

# My Early Engagement with Humanistic Psychology

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John Heron

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## SYNOPSIS

I have been invited by the editors to contribute an article with the above title to *Self and Society*. I cover the period from 1970 to 1985, which includes: the launch of the Human Potential Research Project and its humanistic extramural programmes at the University of Surrey; the start of co-counselling in the UK and Europe and the birth of Co-counselling International; humanistic innovations in postgraduate medical education at the University of London; the dawn, development and coming of age of the participatory action-research method of co-operative inquiry; the founding and humanistic psychology diploma work of the independent Institute for the Development of Human Potential; strategies of soft revolution; and the grounding value of comradeship. The interacting triad of autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy is a theme that runs through the whole.

## The Launch of the Human Potential Research Project

Humanistic Psychology (HP) arrived in the UK, as an experiential force, with a large minilab held at the Inn on the Park Hotel, in London in March 1970. The event was sponsored by Leslie Elliott. Immediately after it, he provided the premises for Quaesitor, the first growth centre in Europe, run by Pat and Paul Lowe, which I attended several times in the summer of 1970. In November of that year, I founded the Human Potential Research Project (HPRP) at the University of Surrey, the first academic base for Humanistic Psychology and education in Europe. The launch of HPRP was occasioned by an unexpected and unusual turn of events.

Inspired by my liberating experiences at Quaesitor, yet with considerable trepidation, in September of 1970 I took seven senior police officers of Superintendent rank on a two-day journey of experiential exercises *exploring the interface between their humanity and their professional role*. This was the start of a five-day course at the University of Surrey, where I was on the intramural academic staff. The course was put on at the request of the Assistant Chief Constable of Surrey Police – to build relations between town and gown – and the university had asked me to help out by running the opening sessions.

I offered the officers a choice between two days of lectures and discussions on ‘man management’ – a topic much in vogue at the time – and two days of the experiential inquiry mentioned above, which I briefly outlined and which, I said, would require courage from all of us: courage from me because I had never done this before with persons of their status, and courage from them, because of the risks of radical self-disclosure before their peers. When they heard the word ‘courage’ they lined up to a man at the deep end to take the plunge.

At the end of the five days, the officers had a review session voicing their evaluation of the course as a whole. I

was unable to attend this because of other commitments. I heard later that they had spent most of the review talking about the first two days. I also heard that they were so astonished at the impact of those two days that they sent a deputation to the Vice-Chancellor's office to affirm the value of this kind of education, and to ask why they had never heard of it before.

On the strength of this unprecedented recommendation, I proposed to David James, Head of the university's extramural Centre for Adult Education, that I set up, within his Centre, the Human Potential Research Project to develop person-centred research methods and to provide experiential education for other professions, organisations and the general public. With the approval of the Vice-Chancellor, David agreed and the HPRP was born. And thus I learned one of the practical principles of soft revolution: significant change for those in one arm of the establishment can provide leverage for introducing significant change for those in another.

It also helps to have a luminary leader. Peter Leggett, the Vice-Chancellor, was at that time one of a group of four key players engaged in ongoing radical discussions which eventually led to the founding in 1973 of the Scientific and Medical Network (which is still thriving today), a forum for doctors and scientists to dialogue about issues – considered taboo in orthodox thought – such as non-local consciousness, alternative forms of healing and paranormal phenomena. These unorthodox interests, I believe, contributed – along with the police officers' deputation – to his discreet backing of my initiative.

I owe David James a great debt of gratitude. He provided me with consistent and unwavering support through all the vicissitudes of the early days, fending off much intramural hostility towards the HPRP. I am also grateful to a small team of HPRP associates whom I recruited from postgraduate and undergraduate students aroused by the arrival of HP in the UK. Indeed, it was one of them who first alerted me to the opening of Quaesitor. I found the team members invaluable for talking through ways of developing the extramural work of the Project, and for discussing issues arising from work in progress. Their youth and vision, unrestrained by narrow academic convention, was a guiding inspiration.

The work of the HPRP team and myself, with dynamic links with David James and his staff, and with discreet links with the Vice-Chancellor and his office, constituted a form of participatory action research within the community of the university into its potential for actualising some degree of humanistic change.

## The Dawn of Co-operative Inquiry

Early in 1971, to begin the quest for what person-centred research might be like, I presented a paper called 'Experience and method' at the annual conference of the British Psychological Society (Heron, 1971). In it I argued that doing any kind of original research presupposes that the researcher is a self-directing being, that therefore a central research question for psychology is, 'How can self-directing capacity be developed?', and that this question can only properly be answered from the standpoint of the agent, the person who is developing their self-directing capacity. Thus, the researcher is necessarily also the inquiring agent, who is both experimenter and subject combined.

It also argued that self-directing persons develop most fully through reciprocal relations with each other; and that, in this co-equal relation, two people can reverse the roles of facilitator and agent, or combine them at the same time. They could support each other in applying to themselves some theory of personal development, where any such theory would involve relations between the potential self, the socially conditioned self, the directing self and the transformed self. They could also explore the ongoing dyadic relation itself and its potential. And both approaches could be developed by a larger number of people using group interaction methods. The paper also looked at issues of validity, especially the problem of consensus collusion.

In order to explore this kind of person-centred participatory inquiry in practice, elements of it were progressively incorporated into the Project's experiential learning programmes through the 1970s. By the start of the 1980s the method had developed into full-blown co-operative inquiry, as I explain in a later section.

## Experiential Learning Programmes

The HPRP had a purely extramural focus. As a matter of political prudence, in those early days we made no attempt directly to attract intramural undergraduate or postgraduate students, but if they happened to get wind of us and turned up for our workshops, they were welcome. So our publicity went exclusively to the general public and professional groups in the surrounding community.

The Project associates, who were drawn from the student body, understood and accepted the extramural focus. They would participate in general public events which appealed to them, and they also sometimes helped out in supportive roles in the facilitation of events for

professional groups.

Through the first year (1970–1) I ran a programme of weekend Human Relations Training Laboratories. I facilitated the process of each experiential group, based on a few simple and basic ground-rules to which everyone, after full discussion, had assented. The idea was that participants would acquire – through exploratory action-inquiry within the unfolding dynamic of the workshop – new intrapsychic and interpersonal awareness, insights and skills.

My guiding definition of love, for professional facilitators and helpers, was 'to provide conditions within which people can in liberty determine their own true needs and interests in co-operation with others who are similarly engaged'. It is a definition which points to the interdependence of *autonomy* and *co-operation*, emerging within a fertile context created by the *hierarchy* of benign facilitation. These are three basic and complex values in all forms of human association, and can be defined in their simplest form, respectively, as deciding for oneself, deciding with others, and deciding for others.

The next year, 1971–2, I added a 20-week, one evening a week, training course in co-counselling. Earlier in the year I had attended workshops in London in this form of peer self-help emotional development, run by Tom Scheff, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.. Tom was also in the UK to continue his research into the anti-psychiatry work of R.D. Laing and others. Before returning to the USA, he asked me if I would be willing to organise a local co-counselling community and launch more training workshops.

Co-counselling takes emotional growth out of the domain of therapy and into the arena of affective education and training. The sole role of the teacher/trainer is to provide structure for the client to develop skills of autonomous self-help in working with emotions, and for the counsellor to acquire skills which facilitate this process in the client. Once again, hierarchy serves the progressive emergence of a co-creative interaction between autonomy and co-operation. I ran the 20-week course as a participatory experiential inquiry; and the element of reflective inquiry built into the co-counselling training was a primitive precursor of the co-operative inquiry method which developed into full form some years later.

In the third year, 1972–3, I started working with the medical profession, training experienced GPs to become trainers of young hospital doctors entering General Practice. When the senior GP course-organisers first

approached me about a course, I said they should only work with me if they were seriously interested in my educational model: the programme would be co-designed by the organisers, the participants and myself, negotiating to include our various concerns and interests; and that my concerns included not only this participative decision-making, but also a significant element of experiential learning, using structured exercises of various kinds. They nervously agreed to the model.

The course took off, and became a powerful arena of experiential learning and participatory inquiry, especially through the use of role play to differentiate between facilitative (you tell me) and authoritative (I tell you) interventions in the GPs' relations both with their trainees and with their patients. In those days, most of the GPs could not really tell the difference: every initial attempt to be facilitative got compulsively skewed into an authoritative form (e.g. 'Don't you think that what you really ought to do with this patient is...'). This and the subsequent GP training-the-trainers courses were where I first developed my six category intervention model of interpersonal skills (Heron 1975, 2001), which has since been widely adopted in diverse fields.

### Further Developments of Experiential Learning and Participatory Inquiry

Through 1973–81, I continued to use aspects of participatory inquiry in experiential workshops on a wide range of topics: the elements of human communication and encounter; intrapsychic states and processes; interpersonal and professional skills; facilitation training; group dynamic phenomena; peer self-help networks; peer learning community; peer review audit of professional practice; humanistic education; humanistic medicine; and transpersonal psychology. There were forays into organisational development with the Home Office, Rank Xerox, Lloyds Bank; educational development with South West London College and other tertiary institutions; staff development in a number of different hospital and therapeutic settings.

Other unfolding themes at this time were: a first account of the six dimensions of facilitator style, developed in the facilitator training courses (for the latest version, see Heron, 1999); the application of first-person and peer experiential inquiry in the burgeoning field of transpersonal psychology to counter dogmatic intuitionism and authoritarianism in spiritual schools and traditions; an interim account of experiential research method, which affirmed the interdependence

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between phenomenological mapping and intentional action; extending peer inquiry, as a project for the future, to include all aspects of social life in what I call a self-generating culture, as a counter to prevailing forms of social oppression and disempowerment. A self-generating culture is a society whose members are in a continuous process of collaborative action research, in which all forms of association are consciously adopted, periodically reviewed and altered in the light of experience, reflection and deeper vision.

As one precursor of such a culture, co-counselling training, with teacher training and community building, continued to be a basic component of HPRP programmes. In the early 1970s I also took it to Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, and, in 1978, to New Zealand. In 1974 I joined forces with Dency and Tom Sargent, who led the community around Hartford in the USA, to create Co-counselling International (CCI), a worldwide association of independent co-counselling communities. CCI continues its work today as I write, with recent contributions from Tom Scheff, and provides an alternative framework to the rigid Re-evaluation Counseling Communities organisation within which co-counselling was originally developed.

The HPRP published a series of 20 monographs, from 1971 to 1982, on the theory and practice of the many endeavours mentioned in this and previous sections. A complete list of these and other related publications can be found in Heron (1996: 211-12)

## Medical Adventures

The GP training-the-trainers courses outlined above went on for some time and were a breakthrough in medical education. As a result, after seven years with the HPRP at Surrey, I was invited by the Director of the then British Postgraduate Medical Federation (which in the mid 1990s became the London Deanery) of the University of London, to be an Assistant Director – starting in January 1977 – to run, and be innovative within, their Education Department.

This was an extremely anomalous appointment because it was unprecedented for someone with no medical background to fill such a senior position at the top of the academic medical hierarchy. I realised that while this was a rare and challenging opportunity to make a significant difference, it was also a very hazardous undertaking. I accepted the post on condition that I could write my own job-description, with signed assent to it from the Federation. This was to be my contractual protection, because I knew that once I started to innovate, there would be uproar.

The contract also included a clause that I would continue my work both with the HPRP as its Honorary Director, and with the further development of co-counselling worldwide. The continuing work at Surrey owed a great deal to the internal support of James Kilty and Nicholas Ragg. Later on, in the early 1980s, I made way for James to succeed me as the Project Director.

The Education Department within the BPMF was, like the Human Potential Research Project within the University of Surrey, an alternative education and research centre. The programme of courses I organised was so radical, by conventional medical education standards, that some non-participant doctors were in shock. But a high percentage of the participating doctors were liberated into new vistas of thought and practice, and medically empowered in a patient-centred way (Heron, 1984). The courses, which were run by myself and carefully chosen medical luminaries, had interrelated themes: medical education as the facilitation of whole-person learning; medical practice as the facilitation of whole-person healing; medical audit based on self and peer assessment; emotional competence and interpersonal skills in relating to patients/staff/colleagues; in-depth personal development as a foundation for professional development; revision of the ethical and philosophical assumptions on which modern medicine is based (Heron, 1978).

After the first few years at the BPMF, I invited my colleague from the University of Bath, Peter Reason, to

co-facilitate an externally initiated co-operative inquiry (see Heron, 1996: 41) into whole-person medicine for 16 experienced GPs. This ran for nine months through 1982–3. We met every six weeks for a long weekend to review and reflect on the innovations of medical practice applied in the previous weeks (Heron and Reason, 1985). Prior to this, there was a preliminary weekend at which we worked out a provisional model of whole-person medicine. It included a statement about the integration of body, mind and spirit.

When it came to planning the third six-week action cycle, one subgroup said 'Look, our model includes this idea of integrating body-mind-spirit, but what does this mean in practice in the NHS in our consulting room?'. So they contracted to try out different sorts of spiritual intervention for six weeks, and review and revise them at the subsequent reflection weekend. Another subgroup elected to explore methods of power-sharing with patients. Between them the two sub-groups took on two of the most radical transformations of medical practice. Patrick Pietroni and some of the other doctors participating in our inquiry went on to create the British Holistic Medical Association. At the same time, another group of doctors from the BPMF and I co-founded the Research Council for Complementary Medicine.

### **Co-operative Inquiry Comes of Age**

In 1978 Peter Reason, John Rowan and I launched the New Paradigm Research Group, which provided a major forum for the development of humanistic research thinking. The highly creative discussions within this group were a great stimulus to my own research reflections. They also led to Peter and John editing *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research* (Reason and Rowan, 1981). I contributed two chapters updating the theory and practice of co-operative inquiry, which were the foundation for full-blown applications of the method from 1978 and through the 1980s (Heron, 1981a, b).

Peter Reason became a firm supporter of my updated model, and co-initiated with me two co-operative inquiries with experienced co-counsellors, and the whole-person medicine inquiry with GPs as outlined above. The two co-counselling inquiries, published as HPRP monographs in 1981 and 1982, were for me particularly significant. They brought to practical fruition the theoretical aspirations of my 1971 paper on 'Experience and method' outlined in the second section, above.

I launched two early altered-state inquiries – one in 1978 on spatio-temporal extensions of consciousness, the

other in 1981 on impressions of the other reality, followed from 1990 onwards by a wide range of inquiries into participatory spirituality. For references for these and many other co-operative inquiries, and for the further expansion and development of the method into the 1990s and beyond, see Heron (1996, 1998, 2006), Reason (1994), Heron and Reason (2001, 2008), and Heron and Lahood (2008).

Peter Reason has been particularly influential in supporting the practice and the spread of co-operative inquiry through his Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, from which he retired in 2009. He helped co-operative inquiry find its place within the growing family of action research methods (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, 2008).

Co-operative inquiry has gradually aroused worldwide interest, with researchers contacting me over the years from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, India and elsewhere. It has come of age with this basic format, which is simple to describe, challenging to initiate and deeply rewarding to practise.

All those involved work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects. They both design, manage and draw conclusions from the inquiry, and they undergo the experience and action that is being explored, using cycles of reflection and action. Each cycle of reflection and action has four phases:

- › In **Phase 1**, as co-researchers participants agree on the focus of their inquiry, and develop together a set of questions they wish to investigate. They plan a method for exploring this focal idea in action, through practical experience. And they devise and agree a set of procedures for gathering and recording data from this experience.
- › In **Phase 2**, as co-subjects, they engage in actions agreed, and observe and record the process and outcomes of their experience. They are careful to notice the subtleties of experience, to hold lightly the conceptual frame from which they started so that they begin to see how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas.
- › **Phase 3** is the touchstone of the inquiry method. The co-subjects become deeply immersed in, and engaged with, their practical experience. They develop a degree of openness to what is going on that is so free of preconceptions, that they see it in a new way.

› In **Phase 4**, the co-researchers re-assemble to share their experiential data from Phases 2 and 3, and to reconsider their original ideas in the light of it. As a result, they may develop or reframe these ideas; or reject them and pose new questions. They then plan the next cycle of action: they may choose to converge on the same aspect, or diverge on different aspects, of the overall inquiry; they may choose to change their inquiry procedures – forms of action, ways of gathering data – in the light of experience.

This cycle, between reflection and action, is repeated several times, so that early discoveries tentatively reached can be checked and developed, investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration of other parts, new skills can be acquired and monitored. Experiential competences are realised; the group itself becomes more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work.

Repeat cycling, balancing divergence and convergence, enhances the validity of the findings, as does increasing congruence between the four ways of knowing involved – affective, imaginal, conceptual and practical. Additional validity procedures are used during the inquiry: some of these counter unaware projection and consensus collusion; others monitor authentic collaboration, the balance between reflection and action, and between chaos and order.

### Alternative Education Centres

The HPRP within the University of Surrey, and the Education Department within the BPMF of the University of London, were – as I said earlier – alternative education centres within their respective academic institutions. They offered no university diplomas, certificates or degrees for any of their courses. I chose this as a matter of deliberate policy, for both universities would have insisted on unilateral assessment as a non-negotiable precondition for granting any university qualification. And such assessment was incompatible with the kind of in-depth whole-person education which these centres practised. Fortunately, a more radical full-blown alternative approach was already under way.

For in the winter of 1976, in London, five of us – David Blagden Marks, Tom Feldberg, Frank Lake, Kate Hopkinson and myself – had begun discussions to found the entirely independent Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP), to run two-year part-time courses, integrating experiential and theoretical learning, and offering a Diploma in Humanistic Psychology,

awarded on the basis of the rigorous practice of self and peer assessment by students trained in the method throughout the course by the course facilitators.

The original vision and initiative to create the IDHP came from David Blagden Marks, the second director of Quaesitor. A year after the IDHP launch in 1977, David, a single-handed transatlantic yachtsman, was drowned in a severe storm when crossing the Irish sea, after setting sail on the basis of a highly inaccurate weather report. As we reeled from this tragedy, I took the rudder and became chairperson of the IDHP for a period, as we refined our educational ideology and method. Tom Feldberg initiated the first IDHP two-year course through Quaesitor in 1977, and I initiated the second through the HPRP in 1978. Many other distinguished colleagues ran IDHP courses over the years in Cornwall, Bath, Surrey, London and Yorkshire.

The IDHP and its 25 years of educational pioneering were celebrated by four articles in *Self and Society* in 2001 (vol. 29, no. 2, June–July). The Institute has consistently affirmed, among other things, the following: experiential learning, in the spirit of inquiry, as the ground of multi-faceted integral learning – personal, interpersonal, political/social change, spiritual; emotional competence as a prerequisite for facilitative skills (the interdependence of personal and professional development); the intentional and empowering interplay of hierarchy, co-operation and autonomy in the relation between facilitators and participants, and in the unfolding of course dynamics; the application of self and peer assessment as the sole basis of accreditation.

What is so important about self and peer assessment, and using it as a basis for diploma accreditation, is that it affirms to society at large that the validating authority for personal-cum-professional-cum-spiritual development lies primarily within the depths of each individual person, where that person is profoundly engaged with other persons in the developmental process, and where that person is within an educational culture that promotes the cultivation of integral learning and self and peer assessment skills. Autonomous self-assessment is set in a context of rigorous peer assessment and institutional training. The autonomy is interdependent with peer process and institutional hierarchy. This interacting triad of autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy (Heron, 1999) is a theme that runs through my whole work, and is, perhaps, a key to the dynamics of the possible emergence of a peer-to-peer culture in the future.

When I accepted the invitation to become an Assistant Director at the BPMF, I decided that I would

stay there for at least three years. This changed to five years; and it was in fact nine years before I left in 1985. After a period of rest, reflection, travel, writing and four years off from any kind of group facilitation (with the exception of a TV programme), I re-entered the world of alternative education and research centres, setting up the International Centre for Co-operative Inquiry in Italy, 1990 to 2000, and the South Pacific Centre for Human Inquiry in New Zealand, 2000 to the present time (2012). But these are stories for another time.

### Strategies of Soft Revolution

There are some simple strategies for introducing change in rigid institutions by those who are working members of them. They may also be used judiciously by external change agents under contract to introduce change into such institutions.

**1. I have learned over the years that whenever negative and ill-informed criticisms of radical change are circulating, it is essential to search out the person who is their source and firmly and politely confront him or her with the correct information, while seeking to develop a constructive dialogue about the basic issues involved.** I used this approach at both the Universities of Surrey and London, and found it both necessary and invaluable. At Surrey I was alerted to the importance of this strategy by an unexpected ally.

A significant feature of the first year or so of the HPRP was the intense hostility and anxiety evoked by my use of experiential learning on the campus. Even though my radical work was all done in the extramural Centre for Adult Education, many of the intramural staff were very agitated that it was being done under the auspices of the university. Indeed, the undercurrent of upset got so intense that Roger Simon, the Anglican chaplain at the university, entirely on his own initiative, got all my critics and foes together at his house near the cathedral, and invited me to give a talk to them about my work, its underlying theoretical base and its evidential support.

As it turned out, the evening was a shining example of the best kind of academic debate – sharp, clear and to the point, structured with respect and free of acrimony. However, I noted that my two most aggressive and vociferous foes remained silent throughout the evening. In any event, this meeting marked a turning-point in staff attitudes to what I was doing. There were still question marks but they were reasonable, the hysteria had gone, and the dark foes continued to keep their heads down. I

am grateful to this day for Roger's intervention.

A later instance at Surrey was when I heard that an unnamed senior figure within the university had received a vigorous forbidding critique from a senior and influential figure in another university, discrediting the work I was doing. I eventually tracked down and went to see the first of these, who turned out to be Lewis Elton, a professor running the Department of Educational Technology. He obligingly revealed the identity of the second figure, who was head of the Counselling Service in the University of London. Lewis was eager to see the confrontation, so he set up the meeting in Gower Street in London, drove me to it and sat through it as a silent witness, clearly relishing every minute.

My critic raised his concerns, I presented my case, and asked if he had a grasp of the extensive research about the approach I was adopting. It turned out that he had not. He then revealed, in response to my questioning him, some controversial and radical methods he was using with some of his psychotherapy and counselling clients. Thereafter, we had a congenial discussion on matters of mutual interest. A couple of months later, he invited me to be a keynote speaker at a conference he was organising. Lewis was delighted with all this, and asked me to facilitate a session with him, his staff and postgraduate students. The significance of this story lies in the strange and roundabout forms which resistance to change can take.

**2. Appeal to the precedent set by one arm of the establishment in order to innovate within the arm of the establishment with which you are involved.** I have already illustrated this in my opening story of launching the HPRP at the University of Surrey on the basis of making a radical impact on senior officers of Surrey Police. Another example occurred at the BPFM, when the education committee of medical deans was having difficulty with approving one of my course programmes. They were specifically challenging the inclusion of workshops by Frank Lake on birth re-enactment. When I pointed out that Frank was not only a fully qualified psychiatrist, but a devout Christian whose workshops were included in training programmes for the clergy approved by the bishops of the Church of England, the opposition melted rapidly away.

**3. Appeal to the publicly stated values of your institution in order to launch radical practices within it.** If an educational institution claims to support the values of initiative and discretionary judgement, you point out that a basic way of doing so is progressively to introduce

significant degrees of student participation in major aspects of educational decision-making by staff.

**4. Launch innovations in the open spaces between the rigid grid-lines of the closed system of your institution.** In the job-description contract I wrote in response to being invited to be an Assistant Director of the BPF, the grid-lines of the BPF were only visible enough to evoke the spaces between them, spaces within which diverse creative initiatives could be taken.

### Comradeship

The overriding sense I have of my engagement with HP throughout the 1970s, and into the early 1980s, is the vigour, excitement and daring of those years, and above all the co-creative comradeship of noble friends equally committed to, and delighting in, the emergence of human flourishing through the process of lived and shared inquiry.

Today, some decades later, at the age of 84, I am a

member of an ongoing inquiry group exploring human spirituality, and have participated in our meetings every fortnight for many years. Our current action-inquiry between meetings is focused on what constitutes practical wisdom in everyday behaviour, and what are its distinguishing characteristics. Once again it is comradeship, friendship, the ever-deepening passion of mutual co-creative inquiry – and its transformative impact on action in the wider world – that really matter. **S**



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