

How can we live out our values more fully in our practice by an explicit exploration of our living contradictions?

Ben Cunningham & Moira Laidlaw

Ben Cunningham

Dublin, Ireland.

Moira Laidlaw

*Open University,
Milton Keynes, UK*

Abstract

This paper has arisen out of email conversations between us from June 2015 to the present, and centres principally on an exploration of the living contradictions in our practices - voluntary prison-visiting in Dublin, Ireland, and tutoring at the Open University (OU) based in the UK. We explore our values overtly in our extensive e-mail correspondence, as well as our fears, hopes, disappointments and triumphs. We pay close attention to each other's concerns for compassion, tolerance, love and human equality, as we raise our own and each others' awareness about the issues that concern us. In that pursuit we find ourselves looking at our living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989), and consequently explore how we can resolve them. During this process we recognise that we are involved in a process of peer-mentoring (Yamamoto, 1988) which enables us to support each other at difficult times. This process channels some deeper insights about the growth of our own humanity, and therefore, we are claiming, to improvements in our practice and in our understanding of the significance of what we are doing.

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Introduction

In this paper you will read about our experiences as Living Theorists as we seek to improve our practices – as a counsellor with prisoners in Ireland (Ben), and working with an ex-offender on a foundation module for an M.Sc. in Development Management at the Open University (Moira). We recognise the complexities of writing a joint paper, given the significance we both feel about valuing the uniqueness of individuals (Laidlaw, 2015; Cunningham, 2002; 1999). We have been sensitised to the importance of not drowning out our unique voices, but have been learning how to write something jointly that is a fair statement of commonly-held living values. We concentrate on our shared values as a way of showing the learning we are both involved in (Johnson & Vickers-Manzin, 2014). This has been focused around tolerance, human equality, compassion and love, and we hope that the following narrative reads as authentic in coming to terms with some of our living contradictions around those particular values.

In reviewing our paper, Jocelyn Romero Demirbag (2017) questioned the precise meaning we are giving the term ‘living contradictions’. We are using the term as Whitehead (1989): ‘[B]y this I mean that ‘I’ contained two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation’ (p. 44). For example, in this article you will see Moira emphasising the importance of love and compassion in the processes of education in her correspondence with Ben and her student (C.), yet not always reacting initially to C. in that way.

We also recognise the limitations that a purely linguistic account will have in attempting to illustrate the life-affirming energy we released between us during this work (Whitehead, 2004). Collecting data directly through video or voice-recording at the prison was not possible, and the ex-offender student only had access to email communications. In addition, both of us were restricted to email-exchanges and a week-long visit in Dublin in September, 2016, in which we didn’t directly collect data for our paper.

We have presented some sections of this paper jointly, and others from our individual points of view. Following this introduction is an individual section from us both about our practices, followed by our separate reflections on the beginnings of our correspondence with each other. We then present a joint section with extracts from some of our emails, about the four living values listed above. This is followed by our personal, critical reflections on the processes we have been involved with, and the conclusion is, again, jointly-authored.

You will see a discrepancy in the amount of data we can present about our individual practices. We were already writing to each other for nearly a year before Moira started working online with C., and much of the data from her learning about how better to work with him derives from her data-archive and reflections on Ben’s practice. However, there is some evidence that the correspondence between us influenced Moira’s actions with C. and became part of our considerations as we worked with others.

Great care has been taken to assure anonymity for the people we work with, changing any identifying details, without ever corrupting the meanings emerging from the dialogues.

Ben's Practice

I am working within a living theory methodology in order to improve my counselling practice with prisoners as I generate knowledge from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead, 1993, p. 69). It includes a living epistemology for educational knowledge, which rests on a living logic of educational enquiry and living standards of judgement (Laidlaw, 1996), and includes flows of life-affirming energy with values that carry hope for the future of humanity (Whitehead, 2015).

In my work with prisoners in an Irish prison I try to emulate Rogers' idea that my presence can become 'releasing and helpful' when I am closest to my intuitive self and to the unknown in me and that this can lead to healing (1980, p. 129). This means that I, '(reach) beyond conscious competence to aspects of yet unfathomed capability, where new possibilities for working are forming only in the precise moment of being with the client' (Wosket, 1999, p. 30).

In my various past roles in education as a teacher, school-head, school-counsellor or occasional lecturer in third-level education, and now as a prison-visitor, I believe I have tried to be fully present to those for whom I was responsible, recognising that my presence could be a healing force that embraced emotional knowing (Cunningham, 1999). As I explained in Taylor et al. (2002):

I rarely hesitate to appropriate and to absorb emotional, affective ideas, because I feel I have lived with them, interiorly and exteriorly, all my life. They are a lifetime's house guests, guests of my interior which I call home. They are familiar. I don't have to doff my hat to them, be polite in their presence. It's not that they own me or that I am beholden to them, even when I allow them to disport themselves, as they sometimes will. But my instincts trust them. They have always been my touchstones to reality, the real guides to my life. At the same time, I never attempted to oppose one form of rationality with another, the intellectual with the emotional but, rather, I attempted to use both and linked them with the synthesising capacity of my 'I' as I used both a propositional and felt form of language within a dialectic of relationship with others. (p. 361)

For many years in the later part of my teaching career, and especially now as a counsellor to prisoners, I have become more and more convinced that, 'in the act of giving something is born, and ... persons involved are grateful for the life that is born (in) them' (Fromm, 1956, pp. 24–25). This is now a key element, which I will be exploring as I reveal and explain the contents of my conversations with prisoners and Moira, as we account for the renewed life that is being born for them and for us as well.

Moira's Practice

After working as a secondary school teacher and Higher Education tutor in the UK for 25 years, and as a volunteer with Voluntary Services Overseas in China for 6 years, I now work at the Open University as a part-time tutor on its M.Sc. course in Development Management. In this role I have been involved with four different modules. All aspects of

teaching are mediated through online facilities. I wrote a paper for EJOLTS (Laidlaw, 2012) about the difficulties of doing this, as my teaching life from 1978 to 2009 had been conducted entirely face-to-face. Adjusting to online tuition was initially extremely stressful, because I assumed I would not be able to forge the necessary close educational relationships with people I'd never met (Brookefield, 2006). One of my aims has always been to reach a rapport with a student if possible, as a firm foundation for learning (Laidlaw, 1996; 2001; 2008). Learning to do things differently seemed daunting, as I had established a particular way of working that was successful in terms of helping my students to improve the quality of their learning (Laidlaw, 2004).

One of the concerns of my practice has always been that I see myself as working with people rather than subjects. One of the most telling examples (I believe) of this can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1jEOhxDGno>. You will see me trying to engage with as many students as possible as they leave the Chinese classroom (from a Teaching Methodology lesson). At the same time, I was singling out one young woman for special notice as she had shown, I believe, real courage in openly disagreeing with me during the lesson. In China I was frequently told it was culturally unacceptable to contradict a teacher, but I had asked them to do so whenever they believed I was wrong. Affirming actions which have taken courage and honesty to express, and are thus in the direction of truth and educational validity (as I saw it then and see it now) seemed to me highly important; I believe the way we are taught affects what we learn (Laidlaw, 2008). This incident represents an example of actions free from a living contradiction because I both encouraged the freedom to contradict a teacher, and then affirmed it when it actually took place. Jack Whitehead filmed the extract because he saw something going on that he valued. I took my behaviour then for granted then. I don't anymore.

I believe I have always tried to use the curriculum as the medium through which I can best help students to improve the quality of their learning (Laidlaw, 1994; 2001). In an EJOLTS paper (Laidlaw, 2015) I detailed ways in which my value of fairness – in attempts to carry out my work democratically – was being challenged and was thus still evolving. This was in a dialectical relationship with making more conscious (through a process of conscientisation (Freire, 2005)) the part that social and political contexts play in my work, a consciousness I had resisted for years. In that paper I explored the reasons why. Later in this paper you will see me deliberating about my work with C. when it reaches something of a crisis. This is effected largely – with Ben's help – by a necessary raising of my consciousness to treat him as a full human being and not simply someone whose emails I read and then responded to merely linguistically.

However, in working on issues of conscientisation and fairness between 2012–2016, I came up against a block: I felt I hadn't been developing educationally in the previous couple of years up to the beginning of my collaboration with Ben in 2015. I believe with McNiff (1993) that a good teacher needs to be a dedicated learner. I felt I had mastered the processes of working in my new role at the OU, but there was something lacking in the way I was going about it. I wrote in my journal:

I love working with students. I enjoy their successes and feel their disappointments. I understand the curriculum, am widely read in it and yet I am not inspired by my work. That's rare for me. I felt a little like this when I worked in Guyuan towards the end of the five and a

half years' placement. As if I had fulfilled something and was ready to move on... But helping students to emancipate themselves is surely more important than mere curriculum and professional obligation. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, June 9, 2015).

Beginnings of our collaboration

Ben:

In all my meetings with Moira when we both attended the University of Bath [in the nineties] and through many emails since then, we invariably spoke about many issues and often to do with justice and fairness. I remember a particular series of emails, one of them on 8th January, 2016 when I emphasised that what was of huge importance to me was the preservation of my own integrity and that of others because of my experience of its abnegation in my previous life as a member of a Religious Congregation in Dublin.

What particularly impressed me was that Moira believed that issues of values needed to be pursued, to be interrogated, and something to be done about them at whatever cost to oneself. I mentioned to Moira that I had sent an email to Jack Whitehead about the work I was doing with prisoners. In his reply he mentioned, among other things, the importance of restitution. He was right, of course. I added it to my work with prisoners, knowing it has to be there. However, I did say to Moira that I still felt there were immediate issues to be dealt with and these were acceptance, love, and forgiveness from me for the prisoners.

With these in place I felt there would be the right background with which to deal with restitution. Of course, one part of restitution is being imprisoned, and rightly so. But the start of my communication with the men wouldn't start there. However, I felt a slight fear that the topic of restitution might mean either foregoing or not paying due regard to love, acceptance and forgiveness. My view was that I had to get to know the prisoners even before I knew what they had done. They are as human as I am; they did bad things, and so did I. They didn't know that I harboured hatred more than once in my heart and soul for some others in my past because they seemed to have consciously attempted to damage me psychologically. When I met my first two prisoners, I couldn't but feel compassion for them.

I thought about what it would be like for me if I never knew who my parents were! What would it be like for me if I were adopted or fostered and those who did so did not actually love me? What would it be like for me if an adult had violated me sexually as a child? When I was finished considering the effects of these kinds of behaviour I was filled with sadness but, more than that, I felt I had a moral obligation to love, forgive, and have compassion for the men who had committed crimes and, of course, rightly, ended up in prison. They do have, of course, to pay a price to society and, I believe, they know that and that it is justified. However, if they are ever to emerge from prison changed in attitude and prepared to use the possibility of their new life for the good, they need to know also that they can be forgiven, loved and cherished in whatever way that can be done by me. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, January 8, 2016).

Moira:

Shortly after starting our correspondence I came to the conclusion that I needed to include the value of fairness as a standard of judgement (Laidlaw, 2015), by which I would subsequently be able to judge my own work more completely as I developed a conscientisation of my practice. This value would need to be shown in relation to the political and social contexts of my work (Freire, 1970; Briganti, 2015). Our correspondence began for me as a response to happy memories spent on Sunday afternoons in the 1990s as we put the world to rights and settled frustrations in my sense of personal development. I found Ben extremely easy to talk to, and we always became embroiled in deep conversations about what our lives were for, and how we might improve what we do with them. Very soon, however, the correspondence became something more than memories of a past friendship: I realised that it was beginning to challenge me a lot because of the intense and complex work at the prison he was telling me about, and what had brought him to it to do with compassion, and tolerance and love; through that challenge I began during the first few months (June 2015 – February 2016) to recognise that our correspondence was enriching the way I was perceiving the work I was doing in general; specifically I was working with an ex-offender towards the end of that beginning-phase. I felt a barrier between myself and this student, although at first I was reluctant to admit it to myself and – as you will see – there is little data on this stage of my learning. There was a distinct rapport there between Ben and myself, however, which was grounded in trust and respect.

We spark each other off and so an idea might seem to come from one of us, and that will sometimes be the case, but I find it difficult to isolate it always because it...grows out of us both and our dialogue. We are here, I believe, creating knowledge, and therefore it seems to me to be our knowledge. I know that's a huge claim, but I do think it might have some validity. We've known and trusted and cared for each other for a long time, known each other at key moments in our lives. This trust – and I would say love – means that we venture things. (B. Cunningham and M. Laidlaw, personal communication, February 2, 2016).

I gradually began to realise that we were engaged in a process of mentoring (more later) and that I might begin to apply what I had learnt through our early correspondence, to the work I was doing with C. Corresponding with Ben helped me to take that initial risk of being disappointed in myself. I hadn't consciously had to work hard on my tolerance and compassion before, so Ben's loving, tolerant and compassionate engagement with the men he was visiting was very challenging for me when I reflected on my initial reactions to C.. I realised that a conscious focus would help to improve the educational quality of the relationship between us.

The Four Values:

In this section you will see how we try to make progress in terms of how our living contradictions influenced our actions. In particular these contradictions began to crystallise and settle as ideas in our pursuit of actions related to human equality, tolerance, compassion and love. We are claiming in this paper that our extensive correspondence over two years allowed us to look at what it was in ourselves that was getting in the way of helping the other, and that it developed into what Yamamoto (1988) writes about in terms

of an art of mentoring. A leit-motif throughout our correspondence and in our practice was the 'truth' that Yamamoto writes about:

In mentoring... this need to see on one's own has to be carefully...preserved and enhanced so as not to deprive the individual...of motivation and dignity. There must be in both the guide and the guided a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen. One complements the other and the two together help each person develop his or her own idea of self as a unique, competent and worthy being. (pp. 184-185)

We began – imperceptibly at first – to mentor each other, and we were already acting as mentors for the people we were working with. Both of us felt that through listening, reading, responding, encouraging, showing genuine interest, and expanding on those points that seemed to us most educational and helpful with each other, we were evolving a deep and mutual professional trust and respect and this was influencing the work we were doing. It is also important to mention that at no time did we feel threatened by the other's constant, and gentle but probing, gaze. This was due in some measure to our solid friendship, built on trust over years. However, it was also based on our knowledge of each other's work and our reflections about it. In addition, the processes we were going through with each other had the same qualities of humanity, which we were concerned to bring into our work with others. In the exploration of the following four values, we were seeking to improve their depth and integrity.

Tolerance:

Over the years we have discussed our abusive childhoods and their possible effects on our adult lives. We recognise that self-awareness is a way of understanding other people better as well, so that we can more cogently live those values, which offer hope for the future of humanity more fully in our practice (Whitehead, 2017a; Laidlaw, 2015; Cunningham, 2002). A frank discussion of tolerance (and its opposite, judgementalism), emerged over the months of our correspondence. Three short extracts will serve as examples of many we could have chosen to show our concern to be tolerant towards others.

Ben: I have known that you may have been leaning towards judgementalism. I could, of course, see what would spark it off: two of the people I was working with had murdered others and, yet, I appeared to be dealing with them in ways that seemed to have scarcely recognise that.

Moira: That might be a superficial appearance, but it would be because you would not describe then how you did not and do not feel about them.

Ben: I did recognise it, though, and worried about how I could justify what I was doing.

Moira: Is there possibly a sense in which one might be able to say ... how could you *not* justify what you are doing? I think that question is really telling because it shows me how far I still need to go. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, January 8/9, 2016).

Ben: [Perhaps] it is not so much the way I look at myself but the way I look at others, which is the important factor.

Moira: That's an interesting view, isn't it? I think both are [important] ... because they are ... intimately connected. If I am feeling confident, I am more likely to be kinder in my 'judgements' of others. If I am feeling insecure, or something has happened to shake my worldview, then I am less likely to give the other the benefit of the doubt. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, May 10, 2016).

Ben: I have to constantly be trying to improve myself as a person, constantly asking of myself if I am improving or going backwards in my view of how I ought to behave and think with prisoners. ...Judgementalism [is] ultimately life-denying and injurious to the human spirit.

Moira: Yes, it suggests a lack of any loving response.

(B. Cunningham, & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, November 4, 2016).

This coheres with Rogers' (1961) view, that:

[An] increasing ability to be open to experience makes [a person] far more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, new problems. It means that his [sic] beliefs are not rigid, that he can tolerate ambiguity. (p. 115)

We have recognised more fully the importance of being able to discern the degree of tolerance in our relationships with others and ourselves as a way of coming to conclusions about the quality of our work. We are not claiming causal links between our growing insights about how our way of being affects the quality of our practice and its impact on others. However, we can point towards occasions when our greater tolerance of the needs of the other seem to result in a greater openness in the processes between ourselves and the people we work with:

Moira: I think I've got somewhere with this struggle towards a greater open-mindedness with C. It is not for me to judge him at all, but to work with him towards the greatest realisation of his own abilities. It seems so simple now, but it hasn't been easy getting here... Today he wrote and thanked me for my efforts on his behalf¹. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, September 10, 2016)

Ben: I found myself having to comfort [prisoner] ... by holding his hands at times, and sometimes putting my hands on his bowed head. He accepted both actions. I do believe that such physical contact if acceptable to the recipient is appropriate. Anyway, that is what I do when somebody is convulsed by sadness. It indicates a fellow feeling and that I am withholding making a personal judgement on what I am being told. (B. Cunningham, personal communication, February 24, 2017).

¹ See under 'Compassion' for C.'s message.

Equality

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2017) defines human equality as existing of, 'the right to fairness, equality, [and] respect ...'. We have always accepted this as an intellectual tenet, but our work with offenders has sometimes brought us into living contradictions. We also believe that no one should be disadvantaged because of circumstances beyond their control, but that the difficulty arose in terms of discerning personal responsibilities – our own and those with whom we worked:

Ben: One thing that was seminal to me was your acceptance of me as I was dealing with people who had committed murder.

Moira: Well, if this is what [you] think, then there must be something in it!...It's an awesome thing you're doing, and ...I do recognise it, because I know, deep down,...that every single one of us is a human being ... [even] Mao Zedong. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, April 16, 2016).

Ben: As a human being I had to come to some conclusion as to how I was to ...find a method of accepting E., and, of course, without accepting what he did – and I did that. As you said, we all have fragmented egos to a greater or lesser extent... (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Moira: I wish I had Ben's capacity for greater magnanimity. I judge quickly, apportioning blame, feeling resentful of being treated poorly, judging the person not the deed... Ben told me 20 years ago, 'always defer judgement'. I thought that was mere behaviour, but it's not, it's ontological. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, December 9, 2016.)

We learned together that we need to approach each person with a sense of their unique humanity, valuable because it exists. Our data archive is, however, full of failures to live up to that!

Ben: C. must be a cause of some concern for you. You do your best for him but you are constantly unsure about how or when he'll respond.

Moira: Taking the discourse to areas of truth rather than power is what I have to do all the time, but of course C. [finally] needs to make up his mind, [and] then take responsibility for so doing. It's a fine dancing with words I need to do because he's very quick to cut me off... I have to act as though the distinction I am beginning to perceive – I believe – [in] his attitudes to me... – are not significant... He requires the same loving attention I gave to D. [7 year-old child who was unhappy about something] in the sense of being person and context-specific. (B. Cunningham and M. Laidlaw, personal communication, October 3, 2016).

Ben: I am ... consider[ing] my earlier relationship with R.. I read his impassive demeanor as being ... negative; that there was no effort on his part to be responsive. Though ... there is no evidence to support this, R's apparent passiveness inhibited me somewhat week on week.

Moira: ... We do need to be open about our failures... Intuitions can be wrong sometimes, can't they?

Ben: Secretly I now think I was 'blaming' R. for being resistant, 'not being ready to change, and perhaps even, 'not really suitable for counseling', as Casement, Wosket and others would have it. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, October 16, 2016).

Working from the premise that all human beings are equal brought us at times face-to-face with our deepest living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989). Equality, however, does not mean sameness, as Fromm (1956) so well understood, '[J]ust as modern mass-production requires standardization, so the social process requires standardization of man [sic], and this standardization is called 'equality' (p. 16).

Compassion:

There was much discussion about the meanings of compassion, particularly as we concluded this phase of our collaboration. We both recognised that we needed to communicate with our clients so they could feel safe, comforted, understood and accompanied when necessary (Wosket, 1999, p. 212). We believed compassion to be the essence of our relationships with them. The reaching out for Ben was face-to-face and for Moira through email only. Empathising with clients wasn't sufficient as it might limit us only to seeing what is familiar to ourselves rather than enlarging our vision so we had to develop an openness to, and respect for, feelings and experiences that may be quite unlike our own (Casement, 1985, p. 95). In other words, we were seeking compassionate responses from ourselves with our clients.

Moira: I've always said I teach people, not subjects, and yet I'm less willing to engage with C. because of what I perceive as his negative attitude towards me as a woman. I need to write to Ben about this. I'm on the way to where I want to be, but I'm not there yet by any means. (M. Laidlaw, journal entry, data archive, June 9, 2016).

Ben: [writing about P.] I was a little fearful for some time that he was isolating himself too much. ... I also knew that he suffers huge pangs of conscience for what he did, but isolating himself wouldn't do his rehabilitation much good.

Moira: Depression would be a perfectly natural reaction to being incarcerated...I do feel for him – and believe him, [although] before we were in touch again, I don't think I would have. But I see the enormous effort you put into being with him and for him and realise that if you consider this important work – which I have no doubt of – then I [still] need to reconfigure my inner parameters to include more mercy, more compassion. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, March 14, 2017).

Moira: C. wrote to me today: 'Thank you, Moira. You always responded quickly to my emails. You always expected high standards from me. You 'listened' to me and helped me a lot when I was feeling at my lowest because you were always there for me. This has been a difficult time. Sometimes I thought I would never get through it, but I did, and you helped me. Thank you, Moira.' Brought tears to my eyes. I thank heavens for Ben. He has made me stop and think about my behaviour, about how to improve it, without ever suggesting I was getting it

wrong... that's a real mentor! ... C.'s email came out of the blue for me and makes me realise that I had gone some way to undo some of the negative feelings I came up against in my treatment of C. And I believe a great deal of that was to do with the way in which Ben treated me throughout our correspondence. He always walks the talk. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, October 28, 2016)

We wished to as be 'real' and compassionate as possible with the people we're working with and concur with Rogers (1980) when he says, 'I am inwardly pleased when I have the strength to accept the prisoner as having ideas, purposes and value of their own which might not be like mine' (p. 18).

Ben: I am sometimes nonplussed at a prisoner indicating that he cares for me, accepts me, admires me, or prizes me, as E. does, [and] whom I have been meeting the longest... My gesture of acceptance and thanks in those circumstances is to shake warmly [his] hand. ...In such an encounter ...I believe, 'only love is the adequate communication' (Thorne & Lambers, 1998, p. 82). [Then, discussing a new prisoner, A.] A. is a most likeable guy; very intelligent but ...unwise in his relationships with guys who ...led him badly astray to the point that he didn't know he was being set up to do what he did - killing a person or he'd be killed himself if he didn't. [Oh] why can't guys be girls for a little while until they learn how to be grown-up and sensible?

Moira: ... Surely... what we all need to become is more human, rather than more female or more male...Nothing is linear and causal in human experience... but there's some truth in what I'm saying. Not that I am heroic, only that the paths I trod, and the paths he did, meant I won some kind of confidence from the world, and he didn't. Indeed ... you talk about what you might have done, had you been embroiled in other circumstances in your life.

Ben: [It is] shocking to think about what A. did and how he also he destroyed one life and certainly almost did the same to his own life. ...My blooming problem is that I like him and would like to be in a position to have the power to forgive him, but I suppose I have done so to some extent. You ought not to mix with me at all, Moira. I'm not sufficiently law-abiding in the fullest possible way.

Moira: Oh, I think I'll carry on mixing with you, Ben, if you don't mind!!! I don't want law-abiding, I want integrity. And you've got that in spades!

(B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, March 14, 2017).

Brian Jennings (2017), one of our reviewers, asked if we could expand on the differences between the meanings we give to 'law-abiding' and 'integrity'. In this context we were meaning 'law-abiding' as those governmental laws decided at national level, without our direct engagement, and which exercise authority over us, and to which we are expected to conform. 'Integrity' we see as having to do with the ethical and moral² rules we devise ourselves in the course of our own lives, which seem – from our experience – to be appropriate. It then entails acting in the direction of those values. In the rather flippant

² We understand ethics to derive from external and social sources, and morals to come from within the person. See http://www.diffen.com/difference/Ethics_vs_Morals for details.

exchange, we were, however, seriously affirming our belief in taking personal responsibility for our own actions, rather than simply conforming to rules made up by others without necessarily thinking through the ramifications of so doing, or not doing.

Love:

In our correspondence there was continual emphasis on creating 'our knowledge'. Moira wrote, 'We've known and trusted and cared for each other for a long time', and she summarized it thus: 'This trust – and I would say love – means that we venture things' (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, 2.2.16). And what we have increasingly ventured has concerned our vulnerabilities in terms of being open to the other and ourselves. We have also had to cope with our feelings about the serious crimes the individual men have committed, to ensure they don't get in the way of providing them with loving service, and in so doing we believe we come closer to a sense of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1962).

Ben: All of this ...leads me to think that self-actualisation for me happens – if at all – only when I forget myself for the sake of others... It is this ideal that I hope I am serving in whatever I do with prisoners, whatever their circumstances.

Moira: Yes, the art of self-forgetting is a real art, isn't it? ... It's like the difference between praxis (the merging of theory and practice), and the separating of the two. I know I am ... living my values of love and compassion and empathy ... more fully in my practice when I have lost a sense of self – i.e. less self-conscious – yet still know that I am a self at all. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, May 10, 2016).

Both of us are helped in our relationships with prisoners by offering them love, and we have discussed an awareness of Adler's (1992) view in his work, where he emphasized that the work of understanding human nature should be a vital task for everyone, love (our emphasis) being one of the means for doing so.

There have been times when we've been fearful that we may not be sufficiently following what Levinas (1969) advocates in his description of the primary importance of the ethical:

The approach of the face is the most basic mode of responsibility ... The face is not in front of me but above me; it is the face before death ... it is the other who asks me not to let him die alone. (pp. 59-60)³

We have struggled to ensure that we are seeing our clients as fully human as we can, in other words, people as capable of loving and being loved as we are. We have discussed if we are up to the task of approaching them with the conscious aim of being loving. And we remain now more determined to do so. Recently, we shared this interim conclusion on the subject of love at work (Lohr, 2006).

³ By 'face' here, Levinas means that people are ethically responsible to one-another in any face-to-face encounter. We are not naturally solitary creatures, but need the recognition and presence of another who sees.

Ben: What I give to prisoners I receive back from them as well – affection and even love. I'm overwhelmed by their contribution to my life. I'm thinking that I ought not to expend too much time into over-worrying about crime, uselessness, neuroses, feelings of inferiority, and so on. Others would ask, of course, as is their right, where is restitution? For me, restitution finds its beginning in the prisoners being able to begin to love themselves. They are doing so because they see me doing it with them – I forgive (and love) them and they know it. (B. Cunningham and M. Laidlaw, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

Ben: Thanks, too, for your comments on E. and me. I was hoping that I had struck a balance between representing him faithfully and also how I was dealing with him and his crime.

Moira: I honestly believe that you have worked wonders with [him], because love, real love, which seeketh not itself to please – as Blake wrote – always does. This is a man who deeply regrets what he has done, and you have been able to talk him through this over months. I sense that you are very important to his life because you see him, because you see and love what you see. To a starving soul that is the most valuable nourishment. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, March 9, 2017).

There is a real sense that Ben's journey of self-actualisation helped Moira to find her own. Throughout our friendship, this has been a conscious motivation between us, because we recognise that aspiring to fulfil our human potential is a part of working in greater harmony with the values we aspire to, like love, compassion, tolerance and the recognition of the absolute equality of all people. Trying to improve our capacities to live out these values more fully brings them into sharp focus as the living standards of judgement by which we might then evaluate the quality of our practices.

Critical Reflections:

Ben:

There are two of aspects of my learning in particular that are very important and relevant to me.

i) My approach to prisoners for whom I became responsible is a moral one involving 'certain human attitudes' (Fromm, 1956) involving the use of my feelings about inculcating freedom and autonomy within them.

In a paper I presented to the BERA Conference many years ago (Cunningham, 1997), I wrote with some passion about what I felt was my moral responsibility in my educative relationships with others:

My experience is that people have 'psychic' needs, that more than one person I meet is 'weak, wounded or frail' (like myself). My question to myself is this: 'what can I do about it? Can I pass by on the other side?' The answer is, 'No I help because I believe I have a gift for doing so'.

I also wished in my relationship with prisoners to inculcate freedom and autonomy within them. As Greene (1988) puts it:

To be autonomous is to be self-directed and responsible; it is to be capable of acting in accord with internalised norms and principles; it is to be insightful enough to know and understand one's impulses, one's motives, and the influence of one's past. (p. 118)

What I had not sufficiently taken into account was that some of the prisoners I visited and worked with suffered from psychiatric problems for which I had no training. However, most of them kept returning week after week so I found a way of staying with them.

Moira played a huge part in encouraging me in my work with prisoners, as my email to her below shows:

Ben: Thanks so much, Moira, for endorsing the strong place in my humanity that you have detected and that I play a part in your life, too. It is clear to me from what you write that you are filled with energy and delight in front of people you meet. I like the idea of Truth resonating from us both as we continue doing what is right. Yes, you are right when you reminded me about what I do when in front of the men in prison – I am positive about them despite what they did. I know instinctively that I always grab their attention immediately when I meet them and a part of it is that I am full of delight beforehand at the thought of meeting with them. (B. Cunningham and M. Laidlaw, personal communication, January 8, 2016).

ii) 'My real problem is that I wish to forgive him' (the prisoners, 20.6.16)

On one occasion Moira wrote:

I am literally only asking, not suggesting: is there an assumption that self-understanding will improve something? I'm not saying it wouldn't, but there does seem to be an underlying assumption here. I think it's possible [in terms of] my supposition that there might be more underlying the use-value of what you are doing. (B, Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, June 20, 2016).

I admitted floundering with Moira's astute observation and question, but went on to say that:

Ben: I know that self-understanding on its own won't improve anything for E. Because I offer understanding he may – does – I think, accept it, but I know myself it is not enough. I don't know why I can't say to him: 'Look, you committed murder. You have to pay for it and, indeed you do, because the law decided that imprisonment was the answer. In days gone by, E., you would have been hanged for this crime and society would have felt you deserved it'. The real problem is that I wish to forgive him.

Moira wrote back:

Moira: You have returned to this almost – again as it appears to me – as a justification for the stance you take with E, H, R. and others. As if you need to justify it. I personally see no need. In fact I hold it as a morally and humanistically more advanced state of being than the one I often inhabit.

Ben: I have often felt I could have been him. I could have murdered some people. This was not a euphemism. It's fact. But I adopted the mantra of 'live and let live'. I was also reminded

of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing death, who said to the followers who came to arrest him: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'.

This statement did influence me in how I regarded the prisoners I was dealing with.

Moira: You believe that it is through forgiveness that this (breaking the cycle of murder) comes into being. ... I believe you have this latter quality already. Your humanity resonates with the men you want to forgive. ... And this forgiveness ... I sense that you equate – in some ways – forgiveness with personal metamorphosis, with movements towards greater joy in being human, greater hope for particular humans.

Ben: I just can't shake it off. I have never been able to shake it off and I can't do it now. It's part of my life and my psyche.

I went on to write, 'If I can't forgive E and R' – though I never used these words with them – 'I would be a sham'. I continued:

Ben: Despising myself for much of my life, feeling worthless, as I did, I needed someone to know this wasn't true. It was pre-eminently you and Jack (Whitehead) who did it for me. I can honestly say, hand on heart, that the greatest years of my life to date were those I spent in Bath, meeting and conversing with you and also with Jack. I had never at any other time ever experienced the total acceptance and, yes, love, that I received probably for the first time in my life.

As Yamamoto (1988) writes, 'What peer-mentoring [as we have been doing throughout this process] involves at its root is the matter of accepting, carrying, and giving of the torch of Life itself' (p. 185).

Moira:

There are three aspects of my learning that I wish to highlight.

i) The effects of personal well-being on my behaviour with others

If I am feeling insecure, or something has happened to shake my worldview, then I am less likely to give the other the benefit of the doubt. (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, May 10, 2016).

I have recognised the weakness of relying on current feelings of well-being in order to behave well with others. I don't believe I would have been able to see the ramifications of this insight, had Ben and I not been involved in this intense correspondence, which has been part personal, part professional, but always about friendship. Evolving my practice with Ben as a witness and communicant added both depth and motivation. He never pointed out a living contradiction in my practice, but through his feedback on my concerns was able to offer me a space in which I felt entirely comfortable to explore them. He did for me what Yamamoto (1998) advocates in the mentoring process:

What is sought is not praise, reward or pity, all of which are an accounting for past deeds. Rather it is regard – an acknowledgement of one’s personhood as well as trust in what is and is to come – that is desired. (p. 184)

What I struggled with at time was about acting out of a sense of obligation in my correspondence with C. rather than a desire to help him because he is a human being like myself. Because I felt ambivalent at times about him it was difficult for me to act intuitively as I would normally do. I had to second-guess myself. Ben enabled me to explore that dilemma over time by reflections on his own ways of working. This is an example of a living contradiction because my feelings for the student were compromised by my inner reactions to him. On the one hand I wanted to feel a genuine loving regard for him, rather than ‘doing my duty’, which implies a less-than generous response on my part. This comment from Ben struck me very forcibly:

Ben: Towards the end he [prisoner] thanked me for my visits. I was always very respectful of him, he said. I always understood him, he felt, and never condemned him. He especially emphasised how open I was about myself. It was a great help to him, he said, that I had to struggle with life, too. I had told him of my struggle for many years to overcome a drink problem (B. Cunningham & M. Laidlaw, personal communication, February 11, 2016).

I thought of my own feelings towards C. sometimes, particularly when he was apparently authoritarian with me, which I perceived as happening a lot at the beginnings of our correspondence. I would retreat into a judgemental stance as a kind of defence, I suppose.

C: Please send me details of the readings I need to go through. Then I will send you excerpts from my assignment and you can comment on them. (Email correspondence, May 23, 2016).

Moira: Sometimes I feel as if C. sees me as an interactive tutor-machine, and not as a person at all. I don’t like feeling de-personalised...Oh no! I’ve just realised I’m tending to see him in the same way, as someone who only has fragments of humanity ... Oh dear, I need greater magnanimity, a wider vision. I’m exacerbating the problem. How can C. see me as whole if I only act in fragments and I only see him in fragments, like brusqueness, depersonalisation, instructional?... I know that Ben genuinely feels love for the men he visits. I wonder if I can ‘fake it ‘til I make it’ with C.. I really do need to give this a try. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, May 24, 2016)

It is significant that this correspondence with C. was entirely conducted through email and feedback on his assignments, rather than being able to learn more about the person through insights which accrue in face-to-face encounters, and which I had always relied on before working with the Open University. The fear of digital media enabling distancing to occur between tutor and student (which was the subject of my earlier paper (Laidlaw, 2012)) was shown up very clearly for me with C. because I didn’t find myself warming to him as he appeared to present himself in his emails. For a time I allowed these snap-judgements to influence my responses, although I tried not to let that show. However, it is my personal experience that negative feelings do come across in prose, whether I want them to or not. In his review of our paper, Brian Jennings (2017) wrote the following:

Is it possible to distinguish the limitations of the medium and your desire for communication and to find ways to overcome the limitations of the medium to communicate in the manner that you would like? Perhaps we need to find ways to expand the medium to accommodate the message rather than limit the message to the medium. (B. Jennings, Review at <http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=189#p1709> , April 14, 2017)

This is something I need more consciously to focus on in subsequent work.

Overall, though, having Ben as a kind correspondent, someone who doesn't judge me, who doesn't put his own humanity above anyone else's, has helped me to act more in the direction of the values I have espoused for my entire educational career. He gives me a safe space in which to grow. The end result, it seems to me, has been something that Buber (1963) also writes about:

Trust, trust in the world because this human being exists – that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hard-pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth (p. 98).

And I believe it's relevant not only in our collaboration but also within our practices with others. I am of the opinion now that I was able to change the way I worked with C. (see thank-you message – cited earlier) partly because of Ben's ability to nurture the necessary insight in me, that all human beings are deserving – without equivocation – of recognition as being equally human.

ii) Considerations about my moral confusion

There was an issue for me with the amount of data we collected. Our emails ranged over two and a half years, sometimes four or five letters a week, and mostly long ones. I think we collected too much data before we were clear about the parameters for any joint writing and this was probably because we didn't start our correspondence intending to write a paper. This made the organisation of our material to draw on very complex, but for me eventually increased the sense of purpose and 'jointedness' in our work. In any subsequent collaborative writing, I hope I would recognise the danger-signs earlier, and take appropriate measures. It was daunting to set out with such a mountain to climb.

One of the reasons for the growth of such a wealth of data from my point of view, emerged out of a sense of not wanting to mechanise the flow of letters between us, with a view to expediency rather than friendship. MacNiven (2015) writes:

A [genuine] friendship, unlike a utilitarian one, is based on mutual respect and not mutual advantage. The basic obligation... is concern for the other person's moral well-being. It is not just to help the other person when he or she wants help. (p. 99)

My misgivings at mistaking one for the other affected the writing-up of the paper for me, in the sense of always being conscious of wanting to ensure that the text was authentic in its expression of us as colleagues and friends, as well as unique human beings.

I feel as if I'm treading on thin ice sometimes, in terms of what decisions it is ethical to make in the process of putting this paper together. Have I portrayed C. with a sense of his absolute

right to receive tolerance, compassion and love from me? Will my writing step on Ben's sense of self, however tangentially? That would be a violation. I don't want to go there. I have a lot to think about. (M. Laidlaw, Data Archive, March 2, 2017).

These thoughts have remained uppermost in my mind for the whole of this writing-up process.

iii) A greater sensitivity to my living values as my living standards of judgement

When I came up with the idea of values as living and developmental as we are ourselves (Laidlaw, 1996) it was an intuition that led me there, mainly from being-in-the-moment with students at the school I was working at in Bath. There was a conceptual and emotional symmetry for me in the idea and experience of values as living and developmental, which could then act as living standards of judgement through which I might evaluate the quality of my practice (Laidlaw, 2001; 2008). The idea is a cornerstone of my work, and a fundamental tenet now in the living-theories of other practitioners – for example, Whitehead, 2008; Huxtable, 2016; Briganti, 2015; and Mellett, 2016. However, I have not experienced so tangibly a sense of the development of my living values in myself and my work before. It comes almost as confirmation that the emphasis I placed on this way of being over 20 years ago is still developing as I develop. Focusing on my own living contradictions, particularly in terms of tolerance and equality, has enabled me with Ben's help to see how the dialectic between my espoused and lived values have actually been functioning. Putting tolerance, equality, compassion and love under the microscope has brought me closer to an understanding of the living nature of my own values and the necessity to be vigilant in my pursuit of them.

Through all the above critical reflections, I remain convinced that the peer-mentoring process in which Ben and I were engaged, has enabled me to come closer to satisfaction about the work I have done than I usually experience. It's a very pleasant place to be – for a while! I am sure there are more living contradictions lurking!

I would like to end my critical reflections, by establishing the following question James Finnegan (2000) poses to his own work, as a cornerstone for my own future enquiries into how I can improve my practice: 'How can love enable justice to see rightly?' I have realised that tapping into my ability to love helps to dissolve any living contradictions in terms of tolerance, compassion and a heartfelt insight into the truth of human equality. There is still a way to go, though.

Conclusion:



Image 1: Ben and Moira in Dublin, September 2016.

Over the two and a half years we have corresponded as friends this communication has developed into the explorations of key concerns we've had in our practices. We wrote narratives of our work with others until we realised we also wanted to write a narrative of our work together. We recognised the enormous potential of articulating something of what we had been learning to others, in a bid to lessen the living contradictions in our individual practices. By concentrating on the four living values of tolerance, equality, compassion and love, we were able to bring about some greater clarity and consistency between our espoused and lived values.

During this time we have been involved in new ways of seeing that would offer us richer educational possibilities (Greene, 1986) in our work and lives. Whereas Greene writes about individuals aspiring to a critical pedagogy of practice [our emphasis], as living-theorists we are concerned with a continuing development of our own living values as living standards of judgement, by which we are able to evaluate the quality of what we are doing, both as individuals and, in this case, as colleagues and friends.

We have discussed issues of ethics and morality in terms of questions like, 'What ought I to do?' An (unrecorded) conversation at Dublin Airport in September 2016 found Moira at an impasse with her student but, by articulating her fears and by Ben offering a warm listening space, she was able to gain the trust in herself to see C. with more compassion, tolerance and love. For her specifically, there was a realisation through the correspondence that, when love flowed freely, there could then be no room for feelings of resentment at a student's tone or manner. What mattered was making contact with them as fully equal human beings who deserved love, tolerance and compassion and was always, of course, equal.

Both of us were aware of the necessity to answer to ourselves for our authenticity in our actions with others. Again, however, unlike Peters (1966) and Greene (1986), our search for authenticity in our pursuit of improvement doesn't happen against a theoretical set of standards we aspire to. In a sense we aspire to be better versions of ourselves. This does not mean we are dismissive of written ethical standards of judgement about areas of

professional practice, for example the ethical guidelines for the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) or The Psychological Society of Ireland (2011). These can be useful in articulating parameters for our work, but we don't specifically – as other living-theorists (Lubjak Mec, 2015; Bruce Ferguson, 2015; Ukani & Rawall, 2016) – use theoretical tenets as the standards we should aspire to in order to constitute 'good practice'. This brings to mind the comments made earlier about the differences between (being) 'law-abiding' and (acting with) 'integrity'. The former requires conforming to outside rules. Integrity has to do with acting on internal and developing values, which sometimes requires great effort and soul-searching.

As a result of reflections on the above, it could be said that our whole work with each other and with other people has become about negotiating our own ethical and moral ways to behave in order to improve our practices. It may be true to say that we are engaged in evolving our own living ethical standards of judgement as a way of moving forward as individuals, as collaborators, and as professionals in our chosen spheres.

It has been difficult to bring any documentary evidence for such claims, given that Ben worked entirely face-to-face with the men he visits and had no correspondence with them between visits. Moira worked only through email with C. However, the tone of his final email was in direct contrast to many of his earlier messages, which were usually highly functional and without any comments about his feelings and circumstances. In this final email he showed more of his fears and vulnerability, which suggest he had come to trust Moira more. The main proof for the effectiveness of understanding our living contradictions and acting on them will likely be realised in our subsequent work with others, although it will probably still be challenging to determine.

Another point arises out of this: we wanted to become accountable to ourselves. However, accountability that works only within an entirely external set of power-relations will not – in our opinion – bring us to a state we want to occupy, which is one of living out our own values more fully in our practices and within our lives as human beings. The statement made by Deleuze in conversation with Foucault (Bouchard, 1972) is relevant here:

In my opinion, you were the first ... to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others. We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this 'theoretical' conversion – to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf (our emphasis).

However, this raises another point. There is something about being accountable to ourselves as individuals and in this process to each other, which has given rise to a desire to be accountable to others within the social formations in which we live and work (Whitehead, 2008). We didn't begin this correspondence with a view to becoming accountable to the values inherent within it. Neither did we aim to mentor each other through the process. The form and substance of our correspondence evolved over time as we related to each other about our work. This paper is a tribute as much to our friendship as it is to the work we have done together.

Our desire to write a paper grew partly out of a sense that has recently been discussed in the Living Theory papers and forums at EJOLTS (see www.ejolts.net and

<http://ejolts.org/> for details): of a wish to contribute to a good social order (McNiff, Whitehead and Laidlaw, 1992). In inviting each other into dialogues about how we can better live out our values in our practices, we are at a micro-level embodying the kinds of values and processes we believe could pave the way towards a better social order. Let us be clear: we are not aspiring to an absolute – we will always be on the journey because we are human beings – but we do see the implications of what we are doing here in terms of generating our own living-theories as a manifestation of a social order that is expressed as dialogical forms of negotiation and accountability, living values as standards of judgement and accounting for our practices within a developmental set of social contexts.

Earlier, we commented that we work from the premise that all human beings are equal, but that this brought us at times face-to-face with our deepest living contradictions. Jack Whitehead, as our paper's first reviewer, wrote in response, 'I believe that both of you express an ontological and relational value that carries hope in the flourishing of humanity that is non-contradictory' (Whitehead, 2017b). We believe this might be true, but are mindful of how easy it is to slip back into contradictions again.

We hope you are able to see that our correspondence has helped to enable us to conquer our most difficult living contradictions in relation to issues of human equality, tolerance, compassion and love. We also hope that you will see this work (and the photograph at the beginning of this conclusion) as embodying a quality that Whitehead (2016) writes about: a delight of being together. He goes further in his review (Whitehead, 2017b), when he asks if we might find a photograph that shows delight in the natural world and the cosmos, through which we find a life-affirming energy. Unfortunately we don't have a photograph of us together enjoying our wanderings through Phoenix Park in Dublin last September, but there is one we both believe expresses this feeling, that we are able to share with you.



Image 2: Moira on the Cliffs at Flamborough

We are aware how significant it is to bring this pleasure in being alive to the work we do with others. Our journeys continue!

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