

‘the between’, in the Gratitude Enquiry

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Throughout 2016 I have been engaged in an Arts Council funded Research and Development project, The Gratitude Enquiry. Previous research, into the way that different art forms invite different configurations in the workshop space, and therefore a variety of ways for participants to connect with one another, made me want to understand more fully what were the movements between individuals, and between individuals and the group, that created, or could create this weft that was woven in with warp of the connection to the project. I was also interested in how purposeful an artist or facilitator can be in terms of fostering the growth of relationships within a group.

I was intrigued by research by social psychologists into gratitude, which some describe as an emotion and others as a trait. Gratitude is not without complication. Tiffany Watt Smith describes the movement from Adam Smith’s understanding of gratitude as an emotion that engendered response, and therefore reciprocity, in the 18C, through to American Psychologist William McDougall, writing in the late 1920s’s who saw gratitude as an emotion that could provoke complex and contradictory feelings, especially when operating within fixed hierarchies, which it could be used to reinforce. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the positive psychology movement currently focuses on the benefits of “counting one’s blessings”, sometimes with the aid of a gratitude diary. Smith points to reciprocity in terms of rewarding good deeds, the thankfulness being expressed in a material way, but there is also evidence of a much simpler affective movement, unencumbered by grades of reward. Bartlett and DeSteno write about ‘the reciprocal, prosocial behaviour between a benefactor and a recipient’, and Stang points to the fact that the one experiencing gratitude feels ‘positive about the benefit and the benefactor’. Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Koltz, consider that Gratitude is a trait, that most have but some don’t develop, and explore the impact of a lack of ability to feel grateful, indicating a cyclical connection with depression and feelings of deprivation.

*Notwithstanding the complexity of this trait or emotion, the aspect that most forcibly struck me was that the feeling and the expression of gratitude, when authentic and not imposed, are a recognition that one needs something from others. This, and its corresponding movement,*

*that one might have something to offer others, seem to be at work in the building of relationships in the making of art together.*

Before turning to the projects I have piloted this year, I want to briefly look at two other approaches to understanding pro-social relationality. Arts organisation, People United, in their research into the notion of kindness, a concept and practice that underpins all their work, propose that 'kindness' (which has its roots in the old English noun *cyne*, meaning kinship, family) 'arises from a sense of people being connected by force of common humanity'. I understand this to mean that we humans do not choose to be interconnected, we are already. People United suggest that Kindness is fundamentally pro-social, using Penner et al's definition of pro-social as 'an action that helps or benefits another person'. They suggest that art-making's offer; to listen and take in the stories of others, to expand one's knowledge of oneself, to imagine new possibilities, to face up to inequities and challenges, to shape and to share, and to develop empathic skills, is an offer to enter a space where interconnectivity can be fostered and can flourish. They cite McArthur et al, 'A work of art is....however tenuous, a bridge between one mind and another'<sup>1</sup>

The Young Foundation, in its 2012 report *Charm Offensive: Cultivating Civility in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*, looks at connectivity in everyday life through the lens of what it describes as civility. Civility is 'the often small, every day ways in which we treat each other – [it] acts as an important social glue'. Reviewing this report, Guardian journalist Madeleine Bunting writes

Much of our day-to-day wellbeing is rooted in the granularity of tiny interactions - in the shop, on the street and buses. Isolation can be eased by a greeting, anxiety assuaged by friendliness; and the reverse, an irritated or aggressive response can reverberate in someone's mind for days and leave lasting damage. The research found that many said it was the single most important factor in their quality of life. <sup>2</sup>

Moving on from their analogy of 'social glue' The Young Foundation suggest

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<sup>1</sup> <https://peopleunited.org.uk/research/arts-kindness-the-theory/p32>

<sup>2</sup> [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk) , Monday 10 October 2011

*....a more useful framework is to think of civility as akin to tiny bacteria that sustain complex eco-systems, including our own bodies. They are invisible to the outside observer but turn out to be critical for helping organisms survive.*<sup>3</sup>

This sense of infection is present also in writing about gratitude; we may repay an act of kindness to the next person we meet and not to, or as well as the 'giver', spreading the benefit beyond the original dyad of giver and receiver. My work this year has led me both to attend to this movement of infectious connectivity, but also to provoke thinking and talking and making around the theme of gratitude. I work absolutely from the starting point articulated by People United. We are connected, we are kin, and I am concerned with exploring how that can be manifested, and, in the words of the late Ken Campbell, "astounded into being", without ignoring the 'granularity' of our interactions.

The first project, which I led in partnership with Magic Me, was a dance work, exploring the possibility of being thankful to one's own body. The participants were women aged between 15 and 90, all from Tower Hamlets in East London. The stated aim of the project invited the women to think about their relationship to their own bodies. I called the project 'I live in it' after hearing an interview with a young woman responding to the objectification of her body, by herself as much as by others. "It's me!" she exclaimed, "after all, I live in it". The theme invited personal reflection and individual exploration, so it may not seem to be the ideal place to be investigating relationality. The contrary however was true. One woman remarked, during a break, "Why is it so different to have a cup of tea alone and a cup of tea with others?" This indication of the benefit of being in company is, I suggest central to an understanding of the location of the building of relationship. Things are happening within people, but also in between them. Martin Buber writing in 1947, says

The fundamental fact of human existence is neither the individual as such nor the aggregate as such. Each, considered in itself, is a mighty abstraction. The individual is a fact of existence in so far as it is built up of living units of relation. [...] What is peculiarly characteristic of the human world is above all that something takes place between one being and another. [...] It is rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular other being, in order to communicate with it in a sphere

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<sup>3</sup> <https://youngfoundation.org/publications/charm-offensive-cultivating-civility-in-21st-century-britain/> p8

which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each. I call this sphere [...] the sphere of between.<sup>4</sup>

Initially the women shared stories of marks on their bodies, scars, freckles, birthmarks. They discovered that one person liked to interlace her fingers with her toes in the bath and that one of the girls had broken her arm boxing. These shared stories are gifts to one another, and they were appreciated. Several women spoke about losing some of their anxiety when they heard others' stories, casting a new light on the idea of a donor and recipient in the action of gratitude. Here it was often when the 'donor' of the story revealed a vulnerability or a concern that the receiver felt thankful. There were also the many untold stories. Working mostly non-verbally the women were often referencing thoughts, feelings narrative that they did not want to share in spoken form. The room felt full of stories, swimming between people. In some ways, they each belonged to one person, but they went 'beyond the special sphere of each'.

The second project, FANMAIL, was run in partnership with Sydenham Garden, a therapeutic garden in South London, offering horticulture, art, singing and mindfulness to adults dealing with mental health and physical health issues. Meeting weekly, we learned how to make fans. We also thought about how to use the fans to carry a message, and in this project, I used a Psychology experiment to help inform the way in which we worked. Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts, were interested in the difference between thinking about and expressing gratitude. They conducted an experiment in which one group of participants thought about someone living to whom they were grateful; another wrote down their thoughts about a living person to whom they felt grateful, and another wrote a letter to someone living to whom they were grateful which the researchers told them would definitely be sent. They had expected this last exercise to be the one that produced the most positive affect, but in fact it was the thinking exercise that showed a stronger positive affect. Their conclusion was that social anxiety, and worry about how the letter would be received accounted for this negative score. This research gave us a lot to think about as we approached a project where we were clearly suggesting that people write thank you letters, although we had planned from the start that they could write a message that was never sent. Some years ago, I wrote a long thank you letter to an ex-teacher of mine, who had died of Multiple Sclerosis. I knew she'd never see it but I needed to write it.

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<sup>4</sup> Between Man and Man: Martin Buber p203 Martino Publishing 2014 (original 1947)

When the visual artists and I were experimenting with forms of fan, we discovered some interesting possibilities. Any writing needed to be done before the fan was fixed. The writing could be done so that it was a public message. In another version of the fan it could be written beneath a fold, hidden from the general viewer, but known to the recipient of the fan. If the writing was done at the bottom, it would be sealed into the handle of the fan, and known only to the writer. In the first week we settled down to learn the skills. Fans are not easy, because you need to be very precise and take your time. In the second week we tentatively introduced the idea of the writing. Immediately one participant wrote to thank her Dad, Granny and two pets, all of whom had died, because “You held me Hi”. Another wrote to herself, in the section of the fan that would be completely sealed. She told us that she needed to remember to thank herself sometimes, especially when she felt down, and this fan would always stay in her bag and remind her to do that. Another woman hid her message behind the fold at the top of the fan, and then released it, tied to a helium balloon, while another created a network of numbers, in which she had hidden her bank pin number. What all the participants told us, was that the activity prompted them to think about what they were grateful for. This provoked some sense of the pro-social and the other-focussed, but also some pretty salty conversations about the need to cut people out of your life if they bring you down, and a wonderful, provisional love letter. “Darling, you make my heart sing. Occasionally.”

This ‘granularity’ was a relief. The danger of a focus on positive emotions is a neglect of the realities of the lives in the room.

Buber writes:

*In a real conversation (that is, not one whose individual parts have been preconcerted, but one which is completely spontaneous, in which each speaks directly to his partner and calls forth his unpredictable reply) a real lesson (that is, neither a routine repetition nor a lesson the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises)[...] in all these what is essential does not take place in each of the participants or in a neutral world which includes the two and all other things: but it takes place between them in the most precise way...<sup>5</sup>*

The 3<sup>rd</sup> project, BREAD, took place at Ovalhouse in South London, where we worked with young emerging artists and older people from Stockwell Good Neighbours. We had a plan that was in some ways very

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<sup>5</sup> Buber Between Man and Man p204 Martino Publishing 2014 (original 1947)

clear, and in others very sketchy. We knew that we were going to make bread together. Bread making in a group is absolutely saturated with reciprocal gesture. One person holds the bowl for you while you mix the sticky dough; someone passes you the salt or helps you scrape dough off your fingers. When we all learned to pull the dough thin and see if it was the right consistency to have a 'window' everyone came to check. When there was silence it was very companionable, and but often there was lots of chat. There were a great many stories of mothers, and, alongside an appreciation for home-made bread and organic flour there was also an obsession with white sliced bread, toasted. I remembered that many of the women in Stockwell Good Neighbours had been nurses at St Thomas's hospital, and they had told me about that first cup of tea and piece of toast in the canteen when they arrived at work at 5 am, and how they made toast for women who had just given birth. In the last session, everyone made six rolls for someone else. This meant asking what they liked and trying to follow their requests. Once the bread came out of the oven and was packaged up, people made short speeches when they handed over the bread. These were thank-yous, thank you for being such a lovely partner, thank you because I never would have met you otherwise and now my life feels different because I know you. I was surprised in a way. We hadn't done ice breakers or name games or getting to know you exercises. But we had made stuff, we had helped each other, we had fed each other. There was no hierarchy of gratefulness; everyone was saying thank you and being thanked.

Buber suggests that we cannot meet ourselves without relationship.

*When imaginings and illusion are over, the possible and inevitable meeting of man with himself is able to take place only as the meeting of the individual with his fellow man, [...] [only when he] breaks through to the other has he broken through to his solitude.*

Emmons and Shelton relate this other-focussed but self-realizing relating to a bigger context

*Pro-social sentiments and attitudes are intertwined within a vast, interlocking social network.*

*In this attitude, people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious way that is not fully determined by physical forces but is part of a wider or transcendent context.*

Tomorrow I will sit down with the seven artists with whom I worked to look back over the Gratitude Enquiry. I know already that for some of them the word was tricky, invoking particularly times when they have been told to be grateful or that they were not grateful enough. I also know that some of them felt that having thought about and discussed gratitude, their awareness of the world of the 'between' was sharpened. Not just the development of individuals, not just the growth of relationships, but the inscribing of the spaces between with reciprocal gestures of care, attention and appreciation.

One artist, who was involved in all three projects wrote to me

*The projects weren't just about gratitude. They were all about kindness and reciprocity and sharing and happiness and being helpful and being helped and silliness, laughter, growth, struggle, vulnerability, strength and fun.*