the same situation.”

She swallowed. “We are not so different from each other.” She spoke for a moment about her formal role and then concluded that her personal contribution would be to come out of her office more often, send email less often, and promote more face-to-face contact with the rest.

We’ve reached the end of day one, and the stand that our participants took felt more like a few strides forward. Our crawl into play during the morning has ended with them taking a few definite steps in becoming real, reaching out, fostering greater positivity and solving real problems. We thanked the group heartily for a session and conversation that felt very meaningful. We asked everyone to share one word of how they feel at the end of the day. Inspired. Tired. Content. Let’s go! Fixed up. Unsure. Helen added “privileged.” I said “cowabunga!” after the victory cry of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Facilitating play requires some Ninja-like footwork, and at the end of a day of facilitation, I normally just want to drop some Ninja-dust and disappear with the cloud of smoke.

“I think we are starting to realise that the treasures that will make a difference to the life and performance of this team is not under some distant tree,” I rounded up in a clear reference to where we started the day. “It is right here in the living room, buried underneath a cosy fireplace where we share and connect.”

“And laugh,” added Leon.

“And turn into 10 year olds,” said Minette, sounding very sincere.

It was a good day. Helen and I agreed to leave any further janitorial and set-up work for the next day, when we would be back for more formal conversation and hopefully more action. But “being” precedes “doing,” Helen reminded me before we did a fist-bump-good-bye and we both left the playground.

2.2. Evening interlude – on dancing and sustainability

As I drove home that evening, my thoughts regarding our workshop included gratitude as well as concern. All indications were pointing to a good day. People were engaged, they were laughing, having fun, they were connecting and the conversations felt meaningful. Yet, something troubled me. So many people walk out of our workshops with a combination of satisfaction and insight on the one hand, and on the other hand, anxiety about the questions of what happens when the rubber hits the road back at the office. Is it sustainable? In my role as a facilitator, I don’t find it difficult to create spaces and processes that are pleasant, entertainment and memorable. But lasting significance was something altogether different.

Too school for dancing

Then I think back at my own experiences of play and how it impacted the team of which Helen and I are a part. For one, play saw us through difficult times, like when we “danced like no one was watching.” I smiled at the recollection. A crazy session facilitated by a colleague who inspired so much of the play-based methods I was using in my facilitation. Dancing also made a few entries in my approaches, but not the crazy-type, like no one is watching. “We know things in play that we don’t know without it,” he always says.

That day of crazy dancing was hectically uncomfortable for me, because there was at least one person that was watching – me! And when I look at myself dancing like that, I think I look stupid. I’m more calculated when it comes to dancing, too educated. Yet, despite being uncomfortable, the symbolism succeeded in making me think about habits of perfectionism and procrastination. For us as a team, the session was also a useful stress reliever and encouraged a few important decisions. We used to encourage each other to make decisions that are personally meaningful (like no one was watching) for a few weeks after that. Similar to what I hear from other groups where we use play, the session also became a fond, shared memory. Groups easily

refer back to “remember the session where we danced,” “it happened at that session where we made bandanas,” or perhaps “this is like playing volleyball with Helen.” I made a mental note about play and shared reference points with the resolve to add them to my journal entries.

Journal jot:

Play and community: creating shared memories

The thoughts about what play had done for me in sustainable ways allowed for more serenity and confidence. I wasn't 100% sure it always worked, but I had no doubt that the benefits outlasted any potential drawbacks. Back in the car on my way home from my memory trip, I balled my fist and made a small yet decisive air-punch, like the photo from the exercise after lunch. Without immediately realising that I was accelerating at full speed now, I started feeling lighter and hummed along to the popular song of Pink that started playing over the radio. Just then, I drove past a metro police officer, and somehow, my inappropriate driving speed instantly entered my full awareness. When we know someone is watching, we are also accountable. I momentarily wondered what this does for play before easing off the gas. I settled into my seat and raised a metaphorical glass to Helen, our group, and myself, for a day of productive play. By this time, I was singing/humming at full volume to the radio: “*So if you're too school for cool, and you're treated like a fool, you could choose to let it go.*”¹⁸ Raise your glass.

Playing instead of working

Later that evening, I moved in behind my computer to work on the dissertation of “play at work” on which I had made some notes during the day. I was nowhere near being in the mood for studies. I quickly glossed over the notes I had gathered during the day. Some notes had to do with the methods we were using. Play-based methods such as story and metaphor were quite prominent. We went further and often combined these with creative-arts methods such as drawing, painting, and collage. I also wrote quite a few comments on creating spaces for play and participative safety. This included some comments about people's reservations about play and play at work. Then, there was a whole bunch of comments that related to the processes

¹⁸ From the song “Raise Your Glass” from Pink.

inherent in play, or just the stuff that draws us to play and what play does for us on a psychological and social level.

Looking down at the comments, I noticed a few themes emerging. I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down some of these ideas. Not all the comments fitted perfectly. Not having any better ideas for the time being, I made a few more notes and reminded myself that it didn't have to be perfect.

"Suck with confidence," I said softly. But this wasn't enough. I still needed activation, and was craving play of a different kind. Rather than spending more time on this, I decided to open my Internet browser and started reading news and articles that I find informative and relaxing. I typed "raise your glass" into my search bar and managed to find some online copies of the song I heard over the radio earlier. Not all play is purposeful, productive, or even good, I thought. At times, play becomes a distraction without the intent to reengage.

Idleness. A car idles when it burns up fuel, but it is going nowhere. I considered making a few notes on play, escapism and creative avoidance. I didn't. Rather, I abruptly divorced myself from Pink, poured two glasses of red wine from a leftover bottle we had opened over the weekend, and while plopping myself down next to my wife, switched on the PVR and asked: "In the mood for some television series?"

2.3. Day two of the workshop

Helen and I spent an hour the next morning on discussing the day, putting up material, cleaning out the room, and listening to lively music to pep and pump ourselves. I took a few moments to look through my journal and added a jot from the previous evening.

Journal jot:

Meaningful distraction or wasteful avoidance

Our participants looked strikingly different to the previous day. Minette was dressed in a smart-casual style, with perfect hair and makeup. Mpho wore shorts with a golf-shirt while Alister was stylishly dressed in designer label jeans and a patterned shirt that won the compliments of the ladies and uncomfortable stares from the guys.

Even Prevasni looked much more comfortable with tight jeans and a white blouse, even though the blouse was buttoned up to the top. Leon wore Chinos and a Springbok shirt and Catherine's professional style from the previous day had turned into a colourful summer dress with thin shoulder straps that spelled vacation. If our exteriors reflect our interiors, the change in our groups dress communicated a powerful message of hospitality: who you are is okay with me. There is something symbolic about dressing down, something simplistic and humble. Just as we were about to start, Catherine picked up that people were again sitting in similar spots to the day before and instigated a quick shuffle.

I kicked off the day by explaining that we would spend a significant part of the morning on team structure, roles and short-term deliverables, and would then use the afternoon being more decisive about what to do next. The previous day was meaningful, pleasant and everyone seemed satisfied. Yet, I still often feel compelled to compensate for "too much" play, fun and freedom, with a dosage of structure and hard work. Exactly when we reach the "too much," I must admit, is more a function of a script in my own mind than direct feedback from participants. By creating an expectation of some serious hard work, I also hoped to have gained some license for us to start on a lighter note.

"With that admin out of the way, Helen, please stop me from talking and let's do some stuff together!" I concluded the introduction and handed the process over to Helen.

Show me yours and I'll show you mine.

We kicked off the day with what we call a "show-and-tell," named after a familiar primary school activity. The activity was pitched purely as a way of getting to know each other better. Each person had been asked to bring an object from his or her childhood, something meaningful and memorable. Seeing that not all of us are sentimental enough to keep stuff like this, we agreed that people could bring something that symbolised such objects. During the past times that Helen and I have done this, both in our own team as well as with client groups, the results have been very positive and affirmative. People clearly love sharing stories and memories, once the right context is created.

Alister plucked out three juggling balls and a deck of cards and shared that he used to be very interested in magic. He told us that he used to host concerts for his family and loved making things disappear. He lamented how he neglected the hobby and, while bragging that he still had a few tricks up his sleeve, declined to show any. Leon stood up next and flicked down the wooden yo-yo he brought along. At the second flick, the rope snapped and the yo-yo sent Catherine and myself chasing after it like bloodhounds after a rabbit. In addition to the yo-yo, Leon then revealed a small tin box from which he pulled toy soldiers, marbles and some coins that he used to collect. He spoke fondly about these treasures and how he had managed to salvage the box after almost losing it once when they relocated to Johannesburg.

I wish I had a box like that! My anti-sentimentality has left me with little from my childhood years. It is as if those objects created threads of meaning through Leon's history. Memorabilia become monuments that speak of our life experience. I have often felt that I live my life too loosely, and while not being sentimental, it did feel like I missed something. I resolved to go over to my parents' and collect all the things from my childhood they still had. Nostalgia is a powerful motivator.

Minette paraded a few sketch-books and a small locket that she received from her mother. She carefully flipped through the pages of the book and opened and closed the locket as if presenting an infomercial. She also spoke about how she loved art and then sent her cell-phone around so everyone could see the paintings that she makes as a hobby. We were all amazed. "People have layers," my wife would always say when we learn something unexpected and new about someone we think we have figured out.

As Catherine's turn arrived, she threw a hockey ball at Leon while shouting, "Catch, quick!" After catching the ball like a real Springbok, Leon's witty rebuttal came as quick as the ball did: "I'm used to this kind of treatment from my boss." The group jeered along at the expense of Catherine who seemed to endear it. Catherine spoke about competitive sports and also about books she enjoyed reading.

"I'm not sure that I played much as a kid. There was a lot of pressure to perform, and to be the best. For instance, I played piano until the age of 13, but then

completely lost the love for it,” Catherine explored some of the side paths in her trip down memory lane.

“Sometimes our play is replaced by duty and seriousness, not only when we are kids, but also as adults. For example, just think about the levels of stress that surrounds Christmas, or holidays, or even sex,” I risked.

“What sense do you make of it now?” Helen moved us along.

“Well, from early on, there had to be a point in play to make it worthwhile for me,” Catherine replied. “So I also treat my kids like that. I buy mostly educational toys, but my husband would then buy water-guns and fart-bags. And the kids end up loving that stuff more than the more expensive and sophisticated educational stuff I’m buying. I think my eyes are starting to open up.”

I was happy about Catherine’s insight, and wondered if she would allow herself to also see how it related to her adult life, not only the upbringing of her kids. A gesture from Prevasbni brought my attention back to the process. Prevasbni first pulled out a schoolbook from her bag. It was one of her children’s Mathematics workbooks from primary school, and she shared how she enjoyed doing maths at school. No, she didn’t enjoy maths, she LOVED it. She then also pulled out two ballet shoes as proof that she wasn’t just boring. I found it interesting that, of all spheres in life, there are but a few where ballet trumps maths. And being interesting was one of them.

“Ballet taught me about hard work, perseverance and elegance,” Prevasbni finished off.

Last up was Mpho, who, like a master storyteller, boasted about how he drove a car to school from the age of seven. He then presented a wire-car that he pulled from a bag. This model, which he made for his son a few years ago, represented the wire-car he made for himself when he was a boy. The original wasn’t nearly as neatly done, Mpho explained, but he loved it. The real childhood McCoy subsequently got passed on to cousins and friends.

“Kids don’t play like that anymore,” Mpho said, I guessed in reference to TV, movies and computer games. I could see him as a seven year old driving that car, and it made me think of Vygotsky, who said that “play can make children act, as if a head taller” (As cited by Holzman, 2009, p. 66). Such play propels us into the future with dreams of what may come. Mpho spoke about his dreams of owning a fancy car and flashed his BMW keys at us. The rags-to-riches story, so wholly owned by our storyteller, inspired me. Even though I have different values around expensive cars, as my Hyundai Accent would testify, I found myself swallowing hard at the break in composure that was suddenly grabbing hold of my throat. We had three cars when I was a teenager. And while sitting on my dad’s lap, I got to drive them from the age of probably 10. Mpho had a wire-car, and he drove it to school from the age of 7. Who was richer? , I wondered. Who was a head taller?

After everyone had spoken, the group sat in a long appreciative silence. A moment of magic arrested us as people greeted each other with a *sowubona*¹⁹ – “I see you!”

“This was nice,” said Alister after a while.

“It really levels the playing field,” Minette agreed without realising how appropriate the metaphor of playing field was.

“I agree,” continued Alister. “These are the kind of things we never learn about each other. I sort of look at all of you with new eyes.” Alister’s comment seemed sincere, before he spoiled it with more words: “I see the naughty children in you that all need some discipline.”

“Aren’t *you* going to share? We insist!” Catherine suggested to me and Helen. Helen and I briefly glanced at each other and then gratefully agreed to share the items we brought along. We didn’t want to impede on the group process, but both really enjoyed becoming part of group processes like these if there was an explicit invite. We, in addition to wanting to appropriately disappear as facilitators, also enjoyed being seen, understood and appreciated.

¹⁹ A Zulu form of greeting that literally means “I see you.”

I pulled out a pink panther stuffed toy with a Batman cape wrapped around its neck. Pink Panther was a buddy when I was young. He was cool, clever, stealthy, and he caught the bad guys. And Batman was my adopted super hero. My older brother got Superman, who could do all sorts of stuff like fly, blast laser beams from his eyes, and blow stronger than a hurricane. Batman had to use his brains, I figured. He had to come up with plans. At first, I settled for Batman as a young boy. Later, I started liking him. As a young adult, this idea of using what you have spoken to me about stewardship. And today, with a receding hairline that forms the shape of Batman's iconic symbol,²⁰ I was becoming Batman.

Helen presented a storybook about a magic brush. The story had inspired Helen from a young age. Whatever the brush painted would come alive. She recounted how she watched her grandfather making art, and she fell in love with the idea of colours, canvass, and getting her hands dirty with paint. We later reminisced about how applicable a magic paintbrush is to play. Scholars would argue that play is separate from reality. Play is not real. Yet, we were seeing in front of us how real connections, real identity formation, and real learning was happening. Play crosses the boundary from unreal to real pretty quickly, the same as the magic paintbrush.

Playfully collaborating with work

We spent the next couple of hours doing what we heard the group occasionally describe as “more serious work.” We asked the team to create a visual idea board by pasting paper shapes, ideas, symbols, post-it notes, and more. Although this approach is a little more analytical and conceptual, it also allows for spontaneity, involvement, accessibility, symbolism, flexibility, experimentation and emergence.

Helen and I covered one wall with a large piece of brown paper and moved all the chairs close enough so the participants could have conversations while being able to easily post items on the walls. I handed out a few black markers and crayons and colour pens were also readily available. Helen retrieved a variety of paper shapes that we had tediously cut out the previous week. In the first 15 minutes, we assisted the group in setting up a basic structure for their conversation. I ran around for a couple of extra minutes, posting the stuff participants were writing down on the wall. The

²⁰ A young nephew of mine once naively described my receding hairline as a Batman cut. Since then, I have worn it with pride.

group initially enjoyed shouting out orders and Prevasni was in for some touché on the slave-driving she accused us of the day before. The group quickly got the hang of it and I was demoted to warming up the Press-Stick™²¹ and dishing out more paper shapes when needed.

For the rest of the morning, the group was in flow. Helen and I prompted them with questions and process observations. After three hours, that felt more like 30 minutes, the group all stood in front of a visual board full of ideas. Mapped out on the brown paper were a list of key stakeholders, high-level roles and purpose statements attached to each, key initiatives with post-it notes on non-negotiable deadlines as well as dots and lines, indicating the team's interdependencies and intentions to collaborate. Some of the group members, in particular Minette, added exclamation marks, question marks, dollar signs, emoticons and the like for some needed aesthetic. On two flipcharts standing close by, we also had a list of issues that still needed attention, which was postponed to another session, as well as a list of actions the team decided on. There were a few heated moments, when Leon was accused of operating in a silo too much, and Alister was given the feedback that he needed to work more collaboratively. The conversation felt open and constructive.

Overall, the group felt proud of what they created. The brown paper on the wall symbolised a piece of work, an alignment of ideas and also the product of good teamwork. About twenty minutes later than we had planned, Alister ushered in lunch with a round of high-fives. Leon doubled-up every high five with a second gesture in which he would pinch together all 5 fingers on his right hand, as if holding something small, while announcing “baby-five” in an elevated pitch.

“It looks like the kids from this morning's conversation are still with us,” Helen remarked to me so the others couldn't hear. With nods of self-satisfaction, we were both off to lunch.

Interlude: co-facilitation and play

“I'm not feeling connected to this idea of a code of conduct for the team,” Helen said assertively as we returned to the room. Our session plan stipulated that the

²¹ Press-Stick™ is the brand name of a reusable sticky material that we use to stick posters up on walls. In other countries, this is called Blu-Tack™.

development of list of affirmations and desired behaviours for teamwork (together with ideas on what to stop, start and continue) was on the cards for after lunch. We sometimes call this a “code of conduct”, and simply put, it offers a way for teams to formulate behavioural commitments that they see as the necessary consequence of the workshop. Neither of us likes the phrase code of conduct, but it has traction in the company. We had about 15 minutes before starting the next session. We were approaching the end of the workshop and neither of us wanted to have a big disagreement about the process.

“What do you suggest?”

I was agitated. We were tight on time. Helen wanted us to lighten up the last couple of hours and allow our participants to connect to their own strengths. I supported her idea, but neither of us had a solid idea for how to do it.

“I’m trying to be pragmatic here,” I said. “If you have a few ideas, run with it.” The truth was that I was stuck on the initial ideas and was starting to feel the end of the workshop racing towards me in ways that sometimes made me slip into autopilot. This was seldom the best way to do it.

“I don’t want to run with it. I want you to listen to me and then help me implement this. Saying I must run with it feels like an abdication.”

I took a deep breath, then said slowly, “Ok, let’s try this again. What don't you connect with in our initial plan, and what would you rather want for the group. Let’s try to articulate that and see where it takes us.”

We spent a few minutes talking and finding points of agreement. Helen and I agree more often than not, but often need lots of time to realise it. Helen pulled closer a piece of paper and we used the coloured pens to run a quick brainstorm. As ideas started to form on paper, the task started feeling less uncertain, and we ended up with a few options. We both still liked the idea of doing something physical, building the metaphor around “returning” to work. We decided to leave out the code of conduct and rather to allow the individuals to connect to their resources and resilience. It was off script, but we recovered our alignment with each other.

“Why don’t you tackle the start? I have a few rough ideas on the resilience bit. We’ll figure it out as we go along,” I concluded.

By the time we concluded our little reshuffle, we still had a minute or two to spare. Some of the most satisfying moments in facilitation happen when we work off script. But it is also possibly one of the most frustrating. When we improvise, we want to try things for which we don’t have words, defences, session plans and refined ideas. We have hunches, glimpses and imperfect outlines. What is needed is trial and error, a play of ideas, approaches – experimentation. Helen and I have learned to offer each other this space, although we had to work against some of our impulses. In co-facilitation, there is more often a competing of ideas. The most refined, most tested, and pre-planned ideas often won over the rough, impromptu and in-the-moment. What Helen was saying, I realised, was that she had a hunch. And she wanted us to play with a different idea for the closing. Nothing definite, nothing refined. We needed to play. And giving each other that permission is liberating. But still, playing in that sense takes a form of discipline, a hard choice to not be complacent and follow the path of least resistance.

I later wrote down some thoughts on this. It struck me as a somewhat novel idea, and I wondered about approaching my research playfully. Often, play required a sort of discipline, a choice that wasn’t easy. I experience it before designing a workshop, before writing a song or poetry, and before writing pieces of my dissertation. Those are moments that require a deliberate choice to play. And once that choice is made, play takes over; I feel connected to what I am doing and creativity abounds. Also, I also had the bad habit of putting myself under so much pressure, that play becomes impossible. Play is not always the easier thing to do, and if we want to complement our work with the power of play, this was something I needed to learn.

Journal jot:

Play and discipline – going against the path of least resistance, making hard choices in favour of play.

“Toe-to-trail”

“Okay everyone, lose your shoes and let’s meet outside!”

It was a beautiful spring day. A slight breeze welcomed us with the smell of flowers. We should get out more often, everyone agreed. We huddled together under the large Bluegum tree, some preferring the shade over the sun.

In South-Africa, with our beautiful sunny weather, it is a crime to spend so much of it in air-conditioned offices and restrict our vitamin E intake to pills, possibly weekends and a two-week short vacation in December. Even those two weeks were something that few people took up. “We had to change the leave policy because people just weren’t taking leave,” Minette mentioned the previous day, when we spoke about burnout. The company was left with a massive debt on outstanding leave and subsequently, people are now forced to take leave. I briefly think about the close to 90 days of leave I had personally managed to stack up over the ten years I worked for the company. Minette was talking about me.

“We want to create a few moments to connect with the idea of ‘getting out’,” Helen improvised while smiling at me. She was experimenting with metaphor and we were both a little off-script.

Helen continued: “Ultimately, the real changes need to happen out there, when you return to your office, and your desk, and your printer, and your keyboard, tomorrow and every day after that. We need to “get out” of some old ways and “get out” of the way of our potential.” She was enjoying herself. I have always admired how Helen worked with symbolism, and how easily she could move between symbolic play and reality. She was in her strength.

“In a few moments, Jacques will take you through an exercise that will help you connect to your own strengths and resilience. But first, we are going to warm our bodies up in order to stretch out, take a stand, walk and touch, all things that will be incredibly important when you leave here.”

Strong linkages help legitimise the kind of stuff we did with participants. It is important because it gives people a frame, or boundary in which play can take place. But, for many of the activities, icebreakers and games we play so often, we simply do them for the heck of it! It is more like the fart-bag and water-guns that Catherine’s husband bought their children.

Helen led our participants in a few quick stretches and then explained the game. We called it “elbow-to-elbow.” Participants had to listen carefully to the instruction, which included two body parts, such as an elbow and an elbow, or a hand and a shoulder. This meant that two participants needed to find each other and then make sure that they both followed the instruction, in this example, touching with their elbows or putting a hand to each one’s shoulder. The game would then vary the instruction and participants needed to vary their partners.

“Let’s try it out! Hand-to-shoulder.”

A quick scramble took place and eventually, everyone stood in pairs, each with a hand on the other’s shoulder. “Elbow to elbow,” Helen announced next, which sent people darting and running around in a scramble to find a new partner. There was, of course, no need yet, because everyone would eventually find a partner, but no one seemed to notice. “Toe-to-toe.” Leon loudly accused Catherine of stepping on his toes and Catherine wrote it down to self-preservation. Leon did have some mean looking feet. “Elbow-to-chin.” Prevasni looked like she was giving Minette an uppercut that rivalled a Rocky movie and Alister stood in a Jean-Claude Van Damme pose while trying to dominate Mpho.

Adding a little competition-spice to any activity is a sure way of infusing even an arbitrary thing with purpose and passion. It’s a facilitation trick we often use, and that was what was up next.

“Okay, everyone got it?” Helen checked and explained the announced that people will now start falling out until we have a last person standing. To make it work, I would join the group intermittently to ensure that there is an odd number of participants.

“Next round!” Helen was sounding like a boxing commentator. “Bum to bum.”

Prevasni hesitated for too long and was the first to leave the ring while the rest were chuckling at the ridiculous postures and unusual interactions. It was followed with “nose-to-foot,” which sent some people diving onto the grass like Jonty Rhodes. Looking around me, I doubted the common practice of calling after-lunch the graveyard session. I was still questioning this logic when a competitive Minette came

storming at me after Helen instructed “forehead-to-forehead.” Her momentary resemblance to an angry rhino was frightening and gave ‘graveyard session’ a complete new meaning. Finally, a sneaky “hair-to-hair” from Helen ended the game as Catherine indignantly objected at Mpho’s suggestion of putting her hair under his armpit. With a shaven head, this was Mpho’s last resort. I had a hunch that Mpho was making fun of the situation, but couldn’t tell if he was serious or not. Irrespective, by now the group was screaming with laughter and we had to stop before a winner could be announced.

“How did you experience that?” Helen started a quick debrief. I quickly ran into the room to fetch some water on Helen’s suggestion and found the group all huddling in the shade when I re-joined. The group was talking about personal space, and Mpho explained briefly about the apartheid years and how he was taught not to touch white people. This was a curious point that highlights how physical distance also creates and maintains psychological distance. Furthermore, this can become institutionalised. Play brings us physically closer to our colleagues, and a touch or a hug crosses a kind of threshold of intimacy. For some, this worked. For others, it took it too far.

Reving it down

Following on this, we proceeded with a more structured activity with a greater emphasis on teamwork and resilience.

“If this team was a vehicle, use yourselves, your bodies, to represent it,” I explained. A quick conversation for clarity ensued. “You want us to build a car by positioning ourselves...,” “If you want it to be a car,” “Or a bus?” “Sure.” “Must it move?” “If you want.”

At one point, Catherine called the group to a halt and started planning the end-result after which I explained that we want to encourage a more intuitive approach.

“Just start somewhere, and see where that takes you.”

And that got them going. The group tried out a few formations and we had conversations all the way through. Catherine was mostly put behind the driving seat, but also wanted to be responsible for holding the group together. Someone suggested a chassis. Leon and Mpho were the engines that needed to ensure the main thrust and

continuity of the vehicle. Alister, in his technology support role, saw himself as the oil and started dancing in-between Leon and Mpho like an Egyptian while, as he explained, “lubricating the cylinders.” Prevasni, in her role of governance, started off as the electronic dashboard, but after Mpho and Leon tried to pick her up sideways with plenty of cheerleading coming from Alister, she opted to be the gearbox instead, “to regulate the speed and ensure efficiency.” Minette, in being the self-proclaimed outsider, found it difficult to find a role and opted for being an assistant navigator to assist Catherine with the overall direction. She also offered to be the radio. “To spread good vibes,” she explained, while giving her lower body a sexy kind of twirl. “Just don’t be a backseat driver,” came a dig from Leon, who then sarcastically added that woman are normally pretty good at that.

The group experimented with a few different formations while we offered some process questions. What direction was the car facing? What are the strengths of this team? What is working well? Where are your safety belts, shock-breakers and spare tyre? While keeping the conversation light, people kept moving and took on different positions. After a few minutes of lively conversation and debrief about the process, I invited them to sit down on the grass.

“Most new journeys are started with a sense of adventure. We start off well. But that’s the easy part. As the saying goes, the important thing is off course to end well. So how can you sustain yourselves on this journey?”

We spoke a bit about what goes wrong on journeys. “We ran out of gas,” one person said. “Or the thing starts rattling and falls apart,” another supposed. “Only if you drive a Volvo;” Mpho’s punch was aimed at Alister who, in rare fashion, failed to make a comeback. We can get lost, forget where we are going, overheat, lose a wheel along the way, take a wrong turn, a taxi can push us off the road, there can be an accident and we could get stuck in first gear. We needed to slow down a bit, not rev things up all the time. “We need to take a foot off the accelerator,” was Catherine’s observation.

I took a few moments and, while avoiding too many technical terms, gave a short lecture on psychological burnout to our group as a way of describing a break-down, or running out of gas, or flat tyre. I succinctly relayed to them some of the classic

symptoms, such as *exhaustion*, *cynicism*, and *inefficacy* (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). In inverting those ideas very loosely, I then invited the group to talk more around three points: Rejuvenate (as opposed to exhaustion), relate (as opposed to cynicism), and reframe (as opposed to feeling overwhelmed by inefficiency).

Journal jot:

Rejuvenate, or finding sources of energy, inspiration and replenishment;

Relate, or connecting in meaningful ways, dealing with the unhealthy rattles; and

Reframe, or finding a renewed sense of meaning in the work challenges that faced us, or discovering the gift in it.

“In what ways do you feel we’ve done these things over the past few days?” Helen asked. The conversation tracked back to our activities of the previous day, with people expressing that they felt refreshed, rebooted and energised. They also felt closer as a team. The session succeeded in breaking down unnecessary boundaries, and the challenges that lay ahead felt a little more like a journey worth being excited about. Perhaps there were some treasures, hidden underneath a tree or in a fireplace.

Rituals and hugs

We were reaching a point of diminishing returns and the conversation became a little muted. After two days of play and work, people were saturated. The irony of speaking to people about exhaustion in those conditions announced itself clearly when energy-bunny Alister started disengaging and lay down flat on the grass. At least, when people are exhausted and saturated after a workshop, complaints such as “slow pace” and “not enough” won’t appear on the feedback forms, guaranteed. Heaven forbid that, in corporate settings, we embrace a slower pace and agree that less is more. I’m not sure that I deliberately subscribe to this, but it would seem that part of meeting participants’ expectation lay in depleting them. So I often obliged.

After a quick leg-stretch, the group insisted that we reconvene underneath the tree for the closing of the workshop. Helen fetched a couple of notepads and evaluation forms and asked people to complete them. We also asked the group to bring their bandanas to the closing. Catherine was the first to put her bandana on, which struck me as unusual for her professional persona. Soon though, everyone was wearing their

bandanas, and the group looked more like a class of rebellious art students than accountants.

Our closing ritual required each group member to state what he or she wished to take away from the workshop. Thereafter, the group would thank each other for their contribution to the workshop by completing the sentence: *Name* (always start with the person's name, and look them in the eyes), *I* (always own what you are about to say) *thank you* (the main idea) *for your* ... (complete the sentence with a quality or characteristic).

As the acknowledgements streamed in, Leon got particularly emotional. He was an old hand in the team, and it was clear from the past few days that he often felt unappreciated and looked over. As a result, he was also disengaged. This process gave him “a new lease on life,” I later saw in his evaluation form. Minette, who expressed some discomfort at receiving the acknowledgements, was in her element while dishing it out. She offered colourful words to her colleagues, such as “you are a lion,” or “you are a rock.” “You are like an octopus,” she said to Catherine for her uncanny ability to do many things at the same time. A few people agreed that this was very apt. Alister, who over the past days demonstrated his individualism quite often, thanked nearly everyone for their willingness to share and collaborate. To Mpho, he expressed gratitude for being a wise and always-available mentor. The comment made Mpho's eyes shine and chest swell.

The closing session was encouraging. Cohesion, alignment, direction and hopefulness were all prominently highlighted as good “take-aways.”

“It felt like we dug up a treasure under this tree,” Minette offered an indirect reference to the opening story.

Leon suggested we all do a group hug, which felt very uncomfortable, but everyone nevertheless indulged it. After the unsatisfying group hug, they proceeded with real one-on-one hugs and even the man hugs turned into fuller embraces.

A few moments later, Helen and I stood alone under the tree. We made our way back to the room and spent another 30 minutes packing up the playground while blasting Dave Mathews Band's “Shake me like a monkey” over the sound system.

Helen and I had a number of closing rituals over the years, some more serious than others. For today, lively music, a few jumps, head bangs, a solid high-five and a caring hug; we would debrief in more detail two days later.

2.4. Evening interlude – planning to play

That evening, I didn't plan to do any work. On my way home, I responded to a few important emails and missed calls I received during the day, stopped for a bottle of red wine, pizzas and a movie, and went home for the weekly date night Anne-Marie and I instituted a couple of years ago. We didn't always succeed in sticking to it, but we did do it more regularly than not. In a way, it is sad. When we first met, romance came spontaneously. Now, it seemed like I had to schedule it to remember to do it. Having thought about this quite a lot, I think I made my peace with it. Rituals like birthdays, anniversaries and date-night need not be without spontaneity, or without play. It merely serves as a reminder for it. This is part of a disciplined approach to choose play. That night's play was more passive. We would drink a bit, eat, talk, watch a bit of movie and hopefully kiss a bit. We would escape from the world of seriousness, and re-engage it tomorrow.

But despite this positive anticipation, I felt less enthused than normal. I have a mountain to climb with my studies that is constantly throwing eerie shadows in my mind. In the past, in real mountains, climbing them has been tough yet fulfilling. We played our way to the top. I secretly hoped that the mountain of my studies could start looking like the Cederberg, the Tsitsikamma Mountains and Injasuthi. Now there's a treasure to dig up!

2.5. A few days later

I was at the restaurant before Helen arrived, for a change. This was unusual. Normally, I constantly ran a few minutes late and Helen was normally a couple of minutes early. We enjoy meeting at coffee shops because we find the office stifling at times. HealthCafé, a small establishment that distinctly caters to vegan and vegetarian preferences, was probably not a place I would visit if not for Helen. Much to my delight, they recently started adding some meat options to their menus and served some killer cappuccinos. While sitting in comfortable chairs on the partly shaded veranda, the light breeze was refreshing.

I flipped open my Apple MacBook, which I preferred using way above the company-issued, overly-governed Windows PC. I started typing some emails and, with a sardonic smile, thought about how rebellious I looked and felt. I was comfortably dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with the word “revolution” on it, and aside from my slightly different food preferences, I felt pretty comfortable in the artistic company that HealthCafé’s drew. We had managed to bring something autonomous, independent, light and free to how we did our jobs.

Helen joined a couple of minutes later. “Don’t apologise,” I mocked before she could say anything about being late. We had a standing joke about her need to care less, and carry less. Helen had just recovered from chronic fatigue that had weighed her down for over a year. Such conditions were not too uncommon among our clients, and were definitely something that became exacerbated in an organisation that rewards willingness, hard work and efficiency with more hard work. The kind of emotional work we often do also upped the risk. Helen took her work seriously and was rigorous, thorough. But more recently, there was a change in Helen’s life. She had undergone some huge personal changes. She refurbished her house, ended a destructive relationship, and took a month off from facilitation work. Since we started deliberately talking about play and work and in workshops, Helen has also rediscovered a kind of playfulness in herself.

“How is it going with your drumming, and mosaic?” I asked.

“I’m enjoying it thoroughly. I’m learning to play in it, to reclaim that wild, barefoot and courageous person I was when growing up. To not be too constricted. You?”

“I enjoyed the workshop. It really felt like we could experiment, flow and create interesting and meaningful interactions.”

“We also laughed!”

We ruminated over some of the funny moments in the workshop and I felt satisfied and proud.

“I know that you often feel constricted and crushed by the corporate culture, but I really commend how you come alive in workshops like these,” I said.

“Thanks Jacques. I mean the feeling is mutual. I guess there’s something that I’m learning about play since we started having these conversations. I don’t play enough! I also separate play and creativity, and maybe I don’t need to separate the two. I’m learning to be more playful, in life and work. I’ve been down in the dumps a lot, and that has been a big struggle, and maybe I don’t want to struggle as much anymore. And I think, when we work together, we help each other remember this.”

Co-facilitation hasn’t always felt like this to me. At times, it felt stifling. But Helen and I managed differently. There was an acceptance, an accountability to be ourselves and a willingness to just say to each other: “Stand back for a moment, I’m going to try something out. When it bombs out, please help me pick up the pieces.” And it felt like we learned to do this even more as we became more explicit and deliberate about play. We continued with some small talk about the weather, the latest Grey’s Anatomy episode and my research.

“So, how do you feel about the workshop?” Helen started with the official part of our conversation, that still felt like a pure continuation of our small talk.

“Pretty good, I guess. I had an opportunity to look at the evaluation forms, and the feedback is pretty positive.” The feedback was overly positive, I thought. People loved our workshops, mostly. They felt it contributed to their personal lives as well as their work lives; they said they would recommend it to others; and they often thanked us for being open, honest, and flexible. Now and then, we had disapproving participants who either wanted more theory and tools, didn’t enjoy the “soft and fluffy,” or had a problem with the logistical arrangements. But mostly, the feedback was affirming.

Helen briefly scanned the evaluation forms while almost exclusively focussing on the more qualitative comments rather than the rating scales.

“It really meant a lot to Minette,” Helen said after looking at her form. The workshop was a sort of rekindling for her. She was drawn to the field of Human Resources because of her love for people. And she wanted to get out of the

administration and into work that connected her with others more often. The workshop gave her that opportunity and its effects echoed of the yearnings that drew her to the field in the first place.

“Did you see this comment from Catherine?” I asked, while pointing to the last paragraph on Catherine’s form: “As accountants, it was good to do things differently, to laugh, play, be creative. We could have gotten to the same result, but without the glue that holds us together. Thank you.” Catherine felt that they not only reached their objectives, but they did so in ways that brought them closer. The opposite, of reaching objectives with bodies in the wake of success, was a more common phenomenon.

Other than that, Catherine had written, “being able to drop my guard and be myself” in the free text field. Catherine’s comment reflects, I think, a broader reality of people battling with constantly being “on stage”, “being evaluated.” But I also wonder to what extent it reflected a leadership burden. Leaders need to somehow withstand the criticisms and projections of those they follow, as we saw in the briefing with Catherine. In play, Catherine’s form suggested, we can be freed from that, at least for a while.

“Here’s an interesting comment from Mpho.” Helen pointed out the scribbled comment under the “improvements” heading: “To respect not touching.” We both remembered Mpho’s resistance to the physical exercises that involved touching, and although he participated, he made it clear that he felt uncomfortable. Touching is significant in that it communicates acceptance and comfort. It diminishes the boundaries between us, and in play activities, people touch spontaneously. And play gives us permission. But for Mpho, the permission ended with the workshop. Yet, another comment on his form read: “Helped me connect with my colleagues in a different way.” Perhaps that was enough.

“I’m a little concerned about Prevasni,” I suggested while holding Prevasni’s form out to Helen. “I think she engaged well and made some breakthroughs on day one.”

“But then backed off and withdrew a little on day two,” Helen accurately completed my thoughts. “Play can be exposing.”

Play requires a “letting go,” a “dropping our guards,” which were also comments written on Prevasni’s evaluation. She understood this well, perhaps too well. A friend of mine says that play is a sort of power nap – our ego, power, and perhaps self-righteousness, all take a break for a while. Perhaps this was a bit threatening to Prevasni.

“I don't have much hope for Alister,” I joked as we went over to his evaluation form. Of all the delegates, Alister was probably most like me – a real joker who loved intellectual stimulation and abstract arguments. “Forced me to think differently,” was prominently written in neat capital letters, as was all of Alister’s writing. *Think* differently. Not, “it touched my heart,” or “it helped me connect.” No, to Alister, it was about *thinking*. Who was I to judge? I thought. For the most part, I also engage life through thinking.

I smiled while reading the word “forced” aloud. Play, as something that is in essence described as freedom, is engaged voluntarily. Its effects, however, come without negotiation. It comes forcefully. Joy rushing at us with force, I’m sure, we will all accept. Personal insight and team learning rushing at us with force, no problem. But to be forced to connect and be surprised by the touch of another person in retrospect, that was what I think Prevasni and Mpho was protesting against. We need to engage play responsibly, and allow people to stop freely. They do that in any case. Play, not undertaken freely, might have the semblance of play activity but will lose its playful heart.

Leon’s was the only form left. “Thank you, thank you,” was written across the top of the page. With Leon’s epiphany, he wanted to channel his energies back into the team. The team was welcoming him like someone coming home. “Laughing” and “able to de-stress” were also plotted out on Leon’s form. “I can be myself again.” Home is where the heart is, goes the saying. Perhaps play takes us home.

Helen and I ordered another cappuccino and spoke more about play, work and my research. We spoke a bit about how we played as children, how we play now. We also spoke about how play draws us into what we are passionate about, and how it aids us in breaking free from unnecessary restrictions.

“I mean, what really inspires me,” I surmised, “is the vision of work and workplaces that tap our passions and intrinsic motivation, so that we have more to give to work, home, and life. The current norm is different.” My mind wandered to my research and work, which often drained me. I was still learning.

“How do you think we can do that?” I asked.

“Well, I believe that we have to do what we love. And only when the pressure is taken away can we do what we love. Let’s say I become an art therapist that does more work one-on-one. There will also be pressures, worries and concerned, but I imagine that I would be a much more resilient, playful, spontaneous human being because I’m doing what I love.”

We continued philosophising for a while about economies that do not try to shape human beings to fit a mould of productivity, but rather take their shapes from what people naturally wanted to create. This idea of creation reminded me of the reflections of John Ortberg about the creation story.²² I wanted to look at my day, my work, my research, and proclaim “it was good.” We ended our debrief with Helen offering to pay the bill, which I accepted as a peace offering for the “big brains” lesson she had pinned on me. And with some jovial laughter, we went our separate ways.

2.6. From play to work

The devouring Venus Flytrap went up in smoke as Mario incinerated it with a flame ball. After quickly collecting the reward, he dashed off, threw another flame ball at an innocent looking, yet potentially devastating tortoise. The next moment, he is out of sight, sucked into a drainpipe filled with more treasure.

“Come on, Luigi,” Josh shouted at me without losing a moment’s momentum. He’s a quick little devil on Wii, and Mario Brothers provides hours of escape into a magical world of dungeons, surprises, treasures, power-ups, and devilish foes like that flytrap. A few minutes later, we were through the level and Mario made a quick, yet ineffective jump at the flagpole. A more careful Luigi who was right behind him timed the jump a little better. And, with a smooth “Yippee!!!” Luigi landed on top of

²² See Chapter 1.

the flagpole for extra points. With the enemy's flag taken down, it was time to call it a day.

Josh is my seven-year-old nephew. Anne-Marie, unselfishly, invites him over from time to time. Tonight, his parents were at a function, and it gave us a good opportunity to 'play house', or practise, for when we have kids someday. As a bonus, Josh is a great playmate. He is energetic, has an appetite for adventure, is very honest about his needs, and he constantly craves giving and receiving love. He is also a little aggressive, tremendously competitive and stubborn.

"No, no! I don't want to go to bed," he protested while holding onto the Wii controller. I sometimes wonder who enjoys the games more, him or me. I also didn't want to stop, but it was time for him to go to bed, and for me to put in a few hours of studying.

Anne-Marie came to the rescue. "Up big boy!" she said. She then started tickling him unmercifully, which resulted in some hysterical giggling, accompanied by swinging arms and legs.

"Wait, hold him tight!" I cheered. "I'm still hungry! And this little boy is exactly what I need for desert." The giggles turned into shrieks of either joy or panic as I pressed my teeth into his side. Instead of biting, I sealed my mouth on his skin and blew hard to set off a loud sputtering on his ribcage. We play-play dragged him over to the room Anne-Marie made up for him to sleep in, dropped him onto the bed, and took a couple of minutes to settle him down.

"We have a story for you," I said in hope that it could signal sleeping time. It seemed to work. Josh's attention was diverted from fighting, playing and TV games to the story that now had his attention.

"There was a little boy, called Mario. He was 7 years old when he had a dream." I continued telling Josh an altered story that resembled the story of the farmer, the tree and the treasure. The protagonist was Mario. The dream was about a flamethrower that could light up the dark (he was still afraid of the dark), turn mushrooms into chocolate (he loved chocolate), and turn enemies into friends (there was nothing appealing to him about this idea, but we were trying to counter his aggressive

tendencies). Anne-Marie came in with impromptu comments, sound effects and physical demonstrations throughout the telling, and eventually Mario ended up finding the treasure, not on some exotic island far away, but at home, among the forgotten toys he had buried underneath his bed. Anne-Marie brought him a small piece of chocolate and Josh reminded us to say a prayer together before we half-closed his door and left a nearby light on.

2.7. Batman, a bandana, and a brush

“You need to go dig up some of your own treasures now,” Anne-Marie handed me the cup of coffee she had just made. “Just remember that it is not far off. You have it with you already.” I gave her an intimate hug and moved in behind my desk.

Sitting at my desk, I took a moment to move around some of the papers. I dropped some mail and statements into a drawer and made a neat pile of the notes and ideas, written on the back of scrap paper with different coloured pens. Once my desk had at least the superficial semblance of something neat, I pulled out my research journal and reviewed some of my reflections from the week.

About an hour later, I walked over to the kitchen to make another cup of coffee. “How to study play, playfully?” I wondered aloud.

This question has haunted me ever since I started my research and was largely the motivation behind writing autoethnographically. Synthesis of head and heart, cognitive and emotive, science and aesthetic, fact-based and imaginative - these were essential components to this research. Yet, I could feel the passion and creativity that was part of the study’s inception slip away. Following through on play can be hard work, I thought.

My mind wandered to earlier in the day, when I met with Helen. Just before we departed from our meeting, she asked me about the treasure I was hoping to find. A completed master’s dissertation did not cut it for her – it was too cheap, all fruit and no toil. Real treasure comes at a price. I did not have an answer for Helen then, but back at my desk, I was faced with the toil. No shortcuts. No escape. There’s only one way, and that is through. Not around, not under, no teleportation. I needed a different treasure, a different kind of flamethrower.

“You already have it with you,” Anne-Marie’s words echoed. I sat for a few more moments and then abruptly stood up with an idea. I pulled out the Batman cape I used earlier the week. I then pulled out an old box with materials I had gathered in the workshops and dug up a bandana I made a while ago. Finally, I took a used paintbrush from my stash of facilitation materials. Batman, a bandana, and a brush. Armed with the three treasures, I head back to my study area and spread them out in front of me. I felt a tinge of excitement and inspiration as I slowly gave each object my full attention, my fingers scanning each object searchingly, as if reading some invisible braille.

Batman, the ultimate superhero with no super-powers, a normal guy who used what he had to do what was needed. I thought about what I shared with the group a few days earlier. Batman was a symbol of stewardship. There was another thing. Batman, aka, “The Dark Knight,” was not afraid of consequence. He did not try to win popularity contests. He did not waste time on avoidance and escapism, afraid of what people might say or think. He used what he had, and did what was needed. Batman was not afraid of the dark. I drank in the inspiration.

I thought about the story of Helen’s brush that could turn whatever it painted into reality. I looked at the dirty and used brush in front of me. Brushes aren’t meant to be pretty. Brushes are made for one thing only - to be a medium for colour, beauty, meaning and life. The brush does not come to life, but what the brush paints come to life. Perhaps this study was never about play, but about life. Perhaps play is just the medium. I thought about Helen’s words: “I know I’m playing when I’m on my knees, painting, making, becoming.” I had a million thoughts in my head, but nothing on paper. I looked at my keyboard and screen. I had been avoiding them for too long. They were mushrooms, and I needed turn them to chocolate, and a magic brush could do that.

I then tied the bandana around my head and thought about our conversations in the week. Bandanas, we said, were both about authenticity and service. The bandana in front of me had my name on it, with the symbols of fire and water prominently drawn in blue, red and yellow. My mind wandered over to tough yet fulfilling hikes I did across the country. I wore bandanas on those occasions too, and drenched with sweat, they served me well as a reminder that fiery sunsets came at the price of hard

work. On high peaks, we always stacked some rocks, each rock representing a fingerprint proclaiming that we were there. I also thought about how God had led his people out of Egypt, back home, with fire and clouds. I needed some guidance to get back home. And while looking at my name, I remembered the poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1883):

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves -- goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

And then:

for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Looking at the three objects, I wondered: What am I afraid of? We can't play if we are scared. Play requires safety. Elsewhere, we read that fear also repels love. Perhaps play and love are closer cousins than we think. If we lose play, we lose joy. If we lose joy, we lose love. And if we lose love, we have lost life. Play speaks to me about authenticity and service - allowing myself, a child-self, to leave impressions and imprints on this planet that speak my name. It is both my work and my play. It is my service, my worship. I flipped open my MacBook and started to write, no paint, no pray:

Let us start with a story...

...not so long ago...

...in a land not so far away ...

... when I re-discovered play