



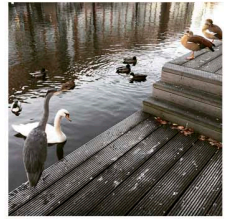
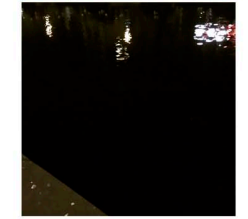
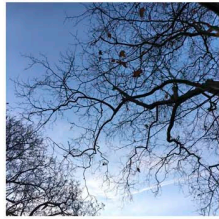
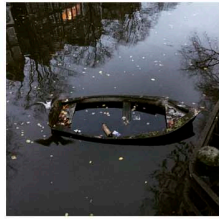
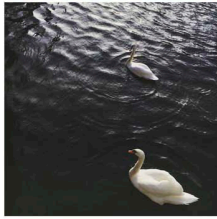
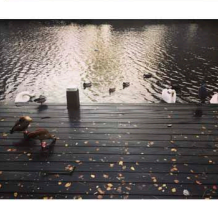
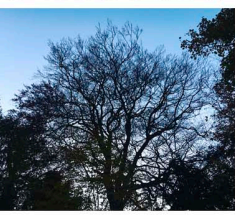
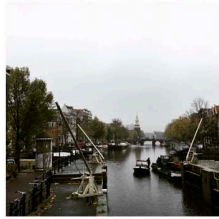
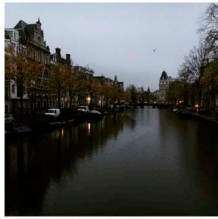
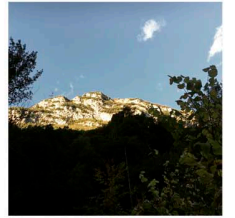
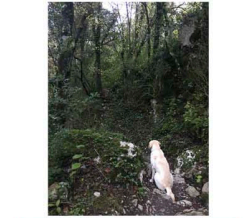
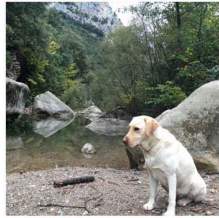
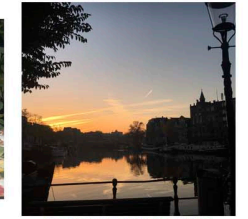
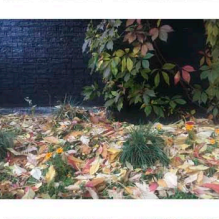
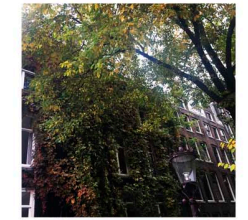
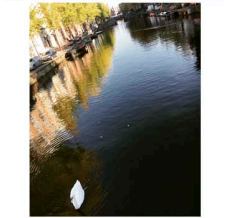
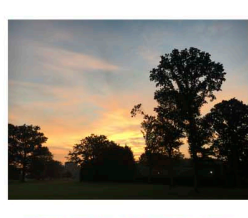
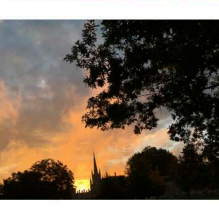
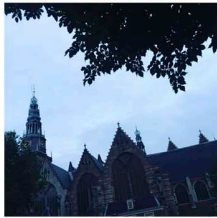
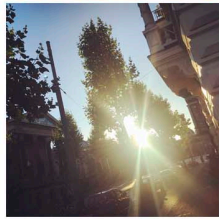
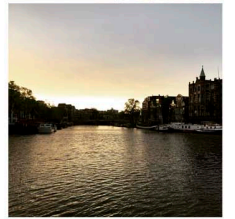
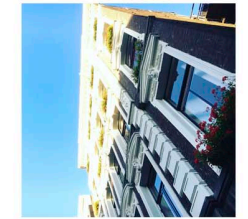
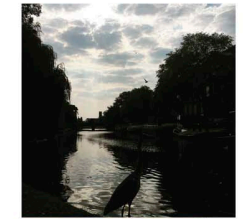
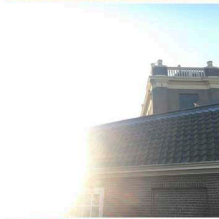
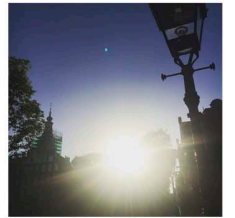
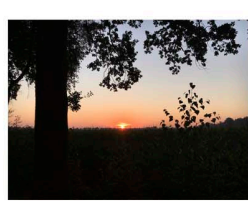
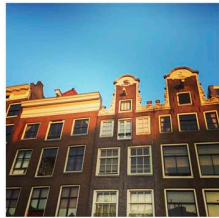
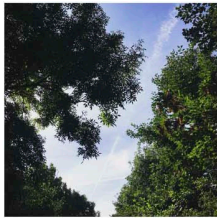
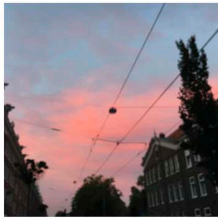
# Songs of Wonder

An inquiry on wonder and magic  
in everyday and organisational life

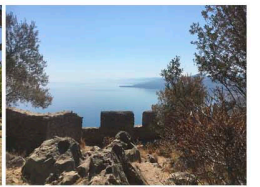
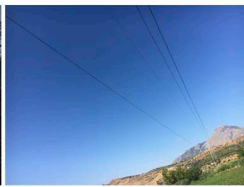
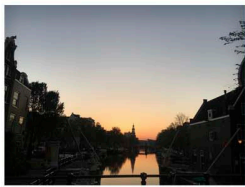
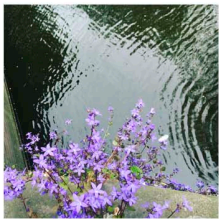
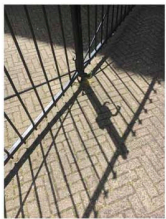
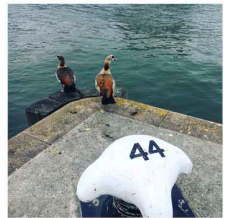
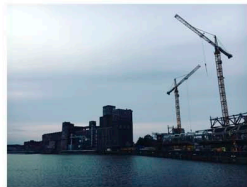
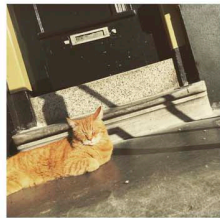
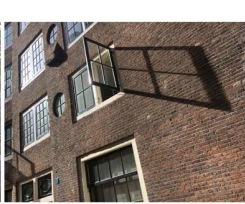
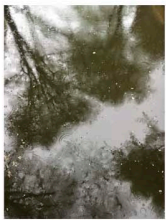
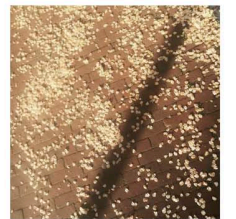
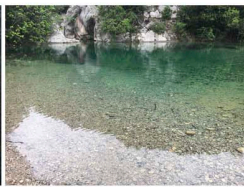
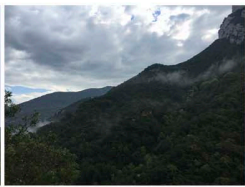
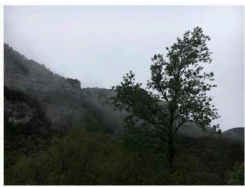
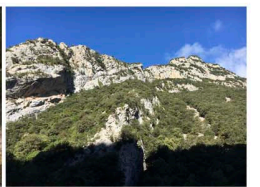
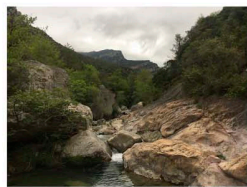
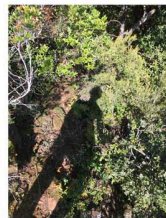
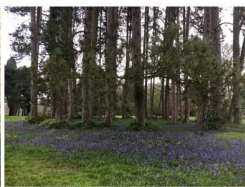
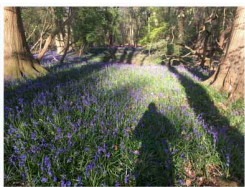
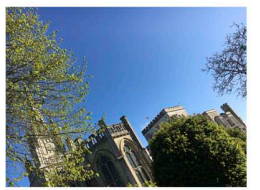
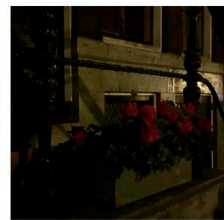
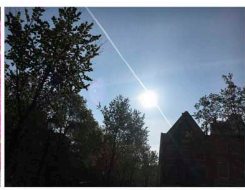
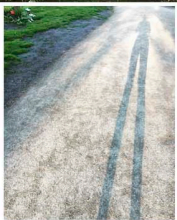
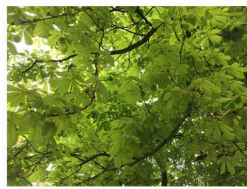
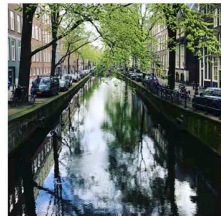
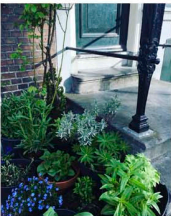
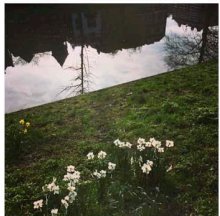
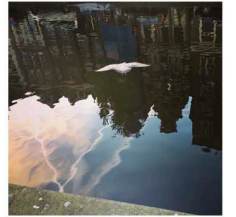
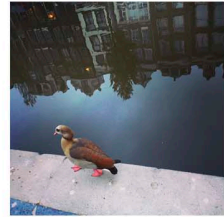
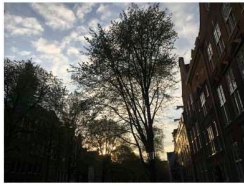
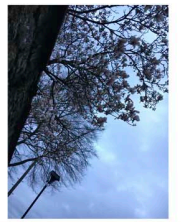
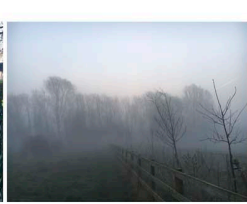
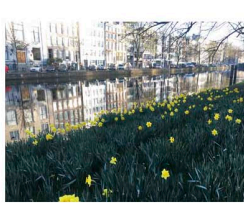
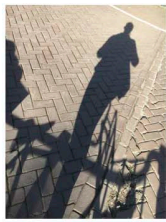
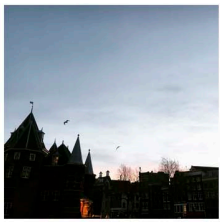
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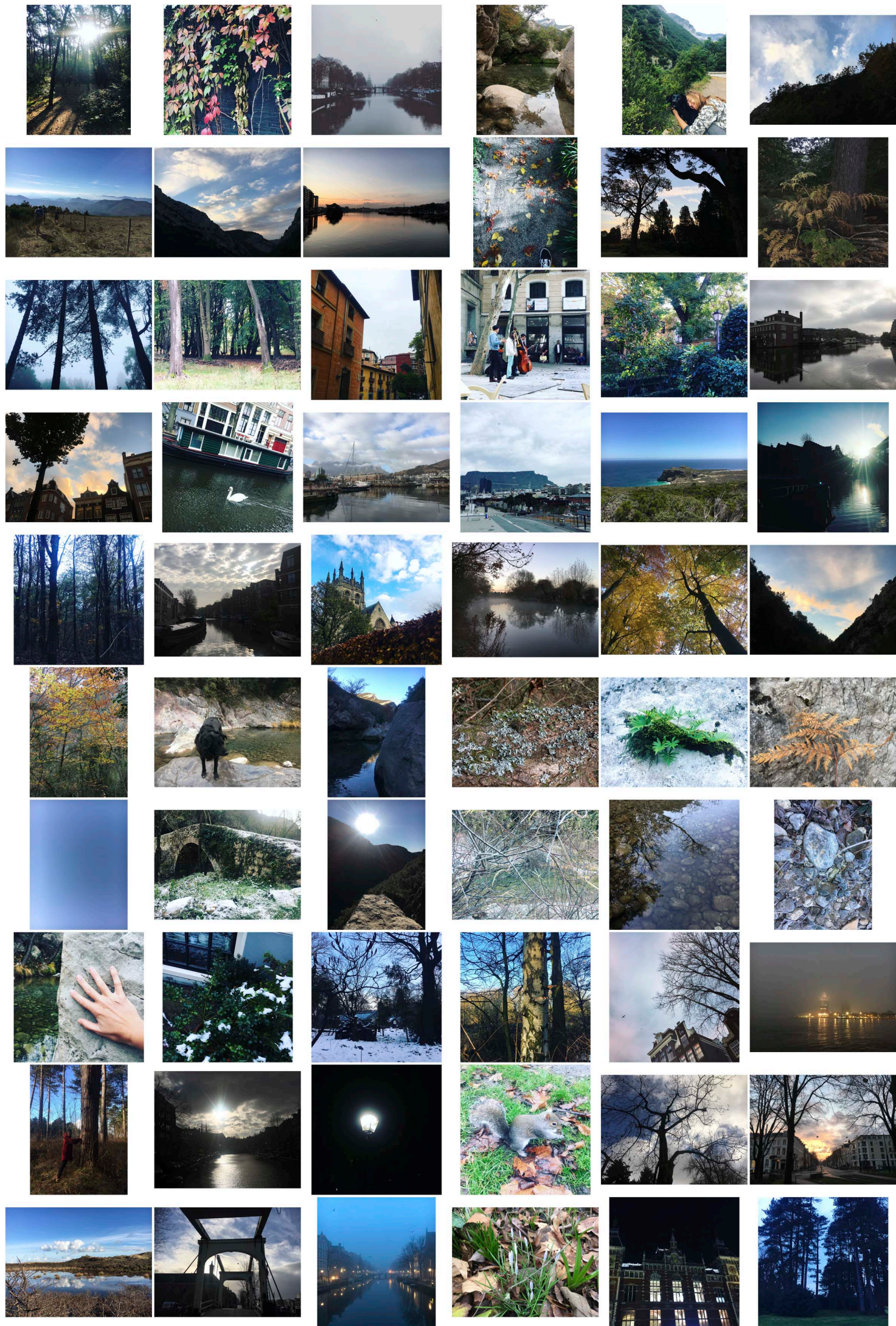














Doctoral thesis

Ashridge Executive Doctorate in Organisational Change

Middlesex University

Submitted in October 2019

Final version with amendments submitted in February 2020

Joeri Kabalt (M0054445)

Cover photograph by Joeri Kabalt

Sant Aniol Valley, Spain, June 2019



For my father,  
who taught me to go through life singing.



*For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open our eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, "what if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?"*

*Rachel Carson*

*In: 'The sense of wonder'*

~

*To be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography. That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost.*

*Rebecca Solnit*

*In: 'A field guide to getting lost'*



## Abstract

This doctoral research explores which practices might support 'wonder' in everyday and organisational life. How do I live my life with a sense of wonder? How do I create spaces of wonder with and for others? How do I create a wonder-full research practice? As an action researcher (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) with a background in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), I have endeavoured to 'live' these questions myself through developing an approach for wholeheartedly loving and living questions. Specific methods I created to do so are daily morning walks, writing 'moment-stories' from within the experience of wonder and creating 'temporary constellations of inquiry' with others.

Whereas some believe wonder is impossible because the world is disenchanted, I followed Bennett's (2001) approach of enchantment by emergence by challenging the discourse of disenchantment individually. Building on Carson (1956/1998), I think of wonder as 'seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary' and found this seeing requires a continuous effort and benefits from routines and rituals as a daily reminder and opportunity to wonder. I distinguish between wonder as a way of seeing you can cultivate and 'moments of magic' that strike unexpectedly. 'Windows' in time when I feel fully alive in a world bursting with life. I learned these potentially transformative moments cannot be forced, predicted or replicated and therefore argue to approach them 'obliquely' – by holding the intention and possibility of magic in the corner of your eye. And instead focus on the practices that help you to wonder on a day-to-day basis.

I learned the most important thing I can do as a practitioner to invite others to wonder is to continue to actively and wholeheartedly live my own questions. This allowed me to create the conditions for wonder and magic through showing up differently myself and 'embodying the container'. I also learned that giving words to wonder through writing and sharing moment-stories can increase the importance and possibility of wonder for myself and others.

Key words: wonder, moments of magic, living questions, moment-stories, morning walks, temporary constellations of inquiry, enchantment by emergence, embodying containers, transformative space, first-person action research, appreciative inquiry.



## Acknowledgements



This thesis is the result of four years of trying to get to know and experience wonder in my life and professional practice. And of four years of searching for words for/to wonder. And while I often found a quiet space amid the trees to write and reflect on my own, my journals are filled with stories about meaningful moments of inquiring together with others and insights from meaningful conversations with friends, family and colleagues. Choosing to live my life as inquiry had far-reaching consequences for my own life, but also for that of others around me. And I could not have continued to inquire without the unconditional support of my friends, family and colleagues. And I am especially touched and grateful for how many of them joined me in my inquiries and wondered with me. Whether it was by travelling with me to Spain or writing together. A heartfelt thanks to all of you.

There are some people I explicitly want to thank. First, all my colleagues at Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company who continued to believe in me and my research, even if this sometimes led me to question (my place within) the company. And especially, Luc and Saskia for being my Appreciative Inquiry buddies and my biggest Fanclub. Martijn, for all the rich conversations and for experimenting with new forms together. Nina, for inquiring into and editing *Living your time together*, as well as to the other colleagues who joined in the writing process. And a special thanks to the colleagues who joined me in Spain to inquire into Natural Rhythm.



I also want to thank all the faculty members of the Ashridge Executive Doctorate in Organisational Change for the many rich conversations and for being a living example of Action Research. A special thanks to Geoff Mead and Gill Coleman who kindly agreed to read and comment on a draft version of this thesis. I feel deeply grateful to Peter Reason and Margaret Gearty for their engaged and in-depth examination of the final version of this thesis and the rich conversation during the viva voce. And of course, to my doctoral supervisor Kate McArdle who has a knack for nudging me to explore at my edge and whose wholehearted trust in me allowed me to inquire into the questions that really mattered to me, even before I knew it myself.

I want to thank Korbi, for creating a second home for me in the valley and sharing his love for the valley with me. Andres, for introducing me to the valley and to Ashridge, and rekindling my love for beautiful places. Jed, for bringing his music and wonderful presence to some of the most important moments of these past years.

I want to thank all my friends ('het college van B&W' and 'de meiden') for being there for me in my most difficult moments, but also for continuing to remind me to live and enjoy life fully together while going camping, dancing or eating together.

And most of all, I want to thank my mother Margreet and my sister Sanne for being my biggest supporters throughout this life-changing research process. They were there when wonder made my heart sing, but also when wonder deeply confused and unsettled me. And who trusted me enough to join me in my most intimate inquiries, even when I did not yet fully trust myself.

And, last but definitely not least, I want to thank Peter, who met me when I was in the middle of these inquiries and had to deal with all the emotions writing this thesis evoked for me. His unwavering belief in me and my research, even when I did not yet want him to read anything, made all the difference.



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## PROLOGUE

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11/11/2016, 8.04, Amsterdam

*I wander through the streets of Amsterdam. Take in my surroundings, and breathe in the crisp morning air. I feel my body and mind, still soft from sleep, soften even more. I ease into the sensation of walking, into the rhythm of my footsteps, and wonder where they will take me this morning. No destination, no agenda, simply some empty space at the start of my day. A daily routine, or ritual. An ode to the beginning of each day in its particularity. Foraging for small glimpses of beauty in my everyday surroundings, nourishing some essential part of myself. Hoping this will support me not to be washed away by endless to-do lists and interesting conversations in the day to come. An attempt to enter the day on my terms. I hear the sounds of the awakening city in the distance, and notice how quiet the city still is. I feel the faint breeze on my cheeks, hear it slightly rustle the trees, see it quietly ripple the water in the canals. I round a corner, and suddenly spot a fellow morning walker on my left, striding confidently through the streets of Amsterdam. We walk alongside each other for a few seconds, our pace matched, our rhythms in sync. In those seconds, the world around me, or within me, subtly seems to shift. As if my heart has skipped a beat, or the hands of the clock have decided to move in slow-motion. A glimpse of beauty, but also of something else or more, a sudden feeling and awareness of interconnectedness perhaps. I take my phone from my pocket and quickly take a photograph. The moment passes, the spell is broken. As our ways part, I wonder what the heron made of me, walking alongside him or her.*

~

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis touches upon many themes, but at its core I think it is about wonder. The concept of wonder intrigues me. First and foremost, at a heart-level. I am passionate about creating small experiences of wonder, for myself, and with and for others. For I believe that in the time and world in which we find ourselves, wonder's invitation to pause and pay attention, to wholeheartedly appreciate, but also radically question everyday life, is important. Furthermore, wonder continues to puzzle me intellectually. I often feel the notion of wonder at the tips of my fingers – and then it slips away from me again. Wonder can bring joy and insight but can also wound and unsettle. Wonder can strike unexpectedly but can also require a continuous effort to see the extraordinary within the ordinary.

### **Wandering in search of wonder**

This thesis tells the story of my many endeavours in the past four years to get to know wonder through an Action Research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), loosely centred around three research questions: how do I more actively live my life with a sense of wonder? How do I create spaces of wonder with and for others? How do I create a wonder-full research practice? I have written this thesis with the metaphor of wandering in mind: to walk or travel about aimlessly. An attempt for congruence between content and form that Marshall (2008) refers to as 'analogic appropriateness': writing that mirrors and evokes the research experiences and themes, not just through cognitive understanding, but as a felt experience. Why wandering? First of all, because I have literally wandered in search of wonder during my daily morning walks. But also, because my style of doing research appears to be a wandering one, without a clearly laid-out route or a predetermined destination. I am furthermore intrigued by how the physical act of wandering, or even of getting slightly lost, might be conducive to wonder. And how the metaphor of writing in a wandering way might support me to meet my intention of writing a doctoral thesis about wonder without taking the wonder out of wonder. Perhaps not quite by writing aimlessly, but by allowing myself to continue to wonder and explore, even in this final thesis. In each of the chapters to come, I



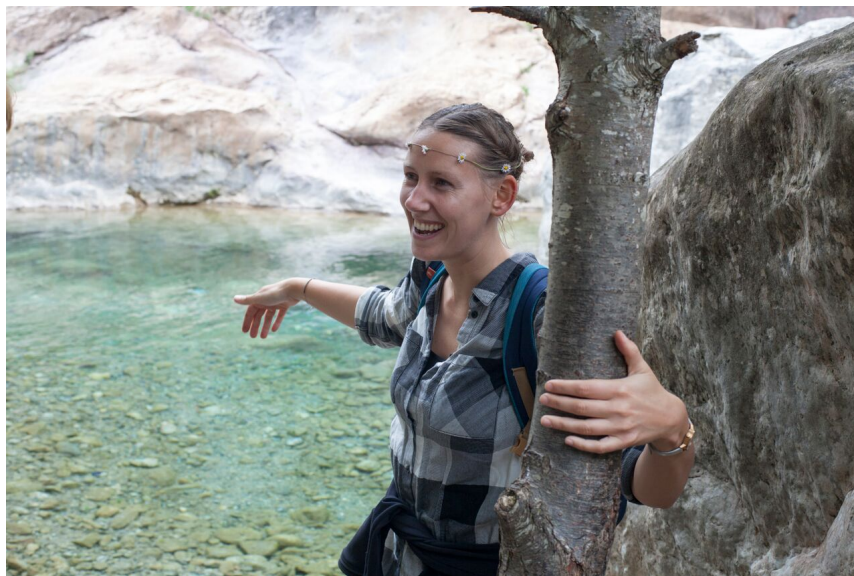
will therefore explore one possible ‘path’ or ‘way’ into wonder that I have walked/wandered in the past years.

I have come to think of wonder as ‘seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary’ and have found that this kind of seeing requires a continuous effort – for me at least. My daily morning walk is one of the practices that has continued to support and invite me ‘to open my eyes to unnoticed beauty’ as Rachel Carson (1956/1998a) puts it. Because wonder largely seems to be about seeing, as well as the other senses, I sometimes find it difficult to convey or bring it across in words only. In fact, some argue wonder ‘comes before language’ (Hansen, 2012) or ‘leaves us lost for words’ (Schinkel, 2017). In four years, I have been on around a thousand morning walks, during which I take a single photograph when ‘something of beauty calls out to me’. These were moments when I ‘knew wonder’ and I have therefore chosen to create a ‘visual story’ consisting of a selection of my morning walk photographs alongside the main text, at regular but unexpected intervals – similar to how I have come to know wonder in real life. My hope is that these photographs will invite you to come to know (about) wonder differently than through my stories alone and will serve as a visual reminder that wonder is not just an intellectual endeavour, but also very much a sensuous one. As well as illustrate my main argument that wonder is not exclusively reserved for rare moments, but also something you can actively set out to do. And my hope is that these photographs might invite you to walk and wander with me in this thesis as I explore the territory of wonder.

In the remainder of this introduction, I want to focus on what I imagine might be helpful to know and make explicit before I, or we, start to wander. Firstly, I think it might be helpful to know more about who I am and where I come from. What was my intention for starting my doctoral research? How did I become interested in wonder? (section 1.1). Secondly, I want to say more about the choices I made in putting this thesis together upfront (section 1.2). And thirdly, it might be helpful to at least have a rough overview of where my wandering might take us and will therefore end with a ‘map’ of this thesis and a chapter-by-chapter guide (section 1.3).

## 1.1 Developing an interest in wonder

Within the tradition of Action Research, research is thought of as a *personal process*. Marshall for instance notes that: “each person creates their own version of first-person inquiry as an ongoing experiment. Each of us draws on our own distinctive array of influences and interests” (Marshall, 2016:1). It therefore seems important to at least make some of these influences and interests explicit at the start of this thesis, to ‘situate the knower’ (Seeley & Reason, 2008).



*Figure 2 Joeri in the Sant Aniol Valley, May 2017,  
photograph by Sanne Kabalt*

## Introducing myself

I was born in Amsterdam, The Netherlands in 1987 as the eldest daughter of Hidde\* and Margreet\*, and later the sister of Sanne\*. Overall, I had a happy childhood, and as a little girl I was known for my bright smile and my passionate love for The Beatles. According to my mother, Paul McCartney was my inseparable ‘invisible friend’ when I was three years old. After we moved to a smaller town close to the Dutch seaside, I also developed a passion for the flowers, butterflies, snails and other inhabitants of the Dutch dunes. And I loved to read books about adventure, history or magic. Later, these interests subsided somewhat when I discovered friendship, and from a somewhat solitary and introverted girl, I developed into a teenager with a big group of friends. But despite my interest in partying and spending time with friends, I continued to be interested in and excel at school,



receiving one high grade after another. When I was eighteen, I left home for Utrecht to study Public Administration and Organisational Science. In my third year at university, my father became ill and passed away later that same year. This marked the end of my somewhat carefree youth, and I took the loss hard. I nevertheless continued with my studies, even though I struggled with finding a way to mourn for my father. When I was twenty-four, I joined Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company (K&S)\*, a community of fifty independent organisational learning and development practitioners in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and South Africa who jointly own their company. Consequently, my first job was not really a job at all, because I joined K&S as an independent practitioner, with all the freedom as well as uncertainty that comes with being self-employed.

I wonder whether this short biography might indeed help you to get to know me. It reminds me of the Dutch philosopher Joke Hermsen's (2016) argument that gender, age, profession, place of residence and so forth say something about your 'what-ness' but not necessarily about your 'who-ness'. Instead, she borrows Hannah Arendt's words: 'to the question who I am, the best answer remains: allow me to tell you a story'. Hermsen believes that to mean you can only get to know someone in their who-ness while they are story-telling: halting and faltering, searching for words. I wonder whether this thesis might be a written equivalent of that. Nevertheless, I do think it matters that I entered this research as a female and relatively young organisational development (OD) practitioner. Alongside all the other influences and interests that continue to make me who I am. While writing this short biography, I again encounter an important inquiry question I have explored: how do I show up? Considering this question made me change the 'professional photograph' of myself to this photo of a more intimate moment, even though this makes me slightly uncomfortable.

I will include many stories in this thesis, but to start, I want to share the story of the moment I first knew I wanted to become a change practitioner, and that set me on the path towards this doctoral research.



*17/1/2016, 10.24, Amsterdam*



## An Appreciative Inquiry on Curaçao

In the Spring of 2011, I visited the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao\* for three months for my master thesis. The island where my mother was born, and where I had been a year earlier for a research project which concluded a ‘mentality change’ was needed. This left me somewhat frustrated: we had thoroughly analysed the causes of ‘the problems’ on Curaçao, but I did not feel our research had enabled a change. I wanted to go back to somehow support a shift towards a more hopeful and empowered perspective of the future – as a researcher. With a suitcase full of books on Appreciative Inquiry, I went to live with a local guest family, with the intention of starting an Appreciative Inquiry process together with others, without knowing where to start. After several weeks of searching and uncertainty, I joined hands with a foundation with and for young people on the island and we found fifty youngsters from Curaçao willing to participate, who each had so-called ‘appreciative interviews’ with five fellow inhabitants – from former prime minister to grandmother. What are places and people on the island you value? What are your hopes and dreams for the island? What could be your role in realising them? The participating youngsters, who I thought of as co-researchers, voiced that the conversations with their fellow countrymen inspired them and made them see Curaçao ‘through the eyes of others’. Especially the conversations with people that were not originally from Curaçao enabled them to see Curaçao and its inhabitant from a different angle and made them proud of their island. One youngster for instance mentioned that before participating in this project she thought ‘you were either that side or the other side’, whilst now she thought there were a lot of similarities between different groups on the island (Kabalt, 2012).

This was the moment I fell in love with Appreciative Inquiry, in a stuffy classroom on Curaçao. If a few conversations could already lead to such different stories, what could the further potential of this methodology be? I wanted to turn this into my profession, but preferably wanted to work with and learn from more experienced colleagues, rather than continue to figure everything out on my own. I joined Kessels & Smit, one of the only companies in the Netherlands that worked with Appreciative Inquiry. These first years were incredibly rich and inspiring. From day one, my colleagues treated me as a full-fledged OD practitioner – even though I had virtually no experience. I

learned the craft by working intensively alongside others and putting in the hours. I continued to work with Appreciative Inquiry, albeit now mostly in organisational contexts and facilitated change initiatives and leadership programmes in diverse organisations and different countries. I fully enjoyed it and had learned an astonishing amount in a relatively short period of time. And yet, I felt there was something missing. I was mainly *doing*, moving from one exciting project to the next, and had hardly any time to reflect – on myself or on my practice.

### Finding my research question

When I started the Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change (ADOC)\* in March 2015, I had no idea that I would eventually end up writing a thesis about wonder. I was mostly interested in the idea that ‘change happens one conversation at a time’. However, my intention for starting my doctoral research was not just to discover and learn more about this specific topic. In my acceptance paper for ADOC, I explicitly wrote that I wanted to ‘add inquiry and reflection to my work’. Because ‘from the moment I finished my master, I missed reflecting upon my work from an academic perspective’. I mostly missed what I thought of as a ‘track of reflection’ alongside a ‘track of action’. To have the time and space to think, read and write. And I thought a doctorate would offer me just that, perhaps without fully realising the enormity of the task that lay ahead.

Where and when does wonder come into the picture? A fellow ADOC student recently asked me: how did you find your research question and what does that teach you about how you inquire? As I pondered this question, I took out my notebook and allowed myself to ‘write into it’ and see what would emerge:

My main research question – how to live life with a sense of wonder and create spaces and experiences of wonder with and for others – it might have been there from the start, slumbering, mostly out of sight. But it emerged during a crisis, a burnout. Did I find it, or did it find me? It was firstly about bringing meaning back into my life, enjoying life, living life fully. Wonder appeared to come into it only later, or the concept of wonder did. I dive headfirst into an inquiry, wholeheartedly.



I read a text that inspires me... have a heartfelt conversation with colleagues, friends or my supervisor... try out lots of small things... in many cycles of action and reflection. And while doing so, I slowly find my way into a concept. Emergent. Relational. Experimental. (Journal Entry, 1/7/2019)

The first half of this journal entry says something about how I 'found' my research question(s). For my desire to create more space to reflect on my practice caught up with me in an unexpected way. A mere month into the doctoral programme, I called in sick with what later turned out to be a burnout. In order to create space for reflection, I apparently needed to pause first, to give my body and mind time to catch up. And/or, starting to reflect seemed to allow me to 'see' my own life in a different light. The second half says something about how I inquire or who I am as an inquirer. If I choose to pursue a certain inquiry, I do indeed seem to do so unconditionally and wholeheartedly, by 'living questions' (Rilke, 1929/2011). And by far the most important question became how to make sense of this personal crisis and the questions that emerged from it. Who am I? How do I want to live my time? Which life is worth living? And whilst I could not work for a couple of months, I did continue, or rather start, with my doctoral research. I abandoned my earlier research plans, and instead shifted my researcher's gaze to my own personal crisis, which would eventually evolve into my research into wonder.

I chose to explore wonder with an Action Research approach, for I deeply believe in its importance and potential as a research and change methodology. For me, Action Research is essentially about inquiry. About attempting to 'live life as inquiry', as Judi Marshall (2016) beautifully puts it, through creating and developing practices and capabilities to 'explore at the edge of knowing'. I think my role as an action researcher comes down to creating the conditions for myself and for/with others to inquire safely and wholeheartedly. I recognise both in what I perhaps find the most provocative and exciting articulation of the role and contribution of action researchers by Chris Seeley:

As action researchers moving forward, we accept the responsibility that we are c/overtly creating transformational spaces for ourselves and others. The act of creating, holding and

protecting such spaces is an art – we become artists of the invisible realm of transformational space. (Seeley, 2011:97)

This speaks to Action Research's ambition to make a difference, for ourselves and others, as well as that there is an art to this.

## 1.2 Writing a wonder-full thesis

I sometimes struggle with how to make wonder land in a doctoral thesis. How might I come to a rigorous, in-depth and scholarly exploration of wonder, whilst at the same time do justice to wonder's open-endedness, mysteriousness and experiential quality? In other words: how might I write a doctoral thesis about wonder without taking the wonder out of wonder? A question and tension I continue to hold and will revisit. Here, I want to make some of my choices explicit in my attempt to create a 'wonder-full thesis'.

### Choosing moments

I had to choose which stories and ideas to include and exclude, and what to foreground and background. Because I have embarked on countless smaller or bigger 'cycles of action and reflection' in the past four years, most of which have been quite meaningful to me, I sometimes find it difficult to choose. How can I do justice to the breadth and depth of my research? My way of dealing with this tension has been to focus on a limited number of meaningful moments, which together might hopefully create some impression of the whole. Which moments to choose then? I have chosen to include and explore the moments 'at the edge of my knowing', the moments where I tried and learned something new about myself and/or my practice. These are also moments that continue to puzzle, intrigue and sometimes even haunt me. As well as the moments where some form of wonder became possible, however fleetingly. Following Jane Bennett (2001), this thesis can therefore be thought of as an attempt to challenge the 'discourse of disenchantment' by weaving moments of wonder together to create an alternative story.



## Exploring the edge

Most of these moments are also situated at ‘the edge’ of my professional practice. The themes of wonder and magic felt so utterly new, intimate and vulnerable for me, as well as far removed from the organisational contexts I worked in, that I chose to think of my doctoral research as an opportunity to create spaces for myself that were safe enough to inquire in. And only gradually chose to widen the circle of my own intimate explorations into wonder: to my mother and sister, my ADOC peers\*, my K&S colleagues... Another way of thinking of my research is similar to how an artist might make a distinction between ‘free’ and ‘commissioned’ work. Most of the moments in this thesis are part of my ‘free work’ where I could freely create and experiment, but I believe this has also radically influenced my ‘commissioned’ work in organisations. I will explore how it might have done so more explicitly at the end of each chapter by sharing a short story of my OD practice. Furthermore, what I think of as ‘my practice’ has shifted during/through my research, and I now think it also encompasses the inquiries I initiated alongside my work in organisations. And even though I still work as an OD practitioner, the ideas I draw on as well as the stories I share are often outside of the traditional domain of OD. Consequently, my research aims to contribute to the role of the OD practitioner who attempts to work at this edge, rather than to OD practice as such.

## Where to start?

Throughout my research, I noticed I kept being drawn to the practice and experience of wonder. What does wonder feel like? How might I encounter or create wonder more often? That is where my energy and excitement is. However, in order to take this work out into the world, as is my wish, it feels important to not only explore the practice of, but also the ideas behind wonder more deeply. I had to make a choice: do I start with the wonder-full experiences and stories and invite you right into the heart of my inquiries, or do I start with situating these experiences within the literature? I decided upon the latter, even though this is not where I started in my research process. The stories in this thesis matter to me. They are intimate, vulnerable and close to my heart. And I am aware that you can potentially read them as ‘quite wonderful’, but perhaps lacking depth, rigour and relevance. I am intrigued by epistemology, by how we know, and think that you might be more free to know

with me on my terms, if I can first show you the breadth of ideas which I work with, and at times get confused by, but that in some way inform my thinking and practice. It is a guess, but it is a choice I have made. So, I hope you can bear with me, while I first have a look at the ideas on (knowing) wonder in Chapter 2 and 3. My ambition is that this will then launch us into stories about my practice and enable you to consider my sense-making of these stories alongside me. Chapter 4 to 8 each focus on a different way or path into knowing wonder I have wandered, in more or less chronological order.

### 1.3 In this thesis: a chapter-by-chapter overview

In **Chapter 2 ‘An introduction to wonder’**, I will therefore start with exploring wonder theoretically and focus on three questions: What is wonder? Why is it important? How might wonder be enhanced in everyday and/or organisational life? I will mainly turn to the realm of philosophy in which wonder has been studied most throughout the centuries, but also pay attention to Rachel Carson’s sense of wonder, since her work has inspired my thinking on wonder most.

In **Chapter 3 ‘Knowing wonder’**, I will articulate my research approach rooted within Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry. I will focus on the apparent tension between knowledge and wonder as well as language and wonder, and how I might come to know wonder without destroying it in the attempt.

In **Chapter 4 ‘Wonder as windows in time’**, I will return to the beginning of my doctoral research, and more specifically my personal crisis in the form of a burnout. This crisis awakened a longing for wonder within me but can also be thought of as an experience of wonder in and of itself: the feeling that the ground on which you stand suddenly appears uncanny.

In **Chapter 5 ‘Wonder as living questions’**, I will focus on my attempts to bring something of the wonder that I had rediscovered for myself into my professional practice as I started working again. I

mostly made use of Marshall's idea of 'living life as inquiry' as well as Rilke's notion of 'living questions' to experiment with different 'micro-gestures' in my practice in organisations. How can I show up differently in my work?

In **Chapter 6 'Wonder as foraging for beauty'**, I will explore my morning walk practice and how the notion of 'the appreciative eye' might be a way into intimate encounters with myself, others and the more-than-human world. I will do so through sharing the story of a morning walk I hosted for my ADOC peers. I will particularly pay attention to the relationship between (a daily) routine and wonder.

In **Chapter 7 'Wonder as Wholesome'**, I want to explore how getting to know physical places intimately, as you would a friend, might be a way into a wholesome wonder: a wonder that invites you to feel part of the whole. And especially how moments of magic – experiences of interconnectedness – might do so. I will explore these ideas through the story of introducing my mother and sister to the Sant Aniol Valley\* in Spain, one of the places I love deeply.

In **Chapter 8 'Wonder as staying in the in-between-space'**, I will share an attempt to widen the circle of my research by organising a three-day Appreciative Inquiry summit together with colleagues on 'radical connectedness for human flourishing'. An experiment to create an experience of intimate inquiry for a large group of people. I will particularly pay attention to the art of creating and holding, as well as staying in ritual or transformative space, what we called 'in-between-space'.

In **Chapter 9 'Songs of wonder'**, I will reflect on my research on wonder by sharing the insights that matter most to me.



*The wind is low, the birds will sing  
That you are a part of everything  
Dear Prudence, won't you open up your eyes?*

## 2. AN INTRODUCTION TO WONDER

What is wonder? A seemingly simple and straightforward question, that I nevertheless find quite difficult to answer. Vasalou (2015) notes that wonder is difficult to define because wonder is and has historically been many different things. There is something slippery about wonder: I *know* what wonder is, but once I try to articulate it, I suddenly realise I do not quite know. Vasalou seems to describe something similar when she argues that wonder is both near and far to our everyday lives, and consequently to our 'epistemic grasp': "wonder eludes us – yet wonder is something we know inside out and as intimately as anything we experience before we can scarcely walk or talk" (Vasalou, 2015:22). We know, and yet we do not know wonder.

Is wonder extraordinary or part of ordinary life? Does wonder strike, or is it something you can invite or cultivate? Is it an experience, an emotion or a specific way of seeing the world? Is it something that is to be sought out, or to be avoided? Are certain objects or phenomena more wonder-full than others, or more deserving of wonder? These are questions that puzzle me, but that also appear to have intrigued philosophers for centuries. Philosophers as renowned, and diverse, as Plato, Descartes and Heidegger have spent a considerable amount of their time studying wonder. I could easily spend another four years reading and researching these philosophical texts, and although I will at times consider these acclaimed thinkers, the true depth and richness of their ideas falls outside the scope of this thesis. I am not a philosopher, nor do I claim to fully understand the philosophy of wonder, but I am nevertheless deeply intrigued by it.

My intention for this chapter is therefore to touch upon some important themes within the thinking about wonder, which will hopefully help to deepen and enrich the sense-making of my practice stories, but it is by no means meant as an exhaustive exploration of the centuries-long philosophy of wonder. For now, I will first introduce Rachel Carson's sense of wonder (section 2.1), before turning to what other thinkers have said about what wonder is (section 2.2), why it might be important (section 2.3) and how it might be enhanced in everyday and/or organisational life (section 2.4). The

focus of my research is mostly on the ‘how’ of wonder, but in order to do so, it is important to explore the ‘what’ and ‘why’. Even though in my actual research process, this was a more ‘messy’ and iterative process, in which I constantly moved between these questions.

## 2.1 Rachel Carson’s sense of wonder

Perhaps you know Rachel Carson (1907 – 1964) as the author of *Silent Spring* (1962), the book that is said to have launched the environmental movement as we know it by exposing the dangers of pesticides. As a marine biologist, she was a fierce admirer of the more-than-human world and its never-ending mysteries, and an advocate for ‘the sense of wonder’. For me, she is an example of a true action researcher, always seeking to do good in the world, and to share her knowledge in a way that resonates with a broad audience. When I read her essay ‘the sense of wonder’ for the first time, it awakened a deep physical longing within me to explore the world around me with all my senses: to see, touch, smell, listen and taste... And although it originally appeared in a women’s magazine in 1956 under the title ‘help your child to wonder’, I find it has more wisdom and depth to it than many other, more scholarly, texts on wonder. I was drawn to her work because I had rediscovered my love for the more-than-human world as well, but mostly because she offered a way of seeing the world that focuses on seeing beauty in the small and the everyday. And because she combines poetic writing with practical suggestions and personal exploration with political engagement. Because Carson’s thinking on wonder has influenced and inspired me most throughout my doctoral research, I want to start and stay somewhat longer with her sense of wonder here, as a ‘starting definition’ of wonder, which I can later question and/or elaborate on.

### Opening your eyes to unnoticed beauty

In the essay, Carson shares many ‘outdoor adventures’ with her three-year-old grandnephew Roger. To the seaside at night to search for nocturnal crabs, listen to the roaring ocean or savour the smell of low tide. Or to the forest after heavy rain to feel the springy texture of wet lichen or jump into newly formed puddles. Carson does not offer a clear definition of (a sense of) wonder, nor makes explicit use of other thinkers, but throughout the text it becomes evident that her sense of wonder



is an active one. She does not wait for wonder to strike, but actively sets out 'to wonder' – in sunshine or rain, winter or spring, day or night. She argues that beauty and mystery are all around us, but paradoxically, that is precisely why people often fail to notice it. As she notes after having watched the star-filled sky on a clear night:

It occurred to me that if this were a sight that could be seen only once in a century or even once in a human generation, this little headland would be thronged with spectators. But it can be seen many scores of nights in any year, and so the lights burned in the cottages and the inhabitants probably gave not a thought to the beauty overhead: and because they could see it almost any night perhaps they will never see it. (Carson, 1956/1998a:69)

This observation touches upon one of the essential questions when exploring wonder: is wonder something that can only be evoked by the extraordinary, because it is rare, new or surprising, or is it possible to see wonder in ordinary and everyday phenomena (if a beautiful starlit sky on a clear night can be thought of as such)? Carson explicitly argues for bringing renewed attention to everyday phenomena, by becoming receptive to what lies around us and 'opening up the disused channels of sensory impression'. She seems to suggest that this largely has to do with how we see the world around us, with what she thinks of as 'unseeing eyes':

For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open our eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, "what if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?" (Carson, 1956/1998a:67)

This statement touches upon the essence of (a sense of) wonder as I understand it, as a specific way of seeing the world, of opening your eyes and noticing things with a renewed intensity and interest, as if seen for the first or last time. And while Carson stresses the importance of the sense of sight here, she continues to say that 'senses other than sight can prove avenues of delight and discovery'.



*2/2/2016, 8.32, Amsterdam*

Furthermore, her whole text is an ode to sensuous exploration of the more-than-human world. So much so that a few weeks after reading her essay for the first time, I found myself thinking back to her capacity to explore and marvel at the natural world when I went for a walk with my mother in the Dutch dunes. Next to the familiar sandy path, I noticed a patch of deep-green moss that seemed almost too bright and beautiful to be real. I paused, and pointed it out to my mother. After admiring it from a distance, I felt the desire to touch it. To lightly press it with the palm of my hand and feel its spongy cushion-like quality. To carefully trace the intricate design of the little moss-like leaves with my fingertips. And with Rachel Carson's invitation at the back of my mind, I laid down across the path and carefully put my head down on the soft mossy pillow. My mother did the same, and for a brief moment we were completely immersed in the experience and sensation of the soft moss on our cheeks. Facing each other, we caught each other's eye, sparkling with childlike happiness. The moment passed, and we resumed our walk as before. Yet, I felt touched and slightly altered by that brief moment of intimacy and connection to the moss, the place and my mother.

### **Wonder as wholesome**

Carson argues that regularly experiencing wonder is deeply meaningful and can serve as 'an antidote to boredom and disenchantments' as well as lead to 'inner contentment and a renewed excitement in living', whatever the vexations or concerns in your personal life. She does not say so explicitly in 'the sense of wonder', but elsewhere, and especially in her public speeches, Carson argued that wonder was one of the answers and necessary responses to the increasing destruction of the more-than-human world by mankind, because she believed that: "wonder and humility are wholesome emotions and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction" (Carson, 1952/1998b:94). She positioned wonder as a way into a different relationship with the world around us and to question the dominant discourse in society. She saw it as her task to introduce people to the wonder, beauty and mystery of the world through her writing, in the hope that this would lead to the conservation of the few remaining 'wild places' that she saw disappear rapidly around her. She thought of wonder as wholesome for both the well-being of people and planet. In fact, she often reminded people in her books and speeches that 'our origins are of the earth' and as such "man, far



from being the overlord of all creation, is himself part of nature, subject to the same cosmic forces that control all other life” (Carson, 1998b:167). From her perspective of interconnectedness, harming the world around us necessarily meant harming human beings, for we are part of the intricate web of relations that make up the world. These were inconvenient truths in a time when modernism and its belief in progress and control were at their height. Carson seems to become increasingly frustrated that decisions were made ‘to accommodate the short-term gain’ and ‘to serve the gods of profit and production’ and wonders aloud in her last speech what ‘hidden fears’ make man so loath to accept his origins and “relationship to that environment in which all living things evolved and coexist” (Carson, 1963/199b:245). A question we might still ask today, decades later.

### **Wherever you are and whatever your resources**

I sometimes ask myself whether wonder is only for the privileged – for those who have the time and money to wander about aimlessly. Or perhaps even to travel to and explore new and exotic places. Rachel Carson goes to great lengths to make wonder appealing and accessible to everybody, rich or poor, in the city or elsewhere, and she stressed that her books were read by and resonated with all sorts of people from ‘housewives’ to ‘fishermen’, challenging the belief that the enjoyment of nature or beauty was limited to any specific group. She offers many examples of practices with which you can start to wonder right away:

[W]herever you are and whatever your resources, you can still look up at the sky – its dawn or twilight beauties, its moving clouds, its stars by night. You can listen to the wind, whether it blows with majestic voice through a forest or sings a many-voiced chorus around the eaves of your house or corners of your apartment building, and in the listening, you can gain magical release for your thoughts. You can still feel the rain on your face and think of its long journey, its many transmutations, from sea air to earth. (Carson, 1956/1998a:66)

Her – largely implicit – theory of change seems to be that engaging in these practices that opening your eyes and other senses to unnoticed beauty leads to regular experiences of wonder. She seems

to believe that once this sense of wonder is awakened in a child by being introduced to it by an adult, it will last into adulthood. This seems to be inspired by her own experience, for her biographer Linda Lear (2009) writes how Carson was herself introduced to the mysteries of the natural world by her own mother. Yet her bestselling books about the sea seem to suggest that she also believed this sense of wonder could be (re)awakened in adulthood, and that one way of doing so was introducing others – millions of people in her case – to the mysteries and wonders of the world through her unique mixture of poetry and science. She stresses that the way into wonder is through the emotions and the impressions of the senses rather than through knowledge and fact. She encourages knowing more about the workings of nature, but is quite explicit about what should come first: “Once the emotions have been aroused – a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love – then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response” (Carson, 1956/1998a:56).

I think it is interesting to note that, perhaps unsurprisingly given her background as a biologist, Carson’s sense of wonder exclusively seems to focus on the more-than-human world. It seems that she thinks of nature as the only ‘source’ for wonder, even though nature is a somewhat problematic term, for she argued herself that human beings are part of nature as well. But even though she has described the pleasure of exploring the wonders of nature together with close friends or family, she does not seem to think that people or their creations are sources of wonder in and of themselves. And this is also where I differ from her, for even though nature has also been the main source of wonder for me, I believe you can also see people with either ‘unseeing eyes’ or a ‘sense of wonder’ and that something wondrous might happen in human-to-human encounters as well.

Where does this first exploration of a sense of wonder bring us? An image starts to emerge of wonder as a form of *doing*, of setting out on small adventures, and of wonder as a form of *seeing* the beauty in everyday life, mostly, in the more-than-human world. A practical sort of wonder aided by seemingly simple practices. And a wonder that leans strongly towards appreciation and beauty. However, this is by far the only understanding of wonder.

## 2.2 A brief history of wonder

As I explored the wide range of literature on wonder, I became increasingly confused by the many different understandings of wonder, as well as the diversity of wonder's advocates. I was beginning to see the implications of Vasalou's point that wonder is and has been many things. I realised I had to choose which bodies of literature and which specific authors to focus on, because of the sheer number of thinkers that explore wonder in one form or another. I chose to focus on and draw from the realms of philosophy, ecology and organisational development, because these seemed most relevant to my practice. I have given myself permission to 'follow my nose' whilst exploring the literature, as well as to draw more extensively on the authors that 'spoke to me', like Rachel Carson. I found these were mostly the authors that offered me a new perspective on wonder that opened new possibilities for exploration in my practice. I tried to search for authors who kept the wonder alive in their work, without turning to religion or the supernatural. I noticed that the religious undertone in some of the thinking on wonder was less appealing to me personally because of my non-religious background, but also because of my interest to eventually bring wonder to organisational contexts.

Four differences or paradoxes within the thinking about wonder stand out most to me: a wonder that dwells in not-knowing versus a wonder that dispels itself by awakening a thirst for explanation, a wonder that strikes unexpectedly versus a wonder that is a conscious act of seeing, a wonder that is evoked by the extraordinary versus a wonder that is evoked by the ordinary, a wonder that wounds versus a wonder that is wholesome. Might these differences point to the existence of two or more essentially different kinds of wonder? Or are these perhaps two sides of the same coin, that show something of the paradoxical nature of wonder? I will examine each of these four differences in turn, but in order to do so, I will first turn to one of the origins of the thinking of wonder.

### Wonder as the origin of philosophy

For if you trace the history of wonder, as for instance the contemporary philosophers Sophia Vasalou (2015) and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2008) have done admirably, you inevitably end up in



Ancient Greece, and more specifically with Socrates/Plato and Aristotle. I have found both Vasalou's and Rubenstein's thinking on wonder incredibly helpful, because they both try to make sense of wonder's many manifestations throughout the centuries and this helped me to understand and give words to some of the tensions I had experienced in my own practice. You will therefore meet both in this chapter, but also throughout the rest of this thesis.

Most thinkers on wonder, up until today, start their argument with Socrates' statement that 'all philosophy begins in wonder'. What makes this statement so special? It can be found in one of Plato's dialogues 'The Theaetetus' – a conversation about the nature of knowledge between Socrates and 'the young student' Theaetetus. I must admit I had a rather romantic image of Socrates as a wandering philosopher who asks beautiful and profound questions at a Greek square to passers-by. But reading this dialogue, I realised that his endless and relentless questioning can also be rather unpleasant, and it already makes me somewhat dizzy as a reader. Perhaps it is therefore no surprise that after a while Theaetetus exclaims:

"By the gods, Socrates, I am lost in wonder when I think of all these things, and sometimes when I regard them it really makes my head swim."

Socrates answers:

"Theodorus seems to be a pretty good guesser about your nature. For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy [...]"  
(Plato, 369 BC/1967:55)

Upon which they continue their exploration of the nature of knowledge, and do not mention wonder again. This wonder already seems to have a different feel to it than Carson's sense of wonder, more intellectual, and perhaps more unsettling and/or unpleasant to experience. But what could Socrates' statement that wonder is the only beginning of philosophy mean? Rubenstein argues that there have roughly been two ways in which Socrates' statement has been interpreted which has led to

two different traditions of wonder that have existed alongside each other throughout history: that philosophers should continue to wonder at the very existence of things and be comfortable with not-knowing (Socratic wonder) or that wonder should be the trigger or starting point for philosophy/inquiry and disappear once 'the truth' is discovered (Aristotelian wonder). This brings us to the first difference: a wonder that dwells versus a wonder that dispels.

### **A wonder that dwells, a wonder that dispels**

Theaetetus said he was 'lost in wonder' and that the conversation 'made his head swim'. According to Rubenstein, Socratic wonder can indeed cause feelings of seasickness, nausea or vertigo, because it can make the very ground on which the philosopher stands appear uncanny. In her words: "What is astonishing is that an everyday assumption has suddenly become untenable: the familiar has become strange, throwing even the unquestionable into question" (Rubenstein, 2008:4). It is precisely the strangeness of the familiar and the ordinary that characterises this type of wonder, as well as these strong (physical) sensations that come with it. Socratic wonder can be thought of as a radical choice to question everyday phenomena, and to stay in the realm of not-knowing. A wonder that 'dwells' and 'endures the vertigo of epistemic vulnerability' as Vasalou puts it. However, both Rubenstein and Vasalou note that this kind of wonder is incredibly difficult to endure and sustain and the temptation to seek for some form of certainty, some firmer ground to stand on, is always there: "Wonder either keeps itself open, exposing itself to the raging elements, or it shuts itself down, shielding itself against all uncertainty within the comfortable confines of the certain, the familiar, and the possible" (Rubenstein, 2008:5).

A movement of opening or closing wonder, of exposing yourself to the elements or shielding yourself away. There seems to be a strength and even violence to this kind of wonder, as well as a vulnerability in the exposure. Vasalou notes that 'wonder contains the seeds of its undoing' because it is so unsettling to experience and it therefore stimulates "an urge for closure and quick resolution which would lift the sense of being at loss and the vulnerability of uncertainty" (Vasalou, 2015:56). The poetic understandings of wonder I have felt drawn to praise this 'being lost' and 'remaining in

mystery' but reading Vasalou and Rubenstein made me realise that there is also a darker and more unpleasant side to this. Perhaps this partly explains why it often felt so difficult to keep wondering. And why I seem to need to remind myself of the possibility of wonder over and over again. What would nevertheless make it worthwhile to expose yourself to wonder? Both Vasalou and Rubenstein argue wonder is important: "Only wonder's attentiveness to the uncanniness of the everyday might stir us out of our unthinking participation in the order of things and into the shocked recognition, ever renewed, "that the time is out of joint."" (Rubenstein, 2008:189). A wonder that positions itself against the mindless and automatic participation in our lives and societies and Vasalou therefore thinks of wonder as a way of 'living life consciously'. This kind of wonder seems far removed from its contemporary caricature as something naïve. No looking away, or hiding in a fantasy world, but truly paying attention to the state of the world, shocking yourself into recognition, again and again.

Aristotle's understanding of wonder appears to be radically different, and in this tradition, wonder is thought of: "as a temporary irritant to be cured by explanation, and only valuable for its instrumental role in stimulating inquiry" (Vasalou, 2015:57). As Rubenstein notes, the aim of Aristotle's wonder was 'to escape from ignorance'. Instead of appreciating questions, as Socrates did, Aristotle seems to value answers. And instead of staying in not-knowing, the intention is to know and explain. Wondering with the aim to make wonders cease, through systematically explaining each of them in turn. Dis-spelling wonder – breaking the spell – through scientific reasoning and discovery. Centuries later, this tradition of wonder is taken up again by the French philosopher Rene Descartes. Philip Fisher builds on this 'Cartesian wonder':

Descartes places wonder first among the passions because it is the origin of intellectual life. To notice a phenomenon, to pause in thought before it, and to link it by explanation into the fabric of the ordinary: this is the essence of science in the widest meaning of the term.  
(Fisher, 1998:55)

I am struck by the phrase 'linking it back into the fabric of the ordinary'. Where Rachel Carson seems to have thought wonder can take phenomena out of the fabric of the ordinary, to notice them once

more, Descartes' aim seems to have been the opposite. For even though Descartes describes wonder as a "sudden surprise of the soul that leads it to study an object that seems rare and extraordinary attentively" (Descartes, 1649/2008:123), he argues that wonder is different from other 'passions' because it alone does not affect 'the heart and blood' and is solely aimed at gaining more knowledge about the source of wonder. For although Descartes appears to value and even argue for wonder as an important stimulant of scientific inquiry, his ideal seems to eventually make wonder disappear altogether. He is therefore both an advocate and adversary of wonder. And he seemed to strongly object against a form of wonder that was not instrumental to obtaining new knowledge, and warns that a 'surplus of wonder' is to be avoided at all costs because people generally 'wonder too much':

But it is much more common that people wonder too much than too little; and that they gape at things that do not or barely deserve it. Such a thing can seriously block the use of reason and in each case disturb it. So while it is good to be born with a certain inclination for this passion (since it encourages us to practice science), we should in our later life free ourselves from it as much as possible. (Descartes, 1649/2008:127)

This also implies that some phenomena are more 'worthy' of our wonder than others. In Descartes' words: "little by little they become so given over to wonder, that things of no importance are no less capable of arresting their attention than those whose investigation is more useful" (Descartes, 1649/2008:129). This can perhaps only be understood in its historical context, and for instance Greenblatt (1990) notes how in the Middle Ages and Renaissance 'wonder cabinets' were something to gape and marvel at and were more about 'possession' and 'prestige' than anything else. But still, Socratic wonder is rather different and precisely aimed at the everyday and the ordinary. Perhaps what Descartes would have called 'things of no importance'. Who decides whether something is important enough to wonder about/at? Does the scientist know best? Here we also see the relationship between wonder and 'instrumental use' – wonder that does not 'lead' to discovery is thought of as a waste of time. Rubenstein argues that this was a common view amongst the



scientists of the 17th century, and she for instance notes that Francis Bacon referred to wonder as 'broken knowledge'.

### Wonder as extraordinary, wonder as ordinary

Sherry notes that wonder "is most commonly directed at the extraordinary (including the ordinary somehow transfigured" (Sherry, 2013:350), although the latter asks for a certain 'cultivation of attention and receptivity'. Fisher believes that wonder fades and decays with age, both as our collective knowledge increases, and more phenomena are explained, as well as when we get older as individuals and have seen and experienced more. When does something become 'ordinary'? If we have seen it more than once? If we 'know' what it is, can explain or predict it? Parsons (1969) notes that where an eclipse or thunderstorm was an occasion for wonder for many centuries, these are less so now, because they have been 'integrated into the system of expectations and meaning of men' and therefore no longer 'extraordinary'. Fisher even notes that for 'the full experience of wonder' it needs to be unexpected *and* seen for the first time. If someone tells you beforehand that you will see 'something wondrous', it will already diminish the effect.

Where the stars at night were a source of wonder for Carson, Fisher argues that these cannot evoke wonder because they are not rare, but rather 'part of the common furniture of daily life', and they also fail to be surprising or unexpected: we know that there is a regular occurrence of a clear starry sky. Perhaps even more tragically, even when we do see the night sky for the first time, it cannot evoke the kind of wonder that it might potentially have: as a child the stars at night or a first experience of snow are no more or less wonderful than 'a new pair of red mittens or someone who knew how to whistle', and Fisher clearly seems to think of the latter as less deserving of our wonder than the former. He calls this 'the aesthetic paradox', in his words:

[W]onder depends on first sight and first experience and yet by the time that we are old enough to have the experience of wonder we may have already used up and dulled by repetition all of the most significant potential experiences of the truly wonderful. (Fisher, 1998:19)

As a result, wonder becomes extremely rare. It almost makes me wonder if there are any phenomena left in the world that might evoke wonder for Fisher. He seems to encounter them in some forms of art and architecture, though again only when seen for the first time.

Vasalou questions Fisher's assumptions: does wonder necessarily strike suddenly or might it also need to be 'hunted' or 'stoked'? Does wonder always produce delight or might it also have a darker side to it? Her blend of wonder seems to be about seeing, remarking and paying attention to whatever stands before your eyes. Consequently, everything can now potentially be a source of wonder, extraordinary or not. As Schinkel notes, an essential characteristic of wonder might be that it: "defamiliarises the familiar, making it appear in a new light, as if seen for the first time" (Schinkel, 2017:543). However, he does note that it requires a substantial effort to keep seeing the familiar as if for the first time, as does Vasalou. Whereas Carson laments that we walk about with 'unseeing eyes', Vasalou argues that a form of 'unseeing' is necessary in order to 'truly see':

[A]n act of remarking or questioning what we take for granted; unseeing to then "truly" see; taking a step back from what stands before our eyes, or beneath our feet as their ground (...) de-taching ourselves from the familiar to see it afresh. (Vasalou, 2015:122)

Carson's question 'what if I would see this for the first or last time?' seems to have a similar effect, to detach to see afresh. Vasalou does however seem to argue for directing this kind of seeing at everything in our lives, not just nature, but also people, concepts and beliefs. Schinkel (2018a) notes that a 'thrill-seeking wonder' evoked by the extraordinary can become an end, and it is much more difficult to 'cultivate an enduring sense of wonder' to which 'familiarity is the greatest obstacle'.

### **Wonder as striking, wonder as seeing**

The third difference that can be found in the literature seems to be whether wonder is something that 'hits' or 'strikes' us unexpectedly, or whether it requires a conscious act of seeing. This seems related to whether you believe wonder can only be evoked by 'the extraordinary' and 'the surprising' or also by 'the ordinary' and 'the mundane'. Fisher's and Vasalou's definitions of wonder

capture this difference well. Where Fisher's defines wonder as: "a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight" (Fisher, 1998:550). Vasalou (2015) characterises wonder in response to Fisher as: "to be dazzled by seeing, to truly remark, to be alive in the consciousness of what stands before our eyes; to see, to *really* see." (Vasalou, 2015:204).

A wonder that 'strikes' can 'stop you in your tracks' (Greenblatt, 1990), make you feel 'feel startled or struck' (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2014) or 'startled and surprised' (Parsons, 1969). It can furthermore potentially 'widen your perspective' and 'reassess the importance of things' (Schinkel, 2018a). And even though most thinkers that understand wonder as something that 'strikes' unexpectedly, seem to think it more likely that only something extraordinary can evoke this wonder, this does not have to be the case. Bennett's (2001) 'mood of enchantment' is a kind of wonder that strikes or hits but is nevertheless evoked by 'everyday marvels'. She describes this mood in different terms throughout her book as a paradoxical state: of joy and disturbance, of being stopped in your tracks while being tossed into new terrain, of being transfixed in wonder and at the same transported by sense, of being charmed by the novel as well as unsettled by the uncanny. David Abram seems to describe a state of being that seems similar to this mood of enchantment, but he calls it 'magic':

Magic doesn't sweep you away: it gathers you up into the body of the present moment so thoroughly that all your explanations fall away: the ordinary in all its plain and simple outrageousness, begins to shine – to become luminously, impossibly so. Every facet of the world is awake, and you with it. (Abram, 2010:224)

I think it important to note that this is an understanding of magic that is not supernatural or extraordinary, but in which the ordinary itself becomes extraordinary. Bennett also explicitly stresses that you do not have to believe in the supernatural in order to be hit by this mood of enchantment. Moore (2004) also challenges the separation between the 'mundane from the sacred', between a material world that has instrumental value and an immaterial world, for instance an afterlife, that has intrinsic value: "If we believe instead that the mundane is sacred, then rather than devalue what

we have and yearn for a better place, we might be more attentive to what is wonderful on this earth” (Moore, 2004:7).

### **Wonder as wholesome, wonder as a wound**

Where Carson described wonder as a wholesome and nourishing emotion, both Parsons (1969) and Rubenstein (2008) argue that the word ‘wonder’ originally derives from ‘wound’. Rubenstein believes that wonder has been ‘sugar-coated’ in our contemporary understanding of it, and that the shadow side of wonder has largely been repressed. According to her, wonder was historically both about the fantastic and amazing, as well as the dreadful and the threatening. Parsons argues how wonder as a wound can come about through a strange event: “To be wonderstruck is to be wounded by the sword of a strange event, to be stabbed awake by the striking” (Parsons, 1969:85). His imagery suggests a violent wonder: the sword, the stabbing and striking. Rubenstein takes the comparison even further and argues that wonder *resembles* a wound, for it can be thought of as ‘an uncanny opening, rift or wound in the everyday’ and: “just as a wound ceases to be itself when it heals, wonder is only wonder when it remains open” (Rubenstein, 2008:10).

Even though I came upon this notion of wonder as a wound only recently, Rubenstein’s image has haunted me ever since. She conjures up such a vivid image; I immediately picture an open and bloody wound, and how it disappears under the newly formed skin when it heals, as if it was never there in the first place. It illustrates the movement of wonder opening and closing, appearing and disappearing, and the vulnerable and tender quality of wonder once it is open. But it also raises questions. What is it that wounds you? Why and how might you decide to leave the wound of wonder open? What might close the wound of wonder? If I take the metaphor a bit further, it makes me wonder whether some experiences of wonder, might have a lasting impact. Some moments might leave a mark, like some wounds do. Or some might continue to ache, even years later. The image challenges my own (implicit) assumptions about wonder as beautiful, wholesome and nourishing, whilst at the same time making me realise anew that my own experiences with wonder have not always been pleasant and beautiful, far from it. Might beauty be able to wound you?



Especially in a time and age when some of the most beautiful aspects of the more-than-human world are at risk due to our ecological crisis? This seems to bring us closer to Rachel Carson again. It makes me wonder whether I might not have unconsciously suppressed or avoided the darker sides of wonder in my explorations, or perhaps in writing about them. What have been the shadow sides of wonder for me? And have I been sufficiently aware of the shadow side of wonder in my attempts to invite others to wonder, and the ethics of doing so?

### **The difference between a sense of wonder and magic**

Based on the explorations above, I want to make a distinction between two essentially different kinds of wonder. Firstly, a (sense of) wonder as seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary, in which I mainly build on Carson's (1956/1998), Rubenstein's (2008) and Vasalou's (2015) thinking. And secondly, a full-on wonder that strikes you, in which I build on Abram's (2010) and Bennett's (2001) work. Words and names matter, and especially in this somewhat tricky terrain of wonder, magic and enchantment. I think a wonder that strikes, this full-on version of wonder, is different from a sense of wonder because it is unexpected and takes you by surprise and is not something you can set out to 'do'. But also, because it has a higher level of intensity to it. Following Abram, I choose to use the word 'magic' for this kind of wonder.

The word magic feels stronger than wonder, but for me, has less of a religious association than for instance 'sacred' or 'grace'. I have nevertheless hesitated to use the word magic, for it might suggest something 'supernatural', which is not how I think of it. Using the word 'magic' is political, especially as a woman, for it might place me in the tradition of witchcraft, and as Simone de Beauvoir (1975) pointed out: the witch-hunts can be thought of as a way to refrain women from gaining too much power. However, Stengers (2012) argues that precisely because 'magic' is such a 'compromised word', we should reclaim and revive it. She states that naming magic, beyond a metaphorical use, is an act of magic. Precisely because of the discomfort this might cause in a time in which everything should be explained. She explicitly builds on Abram's (1996) earlier work to 'reclaim magic as an art of participation' as a way of recovering the capacity to honour experience, without needing to ask:

do you *really* believe in...? Sometimes, the difference between ‘wonder’ and ‘magic’ is not clear-cut. This distinction will hopefully come alive through my practice stories from Chapter 4 onwards. You might notice I will more readily use ‘wonder’, and reserve ‘magic’ for rare moments.

## 2.3 Why wonder?

Why would it be important to foster and strengthen a sense of wonder? Should we not take Descartes’ warning seriously that too much wonder will hinder our reason? There does indeed appear to be a stronger case for Aristotelean/Cartesian wonder, for this kind of wonder can be argued to lead to new scientific discoveries, and the accumulation of knowledge. Which case can be made for Socratic wonder and its related approaches? Why would it be important to dwell in or even endure this kind of wonder, to prolong the feeling of not-knowing, uncertainty and vulnerability that might come with it, and resist the pull towards explanation? This kind of wonder may be seen by some – like Descartes and those following in his footsteps – as a deliberate attempt to undermine the scientific project by promoting and prolonging ‘ignorance’. And Carlsen and Sandelands rightly point out that: “wonder may be unwelcome. Resisted by calculative science bent to dispel mystery and doubt” (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2014:4).

Arguing for wonder is therefore political, and it may well be resisted or ridiculed. The kind of wonder I am interested in seems to have a difficult relationship with questions of use or instrumentality. Schinkel (2017) notes that because wonder is ‘slow’ and not of immediate utilitarian value, time and space to wonder are likely to come under pressure. The alleged ‘passivity’ of wonder, the association with being ‘wonderstruck’ and ‘lost for words’ have furthermore made it appear suspect throughout history (Vasalou, 2015; Schinkel, 2017). Fuller (2006) for instance argues that wonder has not been studied much as an emotion because of this apparent passivity and consequent lack of ‘use’ from an evolutionary perspective: “Wonder imbues the world with an alluring quality, fostering increased openness and receptivity rather than immediate utilitarian action” and leads to “fairly passive contemplation of how the parts of life fit into some larger whole” (Fuller, 2006:370). Some might say that this is precisely what makes wonder valuable, but from a focus on ‘use’ it does not seem of

immediate interest. Moreover, the 'effects' – for lack of a better word – of wonder might be thought of as dangerous or unwanted: inviting people to pause, notice and pay attention might hinder the (short-term) productivity of an organisation or society. Wonder takes time, and as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue 'time is money' is one of the most important metaphors that we 'live by'. And wonder's invitation to truly see and question the ordinary might lead people, in organisations or elsewhere, to question the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas and as such even foster 'defiance' or 'disobedience'. Who might benefit from a world (or organisations) that is either devoid of or filled with wonder? Whose interests might be served by thinking of the world and our organisations as either enchanted or disenchanted? And if wonder does not lead to any immediate action, why would it still be important to argue for wonder?

Firstly, wonder is thought to increase an individual's well-being by living life consciously and adding meaning to life. A life lived with a sense of wonder, or that has regular experiences or moments of wonder in it, is thought of by many of the authors we have encountered so far as a life well lived. As Vasalou notes: the value of wonder is basically an argument for 'conscious experience' and 'aliveness to the world'. It is also argued to increase meaning in our lives, because there is something worth living for as Moore (1996) argues and because wonder invites us to contemplate the bigger questions in life, as well as what our place might be into the larger whole (Jenkins, 2000; Fuller, 2006).

Secondly, wonder is said to develop feelings of empathy, compassion and love for 'the other' and it might consequently change our relationship with and actions towards these others, human or other. Nussbaum (2003) thinks of wonder as a 'non-eudemonistic' emotion, that moves personal goals and plans to the background. As such it is closely related to compassion because it plays an important role in 'marking the world for our concern' as she puts it. A sense of wonder makes us imagine the mysterious inner world of others, whether it is a family member, a cow or a star in the sky. She thinks this helps to overcome 'the type of pathological narcissism that does refuse to ascribe reality to others' and as such direct our attention to the suffering of others, human or non-human. Wonder

can therefore be said to revive our interest in the world and to appreciate the world for its own sake (Schinkel, 2017).

Thirdly, strong experiences of wonder, perhaps those moments when wonder ‘strikes’ us unexpectedly, are said to possess a (trans)formative potential. They might offer a new perspective, a paradigm shift or renewed sense of purpose. Van de Goor et al (2017) argue that this is brought about by wonder’s ability to ‘disrupt the taken-for-granted’. Schinkel (2018a) also argues that experiences of wonder can make you reassess what is important in life.

## 2.4 The possibility of wonder in modern life

What does all the above mean for the ‘how’ of wonder? How might wonder be enhanced in everyday or organisational life? Is it even possible to still experience wonder in modern life?

### **Disenchantment and the decay of wonder**

Descartes argued – and hoped – that wonder would eventually disappear as our scientific knowledge would accumulate over time. Centuries later, the sociologist Max Weber famously said at the start of the twentieth century that the world had indeed become ‘disenchanted’ due to the intellectualisation and rationalisation that came with modernity. Weber argued that modernity led to a belief that ‘in principle all things can be mastered by explanation’ – even if we have not managed to do so completely:

The increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation do not, therefore, indicate an increased general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. (Weber, 1919/1989:13)



I think it important to note that he makes a distinction between the actual knowledge about the world of an average person and the *belief* that in principle all things can be known and explained. Macfarlane (2015) summarises the shift from an enchanted to a disenchanted worldview concisely by saying that wonder has been replaced by will, and mystery by mastery. And I might add that intimacy has been replaced by instrumentality, and interconnectedness by isolation. The central difference between a disenchanted and an enchanted worldview seems to be whether the world is seen as 'alive' in one form or other or not, and whether we believe we are part of the world as human beings or are apart from it. Consequently, the possibility and desirability of wonder is entangled with these different worldviews. Weber's diagnosis – for that is how I read his words – has become accepted by many as 'true'. Bennett (2001) notes that even though the disenchantment of the world is seen as either something to be celebrated or as the destruction of a golden age to be mourned, or at times as a mixed blessing, Weber's diagnosis as such does not seem to be questioned often. There is some discussion on the translation of Weber's German term 'entzauberung' into 'disenchantment'. Sherry (2009) for instance states that disenchantment should not so much be understood as 'disillusioned', but rather as the world "having lost some of its allure and coming to seem lifeless in certain ways" (p.369). Jenkins (2002) nuances Weber's position somewhat by arguing that the world was probably not wholly enchanted before Weber's time, nor wholly disenchanted after his time.

### **The re-enchantment of the world**

There have indeed been several thinkers who have responded to Weber's diagnosis by arguing for a *re-enchantment* of the world (Berman, 1981; Moore, 1996; Bauman, 1992). They argue that even though the modern or 'disenchanted' discourse or worldview has brought us a lot – such as technological advancements and economic prosperity – we have lost something essential along the way: nothing less of our sense of what it means to be fully human. Berman (1981) argues that we 'threw out the baby with the bathwater' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate the interests of capitalism and organised religion. He believes the Scientific Revolution and specifically the legacy of Descartes ended what he calls 'original participation' in the world:

Modern science and technology are based not only on a hostile attitude toward the environment, but on the repression of the body and the unconscious; and unless these can be recovered, unless participating consciousness can be restored in a way that is scientifically (or at least rationally) credible and not merely a relapse into naïve animism, then what it means to be a human being will forever be lost. (Berman, 1981:132)

Quite a strong statement, that summarises the aim of his book. Berman builds on Bateson's (1972) notion of the 'epistemological error' that leads us to believe that as human beings we are separate rather than a part of the world around us. Similarly to Carson, Bateson notes that if we think of nature or the more-than-human world as separate from ourselves and even see ourselves as being in a conflict of 'man against nature', we legitimise our (mis-)use of nature and we do not have to think about the consequences of our actions on the world. Bateson therefore calls this epistemological error in our thinking the root cause of our ecological crisis.

In sum, Berman believes that this 'Cartesian paradigm' has resulted in a collective state of alienation, which manifests itself in the quite literal destruction of our world, but also in the inability of our economies to provide meaningful work. He draws attention to the political nature of the Cartesian paradigm: if we think of nature as wondrous, alive and ever-changing, we would not be able to truly know and control it and consequently most scientific endeavours would become meaningless. Furthermore, if we take the idea that nature is alive seriously, we would no longer be able to place ourselves above nature, see and use it as a resource, and place our interests above those of the more-than-human world. Whereas now "modern man [...] sees himself as having the ability to control and dominate nature, to use it for his own purposes" (Berman, 1981:51). These calls for re-enchantment indeed all seem explicit responses to modernity, as Bauman notes "postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of artifice that has been dismantled" (Bauman, 1992:x).

Moore (1996) also argues for re-enchantment but focuses on the experience of enchantment in everyday life and does so from a more spiritual perspective. He states that an enchanted life is not



*2/3/2016, 7.24, Florence*

about always finding yourself 'in a state of rapture' but rather to have "daily opportunities to enter a different level of experience that has more charm than practicality" (Moore, 1996:x). He frames enchantment as a condition that allows you to connect lovingly and intimately to both the world you inhabit and the people around you, and he thinks of re-enchantment as nothing less than a cure for the 'soul sickness of modernity', as a way to bring back meaning to our lives: "Make a soulless world, and there is nothing in it to lift our spirits, nothing to give us daily meaningful experiences that render life worth living" (p.379).

Both Berman and Moore argue that it is impossible to 'see' a participating worldview from within a non-participating worldview. Berman therefore argues for a collective paradigm shift by coming up with a new metaphysics that is based on interconnectedness, wholeness and participation, whereas Moore argues instead for a rebirth of old wisdom as well as 'forgetting' our current way of understanding the world: "the first step in enchantment, then, is to recover a beginner's mind and a child's wonder, to forget some of the things we have learned and to which we are attached" (Moore,1996:xx). Not only might wonder be an essential characteristic of an enchanted world – it might also be a way to restore it. As Sherry (2009) asks himself: "what if the world always was enchanted and still is, if we but look and keep our sense of wonder?" (p.377).

### **The enchantment of modern life**

That is precisely what the political philosopher Jane Bennett (2001) argues for in her extensive exploration of the possibility of enchantment in modern life. She is less pessimistic than the authors above and offers a different perspective: according to her the world was never wholly disenchanted in the first place and the modern world continues to have the power to enchant. This seems similar to Boje's (1995) argument that premodern, modern and postmodern discourses exist alongside each other, and are foregrounded and backgrounded over time and in specific contexts, rather than point to an era-by-era distinction. Bennett invites us to resist the 'discourse of disenchantment' by searching for modern sites of enchantment, in her words: "One way to call into question the diagnosis of disenchantment is to recall alternative stories about the nature of things" (p. 84). To



her, this is of the utmost importance, because enchantment invites people to be 'enamoured with existence' and be generous to other people and the more-than-human world alike as a result. The discourse of disenchantment might therefore have negative consequences in and of itself, for it is difficult to develop any 'affective attachment' to a world that we think of as dead and lifeless. In contrast to the authors who argue for collective re-enchantment, her work can be read as a call to resist the story or discourse of disenchantment *individually*, by actively looking for and paying attention to the everyday enchantments around you. And she therefore characterises enchantment as an individual 'mood' rather than a collective state and stresses that her work should not be read as an argument for re-enchantment, but rather as an attempt to draw attention to the enchantment that is already present. And according to her, wonder is therefore still possible, even in our modern world.

### Enchantment by design, enchantment by emergence

If we indeed think of a sense of wonder as a worthwhile way of seeing and being in the world and experiences of wonder as potentially (trans)formative, how might these be enhanced in everyday and organisational life? Can a sense of wonder be cultivated or strengthened? Can experiences of wonder be created or invited? The 'how' of wonder is what I am most interested in, and which equally seems to be the least explored in the literature on wonder. Perhaps this is partly because wonder and enchantment seem to have been mostly explored by (political or ecological) philosophers, and seemingly less so by thinkers on (organisational) change or development. Or if wonder or magic are mentioned at all, it is with a different emphasis. For example, to argue that researchers in the field organisational science should wonder more themselves to come to better theories (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2014) or to explain 'the magic' of how change happens in OD interventions (Lichtenstein, 1997).

Boje and Baskin (2011) do however explicitly link enchantment and organisational change, building on Bennett's (2001) work to argue that our organisations were never wholly disenchanted either. They review the literature on enchantment from a change perspective and distinguish between two



*20/9/2016, 10.20, Amsterdam*

ways of thinking about how enchantment, and consequently wonder, might come about: enchantment by design and enchantment by emergence, each of which has a fundamentally different theory of change embedded in it. The former focuses on the way in which dominant narratives or discourses in society shape the individual's experience of (dis)enchantment. Weber's argument is an example of this, using the rise of modernity to explain the collective *and* individual experience of disenchantment. Because the dominant narrative or discourse no longer allows for the possibility of wonder and enchantment, the world and our societies as a whole are disenchanted. Boje and Baskin argue that authors such as Berman (1981) and Moore (1996) fit into the same category, for even though they argue for re-enchantment, they argue for a new collective discourse or worldview. By contrast, enchantment by emergence arises in "an individual's response to the specific conditions in which they live and work" (Boje & Baskin, 2011:414). An individual can choose to either resist and challenge or conform to the discourse of disenchantment. They argue that change practitioners should understand both enchantment by design and enchantment by emergence, because both influence the possibility to experience enchantment. But in the end, they seem to think of enchantment as an individual choice. Individuals choose how to respond to the 'storied spaces' in which they find themselves, whether it is a family, organisation or nation through creating their own story in response to the dominant discourse or narrative.

### **Deliberate strategies and practices that support wonder**

I feel mostly drawn to Bennett's argument for enchantment by emergence, for it offers a way into enchantment that is accessible to all of us and it leaves me with a sense of empowerment: I can challenge the discourse of disenchantment individually. And moreover, it gives me the feeling that we have not lost wonder and magic altogether, but that they continue to exist in unexpected places, if I but know where and/or how to look. But how might I do so? What does Bennett say about how you might experience wonder more often? She struggles with the tension between wonder (or enchantment) that hits us and a wonder that can be fostered:

Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies. One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play, another to hone sensory receptivity to the marvellous specificity of things. Yet another way to enhance the enchantment effect is to resist the story of the disenchantment of modernity. (Bennett, 2001:4)

I recognise the distinction between what I call a sense of wonder (the individual comportment you can foster) and magic (the enchantment that hits you), and I am intrigued by how the two are related. Does a sense of wonder evoke magic? Or might it be a prerequisite for magic to occur?

Bennett does not elaborate on what this individual comportment and related practices might look like. It seems that her way of enhancing enchantment is mainly through challenging the story of disenchantment, to create an alternative story or narrative, and with that to prove that enchantment does still exist in the modern world, and that it can be found in different 'sources' or 'sites', natural *and* man-made. What she calls 'the technical', 'the cultural' and 'the natural'. She thinks of coming up with that story as a deliberate act of resistance, a political act, that might already bring about a change. Apart from that, Bennett does not offer very practical advice on the how-side of enchantment. Yet, she does leave some clues where to start: with your individual comportment that can be fostered through certain practices.

Vasalou also struggles with the tension between what she calls a wonder that 'strikes' versus a wonder that can be 'stoked'. Or in my words: between a sense of wonder and magic. She thinks that wonder might need to be 'provoked' by re-educating our way of seeing and paying attention:

For wonder, we saw, may not only strike, but require wilful provocation – a provocation that invites us to see the ordinary as extraordinary and in doing so to re-educate our ordinary judgements about what is worthy of interest or remark. (Vasalou, 2015:138)

She also argues that we need practices to help us to do so, but her practices seem highly abstract and philosophical and not very 'doable'. However, I do find her definition of a practice helpful as "an iterated, organised acting, a doing disciplined by reflection (...) [with] internal standards of excellence as to how it should be performed" (Vasalou, 2015:122).

What might be the practices that can support or strengthen (a sense of) wonder? Since this is one of my central research questions, I will not attempt to answer this here. What does however stand out is this lack of *practical* practices in the existing literature. Wonder is said to benefit from a certain 'openness' and 'attentiveness' to experience (Sherry, 2013; Silvia et al, 2015) or a 'not-expecting-to-know attitude' (Hansen, 2012). But what you can *do* to enable or support this remains unsaid. Or when more practical practices are mentioned, they are either strongly situated in a spiritual (Vaughan-Lee, 2017) or religious (Moore, 1996) tradition, which makes them considerably less appealing to me, or aimed at children (Haluza-Delay, 2001; Pelo, 2014), as Carson's essay was as well. Interestingly, the latter do mention more concrete suggestions: such as observing 'a meter of your own' for a week (Haluza-Delay, 2001). And though I might try some of these at one point in my life – with or without children – these are mostly aimed at classroom settings with young children and less applicable in other contexts.



*Words are flowing out  
Like endless rain into a paper cup  
They slither wildly as they slip away  
Across the universe*

### 3. Knowing wonder

In this chapter, I will articulate my research approach and situate it within the wider debate about ontology, epistemology and methodology. I will first turn to the apparent tension between knowledge and wonder (section 3.1) before exploring different understandings of research and the implications for how I might come to know wonder (section 3.2) and introducing first-person Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry as my main methodologies (section 3.3). I will then turn to the apparent tension between language and wonder (section 3.4) and share my method of writing moment-stories (section 3.5) and end with articulating my quality criteria for good research (section 3.5).

#### 3.1 Knowledge and wonder

I started the previous chapter with Vasalou's comment that we both seem to know wonder intimately as well as how it eludes us when we endeavour to know it. Knowledge and wonder seem to have a difficult relationship, especially a form of wonder that is essentially a form of dwelling in not-knowing. Do knowledge and wonder necessarily exclude each other? Descartes argued that knowledge dispels wonder, and so did Weber, whereas Carson believed that knowledge would open people's eyes to the wonders of the world. The Romantic poet John Keats writes evocatively in his poem 'Lamia' how 'the mere touch of cold philosophy' will 'conquer all mysteries by rule and line' and 'unweave a rainbow'. In fact, Fisher (1996) writes that Descartes deliberately tested his scientific method on the rainbow – an important symbol of wonder – in order to explain it scientifically and strip it from its mystery. Sinclair and Watson (2001) however note that even though they might know why and how the rainbow appears, they can still 'wonder at' the rainbow. Is it possible to gain knowledge about the world without destroying wonder, or even to enhance wonder as Carson sought to do? Is it possible to know wonder itself – without losing wonder in this very attempt to know it?

Nan Shepherd seems to follow in Carson's footsteps when she writes about her years of getting to know the Cairngorm mountains:

The more one learns of this intricate interplay of soil, altitude, weather, and the living tissues of plant and insect (an intricacy that has its astonishing moments, as when sundew and butterwort eat the insects), the more the mystery deepens. Knowledge does not dispel mystery. (Shepherd, 2011:59)

By contrast, Abram (1996) describes how he temporarily lost the sense of mystery he gained during his travels by reading academic literature afterwards in which what he experienced was thought of as 'impossible' or 'untrue'. I wonder whether it might be a specific kind of knowledge that dispels mystery, and/or whether this depends on the intention with which you seek to know. An argument for Socratic or 'Carsonian' wonder only seems to make sense from within particular worldviews or paradigms, and it is to these different research traditions that I now turn.

### 3.2 Different understandings of research

What first drew me to Action Research was its ambition to make a difference in the world. As can be seen in Reason and Bradbury's definition of Action Research as:

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason & Bradbury, 2008:4)

A form of research that emerges from a radically different worldview or paradigm than what Woolgar (1996) calls 'the received view of science'. Kuhn's (1962) notion of different research paradigms laid the foundation for thinking about different belief systems in research that can exist alongside each other. Gergen and Thatchenkerry (2006) make a distinction between a 'modern' and 'postmodern' worldview, whereas others have distinguished between four 'research perspectives'

(Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) or five different 'research paradigms' (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). As Heron and Reason (1997) argue, each paradigm has to answer four questions: the ontological question (what is the form and nature of reality?), the epistemological question (what is the relationship between the knower and what can be known?), the methodological question (how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known about?) and the axiological question (what is intrinsically worthwhile in the human condition?). This implies that research is always 'with philosophy' (McNamee and Hosking, 2012).

I find Alvesson and Deetz' four research perspectives a helpful way of making sense of the different assumptions within (organisational) research. They have created a grid with two contrasting axes: dissensus versus consensus and elite/a priori versus local/emergent. Research that is closer to the consensus pole, tends to think of research as a 'mirror' that can be used to discover and describe a pre-existing reality in the external world. The role of the researcher is to accurately describe this external reality as a neutral observer. By contrast, research that is closer to the dissensus pole thinks of research as a 'lens' and the role of research therefore becomes to challenge guiding assumptions, values and social practices through providing this specific lens. The researcher is thought of as active and positioned, and as operating in a power-filled context. This blurs the distinction between 'research' and 'change' and research can therefore be 'both inquiry and intervention' (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Gergen (2015) has even explicitly argued for a 'future-forming research' that shifts its attention from 'mirroring what is' to 'creating what is to become', and explicitly mentions both Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry for their potential to do so.

In research that is situated closer to the elite/a priori pole, the concepts and language of the researcher and the scientific community are privileged over the language of 'everyday people', since it is assumed these can describe the world 'as it really is'. Research seeks to produce theories that can be generalised from the local and temporal to the universal. Whereas research that is closer to the local/emergent pole focuses on the inherently situational and contextual nature of research. The researcher works with a more open language system and can be thought of as a 'skilled collaborator

in knowledge production'. This distinction is important for it creates different knowledge: book knowledge or a 'knowing about' versus practical knowing and a 'knowing how'. As can be seen in the definition above, Action Research is concerned with practical knowing and creating practical solutions with others. As Heron and Reason (1997) note: "Research is done by people with each other, not by researchers on other people or about them" (p.284). Alvesson and Deetz also draw attention to the implicit or explicit political alliances between the research(er) and certain groups or discourses in society. Whose interests are served by the research? And how might adopting certain managerial concepts and language benefit the interests of one group (managers and leaders) over another (employees)?

### A participatory paradigm

I would situate Action Research, and my own research, on the side of dissensus and local/emergent, what Alvesson and Deetz call 'postmodern'. This seems to resemble what Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) call a 'participatory (+postmodern) paradigm' that is centred on the belief that human beings are part of the world, rather than apart from it (Heron & Reason, 1997), rather like Rachel Carson argued. There seems to be one important difference between more social constructionist (Gergen, 2009) approaches, from which Appreciative Inquiry tends to depart, and a participatory paradigm: our relationship with the more-than-human world and our experiential knowing of this world. Heron and Reason (1997) note they 'tend to be deficient in any acknowledgement of experiential knowing'. In this context, they introduce the notion of a subjective-objective reality: there is a 'real' world out there, but how we encounter it, know it and make sense of it is subjective to the individual knower as well as to the local-cultural contexts of the knower. They therefore think of experiential knowing as 'the ground' of our knowing. A way of viewing the world that is inspired by phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/2013) and David Abram (1996). Elsewhere, Reason and Tobert (2001) critique the social constructionist 'language turn' and argue instead for an 'action turn', and Shotter even argues for a 'corporeal turn' (Shotter, 2010). In all these texts, I read a desire to fully participate in the world, to remember that we 'know' through our embodied and sensuous encounters with the world and that everything in this world is interconnected and interrelated.





*24/8/2016, 8.10, Castricum*

### Different ways of knowing wonder

This ontological position has implications for how I believe I can come to know anything about the world, and about wonder specifically, in Coleman's words: "Epistemology is concerned with how we know what we know, and how we come to claim we 'know' rather than that we have a hunch or a belief" (Coleman, 2015:392). She argues that action researchers find themselves in 'particularly complex epistemological territory' because they are partly situated in the postmodern paradigm that is open to emergence and multiple truths, whilst at the same time still believing in 'the human ability to make a difference', which is perhaps more of a modernist assumption. Action Research challenges the dominant idea about how you can know the world, which is most elaborately articulated in John Heron's notion of an 'extended epistemology' in which he distinguishes four ways of knowing the world:

Experiential knowing – imaging and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place or thing – is the ground of presentational knowing. Presentational knowing – an intuitive grasp of the significance of patterns expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms – is the ground of propositional knowing. And propositional knowing – expressed in statements that something is the case – is the ground of practical knowing – knowing how to exercise a skill. (Heron, 1996:122)

What sort of knowledge is thought of as valuable in a participatory paradigm? Or put differently: why would we seek to know in the first place? What is it we are aiming for as researchers? Heron and Reason (1997) answer this axiological question by positioning human flourishing as an end, which is echoed by Reason and Bradbury (2008). And although all four ways of knowing are important, practical knowledge is highly valued, as can be seen in Reason and Bradbury's emphasis on action research as 'the pursuit of practical knowing'. Heron and Reason (1997) use an upward pyramid to express the relationship between the different ways of knowing they distinguish: each way of knowing is 'grounded' in the one that follows it, as can be seen in the above definition of Heron. Apart from this upward movement across the different ways of knowing, they also describe a downward movement of 'grounding' practical and propositional knowing in experience. Heron

(1996) states that this also means that the researcher can only 'ground' his propositional knowledge in his own experiential knowing, not in that of others.

What does this mean for how I might come to know wonder? Knowing wonder can be about experiencing wonder – to know what it feels like to be in wonder, before or beyond words. Knowing wonder can be about (re)presenting these experiences of wonder in an artful and wonder-full way. Knowing wonder can be about knowing about the concept of wonder and articulating a theory or set of statements about how wonder works. Knowing wonder can be about knowing how to access or even create wonder, for myself and/or others. I have attempted to come to know wonder in each of these ways – though I have found propositional knowing the most challenging. When I attempted to know wonder by exploring it theoretically, or by critically examining an experience of wonder, the wonder often seemed to disappear. In this context, I find Seeley and Reason's (2008) distinction between getting to know (*connaître*) and knowing about (*savoir*) a helpful one. As an example of 'connaître' Seeley shares how she came to know a patch of the stone floor in a French cathedral as she 'might know a friend' after spending hours observing and drawing it. They furthermore argue that 'getting to know' the more-than-human world in this way, will make it more likely that people respond to the world in respectful and creative ways, as well as feel more alive and engaged themselves (Seeley & Reason, 2008:45). Somewhat similarly, Shotter argues for what he calls 'with-ness thinking' rather than 'about-ness thinking'. A form of thinking that: "occurs in those reflective interactions that involve our coming into living, interactive contact with an other's living being" (Shotter, 2006:600). This seems to resemble Heron's experiential knowing.

This also has implications for the potential 'outcomes' of research. Marshall (2016) notes that first-person action research can result in a 'shift in the sense of self' of the researcher, or as Shotter (2006) puts it: "It is our spontaneous, embodied ways of seeing and acting in the world that we change — we change in who we 'are'"(p.601). However, Heron (1996) notes that while 'pattern' and 'propositional' outcomes can be communicated in a thesis, 'presence' and 'practical' outcomes can

only be conveyed through being in the presence of a researcher or seeing them at work. Which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to 'show' such a potential shift in 'who I am' in this thesis.

### 3.3 Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry

When I started my doctoral research, I had four years of experience with Appreciative Inquiry, and had just finished the draft manuscript of a book on Appreciative Inquiry with two colleagues (Tjepkema, Verheijen & Kabalt, 2016). However, I had no experience with Action Research yet. And although Appreciative Inquiry first emerged as a response to and critique of a more problem-oriented Action Research approach (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), Reason and McArdle (2004) argue that it can be thought of as one of the different schools of practice within Action Research that elaborates upon its more basic orientation of inquiry. It nevertheless took me quite a while to discover and learn about Action Research assumptions and practices, and it took me even longer to think of myself as 'an action researcher' and now think of myself as 'an action researcher with a background in Appreciative Inquiry'.

#### Research for me, us and them

In Action Research, a distinction is made between first-, second- and third person research (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Or simply put: research for me, us and them. Unlike in most other research approaches, first-person research is positioned as an important endeavour, to complement or 'to ground' second- or third-person approaches (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Marshall & Mead, 2005; Marshall, 2016). Where first-person research is concerned with the "individual researcher's being-in-the-world" (Marshall & Reason, 1987:112) and with improving the quality of the practice of the researcher/practitioner by "developing a person's reflexive muscle" (King & Higgins, 2014:5), second-person research "starts when we engage with others in a face-to-face group to enhance our respective first-person inquiries" (Torbert & Reason, 2001:20). Third-person research practice speaks to a wider (research) community or audience and includes practices that allow for bigger groups of people to inquire together beyond a face-to-face group, such as whole system conferences (Reason & McArdle, 2004). The emphasis of my research has been on first-person research. For even though I

have initiated and facilitated inquiries with and for others, face-to-face as well as in a whole system conference, I was mostly interested in paying attention to and improving my practice and being-in-the-world. As can be seen in the formulation of my central research questions:

- *How do I live my (professional) life with a sense of wonder?*
- *How do I create spaces of wonder with and for others?*
- *How do I create a wonder-full research practice?*

How did I decide which methodologies to use to inquire into these questions? There is no one best way to go about this in Action Research. Marshall for instance notes that “how to create an action research approach for specific inquiry questions in a given context is a creative, iterative process” (Marshall, 2016:4). Within the broader orientation of Action Research, I chose to mainly draw upon the methodologies of first-person Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry in order to craft my own methods and forms. And I would therefore like to introduce both here.

### **First-person Action Research**

I had never even heard of first-person research approaches, nor the idea that I could be the focus of research myself when I started my research:

Even though I do feel that it is the only ‘right’ thing to do – for how can I work with others [...] if I have not explored that within myself and bring my full self into the conversation – I do feel a bit anxious about the first person work. (Inquiry proposal, June 2015)

Marshall’s (1999;2016) notion of ‘living life as inquiry’ struck a deep chord with me. Up until then, ‘inquiry’ had been something that I had tried to enable or organise for others, and in professional contexts. Her understanding invited me to think of my whole life as a potential site or source of inquiry. Reason and Torbert describe (the aim of) first-person research as:

First-person research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to



foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. (Reason & Torbert, 2001:17)

A form of research that focuses on the researcher herself, and not just while reflecting on events in a journal at home, but also ‘while acting in the outside world’. In fact, it seems to centre on the interplay between the inner world of the researcher and the effects on the outside world. To be aware of the choices you make and how and why you make them, as well as the effect they might have on others. And all of this while acting. Marshall calls this double focus “engaging simultaneously in inner and outer arcs of attention” (Marshall, 2016:54). In the above, Reason and Torbert make a distinction between ‘skills and methods’ and ‘the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach’.

Both Reason and Torbert as well as Marshall talk about ‘an inquiring approach’ or ‘inquiry’ as an essential quality of first-person research. Over time, I learned that for me inquiry is about loving and living questions by intentionally choosing to dwell with meaningful questions and explore them wholeheartedly, without necessarily searching for an answer. An understanding that is inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke’s (2001) idea of ‘living questions’ as well as Rebecca Solnit’s (2006) idea of ‘getting lost’. I will revisit this understanding in Chapter 5. Marshall herself notes that: “Inquiry is about *having practices* for being brave, for exploring at the edge of knowing and competence, and having the capabilities and support processes, such as learning colleagues, to go fearward, *should you choose*” (Marshall, 2016:59). She seems to make a similar distinction as Torbert and Reason between practices and support processes on the one hand and the capabilities on the other. In the chapters to come, I will share my experiments and experiences with different support practices.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

The original article on Appreciative Inquiry by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) can be read as an argument for more wonder-full research:

the appreciative mode awakens the desire to create and discover new social possibilities that can enrich our existence and give it meaning. In this sense, appreciative inquiry seeks an imaginative and fresh conception of organizations as “ordinary magic”. (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987/2015:59)

They articulate four principles that distinguish Appreciative Inquiry from other research: it is applicable, provocative, collaborative and begins with appreciation. I prefer to work with these original principles, for in later thinking the focus seems to shift towards ‘the positive’. The appreciative orientation is perhaps what distinguishes AI most from other Action Research approaches. Cooperrider and Srivastva argue that appreciation is essentially about assuming that every social system ‘works’ to some degree. The task of the researcher becomes to start with ‘what is’ and discover and describe those elements ‘which serve to give life to the system’. They introduce ‘appreciative apprehension’ as a fundamentally different way of knowing than ‘critical comprehension’: ‘an act of attention, valuing and affirmation’ rather than of ‘scepticism and doubt’. Both are a stance, and each researcher has a choice to make: which stance do I belief in and choose to work from? I choose to work from the former as much as possible.

Later, Cooperrider (1990) articulates his theory of change more explicitly: human systems move into the direction of that which they study, and therefore positive images of the future can help to create positive futures. He initially called this ‘the heliotropic principle’: just as plants automatically grow towards the sun, so do human systems ‘grow’ towards a positive image. And later uses the metaphor of a movie projector: human beings project their expectations ahead of them, and the creation of ‘artful positive imagery’ helps people to move into this projected direction (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). Bushe (2007) notes that AI has become increasingly ‘equated with the positive’ and argues for a renewed focus on all the foundational principles, especially generativity. Other authors argue that AI’s focus on the positive excludes the shadow side of life from the focus of inquiry (Boje, 2010; Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoxsey, 2010; Johnson, 2013). During my Appreciative Inquiry on Curaçao, I found Van der Haar and Hosking’s (2004) point helpful that what is ‘positive’ is inherently a local, cultural and historical construction. I concluded that: “you cannot know

beforehand what a certain community will construct as positive, as an AI practitioner you should therefore be careful not to intervene or impose your own ideas of the positive on others” (Kabalt, 2012:12). I therefore prefer to use the language of ‘appreciation’ rather than that of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’.

Moreover, in later years the focus within the international AI community has also seemed to shift from working from principles to working from the methodology of the 4-D or later 5-D cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008). A focus I have tried to counter elsewhere (Tjepkema, Verheijen & Kabalt, 2016) by focusing on the ‘working elements’ of Appreciative Inquiry: appreciation, inquiry, generativity and participation. Along with an argument for and invitation to continue to design and experiment with new and different approaches and allow for emergence. For as Van der Haar and Hosking (2004) argue: the question of what AI ‘is’ can only be answered in relation to each case and its local particularities and the ability of AI to manifest itself differently depending upon the local-cultural context is precisely where it derives its value from.

### 3.4 Finding words for wonder

Within these two methodologies, I have created a variety of methods and forms to explore wonder, alone and with others, which I will describe in the chapters to come. However, I think it is important to make my method of writing moment-stories explicit here, because I will include these stories in all the chapters to come, as well as because of the apparent tension between wonder and words.

Hansen argues that wonder comes before language, and can only be experienced in a direct encounter with the world, quite similar to how I understand experiential knowing: “through wonder we silently experience an ontological homecoming before language – the word and the question – arise” (Hansen, 2012:162). Or in the words of Merleau-Ponty: “wonder unfolds in moments of stillness and dwelling where we suspend our preconceptions” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002:xiii).

Might it be possible to give words to wonder at all? Schinkel (2017) argues that even if wonder ‘renders us speechless’ this does not mean that it ‘blocks all speech’ or ‘all effort at articulation’. He

notes that if this were the case, most poetry and philosophy could never have been written. Indeed, this idea that poets are the only ones who can give words to wonder seems widespread, and especially the poetry of Keats and Rilke is quoted often. Kingwell notes that “The crux of our apparent inability to talk about wonder lies not with wondering but with what we take as admitting of talk” (Kingwell, 2000:89). Does that mean we do not want to destroy wonder with words? Or that we fear we might be ridiculed for doing so?

I am intrigued by nature writer Robert Macfarlane’s (2015) argument that if we lose the language for our landscape, we will fail to notice and appreciate our surroundings. He states that seeing occurs through language, and that a ‘language deficit’ might lead to an ‘attention deficit’. Even though Macfarlane argues that nature does not name itself and some experiences might resist articulation, human beings have always been ‘name-callers’: we see and make sense of the world in words. He therefore argues that language offers ‘the possibility of re-wonderment’: words not only describe but also create the world we live in. Which is actually a central assumption of Appreciative Inquiry: ‘words create worlds’. Macfarlane notes that some language might detach us from the world around us, by rendering it inactive and stressing its use or functionality, whereas other language might invoke a reciprocal attachment with the world. What sort of language might help?

Macfarlane argues for a precise, poetic and particular use of language that describes the proceedings of nature in a way that ‘keeps wonder alive’ and ‘celebrates not-quite knowing, mystification and excess’. He suggests a grammatical style of writing that ‘hovers between the passive and the active’ and ‘can infuse inanimate objects with sentience and so evoke a sense of reciprocal perception between human and non-human’. A style of writing that seems to come close to Rachel Carson’s. Abram also speaks of the necessity of a new kind of language that stirs humility, opens our senses and acknowledges other beings as ‘expressive subjects’. He thinks of language not as a way to re-present the world, but a way to ‘call ourselves into the vital presence of that world’: “the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos – a way of bridging the silence” (Abram, 2010:11).

Interestingly, the word ‘enchantment’ derives from the French ‘encantement’, which has multiple meanings: a magical spell, a song and a concert. And can be traced back to the Latin ‘incantare’, to cast a magic spell, and ‘cantare’, to sing. This speaks to the mysterious relation between language. Elsewhere, Abram even notes that in many indigenous cultures ‘spelling’ a word is similar to ‘casting a spell’: “To spell, to correctly arrange the letters to form a name or phrase, seemed thus at the same time to *cast a spell*, to exert a new and lasting power over the things spelled” (Abram, 1996:133). The power of names comes back in fairy tales (Tatar, 2010), such as Grimm’s Rumpelstiltskin, and in Roman and Greek mythology (Pulley, 1994). Or in Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘Earthsea’ fantasy novels, in which the world is created by being sung into being, and magic is about learning the ‘true names’ of things. In that world, knowing someone’s or something’s true name is to hold it in your power. In our ‘real world’, names and power also seem to be intricately linked. Solnit (2018) published a bundle of essays in which she argues we are currently facing a ‘linguistic crisis’, because words are no longer used precisely and accurately:

To name something truly is to lay bare what may be brutal or corrupt – or important or possible – and key to the work of changing the world is changing the story, the names, and inventing or popularizing new names and terms and phrases. (Solnit, 2018:2)

This opens the possibility for change through language and naming, but it also brings a responsibility with it for using language precisely.

How does naming something ‘truly’ relate to Keats’ ‘cold touch of philosophy’? Where Macfarlane thinks that names have the possibility to re-enchant the world by ‘singing the world back into being, and singing yourself back into it’, Rilke seems to believe the opposite: “Rilke suggests that such knowledge and naming may be antithetical to the experience of wonder— ‘no mountain thrills them now’ (...) and things stop singing when they are ‘touched’ by being named” (Schinkel, 2017:539). Kingsnorth (2019) recently wrote about his personal struggle of losing faith in words as a writer and wonders whether silence might sometimes not be a more appropriate response to the world. I



recognise his questions but have nevertheless mostly turned to words to get to know wonder better, aside from my photographs.

### 3.5 Writing from within experiences of wonder

I recently took out and photographed all my notebooks of the past four years and was struck by the incredible amount of words I used to/for wonder.



*Figure 3 Four years of finding words for/to wonder, September 2019*

After the first ADOC workshop\*, I first started to journal: writing down the thoughts that were swirling around in my head, describing my inner state, but also the sights, smells and sounds of my surroundings, and realised that this helped me to notice more. To pay more detailed attention, both to the inner and outer landscape. I found that journaling in English works better for me than in Dutch, my native tongue. My pace of thinking and the movement of my pen are more aligned in English, whereas in Dutch I often get frustrated because my pen cannot keep up with my thoughts. Consequently, English has become my writing language. In a matter of weeks, I went from having no journal practice to always carrying a notebook wherever I went, folded in my coat pocket or tucked in my backpack. And now, four years and a pile of notebooks later, I still do. I do not analyse my

journal entries in a systematic way, but I do browse through them now and again, especially when I want to learn how I experienced/thought about something at a specific moment in time.

I also started with writing stories about meaningful moments shortly after they occurred. Sometimes the same day, sometimes as much as a month later, as soon as I could find the (mental) space to sit down and dwell with (the memory of) that moment. I would find a quiet space somewhere, preferably outdoors, and imagine myself back into that specific moment, recalling its richness. The first time I wrote such a story, it happened somewhat spontaneously: after a meaningful moment on the mountainside in Spain, I inwardly revisited that moment and after the sensuous details returned to me, I started typing and wrote a story as if from within that moment itself (see Chapter 4). It gradually developed into a method, and in the remainder of this thesis you will find numerous of these ‘moment-stories’.

These stories are an attempt to write from within the experience of wonder as much as possible, rather than about it. This was a way to ‘suspend’ (Seeley & Reason, 2008) my critical and rational mind, especially in the more powerful experiences of wonder, those moments when ‘all my explanations fell away’ (Abram, 2010). Hansen points to the unique position of poets in knowing and articulating wonder, for they can ‘philosophise from within an experience’ when they write poetry, which he calls a ‘living poetics’ (Hansen, 2012:158). I am not a poet, but my moment-stories are my attempt to write from within the lived experience of being a wonderer. Shotter (2010) seems to argue for something similar with his with-ness writing rather than about-ness writing and portraying ‘striking events’ or ‘living moments’ as if written ‘from within’ these moments themselves. I am struck by how he describes these moments, almost as if he is describing moments of wonder or magic:

[S]omething of importance does happen in such ‘living moments’. They can – and often do – make the kind of difference in our lives that matters to us. Their effect is perceptual; they can ‘move’ us, ontologically. They can occasion more than just a change in perspective. They

can exert a singular, once-occurrent, unrepeatable, spontaneously created change in our very way of being in the world. (Shotter, 2010:203)

I do think it relevant to stress that I explicitly chose to write about moments, but was mostly inspired by Swart's (2013) idea that our life exists of an endless amount of moments, like stars in the sky, and that we can become the author of our own life by weaving the moments of our choice together into a story. To create new constellations so to speak. As well as Mead's (2014) work on storytelling in organisations, in which he defines a story as: "an imagined or re-imagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listener's imagination to experience it as real" (p.16). Stories are therefore about particular people, places and events. However, both Swart and Mead focus mostly on telling stories, whereas I have chosen to write them instead.

On a more practical level, I have drawn on Barbara Turner-Vessalago's (2013) notion of 'freefall writing', a method that allows you to write more intuitively. She introduces five writing precepts that inform her approach: write what comes up for you, don't change anything, give all the sensuous detail, go where the energy is, or go fearward and the ten-year rule. Her method is not necessarily aimed at researchers, but at creative writers. Yet, Marshall (2016) has also adopted her approach and adjusted it to fit with a first-person Action Research practice by drawing on the precepts selectively. Marshall argues that every form of writing can be done reflectively, but that she has made use of creative writing practices because of their potential to: "help us notice the critical mind that might censor, amend, reduce, and limit what might otherwise be said" (Marshall, 2016:100). This is precisely why Turner-Vesselago's method was valuable for me, because it offered a practical way to stay close to the experience of the moment itself, to write from within, rather than thinking about the moment. Indeed, to suspend my rational and critical mind. As a result, the writing seems to almost literally come from a different place, from my belly or heart, rather than from my head. Contrary to Turner-Vesselago, I try to write about moments as soon as possible after they occur, when they are still fresh and rich and confusing. Over time, I have experimented with different 'writerly tricks' to imagine myself back in a moment, and to recall the sensuous details, especially if

more time went by. For instance, by revisiting the physical place where the moment occurred and writing the story there or taking a photograph of my view at the end of the moment itself and use this image to trigger my visual memory.

### Honouring the moment

Sometimes I need someone else's eyes to see what might be significant about my own method, often the eyes of my doctoral supervisor Kate McArdle\*. I had not fully realised the significance of not changing or editing my moment-stories afterwards, save a spelling mistake or two. As Kate noted in a recent conversation:

“There is something kind of incredibly vulnerable and bold about saying: the first version is what stands. For me, that is an articulation of your theory of change that you honour the first voice that comes or the first version of events that comes and you go with that.”

In my response I note how I think of the stories as a way of honouring moments:

“Because I decided to write a story immediately after the moment, that story became an artefact in itself and became a way to honour that moment, but also to prolong it or to go back to it. Or to accentuate that moment in time, rather than it just being one of the many moments. So, keeping it intact in that way, I think is a form of method.”

Through this conversation I became more explicitly aware that writing these moment-stories is a way of paying attention to and valuing moments of wonder and beauty, as I articulated it:

“Languaging them in this story form gave them a significance, when I was not quite sure whether it was allowed to be there, whether it was something worthwhile or worth noticing or worth maybe seeking more of.”

Kate noted that writing and sharing these stories might be an integral part of my change practice, to invite people to notice more/differently:

“Is there something in the middle of this then about: I think it would be really lovely if more people were in nature, whether it is a sparrow outside the garden or the fox on the side of the mountain, or whatever it is. (...) I am wondering if an early step into that is about language. Inviting people that it is OK to name chasing a butterfly on a summer’s day as changing the world, or as a desire to be changed by the world or connect to the world.”

And although I have first and foremost written these moment-stories for myself, I have indeed shared them from early in my research onwards, with an increasingly explicit intention to invite others to see and notice differently. In numerous blogs on the K&S website, in a book with personal stories (Kabalt & Timmermans (eds), 2016), by sending them to people I know or reading them out loud to a group I work with. And more recently, while sharing my research findings. For example, by creating an exhibition of my research with stories for K&S colleagues in March 2018, reading an excerpt of a story during a talk at the World Appreciative Inquiry Conference in March 2019 or making use of envelopes with different stories in a showcase of my research at Ashridge in July 2019.

Later in this same conversation, I share that because it feels like these stories are written from within the moment itself, I not only feel reluctant to change them, but also to ‘analyse’ them. To analyse is to dissect or dismantle. How could I convey the meaning of these moment-stories as well as make sense of them in one form or another, without taking them apart? Inspired by Rilke’s (1919/2011) idea of ‘living questions’, Hansen (2012) argues that we should not ‘hasten towards an answer’ nor ‘hasten towards a logical or emotional understanding’ of a poem as a form of knowing from within the experience of wonderment. And that doing so is a way to ‘stay with’ a moment of wonder. This reminds me of a metaphor Geoff Mead\* shared during an ADOC workshop when he invited us to think of our research themes as ‘wild creatures’. If you go after them directly, you might scare them away, or not even encounter them in the first place. Or if you try to domesticate a wild animal, or even worse, if you try to pin it down too precisely, like a butterfly in a box for instance, it loses its life. He rather invited us to try and ‘sidle up alongside’ our themes. To intentionally dwell and linger in places where they might show themselves, and to catch glimpses of

them from the corner of your eye. This links for me to the idea of 'seeing life obliquely' that Ben Okri (2012) writes about in a poem:

We are better at seeing life  
Obliquely. From the corners  
Of our minds. In the margins. On  
The edge of vision. We  
Are haunted by glimpses,  
The barely seen.  
We think about them more.  
That's what true art is for:  
To make us see what's important  
Through a bending light.  
(For truth dwells in mysterious night.)  
By staying always oblique,  
Always haunting, it lives  
Longer in the mind of mankind:  
Living longer for its mystery.  
Its unfathomability.

I think of my moment stories (as a re-presentation) of glimpses of wonder and magic. And wonder if one strategy to stay with these moment-stories is to look at them obliquely, from the corner of my eye, instead of gazing at them directly. Perhaps this might be a way to 'know' these moments, without dis-spelling or dis-covering them. That also means that I think there might be a value in leaving some things mysterious, in order to keep them alive and let them continue to feed the imagination. And I have quite consciously chosen not to try to explain certain events. And at the same time this remains tricky, and I must continue to ask myself: what are my reasons for not looking at these moments directly? For fear of discovering there was no magic there? Or because I genuinely believe that looking at them directly and attempting to explain them can destroy their magic, even years later?





*31/10/2016, 7.38, Amsterdam*

### 3.6 Questions of quality

I have mixed feelings about explicitly focusing on questions of quality, because considering whether I met 'the doctoral standards' made me judge my research as if from the outside and conform to what I thought research 'should' look like. Paradoxically, considering the quality of my research therefore reduced its quality, because I was not practicing or writing my research on my terms. Trusting my ability to 'follow my nose' as my supervisor called it, helped at times like these. And what also helped, was to locate quality differently: as 'design questions' that helped me to create and reflect on quality in my practice, while doing research, instead of a checklist with which to judge it afterwards. Perhaps this is again a distinction between 'with-ness' and 'about-ness' thinking. I therefore found Marshall and Reason's (2007) notion of quality as 'taking an attitude of inquiry' the most helpful, because it focuses on the researcher's ability in-the-moment to "engage our full vitality in the inquiry and attend to the perspectives and assumptions we are carrying" (p.369).

I emphasised different quality criteria while practicing my research and while writing about my research. I formulated the quality criteria I found the most important while doing research in the form of 'design questions' in order to try to 'create quality':

- **Congruence:** How can I use forms that mirror the themes of wonder, magic and intimacy?
- **Living questions:** How can I continue to live my inquiry questions wholeheartedly?
- **Aesthetics:** How can I create experiences that have beauty to them for myself and others?
- **Intentionality:** How can I both be explicit about my intention and allow for emergence?
- **Relationality:** How can I create high-quality relationships with others (human and other)?
- **Reflexivity:** How can I continue to question and reflect upon my assumptions and choices?
- **Centring experience:** How can I continue to root my inquiries in experience?
- **Transformation:** How can I continue to create and question the conditions for change?
- **Relevance:** How can my inquiries be in service of my practice and the people I work with?

Of the above, congruence and reflexivity were also especially important to me while writing. As was this kind of ‘intentional unintentionality’ (the wandering metaphor). New quality criteria that emerged while writing this thesis were:

- **Resonance:** How can I invite others to ‘to see as if’ and consider their own questions?
- **Simplicity:** How can I touch the essence by using simple and clear language?
- **Honesty:** How can I honestly explore my inquiries without ‘proofing’ or ‘downplaying’ them?

Like Marshall and Reason (2007) I think of these quality criteria as aspirations. However, because I also thought of them as ‘design questions’, I think I have managed to create and meet them in many of the stories in this thesis. Or at moments when I did not, *that* became the focus of inquiry. And as Reason (2006) notes: quality is not about ‘getting it right’ but about being transparent about your choices and their consequences. I have tried to do so as much as possible in the practice chapters to come, but also did not want to overload you with meta-reflections, to keep the story flowing. Another choice, that is informed by my preference for reading texts that invite me to make my own connections and do not spell everything out. In retrospect, reflexivity was perhaps the criterion I found most difficult to meet. All these quality criteria can be hard work, but continually trying to question my assumptions was so most. And, I suspect there are still plenty of moments in the chapters to come when I did not see or name an assumption. But since these are the assumptions I am perhaps still unaware of, this is quite difficult to see myself, and I hope you can help me to see them as a reader.

### 3.7 Living and loving questions wholeheartedly

In the final section of this chapter, I want to articulate my own unique research methodology, influenced and inspired by all of the above. And I especially want to make explicit how the different methods that I have used feed into and enrich each other, resulting in continuous cycles of action and reflection. I will revisit and more elaborately introduce these methods in the practice chapters to come and this section is therefore meant to offer you an introduction to and overview of the different methods rather than a complete description.

#### Crafting and carrying around questions

At the core of my methodology is my notion of inquiry as wholeheartedly living and loving questions. This is inspired by Rilke's (1929/2010) notion of 'living questions' and Solnit's (2010) notion of 'getting lost'. An intentional decision to wander and wonder, without necessarily searching for an answer, that mirrors the content themes of my research. I found inspiration on how such an approach can be turned into 'research' in Marshall's (1999/2016) 'living life as inquiry' and Mead's (2001) 'living inquiry'. However, I am a different person and a different inquirer and have therefore crafted my own methodology to live questions. I 'find' my inquiry questions at unexpected places and moments: while cleaning my apartment, during a philosophy course or in conversation with colleagues. Something 'clicks' and I know deep-down I found an inquiry question worth exploring: this combination of words touches upon the essence of what is relevant for me right now. The art is in recognising these word combinations, to keep an eye out for them, and then craft them into an inquiry question. For example, I translated the lecture about the Stoic philosophers and their meditations about mortality into: 'how might I live each day as if it's my last?'. What all my inquiry questions have in common, is that they offer me a new way of seeing my life and the world around me, as well as invite me to experiment with new ways of acting and thinking in everyday moments. The choice of words matters, and I noticed these questions often have something like a generative metaphor (Bushe, 2013) contained in them that helps to see something in a different light, such as 'friendship in consultancy', 'living your time' or 'natural rhythm'. And even though these phrases

might not immediately mean anything to you yet without their context, the important thing is that they had this function for me as well as for others with whom I inquired.

These are questions that take their time. My focus is on *living* these questions, by actively carrying them with me to different areas of my life. There is not necessarily an ‘answer’ to how I might live my life as if it’s my last or bring the qualities of friendship to my professional practice but carrying around these questions invited me to see certain moments in a new light. Do I really want to spend my time this way? What if this were indeed my last day? Or: how would I act if I were to meet my friends instead of a group I work with? Which in turn helped me to recognise opportunities for ‘experimenting’ with new ways of thinking and acting in-the-moment. Not as something you do on top of everyday life or practice, but in the midst of acting or in the messiness of everyday life. As I argued elsewhere: “Thinking in terms of experiments can help to create space to try out new things. The word experiment in itself already implies that you try out something new and you don’t yet know how it will turn out” (Verheijen, Tjepkema & Kabalt, 2020:162). This asks for a certain amount of courage, vulnerability and not-knowing. At any given moment in time, I had around three different inquiry questions that I was actively living. Some might disappear to the background, only to re-surface later in time, whereas I ‘lived through’ others after a certain amount of time. My way of knowing when to stop inquiring is by asking myself if a certain inquiry question has become so integrated and ingrained in my way of thinking and acting in everyday life that it does no longer need the extra intention and attention. However, I sometimes thought I no longer needed to for example ‘choose radically’, only to find that taking my attention away from how I make choices, led me to make the ‘wrong choices’ or not choose at all and do too much. Which was a reason to foreground this inquiry question once more.

### **Methods to support me to live and love questions wholeheartedly**

Living and loving questions wholeheartedly is easier said than done. This way of doing research, or of living life, asks for constant attention and intention. To keep on catching myself, and to continue to create cycles of action and reflection. What were methods that supported me to actually live these inquiry questions on a daily basis? I want to highlight three methods here: my daily morning walks,

writing moment-stories and forming temporary constellations of inquiry with others. These methods only became significant and meaningful because they allowed me to explore my inquiry questions in different ways. And my inquiry questions also connected these different methods, because they came back in each of them.

### ***Daily morning walks***

My daily morning walk practice is one of the most important methods to support me to live my inquiry questions. Moreover, it became so powerful and significant precisely because I could explore almost all my different inquiry questions in this method. For example, 'how can I live my life at my own rhythm and pace?' was a question I explored experientially during my morning walks. By quite literally paying attention to the rhythm and pace of my footsteps, as well as what this taught me about how I was doing on that particular morning. The morning walks invited me to (re-)connect to myself and the world around me each morning. And this daily moment of quiet, beauty and connection allowed me to choose how to enter the day on my terms. To live my life at my own rhythm and pace and spend my time in a way I felt was meaningful. Later on, the emphasis of my research shifted to different inquiry questions, such as 'How can I show up differently in my practice?'. Which I explored in my morning walks as a moment to explicitly connect to who I am as a human being, and as a result feeling confident enough to bring this with me to a professional context later that same day. And when a new set of inquiry questions emerged about my connection with the more-than-human world, I could again explore these in my morning walks by trying to see and connect differently to my daily surroundings through my appreciative eye and attempting to get to know my surroundings intimately, as I would a friend.

### ***Writing moment-stories***

The other important method that supported me to live my inquiry questions was writing. As I mentioned in paragraph 3.5, I made use of three forms of writing: journaling, writing fairy tales and writing moment-stories. I always carry around a notebook and write on an almost daily basis.



Journaling is my way to reflect on and make sense of everything that happens to me during the day. I think with my pen, and new ideas for action or experimentation often occur to me while journaling. Writing a story as if from within a moment of wonder or connection was a way to honour and treasure these rare moments. Writing them down, and re-reading them, reminded me that these moments were possible *and* to recognise opportunities for creating more of these moments. That is how the moment-stories directly fed into my endeavours to live my inquiry questions. One example is the story I wrote about a moment in which I cried as a facilitator. This was a significant moment for me in which I intentionally experimented with bringing the qualities of friendship to my professional practice. Although I was not necessarily intending to cry more often, paying prolonged attention to this moment in the form of writing, re-reading and sharing this moment-story with others helped me to continue to live this question. Because it taught me that what I found important as a facilitator was showing my vulnerabilities as a fellow human being, which provided new inspiration and direction to continue to live my inquiry question. And, the physical reminder of this moment in the form of a moment-story encouraged and emboldened me to continue to experiment: if I can show up as vulnerable as crying, I can also show more vulnerable parts of myself in other contexts.

### ***Temporary constellations of inquiry***

I tend to find or invite other people that are interested in inquiring into similar questions. Quite often colleagues from Kessels & Smit, with whom I for instance explored how we could each start our morning differently. For a time, we had a WhatsApp group together to exchange experiences and inspiration, as well as engaged in more informal conversations or even joined each other's morning practices once. For me, this was an important support structure to continue to inquire. Because it gave me the feeling I was not in this alone, it offered mutual inspiration and support and it was a way to ensure I actually committed myself to a particular inquiry because my colleagues would notice if I did not. A constellation of inquirers temporarily forms itself around a question that is intriguing, relevant and important for each of the individual inquirers. The individual journeys and questions of the inquirers temporarily align. An organic, emergent, fluid and temporary group of

inquirers, with no clear initiator or pre-designed method. However, I learned that it does help to create some form of minimal structure to support the inquiry, such as a WhatsApp group to exchange experiences in the case of the group that explored friendship in consultancy (Chapter 5) or starting the morning differently (Chapter 6). But it could also be through taking the time to explore 'Natural Rhythm' five days together in Spain (Chapter 7) or writing a book together about 'Living your time' (Chapter 5). These inquiries were more emergent and less structured than other second-person research methodologies such as co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996). I think temporary constellations of inquiry are valuable because they invite people to each inquire into and experiment with the questions that are relevant to them now in their everyday work and life, rather than alongside it in time set aside 'to inquire together'. As such it is a way to support each other to each *live* your questions.

### Quality as radically choosing for inquiry

What makes walking, writing and wondering with others research rather than part of everyday life? What is my understanding of quality in first-person action research and how have I tried to live up to it? First-person inquiry is intimate and personal. As Marshall (2016) notes: each inquirer crafts her own unique inquiry approach, based on her interests and influences. How can you nevertheless make sure your research is of good quality? Judging by some of the articles on quality in action research (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Marshall & Mead, 2005; Marshall & Reason, 2007; Reason, 2006), this is by no means easy to achieve. Action researchers should theorise assertively *and* realise there is no definitive truth out there, should remain open and inquiring *and* strive to make a difference, to explore and express experience through many different ways of knowing *and* realise the world is utterly unknowable. And when it comes to first-person action research, they should enter into a deep reflective first-person inquiry *and* practice humility and beware for 'misplaced heroic individualism' (Marshall & Mead, 2005) for all processes are relational and participatory. I find Marshall and Reason's (2007) notion of 'quality as taking an attitude of inquiry' the most helpful in this context, which they understand as: "having, or seeking, a capacity for self-reflection, so that we engage our full vitality in the inquiry and attend to the perspectives and assumptions we are

carrying” (Marshall & Reason, 2007:369). They argue this creates research that is ‘both disciplined and alive’. This understanding of quality speaks to me because I also believe quality is situated in the attitude and way of being of the researcher rather than outside of the researcher. I used a slightly different definition of quality for myself whilst engaging in my first-person inquiries: radically choosing for inquiry. The word ‘radical’ derives from ‘root’ and literally means to go to the core, origin or essence. For me, striving to radically choose for inquiry means that I aim to do research in such a way that it touches upon the essence for me but also supports me to be more radical for the world by making a difference in/through my practice. This means I always seek to engage in deep first-person inquiry into the questions that matter to me most *and* continue to try to make sure these inquiries are in service of something bigger. But also, that I indeed aim to step into and live my inquiries wholeheartedly and continue to choose for a radical stance of curiosity, openness and not-knowing. I will revisit the question of quality at the very end of this thesis from a more retrospective perspective. Here, I want to describe how I have attempted to create quality on a day-to-day basis. Like Marshall and Reason (2007), I believe you need certain disciplines that help to enact these qualities of being. I have created my own ‘disciplines’ or ‘processes’ to try to create good quality first-person research, or to continue to choose radically for inquiry, which I will describe in the rest of this section.

### ***Duration and repetition***

My way of systematic and rigorously choosing radically for inquiry is by ‘keeping at something’. I do not just walk a few times but went on a thousand morning walks over a period of four years. I do not simply write in my journal when inspiration strikes but have written almost every day for four years. When I talk about befriending and spending time with significant places, I do not just visit a place like the Sant Aniol Valley once or twice but keep returning there over and over again and ended up spending eight to twelve weeks a year there. In other words: one important way to ensure quality in my research is through duration and repetition. I bring a certain determination, discipline and unconditionality to my inquiries. I take my research seriously and do not enter into my inquiries half-

heartedly. Which also manifests itself in my choice to radically work less to create space and time for my inquiries these past four years, which resulted in considerably lower income.

### ***Continuous cycles of action and reflection***

Another way in which I try to choose radically for inquiry is by continuously creating cycles of action and reflection. I try out something different and then reflect about it in my journal that same day, as well as perhaps explore it during my morning walks experientially or use some other form to make sense of an experience, whether it is through singing, writing or creating a 'sculpture'. But apart from that, I have quite a rigorous practice of being in continuous conversation with people close to me. Every time I experiment with doing something different, I will have inquiring conversations about that particular moment with my supervisor, my mother, a colleague who was present, another colleague who was not... then I might write about these conversations again in my journal, and then I try something new again in another situation based on these insights and then perhaps sit with this question for a few hours in silence somewhere in nature... This constant journaling and these constant critical conversations with peers are important processes to ensure the quality of my work. Sometimes these conversations are with fellow inquirers in these temporary constellations of inquiry, but quite often they are with other people around me. I have become quite good in involving people around me in my first-person inquiries and have created a network of perhaps twenty people around me with whom I have these kinds of continuous conversations. They become something like accomplices in my inquiries, by asking after my inquiries regularly and sometimes nudging me to do something different in-the-moment. Here it helps to have crafted inquiry questions that have a powerful combination of words in them that also resonate with others. My mother might remind me: weren't you trying to choose radically? Or a colleague would invite me to open the session with a personal story as an experiment of showing up differently.

### ***Intention and attention***

Every situation is a potential opportunity for inquiry in this approach – which does not mean that it automatically becomes one. Apart from duration and repetition, the intention and attention I bring

to these specific methods is what distinguishes them from 'everyday practice'. Turning a moment into inquiry is a conscious choice. A moment of intentionally stepping in, allowing something unexpected to happen or deciding in a split-second to try something different. The level of attention I bring to these moments is quite different from what I would bring to 'normal life'. It is as if I temporarily turn up the volume of my levels of attention and awareness, which intensifies the experience, but also means that this can be quite exhausting and that I cannot keep this heightened sense of awareness and attention indefinitely. I try to step into these moments of inquiry wholeheartedly. I know I have done so when I feel vulnerable and slightly at a loss, unsure of what will happen. This usually manifests itself in a fluttering sensation in my belly and an increased heartbeat.

### ***Asking for feedback***

Apart from the continuous conversations with others, I also experimented throughout my research with asking for feedback in written form. I for instance sent 'feedback postcards' to colleagues (Chapter 5), wrote letters and asked for a letter in return (Chapter 6 and 7) or asked fellow inquirers to write a story about our time spent together. I hoped this would invite people to offer more honest, well-considered and detailed feedback than in conversation and to learn more about how my first-person inquiries influenced my practice. Receiving feedback in a written form also offered me the opportunity to reread it carefully. Either to encourage me in my more insecure moments that my inquiries were indeed worthwhile for others or to look up what a colleague wrote about what she saw me do exactly.

In the next chapters, these methods will hopefully come alive through a more detailed description of my different inquiries.

*When I cannot sing my heart  
I can only speak my mind*

## 4. Wonder as windows in time

~

### ***Windows in time***

*September 2016*

*Time is always ticking. Life always moves forward, never a step back or a pause. Onwards. Tick, tick, tick. Perhaps not always with the same speed. Sometimes I feel time slipping through my hands like sand through my fingers. Hours, days and even weeks disappear into the whirlpool of time.*

*Sometimes time moves provokingly slow, gritting and gnawing. With fits and starts.*

*Who owns time? My time, if that even exists? Who decides whether he moves slow or fast, with firm strides or runs around in circles from happiness? Me, right?*

*Time flies by. If I pay close attention, I can see the strokes he leaves behind in the sky. Too fast to see with the naked eye.*

*Still, I sometimes think I feel time's presence around me. Can almost see him in my peripheral vision. I carefully touch the air around me, sensing the spot where he just passed by. It feels different, less solid. A possible weakness in the texture of time.*

*With both hands I make a window, in time. I carefully step through it, right leg first. Where am I? Outside the domain of time. Or perhaps in the midst of the domain of time. A place where time does not count, lasts as long as I want it to last.*

*With a bit of practice, I can recognise these spots, slightly glimmering. And when I do, I create a new window.*

*Looking a fox in the eye during a solo in the mountains. Or walking into a square in Florence while a street musician played that special song. But also closer to home, during a morning walk in the city. Magical moments in everyday time.*

~



In this chapter, I will return to the beginning of my interest in wonder due to a personal crisis. I became intrigued by time: How am I spending and living my time? What is the rhythm and pace with which I want to live and work? I took up different writing practices to explore these questions: journaling, writing fairy tales and writing moment-stories. And, I experienced a first ‘window in time’: when time comes to a halt, stretches itself out, or no longer seems to exist.

I will start with a more theoretical exploration of time (section 4.1), before describing the experience of burning out by making use of journal entries and other forms of writing from that time (section 4.2) and sharing the story of a window in time (section 4.3). I will then reflect on these stories through the lens of wonder (section 4.4) and will share a short story of how I have integrated this in my OD practice (section 4.5), before ending with some overall reflections (section 4.6).

#### 4.1 Time, rhythm and pace

How I spend my time is a personal choice, yet one that is – often unconsciously – informed and influenced by what narrative practitioner Chene Swart (2013) calls ‘the taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs in society’:

We then internalise these ideas and they become part of our way of life and thinking, like a lens through which we see life and our own identities. This lens gives us limited vision, allowing us to see and not see certain things. (Swart, 2013:31)

The philosopher Michel Foucault explores in his oeuvre how these beliefs and ideas determine what we do or say, or in other words: what we consider to be ‘normal’. We do not even have to be told how to behave, dress or even think, for we practice what Foucault calls ‘self-surveillance’. Building on Foucault’s work, Swart draws attention to the power that is hidden in these taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs. Whose voices are privileged in the telling? Who do we authorise to speak for us? Who benefits from these stories?

There seem to be many taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas about time, and how it is well spent in modern Western societies. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that there are some ‘metaphors we live by’, often without being aware of it. These metaphors influence how and what we see, but also how we act – they have ‘the power to define reality’, such as the metaphor ‘time is money’:

Corresponding to the fact that we *act* as if time is a valuable commodity – a limited resource, even money – we *conceive of* time that way. Thus, we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:8)

Time is money has become such an all-pervasive metaphor, that we hardly seem to notice it anymore. Lakoff and Johnson argue that all metaphors are social constructs and necessarily highlight some aspects of a concept and hide others. The metaphor of ‘time as money’ seems to be interwoven with the rise of modernism and capitalism. Weber (1904/2002) first explored his ideas about the disenchantment of the world in ‘the spirit of capitalism’, in which he tried to explain why capitalism was successful in some countries but not in others. He looked for the answer in how Protestantism viewed the world and the place of men in it differently than Catholicism: shift from a direct relationship with God through monastic life and ascetic practice to proving oneself to God through ‘worldly activity’. With this comes the notion of work as a ‘calling’. As a result, hard work became a religious virtue, and idleness and a waste of time became ‘deadly sins’. For the ‘impulsive and spontaneous enjoyment of life’ would distract from the duties of both work as a calling and religion. Weber argues that although Protestantism helped to strengthen and spread the spirit of capitalism, ‘victorious capitalism needs its support no longer’ and has consequently been stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, leading to a new kind of ethic that is singular to capitalism:

In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. (Weber, 1904/2002:53)

An ethic that influences what we might think of as a worthy investment of time. Why would many people choose to spend their time in this way if it does not seem to benefit their happiness? Hannah Arendt explores this same question in 'the human condition' and concludes that what it means to lead a good life, and the position of labour and work in it, has radically shifted over time. Whereas in Ancient Greece a good life was one that was free of the necessity of labour, this has been reversed with the rise of modernity: everything we do needs to be in service of 'making a living'. She believes that the victory of this so-called 'animal laborans' has only become possible because of the secularisation that followed the Cartesian doubt. The only 'aim' that remained was to survive as a human species, and 'to labour to assure the continuity of one's own life and the life of his family'. She paints a bleak picture of our labouring society:

The last stage of the labouring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behaviour. (Arendt, 1958/2013:322)

Vasalou's wonder that aspires to live life consciously seems a direct response to this dazed and tranquilized living. Numerous contemporary philosophers of time (Hermesen, 2009;2014, Huijer, 2015; Safranski, 2018) also believe modernity has changed our experience of and thinking about time: the overall pace of life has increased, a short-term perspective seems to be favoured over a long-term perspective and linear clock time has become all-pervasive, and is valued above alternative understandings of time such as cyclical rhythms of life (Hutchins, 2015; Huijer, 2015) or a form of 'inner time' or 'time as duration' (Hermesen, 2009). How might this understanding of time as money influence the possibility and desirability of wonder in everyday life?

## 4.2 The ashes of the phoenix

I feel it is important to start with my personal crisis, even though this is a difficult time to write about. How much do I show here of how dark and difficult these months, and later years, were for

me? With what intention? What is the boundary between therapy and first-person Action Research? In other words: what 'belongs' in this thesis and what does not? The decisive argument for including a (necessarily shortened) description of my burnout, is that I would not be able to look myself in the mirror otherwise, for this is the only beginning of my research that feels 'true' to me.

### **This life is pretty crazy**

Journal whenever you can, wherever you are... in the morning, at night, in a notebook, on your phone... this is how I remembered Geoff Mead's invitation to take up a journal practice during the first ADOC workshop, when I found myself at a train station in Amsterdam a week later. I felt restless, bored of waiting, and wanted to get on with answering Emails. But in the five-minute-wait, for lack of something better to do, I decided to take out my phone from my pocket and wrote my first journal entry in years and years:

*This life is pretty crazy as it is. These days are crazy long... Pff... 16-hour work days are not necessarily a good thing. On the other hand, everything I do relates to my inquiry question. But if I don't have enough reflection time around it, it loses its purpose inquiry-wise. Again, this really asks for some radical choices in taking care of myself. In order to be a 'good' and 'reflective' practitioner. It is crazy to expect to do any reflection on days like this. (Journal entry, 1/4/2015)*

I notice my desire to inquire and become a 'reflective practitioner' and how far removed this felt from the actual way I was working and living, as well as a first realisation that 'radical choices' were needed. Four weeks later, I called in sick, with what was later diagnosed as a burnout, which Dewulf and Vangronsveld (2012) describe as a work-related condition with a mixture of physical and psychological components, ranging from fatigue to anxiety. The first radical choice? In the meantime, I had bought a leather-bound journal, which I am now reading through for the first time in years. I associate this specific journal with this dark and difficult time and have felt reluctant to remove it from its safe place at the bottom of the pile of journals, afraid to be drawn back into the heaviness. And 'heavy' is indeed what I feel now after re-reading this journal. I notice I am all over

the place in these first journal entries: moving between trusting my own knowing that stopping is the right thing to do and a desire to 'get back to work' as soon as possible. Between acceptance and denial, all in a matter of days.

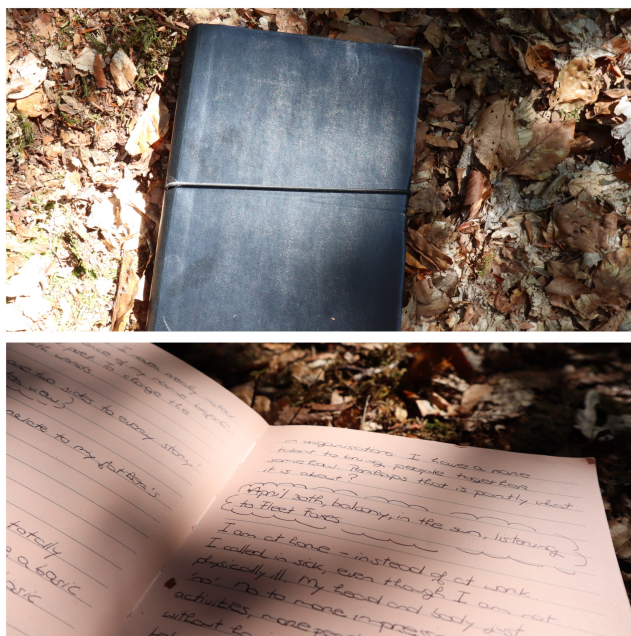


Figure 4 *My first doctoral journal*, photograph September 2019

On the first day I wrote in what now seems a calm and decisive manner:

I am at home – instead of at work. I called in sick, even though I am not physically ill. My head and body just said 'no'. No to more impressions, more activities, more people. Too much happened, without having sufficient time/space in between things to digest and reflect. There's something about the disconnect between my mind and my body. Making that connection again and becoming a 'whole' person. And learning to listen to and with the body. Already Ashridge is doing its work. Maybe it is because of Ashridge that I stopped before I became physically ill. (Journal entry, 30/4/2015)

I think the relationship between starting the doctorate and 'stopping' is worthwhile to explore.

People assumed that the additional workload of a doctorate on top of a busy consulting practice was what did me in. I believe that it was the doctorate's invitation to pause for the first time in years and

to stop running, that allowed me to see the way I was living my life in a different light, and perhaps even gave me the courage to act upon what I saw.

After the initial relief of deciding to stay at home, I mostly seem to have worried about what my colleagues and clients would think when they would hear the true reason for my absence. And whether what I was experiencing was 'normal' or not. The never-ending tiredness that no amount of sleep could cure. The chest pains, the choked throat, the nightmares. At first, I could not accept it. I felt ashamed. Why could I not handle this pace of working anymore when everybody else seemed to manage perfectly fine? What was wrong with me? Why could I no longer keep up?

Somehow this whole thing is already connected with shame. And a sense of failure. I keep on hearing people's voices in my head, even though they are my own. (Journal Entry, 2/5/2015)

I seemed to wrestle with no longer being able to meet the standards of 'the normal' but was also wondering who or what was telling me what was 'normal' in the first place. Some days I seem to have imagined this to be a short break, just a week or two of rest. At other days, the gravity of the situation seems to kick in, especially when I stick to my own intention to listen to my body:

How serious is this? Am I kidding myself in saying it will be better soon? I feel physical changes in my body when I think of work:

- My chest tightens
- I breathe high and short
- My heart hurts
- My neck tenses
- My head hurts

This is not good, not good at all. (Journal entry, 4/5/2015)

My fear is staring at me from the pages: what was happening to me? I had never experienced anything like it, and felt 'let down' by my body, but even more confusingly, by my inability to

perform a simple task such as calling a client without almost throwing up my breakfast. It seemed to take a couple of weeks for me to truly face that this was indeed 'serious'.

These excerpts are only a small glimpse of my experience of burnout, about which I wrote page after page in my journal, for many months to come. And while I have felt physically and emotionally miserable these past two days, simply by re-reading this journal, and reliving those months at home, I scribbled a comment in the side-lines of the above after reading it: 'does it convey the depth of despair?'. I am not sure it does, or can. And I hope you can trust me nevertheless when I say that this was a deeply felt personal crisis, and my life and energy have never been quite the same since.

### **The ashes of the phoenix**

How can you make sense of such a crisis? The most generative understanding of burnout I came across is Janning's (2015) philosophical exploration of 'the happiness of burnout' that reframes burnout as an existential process, essentially focusing on the question 'which life is worth living?'. It is based on the experience of the artist Jeppe Hein, who apparently said: "Burnout is the worst thing that ever happened to me, but it's also been one of the most beautiful things". Halfway through Janning quotes the psychotherapist Dina Glouberman who uses the metaphor of the phoenix for burning out:

The magic bird rises from the ashes. When we burn out, she says, it is our old personality that burns itself out. It is our old way of living that turns into ashes. It becomes evident that a new style of life is necessary. (Janning, 2015:51)

The metaphor of the phoenix appealed to me and deeply resonated with me. Literally burning a version of yourself up, only to emerge once more from the ashes, with a touch of magic. So, while I do choose to use the, perhaps controversial, label burnout here, I want to hold the concept lightly, and mainly think of it as an existential process. Interestingly, Mead (2011) uses the metaphor of 'finding gold in the ashes of our lives' when he refers to the healing potential of storytelling. Perhaps this is no coincidence. For during this crisis, the stories I had about myself and my place in the world,



no longer seemed to make sense. Everything seemed to have gone topsy-turvy. A state of being that Mead (2011) would perhaps refer to as 'narrative wreckage'. Perhaps that is why I turned to story and different forms of (re-)writing my story to make sense of what was happening to me.

The metaphor of the phoenix inspired me to write a fairy tale about the process of burning out. Not hindered by the idea of having to stick to 'the truth' about the process and its possible causes and explanations, allowed me to write more freely and intuitively. Paradoxically, the story feels 'truer' than a conventional true story would be. Up to this day, I do not exactly know how all the characters and events in the story correspond to my actual life. And as a result of that, the story still has a certain mystery to it for me. It seems to capture the essence of my real-life story, without capturing it. And upon every reading of it, a different aspect of the story stands out. It reminds me of a sentence spoken by one of the characters of Chinua Achebe's novel 'Things fall apart' after she is grieving the loss of her child: "I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story." Yet, I did seem to be able to do so in fairy tale form.



*19/11/2016, 8.18, Amsterdam*

~

*Once upon a time there was a young girl who lived in a small village near the sea. She loved to go out to the seaside and chase after the seagulls, swirling around in the foamy waves of the sea. Or run into the adjoining forest to climb the oak trees and dance with the butterflies. The birds, clouds and trees were her closest friends, as was her little sister. She often pretended she could fly and play with her friends the seagulls, blackbirds and magpies. And having such a lively imagination, she almost believed she was. One day she was so lost in her play, that she lost track of time and stayed out too late. Darkness descended upon her, and yet she felt no fear, for she trusted her friends in the sky.*

*Alas, she should perhaps have been more fearful, for her joy made her shine so brightly in the deepening darkness that she could be seen from afar, by good and foul creatures alike. A grumpy old oak tree that had decided to go for a nightly stroll, was so annoyed by her sheer brightness, that he decided to do something about it. "Hey, you, girl!" he shouted, "If you want to be a bird so much, I will turn you into a bird! From now on you will have the soul of a blackbird, but you will be forever trapped in a human body, longing to fly out and be free." Upon which the old, slightly less grumpy, oak tree continued his way. A fox that happened to pass by took pity on the girl. "Yes, you shall have the soul of a blackbird, but a blackbird with magical abilities. There will be a time when your blackbird soul can no longer stand to be inside your human body and will slowly wither and scorch as a result. Like a phoenix, you will have the ability to rebuild yourself from the ashes and emerge more beautiful than ever." Many years have passed since that day and the memory of the old oak tree and the fox gradually faded from the girl's mind, seeming more like a dream than an actual memory. Only when the girl heard the song of the blackbird, she felt her soul longing to fly away and be free. Until finally the day came when her body burned down and she had to rebuild herself from the ashes....*

~

What stands out most to me now in this fairy tale, is the idea of losing the wonder, innocence and joy from childhood somewhere along the way. This seems most present in the description of 'standing out' because of my brightness – either my intelligence, cheerfulness or both – and being 'punished' for doing so. I now think I perhaps hid away or tried to forget about this part of myself in order to fit in and make friends, and also due to the inevitable process of growing up and with that learning a clearer distinction between what is imagined (such as talking to trees and dancing with birds) and what is true. An inner tension between remaining true to myself and my way of

participating in the world around me, and the desire to fit in, have friends, be popular and successful in work and life. Resulting in a difference between how I am on the inside and how I appear on the outside.

## Inquiring into lightness, rhythm and pace

Interestingly, the experience of burning out awakened a longing to reconnect to who I was and how I experienced the world as a girl. And the first inquiry question that I intentionally started to explore that summer was: ‘how can I live my life with more lightness and playfulness?’. I started small, but with zeal. I created a scrapbook to rediscover the things that I loved to do and that gave me energy, but that I had not made time for in years. Most of which I had indeed loved as a girl: being out in nature, singing and playing the guitar, reading and writing stories... And with more time at hand, I started to rediscover these different activities or sides of myself: I climbed a tree, took the time to visit my grandmother, spent most of my day outside, read novels, visited museums, strummed my guitar... Having the time to engage in these activities felt meaningful and nourishing, in the midst of feeling at a loss.



Figure 5 **Photo collage inquiring into lightness**, September 2015

In September 2015, I slowly started working again for two days a week. A process that was far from self-evident. I felt fragile, and dead scared that I would fall back into that dark void without energy. I

often did not feel understood or cared for by my colleagues, who invited me for projects and treated me the same as before, while I felt deeply changed. Throughout the year, but especially in those first weeks, there were times when I just did not think I could continue to work at Kessels and Smit, the context in which I burned out. I can sense the fear in my writing for supervision:

Having experienced a true connection to myself and rediscovering some of the things that I find really important in life, I now feel as if everything around me is attacking and sucking away that very self that I have rediscovered. An image of Harry Potter comes to mind, of the dementors sucking out all the happiness, energy and joy out of a person. (Writing for supervision, October 2015).

Rather a strong image, that does not quite do justice to the good intentions of my colleagues. But it does speak to how lonely and vulnerable I felt. How could I reinvent myself in a context where people knew me in a certain way and that appealed to certain parts of me? How did I want to spend my time and energy from now on? Did I want to work to live or live to work? I chose radically to work less: two days a week with clients, one morning for my research, and two days 'empty space' in which I could continue to reconnect to those other parts of myself. I already shared my explorations with the wider world in a small E-book with two K&S colleagues in December 2015, which seems quite brave in retrospect. I wrote that one important question was to:

search for the right balance, in which the busyness of the full days does not spill over to the empty days. So that the empty time feels genuinely empty, and not just as recuperation time from the full days. (Timmermans, Kabalt & Van Wijngaarden, 2015:19)

During the Christmas break, I travelled to Myanmar with a friend, and reflected on those first intense months:

Time, rhythm, pace... all themes that have featured strongly in my inquiry in the past months. To search for a new rhythm and pace that would suit me. Or to rediscover my own rhythm and pace

again. And dare to organise and live my life accordingly. Even though it is perhaps different from what people expect. Or from what other people do. This line of inquiry into rhythm and pace has been so meaningful for me... I feel it has literally saved my life. I did not realise before how unhappy I was with the way I was living my life for the past years... not until I am now doing it differently. It is really a profound shift. I feel tears coming up in my eyes now... and what the heck, I even start crying... It's mostly a feeling of relief... gratitude and thankfulness... that I am actually stepping out of the treadmill. And living my own life. In the way I think is meaningful. Or am actively inquiring into what that means for me anyway.. (Journal Entry, 20/12/2015)

#### 4.4 Seven years

In these first weeks back at work, I also went to the Sant Aniol valley\* in Spain to spend twenty-four hours alone in nature. A relatively new ritual for me, but an ancient one in many indigenous cultures. This was to be the fourth time I would do so in three years, each time in the Sant Aniol Valley and facilitated by my two friends Korbi\* and Andres\*. By now I knew what to expect, and I was nowhere near as nervous about spending a night alone under the stars as I had been the first time. However, I had also learned that spending twenty-four hours on my own could bring up a lot of emotions. And at the time, there was still rather a lot going on, which made me slightly anxious beforehand. I will describe the practice of sitting still and spending time alone in nature more extensively in Chapter 7. For now, I want to share the story of this particular time on the mountainside, because it was a first and powerful experience of wonder as a 'window in time'.

I wrote this story during the flight back home to Amsterdam, mere hours after returning from the mountainside – the result of clumsy planning. I was quite shaken by the experience, and felt rather out of place at an airport. When I took my seat, I inwardly revisited 'my spot' on the mountainside again. The sensuous memories started to return to me: the smell of wild thyme, the feeling of the rough rock under my sitting bones... And when I closed my eyes, the visual memories slowly flowed back in: the pine trees swaying in the breeze, the shape of the mountains on the horizon... I waited, until I could see the clearing again in my mind's eye, and imagined myself stepping back into it, to sit

down on 'my rock' once more. And as I did so, the feelings and emotions I experienced while sitting there seemed to flood back in, not yet labelled or clearly defined, but I could feel them once more, in my belly and in my heart. This was the moment I took my laptop from my bag and put my fingers to the keys, without a predetermined plan. I wrote about my time on the mountainside, but it felt like I was writing from within the experience itself. The words came in one flow, and I did not take my fingers from the keys for half an hour, so immersed in the writing that I seemed to have lost track of time. This is how my first 'moment-story' was written, and this is therefore still the original, unaltered version.



~

### **Who am I?**

11<sup>th</sup> of October 2015

*Sitting on a single rock in the beautiful Spanish Pyrenees for 24 hours. Contemplating... meditating... listening to all the sounds of the birds and little insects around me... taking in the smells of wild thyme, mixed with lavender and the pine trees that surround me... staring at the mountains in the distance... I start thinking about the last words my friend and colleague Andres said to me before he dropped me off on my spot: "I will be thinking of you and your seven years..." Seven years. Supposedly your body cells change every seven years and you become 'a new person'. And my therapist told me the other day that there are some philosophical traditions that highly value the seven-year cycle in life. According to these traditions, you become 'an adult' in the years between 21 and 28. The seven years that have drawn me to this rock in Spain are all about my father though. Wednesday the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2015, it will be exactly seven years since he died from pancreatic cancer. And coincidentally (or not...), I am now 28 and was 21 when this happened.*

*I decide to get up from my rock and create a little 'history line' with all the major life events of the past seven years. I take the time to find an appropriate little item for each of those events. A yellowed branch of a pine tree for the death of my father, that was quickly followed by two other deaths, that each get a smaller branch. A little flower for the relationship with my ex-boyfriend, and a thorny branch for the way it ended last year. A pinecone for starting the doctorate at Ashridge, and so on... I take the time to express my gratitude, and thank each of the people and events. And when I'm done, and overlook the rock with all the little items on it, it suddenly hits me: these are things that happened to me, people who I am (no longer) connected with, things that I do like studying or working, but it is not who I am essentially. This may seem pretty straightforward, but I suddenly realise how much I have identified with these things, events or activities up until now.*

*This insight hits me like lightning, and I feel the need to sit down and meditate on it. A few seconds after I sit down on 'my rock' again, a beautiful and enormous deep-red fox appears out of nowhere and starts to walk straight towards me from downhill. Yesterday I mentioned to my friend Korbi that I had never seen a wild fox before. And here it is... looking bigger and more beautiful than I expected.*

*Time seems to have come to a halt and I am touched by the magic of the moment. And I start thinking: wow, this is a pretty big animal. Could it be dangerous? What if it comes even closer towards me? Aren't foxes animals that bite? All of a sudden, I feel a sense of fear rushing through*

*me. In that instant, the fox looks me in the eye, suddenly seems fearful as well when it sees me, and disappears as quickly as it has come. A bit shaken, I sense a presence on my left and see a little lizard sitting next to me. I feel grounded once more. And the strange feeling comes over me that I am both the fox and the lizard.*

*Throughout the remainder of the 24 hours, I feel completely present. I feel like all my senses are amplified. I can hear all the different birds, insects, the rustling of the lizard... I can spot a slight movement in the distance... I feel the wind and the sun on my face... and all of this at the same time. It feels extraordinary. And I'm scared once more, overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. Sitting still makes me realise that everything around me is always moving. And that is OK. There is no need to hold on to things that are gone.*

*I am almost at the end of my time on the mountain. At least that is what I suspect from looking at the position of the sun. I stop to think back to what brought me here. My father. I have not actually thought of him that explicitly. Again, I see something moving in the corner of my eye. It is a yellow autumn leaf falling. Something dying, how fitting. I look again. The autumn leaf is moving towards me. It is not an autumn leaf at all, but a big bright yellow butterfly. An autumn leaf disguised as a butterfly. Or a butterfly disguised as an autumn leaf. Both death and life.*

~

I am struck by how the attentive re-reading of my own story seems to bring back my body-memory of that specific moment. I can almost see my view again, feel the sun on my knees, hear the lizard on my left and reconnect to that sensation of being fully alive, of being part of a world bursting with life, as if the volume on all my senses was turned up from ten to hundred percent. And I am intrigued by how some stories can seem to do that, transport me back to a moment, and wonder to which places this story might have transported you, who were not there with me. Or were you? Did you travel with me to that sunny mountainside in Spain? Or did it perhaps transport you to a moment with a similar quality to it in your own life?

This experience was incredibly meaningful for me, and every time I re-read my own story, I notice different themes: my father's death, the encounter with the other in the form of the fox, the opening up of the senses, the feeling of interconnectedness, the fear, the insight that I am something else or more than I thought, the improvised ritual to reflect upon and thank the past seven years... The experience was so rich and deep, but also confusing, that I was not sure how to make sense of it. Yet, it was an experience that I, quite literally, treasured. Before I left the mountainside, I gathered some sprigs of thyme and lavender, a bit of tree bark and some pinecones. Together, they re-created the smell of that specific place. Perhaps this was an attempt to bring something tangible of the experience back home with me, as well as a ritual to mark the end of my time there. When I came home, I placed them in a small glass box. A few days later, my K&S colleague Saskia\* gave me a miniature fox after reading my story, which I placed in the glass box together with the rest. This box became a representation of that meaningful moment, a way of honouring and treasuring it, that I placed visibly in my apartment. Sometimes my eyes would just briefly linger on it on my way to work, sometimes I would open the lid, inhale the smell, and feel myself briefly transported back to the mountainside.



*Figure 6 Treasuring the encounter with the fox, October 2015*

#### 4.4 Writing as seeing and moments of magic

Some of the stories in the above felt like be experiences of wonder. But what sort of wonder were they? And what enabled or evoked them?

##### Writing as seeing

In the first section of this chapter, I argued that how we think of time is a social construction, influenced by taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs as well as the metaphors we live by. What might then be a way to become aware of and perhaps even change how you think of and experience time? I wonder how Swart's and Foucault's notion of the (unconscious) lens through which we see our own identities and the world around us, relates to Rubenstein's and Vasalou's description of wonder as 'truly seeing'. Could wonder be a way to become aware of this lens? I think writing can be a particularly powerful way to 'see' or 'hear' stories, and consequently question them – and I believe this can only be done in this order. Mead notes that the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are “reflect who we are now and shape who we are becoming” (Mead, 2011:61) and Solnit argues that in order to 'learn to be free' we need “to hear [stories], to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them and then to become the storyteller” (Solnit, 2014:4).

Writing about/during my burnout allowed me to examine my own stories more critically because it enabled me to become aware of taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas and the unconscious lens through which I was judging myself. Did I truly consider a life with a successful career as a life well lived? Swart (2013) argues that telling, thickening and naming a story can help to create a 'separation' between the storyteller and the story itself and allow you to see and examine the story and choose your desired relation with or position towards a certain story. How has this story influenced who I have become? Do I want more or less of this story in my life? And as such to become the author of your own life. One possible way of doing so for me seems to be through writing. And even though some might argue that writing 'fixes' a story, I find the effect of separation becomes stronger, when I can literally see my story on the page. The different forms of writing each seemed to have enabled me to 'see' my life in a different light. I confided to my journal, what I dared

not yet utter out loud. And once it was written down on the page, it was much more difficult to ignore. And in fairy tales, I could safely explore themes that were still complex and raw. Writing moment-stories was a way to pay prolonged attention and treasure specific moments, to 'rescue' these moments from 'the whirlpool of time'.

I think my burnout was partly caused by my personal circumstances but can also be thought of as a symptom of and/or a response to the dominant discourse of disenchantment. At first, I thought of it as an experience of utter disenchantment with the automatic, functional and dazed way of living that Arendt describes. It awakened a desire for more wonder in my life, but I now also think of it as an experience of wonder in and of itself: the feeling that the very ground on which you stand suddenly appears uncanny. Becoming aware of how the discourse of disenchantment had unconsciously influenced my choices and story about myself, did not mean that I could easily ignore or it. Again, there seems to be a tension between enchantment by design and enchantment by emergence. Do Foucault's ideas about the disciplining effect of discourses imply that the only hope is to change these societal discourses? Or can you individually choose how to respond to them once you become aware of them? His later interest in the ethics of self-care seems to suggest he did believe in the possibility of personal choice. Inspired by the Greek and Roman philosophers, he argues that we should apply aesthetic values to our own lives in order to become 'masters' of our own life and existence:

We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society, that the principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence. (Foucault, 2010:362)

He thinks of this as a political and aesthetic choice that is personal, and that I would think of as another strategy of enchantment by emergence. His idea of thinking of your self and life as a piece of art inspired and empowered me in those first months to start small, by looking at and experimenting in my own life, rather than either trying to change the whole system or discourse (whether it was K&S or society at large) or not do anything at all, because it was too big to change

anyway. As a result, my own theory of change slowly seems to have shifted to an individual and emergent approach. I do think it is interesting to note how much easier this was when I temporarily stepped out of 'the jobholder society' and its dazed and rushed way of living during my months at home. Or when I was in a context where the discourse of disenchantment felt far removed, such as in the Spanish Pyrenees.

I believe wonder is an explicit response to this dazed and automatic way of living, especially Rubenstein's and Vasalou's understanding of wonder as truly seeing and being alive to the world, but Carson's sense of wonder is also an argument to open up the senses again, rather than live in this tranquilised way. I think that my burnout, and the consequent 'stepping out of the treadmill' were an important first step towards wonder. Not only because it invited me to see and question these taken-for-granted ideas about time, success, money and which life is worth living but also because I was less 'busy' as a result of it. And as Moore notes: "it's difficult to imagine being busy and enchanted at the same time. Enchantment invites us to pause and be arrested by whatever is before us; instead of our doing something, something is done to us" (Moore, 1996:6).

### **Moments of magic**

My encounter with the fox seems the most obvious experience of wonder from the section above. But what sort of wonder was this? How did it come about? An interesting side effect of honouring and treasuring my time on the mountainside, is that I have felt a certain reluctance to examine it from a more theoretical perspective. Might the metaphor of looking at it obliquely help? If I do compare my experience with the literature on wonder, it seems to resemble Bennett's description of a 'mood of enchantment' most, I recognise its characteristic paradoxical feelings: it felt beautiful and insightful, but also fearful, overwhelming and uncanny. Bennett furthermore describes this mood as a sensuous, bodily sensation that is characterised by: 'the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' (Bennett, 2001:5). I especially recognise the suspension of chronological time, as I explicitly mentioned in the notion of a window in time, but I also wrote that I 'felt the need to sit down'.

This does seem to be a wonder that strikes unexpectedly, and that leaves you wonderstruck. But what was it that struck me? The first response that comes to mind is: the appearance of and encounter with the fox. Wasn't that what gave this moment such a wondrous quality? The unexpectedness as well as the beauty of seeing the fox, that brief moment when our eyes locked? Perhaps this then also resembles Fisher's wonder that is characterised by the delight caused by seeing something for the first time. For this was the first time I saw a wild fox in my life (however difficult to believe that might be for some). Would the effect have been the same if it had been a rabbit or deer that entered the clearing? If I read my own story more carefully, I notice that the 'striking' or the 'stabbing awake by a strange event' as Parsons (1969) calls it, was not caused by the unexpected arrival of the fox, but rather when I overlooked the history line I had created. The insight that I was something else or more than this representation, was what in my own words 'hit me like lightning'. The sudden appearance of the fox accentuated and amplified this feeling and added uncanniness as well as beauty to the experience. But it was not the 'newness' of the fox that evoked this feeling of wonder, but rather the insight that shook the very foundations of who I thought myself to be that made my head swim. And seen in that light, this resembles more of a Socratic kind of wonder that 'throws even the unquestionable into question' (Rubenstein, 2008). And apart from delight, it also evoked the vertigo of Socratic wonder.

I now wonder whether I have not focused too much on the appearance of the fox in my telling and thinking about this moment, which might have distracted me from this deeper insight and meaning. Rethinking my own identity, seemed to temporarily dissolve the boundary between myself and the world. And whilst this was a beautiful feeling, it was also immensely frightening. There was nothing to hold onto anymore, everything was alive and flowing, and I was flowing with and in everything. I did not know how to put this feeling into words. And was grateful when, quite some time afterwards, I read other people's descriptions about moments that seemed to have a similar quality to them: *that* is what it felt like! Reading David Abram's description of 'magic' as the feeling that all your explanations fall away, and the world is 'awake' and you with it that I mentioned in Chapter 2 deeply resonated with me. And Peter Reason's description of 'moments of grace' gave me the



uncanny feeling that he was exactly describing what I had experienced during this moment, especially the way he stresses both the temporal quality – a tiny moment – as well as the experience of wholeness or interconnectedness:

Moments of grace occur when a crack opens in our taken-for-granted world, and for a tiny moment we experience a different world that is nevertheless the same world. It is a world that is not fixed in form, but forever changing: no longer divided into separate things, but one dancing whole. (Reason, 2017:ix)

Might his idea of a 'crack' be similar to my idea of a 'window'? Both make me think of Rubenstein's metaphor of wonder as a wound, as an opening or rift. Did the insight that 'struck' me open the wound of wonder? There seemed to be a difference between the intense moment of striking that seemed to last mere seconds, and a lingering opening up of the senses that lasted longer. Perhaps the former is the creation of the wound, and the latter the time when the wound is still open. When and how did the wound close? Is it simply a matter of time, or might I perhaps have closed or at least covered the wound of wonder myself when I entered the airport? I remember how I felt the need to protect myself, close myself off, because all the noises, smells and sounds were completely overwhelming. If I take the metaphor of wonder as a wound even further: did the wound completely heal afterwards, or did it perhaps leave a mark or scar? Can my attempts to treasure and revisit this moment be thought of as deliberate attempts to re-open the wound of wonder?

This was a moment that occurred during that trying time, recovering from a burnout and attempting to work again whilst staying true to a newly (re)discovered version of myself. This glimpse of something magical made an enormous difference to me and showed me that some different way of being in the world was possible, and awakened a deep longing within me to experience more of these kinds of moments in my life, and not just while sitting alone on a mountainside, but also in my everyday life. Unfortunately, this was not as straightforward as it might seem, and the utter openness of my senses and feeling of enchantment quickly faded away as I went back to live and

work in Amsterdam. Nothing I tried, in Spain or at home, seemed to bring back that strong feeling of magic. And only after I resigned myself to the idea that I might not experience this feeling again, I started to stumble upon other moments that had a somewhat similar quality to them. For instance, while wandering through the streets of Florence after I had facilitated my first week-long change conference after my burnout and felt I had managed to do so on my own terms. I entered a little square in front of a church just when a street musician started playing a beautiful acoustic version of John Lennon's Imagine: "you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one..." The song we played on my father's funeral and have engraved on his memorial bench in the Dutch dunes. A coincidence perhaps, but once again I experienced this feeling of being fully alive, of being both the musician and the music itself, as well as the sun on the cobblestones...

#### 4.5 Writing stories with others

One way in which I have integrated these insights in my OD practice, is by inviting others to write moment-stories of their own. My colleague Martijn\* and I both experimented with writing stories about meaningful moments ourselves, and decided to use writing to end a year-long programme with civil servants. Inspired by the work of Turner-Vesselago, Shotter and Swart, and our own experiences, we created a handout with instructions for the group. After about thirty minutes of writing, we got together again as a group: what was it like to write like this? The conversation that followed was surprisingly rich. Everybody seemed to be able to make the connection between the process of writing the story and their actual live story. One participant shared how this programme had made her realise she wanted to shift things around in her life: work at a different pace, find a job in which she would truly be appreciated for her talents and move back to her hometown. "But how does the story continue?" she asked us, with a trace of desperation in her voice. Martijn voiced my thoughts one second before I could do so myself: "Do you mean the story on the paper or your life story?". "Both," she replied. "What would it be like to experiment with writing different endings? You could write an epilogue, or from the future if you like...", I suggested. Something seemed to 'click' for her, her physical demeanour changed, and I imagined I saw a slightly mischievous twinkle

in her eyes. “Can I just do that?”, she asked somewhat incredulously. “Of course you can, it is your story!”, I responded.

A month later we met again, marking and celebrating the end of the course, through reading each other’s stories. Our full attention on the printed piece of paper on our laps, every now and then somebody looked up from the paper to the author of the story, as if we tried to match the person in front of us with the person on the paper. After reading each story, we asked questions and gave reactions. What was it like to write this story? Which new insights emerged? What touched you as a reader? We invited the group to keep two principles in mind while discussing the stories: ‘keep the coin in the air’ by prolonging that moment of possibility and inquiry, by allowing the story to be multiple things at once and ‘respect authorship’ by staying close to the language of the author and use their words whenever possible. The invitation was to ask ‘storying questions’: What drives the main character? What is not said or told in the story? What could the story look like from the perspective of one of the other characters?

After this experience, both Martijn and I have used a variation of this form in different contexts. We no longer ask people to write the story beforehand, but simply ask people to write for thirty minutes and then read their story out loud to two or three others. Reactions we often hear are: “I discovered something new about myself while writing”, “sharing stories in this way is very intimate and allows you to get to know the other person deeply” or “through sharing the story, it suddenly became clear to me what I have to do differently”. Whereas I often ask people to tell personal stories to each other, inviting them to write and especially read their writing out loud seems much more intimate, and raises ethical questions for me. I always stress that if someone does not want to read their story for whatever reason, they can choose to keep it to themselves. But also emphasise that it is not about writing ‘good’ stories, but about sharing ‘real’ stories. And this deeper level of intimacy that can become possible between someone and the page, and with others, is also precisely why I am interested in this method. However, I also learned that it did not have the same ‘magical effect’ everywhere and with everybody. Perhaps because I tried to copy this ‘successful’ form too easily

from one context to another. Or because it is too vulnerable and intimate for some contexts and settings, and therefore unsafe.

#### 4.6 Concluding thoughts

The experience of burning out evoked a strong desire and longing for more wonder in my life. For opening my senses, seeing and encountering beauty and feeling 'alive' to the world once more. For seeing and participating in the world as a child might do, and rediscovering many of the activities that I loved to do as a child. And in hindsight, this deep questioning of how I lived my life and spent my time, and how ridiculous and arbitrary everything seemed once I started doing so, may in itself have been an experience of wonder that 'makes uncanny the very ground on which we stand' as Rubenstein argued.

Based on the explorations above, I want to again emphasise the distinction between wonder as a form of seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary on the one hand, and a full-on wonder that strikes you on the other. Building on Abram's understanding of magic as those moments when the ordinary begins to shine, as well as Reason's notion of moments of grace when the world is one dancing whole, I want to call this kind of wonder 'moments of magic' from now on. For it seems this kind of magic can only be experienced momentarily, in actual micro-moments or glimpses. I continue to think of these moments as 'windows' or 'cracks' in time, in which I feel deeply connected to the world and see a glimpse of a different way of being and relating. Moments that have a certain beauty to them, and from which I seem to emerge differently than I was before. Or if I put it more directly: these are the moments when I feel fully alive within a world that is fully alive.

These moments make a mark, or leave an impression. Practices that help to pay prolonged attention to such moments, such as my method of writing moment-stories, seem to help to continue to revisit these moments. However, I found that there is a risk in highlighting only certain aspects of the moment. And it seems important to continue to remember that these are only (re)presentations of the experience, not the experience itself. This first exploration of moments of magic also raises

further questions. How do these moments of magic come about? Is it possible to create them or can they only be stumbled on accidentally? How might I do so for myself, and how might I potentially even do so with and for others? Do you need to travel to faraway places or spend twenty-four hours on a mountainside to experience them, or might it also be possible to experience them closer to home, in everyday life or perhaps even in organisations? It does however not seem a coincidence that I only started to experience them after I considerably slowed down in my life, echoing the point that busyness, and a dazed or automatic mode of living that might come with it, is not conducive to wonder or magic.

*Waits at the window*

*Wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door*

*Who is it for?*

## 5. Wonder as living questions

~

### ***Your last day***

October 2016

*What would you prefer: live each day as if it's your first? See everything through the eyes of a child, curious, with wonder? Or live each day as if it's your last? A worthy last day in which you only do those things that truly matter, and savour them all the more.*

*That was the question philosopher Lammert Kamphuis asked a room full of people. Almost everybody chose for a child's wonder. The prospect of death scares. Deters.*

*Me too of course. And yet I chose the second option. The idea of finitude, the demarcation, makes the now more real. Now is now. And now is when it happens. Now is not forever. And that is OK, but I do want to make something of my life now. Not tomorrow or next week, no, today.*

*Go to that appointment this afternoon that feels meaningless? Fret for hours about something that 'went wrong' this morning? Do something now because it will perhaps one day benefit my career? And what if this were indeed my last day? Would I want to spend my time like that? Well, rather not. 'No' suddenly becomes much easier. Life is more fluid than I thought.*

*Thinking about death is not something we enjoy. We prefer to pretend our time lasts forever. The Stoic philosophers in Ancient Rome encouraged everyone to meditate daily about their death. So death can no longer surprise you or take you off guard. And live each day as if it's your last.*

*Fully living. Truly living. If we are confronted with our own mortality or that of someone close to us, we feel and know that once more. For a while. Until the forces of the everyday conquer us again. Whereas death is always just around the corner. And if we do remember, perhaps, John Lennon will be wrong for once when he sings: life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.*

~



In this chapter, I will focus on my attempts to bring something of the wonder I rediscovered into my professional practice as I started working again. I experimented with different ‘micro-gestures’ in my practice in organisations. How might I show up differently in my work? How might I bring the qualities of friendship to my work? These inquiry questions led me to explore the boundary between public and private, as well as my own ideas about what it means to be a ‘good OD practitioner’.

I will first turn to how the idea of ‘living questions’ inspired me to explore what wonder might look like in organisational contexts (section 5.1), before sharing my experiments with ‘showing up differently’ (section 5.2). I will then reflect on these stories through exploring the gesture of vulnerability, the power and participation of the facilitator and the support structures that helped me to live questions (section 5.3), and on how my effort to live questions might have made a difference for my practice (section 5.4). And end with summarising the insights of this chapter (section 5.5).

## 5.1 Wonder-full organisations

What could wonder look like in organisational contexts? What would that ask of me in my role as OD practitioner? As I mentioned earlier, there does not appear to be written much about enchanted or wonder-full organisations, and Boje and Baskin are one of the few who do: “the issue here is whether people experience their workplaces as enchanted – places of wonder in which they are full participants – or disenchanted, as well as what that means for their organisations” (Boje & Baskin, 2011:419). I am struck by their characterisation of an enchanted workplace: *places of wonder* in which people are *full participants*. This seems to both refer to whether they feel they can participate in decision-making and their voice is heard, as well as to whether they can show up in their workplaces as full or whole human beings. They note that the discourse of disenchantment prevails in most organisations and is often encouraged by management. But in the end, they seem to think of enchantment mostly as an individual choice:

The decision to live with a sense of enchantment or disenchantment is personal and emergent. [...] It seems to us that most people prefer an enchanted work life, but are capable of living either way and will respond to the storied spaces in which they find themselves. As a result, while the dominant narrative of the traditional management discourse emphasises control/disenchantment, people in organisations will work very hard to recapture their sense of meaning, purpose and power in their work. (Boje & Baskin, 2011:419)

This does make me wonder how much the field of organisational development might have allied itself with (the interests) of management. Could this be one of the reasons why enchantment is so little mentioned in OD literature? Is enchantment too much at odds with our organisational language and concepts? A rational and mechanistic approach of organisations and organising, or a disenchanted one, still seems to be the norm. Resulting in what Habermas (1987) called the difference between the 'system-world' of organisations with a focus on rules and results and the 'life-world' of everyday life that focuses on human interactions. Mead (2011) has taken up Habermas' call for 'communicative spaces' that can 'bridge' these two worlds which he understands as: "opportunities for people in organisations to come together on equal terms to share what really matters to them as living, loving, struggling human beings, who are part of and not separate from the systems in which they work" (p.178). How might you do so?

Enchantment by design and enchantment by emergence each have a different theory of change embedded within them: how and where does change start, at the individual level, the organisational or level or both? Consequently, each will come with different change interventions. Can first-person Action Research be thought of as a methodology to enable enchantment by emergence? It does seem to start with an individual response, and individual gestures, rather than with changing the dominant discourse in the organisation. Marshall however argues that small shifts in behaviour can potentially influence systemic change:

First person action research is not necessarily about making major interventions for change in a situation, although it might be. Often inquiry is about the micro practices of behaviour [...] This does not mean that micro inquiry is unambitious. Systemic change can be influenced by small shifts in behaviour. (Marshall, 2016:49)

The idea that 'change happens one conversation at a time' (Tjepkema, Verheijen & Kabalt, 2016) seems to come from a similar theory of change. Building on the philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), a conversation can be thought of as a series of gestures and responses. And while you can consciously choose your own gesture, the meaning of the gesture is in the response of the other, which you cannot control. You can however choose each gesture and response consciously, and in doing so, you are 'changing the conversation'.

Marshall's idea of 'living life as inquiry' as well as Mead's (2001) notion of 'living inquiry' open the possibility to explore the big questions around wonder and enchantment in organisations through *living* them and experimenting with new micro-gestures, one conversation at a time. I nevertheless wanted to articulate what 'inquiry' meant for me, rather than copy their understanding. I turned to two of my favourite authors in order to do so, for I found they captured my understanding of inquiry in a poetic way:

You are so young, all still lies ahead of you, and I should like to ask you, as best as I can, dear Sir, to be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. Do not now strive to uncover the answers: they cannot be given you because you have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. Live the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future. (Rilke, 1929/2011:24)

[T]o be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through

geography. That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost. (Solnit, 2006:6)

If I reflect on these two quotes several qualities or characteristics of inquiry stand out:

- The invitation to *stay with a question*, to dwell and linger, to slow down, instead of rushing to an answer.
- The notion of *living the questions*. To experience them, feel them, do them and play around with them, rather than merely think about them.
- The *type of questions* that are worth living. Questions that come from the heart and are utterly simple and extremely complex, about everything and nothing.
- The emphasis on *the process of questioning* rather than the possible outcome of that process. Living questions is not a means to an end, but a way of living that is worthwhile in itself.
- The *intentionality of getting lost* and staying in that place of uncertainty. That mysterious, unknown place where new things come into being.
- The notion of a *physical space* of inquiry instead of merely a mental or metaphorical space.

For me, inquiry is therefore about loving and living questions, by intentionally choosing to dwell and stay with meaningful questions and explore them wholeheartedly, without searching for an answer. And be open to 'the moments when something new enters into us, something unknown to us' (Rilke, 1929/2011:52). This requires courage, to go fearwards as Marshall would say, or in Rilke's words: "the only kind of courage that is demanded of us: the courage for the oddest, the most unexpected, the most inexplicable things that we may encounter" (Rilke, 1929/2011:54).

## 5.2 Experimenting with showing up differently

When I went back to work, I started to notice I had a strong image of what it means to be a 'good' OD practitioner: endlessly energetic and creative, from dawn until dusk, always in service of others or the change initiative. Where did my ideas about what it means to be a good practitioner come from? Good for whom or what, and on whose terms? I also started to notice how much I wanted to fit in, be liked and be 'successful' in the eyes of others. I was confused, but also somewhat intrigued,

by how deeply I was apparently influenced by these stories about what it means to be 'successful'. I thought I never cared much for money, status or prestige. Or did I? I felt a strong pull to conform, to work just as much as the rest of my colleagues did, to earn as much money, to work at a similar high pace.... But I simply *could* not, my mind and body were not up to the task anymore. And there was also a part of me that *would* not want to work in this way anymore, and risk another burnout.

One question or thought experiment that supported me at that time was: how would I choose to spend my time if today was my last day? For me, the effect was that I chose to spend my time on things that really mattered to me, and on which I wanted to spend my time, rather than on those things I thought I should spend my time. Later, I thought of this as 'radically choosing':

I want to choose more radically. For myself. But also for the type of work I want to do, the colleagues I want to work with... The idea of 'choosing radically' gave me a lot of energy. And a feeling of agency/feeling empowered again. And thinking: what do I want to choose *for*? Instead of what don't I want to do... (Email to Kate McArdle, 25/4/2016)

I had this idea that I first needed to choose radically for myself, in order to be radical for the world. I thought I could only make a difference, if I continued to take care of my 'self as an instrument' as Cheung-Judge (2001) calls it. But I also liked the notion of radically choosing because the word radical derives from root, origin or essence. Was radically choosing a way to reconnect to and choose from my/for the essence? Now, I am struck by how the notion of living each day as if it's my last resembles Carson's invitation to see the natural world as if 'for the first or last time'.

### **What does it mean to be a good OD practitioner?**

Both thought experiments invited me to question this notion of a 'professional' or 'good' OD practitioner that I had unconsciously integrated: why would there be such a big difference between how I am at home with family and friends and how I show up in professional contexts? How might I stay closer to myself in professional contexts and show different sides of myself there? Especially because I became convinced that we need more human-to-human encounters in organisations if we

are to bring some form of enchantment back to those contexts in which so much of our actual lives take place. And, I craved those encounters myself as well. I had no energy to even think about attempting to change entire organisational cultures, but I could choose to try to show up as a fellow human being rather than in what I considered to be my professional role. And perhaps, this might invite others to show more human sides of themselves in response. 'How can I show up differently?' became an inquiry question that I actively 'lived', resulting in several 'cycles of action and reflection'. I wrote an elaborate 'moment-story' about my first attempt to experiment with this question.

~

### ***An exhibition in silence***

*November 2015*

*What shall we do at our closure meeting? My colleague Martijn and I have facilitated a leadership programme with business controllers of a Dutch municipality for 10 months now, meeting the group every month or so. The group started off hesitantly, an awkward start at a wrongly booked meeting room, the group gazing at us from behind big computer screens, slightly sceptical of our personal and unstructured approach. And yet, we have been on a journey with them. The group opening up more and more, showing themselves and their vulnerability. "I heard two other colleagues mention an exhibition in silence the other day... we could do that?", suggests Martijn. I like the idea and offer to introduce it at the next meeting, jumping at the opportunity to turn this into an experiment for my inquiry question 'how can I show up differently in my professional context by showing more sides of myself?'. I immediately grab my laptop to prepare a PowerPoint presentation (the first in years) with pieces of art that have deeply touched me in the past year. A photography exhibition of my sister, listening to Paul McCartney play Blackbird live (Ha! I recorded that with my phone, let's use that!), that Matisse exhibition I really enjoyed... Another colleague looks over my shoulder and asks me why I'm smiling. Full of enthusiasm, I relate our idea. "Business controllers? You are asking financial people in high positions to make art? Are you quite sure you can pull this off?", he says. I stubbornly continue working on my presentation.*

*"So... the next session is our final session. And we are going to invite you to create a piece of art inspired by the question: 'What is the essence of this leadership programme that you would like to bring into the future?'. I continue with personal stories about each of the pieces of art in my*

*PowerPoint presentation, taking care to cover a wide range of art forms. Feeling self-conscious of showing myself in this way. Making an effort to make it a little more personal, since we are inviting the group to do something personal here as well. I leave some time for the group to individually or in pairs think about their piece of art. Some people start to write down ideas, but most just look a little lost to be honest. Did I overdo it?*

*A few weeks later we meet for our final session. For once, we have invited everyone at our own office at the Maliebaan. A totally different atmosphere. The exhibition space is set up, people installing or putting up their pieces of art. I officially open the exhibition, with a little speech. Inviting everyone to step into silence and to look at the pieces from the heart. All the while thinking: what sort of things would people have made? And I start to walk around... Wow. Even if I would have wanted to say something, words would have failed me. I see a photograph of one of the participants and her daughter titled 'a loving fist'. I see a painting with four puzzle pieces, beautifully drawn, but what touches me is the title 'It took me 54 years to realise...' With a few lines explaining how she rediscovered her own strength and finally realised that she was fine, more than fine, the way she was. Not needing to be someone else. I see a running shoe, sawn in half, with a few lines on how there are always different layers in everything. I see a beautiful personal reflection alongside a picture of horses. But what I see most of all is people who have put their heart and soul in crafting something meaningful, for themselves and the group. People who have shown their vulnerability and were prepared to try something new.*

*And when I arrive at Ashridge later that same night, deer peering at me from the dark, I still feel the excitement in my entire body. And have a little proud voice in my head saying, to my doubtful colleague and all the others who say a form like does not work 'in the real world': if we can do this with financial civil servants, we can do this with everyone!*

~

I notice an assumption that when I ask others to show their vulnerability, I should be willing to do so myself. And that when I show my vulnerability, this might invite others to do so. Both these assumptions were new for me, and radically different from the assumptions I previously worked from: my role is to create a safe space for others by providing structure and radiating self-confidence and the more I show my own uncertainty and vulnerability, the less likely it becomes that the group



will trust me and step into the process. By this time, these felt more like two competing sets of assumptions, rather than that I had shifted from one to the other. Hence my uncertainty, as well as need and desire to prove these assumptions, which I recognise both in the sceptical colleague, as well as in the tone of voice in which the entire story is written, which I would characterise as somewhat boastful. I recognise my own tendency to mask uncertainty with something that resembles arrogance. And while I can easily spot the vulnerability and uncertainty underneath when I read words like ‘proud’ and ‘excitement’, I am not sure if others would. I also seem to play with assumptions around what belongs in the private space versus in the professional space. Is it appropriate to share stories about meaningful moments, about my own inspiration, about family members? To invite the participants to share their personal stories?

### Friendship in consultancy

Some months later, I joined a slightly rebellious subgroup with five colleagues during an event about the future of Kessels & Smit that rallied around the design question: how might we bring the qualities of friendship to our professional practice? This question seemed closely related to my question on ‘showing up differently’, and I therefore gladly seized the opportunity to enrich my inquiry by working and exchanging with others. We jokingly called ourselves the ‘Best Friend Forever’ or ‘BFF’ consultants – a name that stuck. We came up with different forms to explore these questions as we went along: we exchanged stories of moments when we felt we had already managed to integrate the qualities of friendship in our work, and we explored an unresolved issue of one of us with a client. How might we approach this same situation differently from the position of a professional and that of a friend? We literally changed positions by standing at different sides of the room, and several of us remarked on how different it felt to stand on either side. The side of friendship felt lighter, easier somehow. We noticed how many assumptions we each carried around what it means to ‘act professional’, and how this at times might get in the way of entering into a human-to-human relationship. In the case we played out, a conversation about money, our professional attitude seemed to result in a client-supplier relationship, rather than in our desired partnership relationship. Thinking of the other as a friend, made us ask more direct questions, like: why is this so

important to you? But it also supported us to share more of our own feelings, such as: these questions about money make me feel unseen and unappreciated. Furthermore, regarding the other as a friend made us assume the other's best intentions and see the best in the other. However, the idea of friendship also raised questions: can you assume friendship one-sidedly? Can you let your 'friends' pay for the time spent together? Might the professional role also bring us something, such as protect us from criticism or the emotions of the people we work with?



Figure 7 A day in the life of a BFF consultant, March 2016

Despite the questions, we became more intrigued as time moved on, and continued our exploration by each imagining 'a day in the life of a BFF consultant' through creating a collage. What could it look like in practice? I browsed enthusiastically through the pile of magazines, cutting out images that caught my eye: The Beatles, a nice landscape, some jazz musicians... I pasted them on a big flipchart paper and started to add words to it: *sharing my inspiration*, why don't I do that more often in professional encounters? Why not share my love for music, literature or the more-than-human world? I started to imagine meeting people in beautiful places, and designing an encounter together: *where would we like to go today? What would we like to do together? What might inspire us?* And we would have *real* conversations along the way, in which we would inquire into the small and big questions in life. I could see it in my mind's eye: if I could really work this way, it would never feel like work again! I felt the relaxation in my entire body when I imagined myself just showing up as *myself* – whatever that might look like – in professional encounters, rather than having to put on a

mask or play a role. It sounded like an ideal work situation to me, and I believe also to the others. Even though 'BFF' sounded a bit like a joke, it was challenging the existing image of the role of an OD practitioner, in our own company, as well as beyond, quite radically. And perhaps this half-joking supported us to do so in a safe way. When the day ended, we decided to each try and experiment with bringing the qualities of friendship to our practice in small ways and I created a WhatsApp group on the spot to share our future experiences. After this session, I continued to lightly carry the inquiry question of showing up differently and the metaphor of the BFF consultants around. And about two months later, this image supported me to indeed show up differently during a collegial reflection session, about which I wrote another moment-story shortly afterwards.

~

### ***Is it professional to cry?***

*June 2016*

*I feel exhausted. Emotionally and physically. Today is June 8<sup>th</sup>, my father's birthday. How old would he have been if he were still alive? 61? 62? I have lost track of it. It will not bring him back anyway.*

*Why did I not think of the emotional impact of this day while planning this collegial reflection session? Seeing the landscape rush by through the train window, I recall the BFF-idea. How would I deal with this if I were going to meet my best friends? I would definitely burst out in tears, or at least share that I was not feeling all too well. But yeah, I am the facilitator of this session, so I have to put on my brave face and create the space for others to share their issues, stories and emotions. Or, what if I did share mine? As a BFF-experiment? Yes. I want to try this. I search for a way to go about this, and remember Nina sharing a check-in method with me in which everybody shares their internal 'yes-and-no-voices' on being in a session. That could work... I could make sure I actively participate in the check-in and share the grief that I feel on this particular day as a 'no-voice'. With the slight problem that I suspect that what with the way I feel now, I might probably cry... And so what? I have seen Kate cry in supervision a few times and I don't think of her as unprofessional. Quite the contrary, I admire her ability to really be in relationship with us in the moment. And for me that relationship is enabled by the fact that she is real with us. Real emotions, letting herself be seen by us in her vulnerability and letting herself be touched by our encounters. I guess I admire these things in her, because I sense I have a similar talent and craving for that, which I often hold back in professional encounters.*

*So, there we go. I welcome everyone and introduce the check-in round. Somehow, I don't go first myself, wait slightly too long, until someone spontaneously starts and we end up going round the circle. One, two, three, four, five people come first. I try to be with them with my full attention, but notice a growing nervousness in my stomach. I don't think I have ever so intentionally and consciously experimented with showing myself in such a vulnerable way, possibly even crying, in front of a group that I facilitate. And yet, I already feel that crying is what I will do when it's my turn. I hear myself say, as if from an outside perspective: "My 'yes-voices' are that I love this type of work, creating a space for reflection in a smaller group. And I am really looking forward to get to know each of you better. And, I also have no-voices. Well, one in particular... and that is that today is the birthday of my father who died a couple of years ago. And when I woke up this morning, I somewhat unexpectedly felt overwhelmed with sadness..." And yes, there I go... crying... "Sorry," I mumble, "It's just a day like any other, and yet it's not..."*

*Tears rolling down my cheek now. "I feel a bit silly crying here in front of you, but I guess that's really what is there for me now..." The group reassures me, saying it's OK, and thanks me for sharing this. I feel a mixture of relief and pressure dissolving, pride at having done something that I found extremely difficult, and a slightly uncomfortable feeling of a shift in my role. For a split second, I feel as if seven consoling parents are looking my way. As is often the case, I am probably twenty years younger than the rest of the people in the group. Did I overdo it? Did I apologise too much? Have I lost my credibility as a facilitator? The image disappears and we finish the round. Six of the seven group members have never experienced collegial reflection and were a bit sceptical beforehand. We spend the remainder of the three hours exploring two cases in depth. I am surprised by the level of vulnerability, connection and reflexive capacity. I imagine I contributed to that with the start. But do not dare to explicitly ask. So, I have to admit that I don't actually know whether that made a difference or not, apart from my gut feeling. Of the energy shift after disclosing my vulnerability, slower and lower in the body and the room. I can almost see it. But definitely feel it in my body. One of the group members did explicitly express his surprise about the way the session turned out: "I did not have very high expectations, but something really magical happened here between us. I did not know that we could go this deep with colleagues."*

~



*22/3/2017, 8.04, Amsterdam*

This felt like such a radical thing to do at the time. To cry in a session... to show my own vulnerabilities... to share my emotions... to share something about my father's death in the first place. I sent a message in the BFF-WhatsApp group the next day:

*I don't know if it's really BFF, but I thought of it as a breakthrough: yesterday morning I felt like shit and I needed to facilitate collegial reflection. During the check-in (your form Nina with the yes's and no's to be there) I said very honestly that it was my father's birthday and that I unexpectedly missed him a lot and had a difficult time of it. And even cried in front of the group, and it felt good and everyone responded very nicely and as if it was perfectly normal that I did that from my role as a facilitator. And afterwards I could really be there.*

I think it is interesting to note what I chose to highlight here, reducing the whole experience with mixed emotions to 'it felt good', and how I stress how people thought it was 'normal', as if that was what worried me most. I received several responses from my colleagues that same day:

*To show your vulnerability like that, I think is mega BFF! Beautiful Joeri, did you notice it had an effect on the group? For example, enable more openness?*

*Wow Joeri, we can all learn from that. You were real humans with each other. And then you can also be a real facilitator! I'm happy you shared this with us. Thank you!*

*Wow Joeri, the summit of BFF. That point where some would say professional distance and the BFF says, here I am.*

My colleagues immediately ask after the effect, rather than ask me how I was, or how it made me feel. My own tone of voice might have contributed to this. And mainly sent encouragements and affirmations, rather than critical questions. This was such a vulnerable and new path for me, that I think this encouragement and celebration of small steps supported me most at the time.

### 5.3 Tearing through imagined boundaries

Of the stories I shared above, that split-second when I felt the tears welling up in my eyes while facilitating a session, has stayed with me most. I suppose I have 'treasured' it in a similar way to the moment of looking the fox in the eye. Writing the story of this moment seemed to have increased its importance. The raw experience was now turned into an artefact that I could examine, internally revisit or share with others. As I wrote in an earlier version of this chapter:

I have come to think of this moment as 'the tears-moment', for the act of crying makes it stand out the most from other moments in my practice. A moment I have 'carried with me' in the past years as a reminder that something different is possible. (March 2019)

Reading this makes me feel slightly uncomfortable. Reducing the entire experience to 'the tears moment' seems uncomfortably reminiscent of reducing the story of the previous chapter to 'the fox moment'. If this moment was indeed a reminder that 'something different is possible', what was the difference about? What do the tears stand for? Or what were other, perhaps less obvious, qualities of this moment that made it meaningful enough to 'carry it with me'? I explored this same question a year ago through creating a collage and accompanying poem.





Figure 8 *Tearing through boundaries*, August 2018

*Tears.*

*Hide them away, deal with them on your own,*

*Shame.*

*A force of nature? Fluid,*

*Flowing and melting the ice.*

*Naturally,*

*Tearing through imagined boundaries,*

*Afraid of being seen so*

*Vulnerable, intimate, feminine,*

*Unleashed.*

~

### The gesture of vulnerability

The collage and poem offer a new perspective on my own story. The themes of age and gender stand out much more explicitly. What does it mean to show up as a young female practitioner? And then even to cry as one? I think part of my hesitancy to show my more vulnerable side, or even to share personal stories and inspiration, as in the story of the exhibition, was because of a fear to 'lose my authority' or 'no longer be taken seriously'. During my first years at Kessels and Smit, I often tried to hide my age – by dressing what I imagined to be more maturely or refraining from sharing anything about my life that might give away my age. I often felt the need to position myself strongly and prove that I was a professional – despite what people might think when they saw me walk into the room. I often felt one step behind my male or more experienced colleagues, as if I was always measured up to the archetypical consultant, trainer or facilitator: male, greying hair, an expensive suit, an extravert personality, an expert. Perhaps I was partly measuring myself up to this archetype, yet it was also based on a few painful experiences.

I think Kate McArdle, my doctoral supervisor, plays an interesting role in this story. I seemed to have turned her into a role model of sorts and drew courage from how I had experienced her tears as a 'facilitator' from my perspective as a 'participant'. I did not judge her, nor think less of her, in fact I rather admired her for it. Her tears seemed to bring her down to my and our level, from an experienced action researcher, to a human being and fellow inquirer, a woman of flesh and blood with her own stories and struggles. Her 'style of facilitation' opened new possibilities for me, for it was different from what I had seen other practitioners do thus far. What made the experience of sharing and visibly showing my grief so different and insightful, was that it was a first experience in which I dared to show what I considered to be my utmost vulnerability in a professional context and was not 'punished' for it. Nobody laughed at me, dismissed me or no longer wanted me to facilitate the session. Perhaps that is where my comment the next day to my colleagues came from: they seemed to think of it as normal!



*10/4/2017, 8.55, Amsterdam*

### Power and participation of the facilitator

Both stories seem to touch upon the power relation between ‘the facilitator’ and ‘the participants’. There was an interesting moment after showing my tears, when the power balance seemed to shift, and I ‘lost control’. It felt like I was being consoled by the group, which challenged my assumption that my role was to solely support *their* learning process. And that my emotions consequently had no place there and should be kept outside of the room or at least suppressed for the duration of the session. This seems to point to an underlying assumption of the facilitator as outside or apart from the group instead of as an active participant. Much is written in Action Research about doing research *with* people rather than *on* or *about* people, largely inspired by Paolo Freire’s (1970) thinking on enabling ‘power to’ or ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’. In his classic work on empowering people in postcolonial societies, Freire stresses the need to dissolve the distinction between the development worker as ‘a teacher’ and the community members as ‘students’. Instead, both are students and teachers at the same time. I remember I immediately agreed with this when I first read his work years ago, but I now realise I have not always lived up to it in my practice.

Bushe and Marshak (2015) argue that in more traditional approaches to organisational development, what they call ‘diagnostic OD’, the OD consultant stays apart from the process, at the margins and ‘partners with’ (a group of people in) an organisation. By contrast, in ‘dialogic OD’, the consultant is part of and fully immersed in the process. They argue that their mere presence influences the meaning making that takes place, whether they want to or not. And consequently, it becomes much more important to: “reflexively consider what meanings they are creating, as well as what narratives their actions privilege and marginalize” (Bushe & Marshak, 2015:18). What does it mean to be part of the process? Shaw (2002) seems to be one of the few change practitioners who radically seems to do so by only joining existing conversations in the organisations she works with and to ‘create change’ by “participating in the conversation in a way that helps to hold open the interplay of sense-making rather longer than would occur in my absence, to hold open the experience of not-knowing” (Shaw, 2002:33). This also means that the person of the practitioner

becomes much more important. Indeed, that your 'self' is your most important instrument as an OD practitioner as Cheung-Judge (2001) argued. Traeger and Warwick (2018) also argue that OD practitioners need to bring their entire selves to their practice and think of OD as a 'craft' or even an 'artistry of bringing the artist out in others'. Which was quite literally what I managed to do in the story of the exhibition in silence.

But I still wonder: can you ever fully participate whilst you facilitate a session? A question that initiators of more formal second-person action research also seem to bump up against sooner or later. Reitz has for example extensively reflected on her own role as initiator of co-operative inquiry and concludes that the initiator or facilitator has a 'particular influence' whether she likes it or not. She furthermore argues that: "A facilitator might use his or her influential position to role model certain dialogic orientations which could in turn influence the manner of relating within the group" (Reitz, 2015:231). And that one way of doing so is by choosing "to disclose certain vulnerabilities which might invite an openness and authenticity in the group and a lowering of the barriers of role difference" (Reitz, 2015:231). How do you decide when to do so? When does it help and when does it hinder the process? I think working with a check-in at the start of a gathering can potentially lower the barriers of role difference and is a valuable practice because it invites personal stories and can therefore invite people's whole selves into the room, rather than just their professional selves. It also marks the beginning of a gathering, Corrigan (2015) for example refers to a check-in as a 'threshold-crossing practice'. It furthermore gives everybody the opportunity to bring their voice into the room, to be seen and heard, for an equal amount of time. Lastly, it enables a human-to-human connection, for I think a good check-in goes beyond sharing expectations for the meeting and is about truly connecting with each other. As Swart (2016) notes: 'we should pause long enough to see the news in the eyes of the other'.

Over the years, I noticed that many facilitators do not participate in a check-in themselves, whereas some do actively participate, and explicitly disclose vulnerabilities. The session in the story above was one of the first times I did choose to participate. I think this decision to participate in a check-in

is incredibly important, however small it might seem. Not only because it is an opportunity to 'set the tone' or 'role model certain behaviour', but because through this act, I either position myself as apart from or part of the process. If I am part of the process, this also means that I should be prepared to be touched and altered by the process, just as the other members of the group might be. As Harlene Anderson notes when she argues for a more equal power-relation between therapist and client: "It seems illogical to presume otherwise, to think that we could be involved in a transformative process and not be transformed ourselves" (Anderson, 1997:100).

### Support structures for inquiry

In both stories, I can read a conscious decision to experiment with showing up differently, despite my anxieties. What supported me to 'go fearward' as Marshall puts it? I think that explicitly formulating and crafting an inquiry question that feels relevant and intriguing is a first important step. Whilst I do not try to search for an answer to this question, I do mention several times how I am 'carrying it around'. These seem to be questions that are still somewhat vague, but offer a new perspective or way of thinking of my practice or role. Such a question regularly shows up in my conversations with others and in my journal entries, but most importantly, living such a question seems to help me to recognise opportunities to act differently, however small. I wonder whether the notion of the 'BFF consultant' might not have been a 'generative image' (Bushe, 2013) that helped me to see my own practice and role in a new light. Bushe believes such an image allows "people to see the world anew, identify new options, formulate new strategies, even reform their identity" (Bushe, 2013:3). A generative image therefore both influences how people think and act. In early AI literature a similar concept was described as a 'generative metaphor' (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990): a powerful juxtaposition of words that opens new avenues for thinking and acting. Lakoff and Johnson argue that it is not easy to change the metaphors we live by, but that new metaphors can potentially create new realities:

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:145)

Was that beginning to happen with the BFF metaphor?

The feeling of being part of a group of fellow inquirers supported and emboldened me to experiment. Our group was by no means a structured second-person inquiry, yet we did all gather around a common inquiry question and we each went back out into the world with our own first-person inquiries related to this question, about which we shared and exchanged experiences via WhatsApp. Which comes close to the definition of second-person research that “entails people inquiring together, formally or informally, into questions of mutual concern” (Marshall, 2016:8). Marshall does however warn that the title of second-person research is ‘too readily claimed’ and that is often more accurate to claim ‘first-person inquiry in collaborative relationships with others’. Reason and Torbert argue that even though co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) is the most clearly articulated methodology of second-person Action Research, “second-person research/practice is always present, albeit underdeveloped, in everyday life” (Reason & Torbert, 2001:21) and can potentially be found in friendship or consulting relationships. I agree, and am intrigued by how I might more actively build upon this potential in everyday life. I am especially interested in what I have come to think of as ‘temporary constellations of inquiry’. An emergent, spontaneous and more fluid form of inquiry in which people temporarily gather around a similar inquiry or theme. A form of inquiry that is perhaps situated on the edge of first-person and second-person inquiry, and that makes use of existing moments and practices in everyday and organisational life, rather than creating a separate space alongside it ‘to inquire’. This does seem to bring its own dilemmas with it: for how do I contract for such a form of inquiry? Do I explicitly frame it as research, or might doing so actually take the spontaneity out of it? And what are the ethics of writing about such inquiries?

## 5.5 An experiment with asking feedback

One of the criteria for good quality first-person research that I find especially important is whether it is 'in service of something bigger'. And especially whether my first-person research makes a difference in my professional practice. Because it invites me to act differently in the moment, or because it might even shift my professional practice in the long run. After a year of inquiring, I was overcome by an overwhelming sense of doubt. Was this really a worthwhile inquiry? For myself, yes, but for others? Had I moved from one end of the extreme, only focusing on 'creating change' for others, to the other, only focusing on change and transformation within and for myself? But surely, if things had indeed shifted within me, there should be a shift in my practice as a result of that? And others might have noticed this as well? I decided to ask a few of my closest colleagues for feedback. I was not sure what a good way would be to go about that though. I had just finished reading Judi Marshall's book on first person Action Research in which she writes that "eliciting feedback is no simple matter. Other people may well not affirm my perspective on a situation, given that there is no one reality and people will have their different and equally valid views" (Marshall, 2016:63).

I decided to try something different than my normal approach, which would be to ask people face-to-face in a conversation, and wrote a hand-made postcard with some questions and a return envelope instead: *What sort of shift did you see in me during the past year? Is there a specific moment that illustrates that shift? What would you wish for me in the coming year?*

Bearing Marshall's warning in mind, the return letters that I received did seem to suggest that my colleagues not only clearly saw that I was choosing more radically and experimenting with blurring the boundaries between personal and professional, but also thought this influenced and improved my practice in specific moments. Especially because they saw I could now more often be present with my full attention, and as one colleague noted with whom I design leadership programmes together: 'receiving your full design and preparation attention is something grand that enables an





*Figure 9 Postcards for feedback, August 2016*

exceptional result.’ Another colleague, whom I facilitated that same programme with wrote how this influenced my work with the group as well:

I saw more focus and with that more calmness. You choose clearly for the work you do and the places you want to be. Very important, because if you are there, something happens. (...) An important moment that I clearly recall is the ‘history line’ in the AMP. You were improvising full swing there. No method or methodology. But working with what there is. And it worked! We lifted up with all of us!

Whereas a third colleague wrote about the moment I introduced the exhibition in silence, and how sharing my own story enabled something different for the group. All these observations seem to stress the importance of committing to self-care. And as Cheung-Judge (2001) argues, this is ‘not an option but the cornerstone of our work’. Both because the presence of a practitioner has such a big influence on the quality of the work, as well as because she believes that OD professionals without a rigorous self-care practice pay a high price, often in the form of burnout – as I found out the hard way.

I continued to explore these questions around showing up differently through editing and writing a book with my colleague Nina\* called 'Living your time' (Kabalt & Timmermans (eds), 2016). We invited seven colleagues to write and inquire with us. How can we live our time in a way that is meaningful to us? What are practices that support us to do so in our busy lives as parents, consultants or partners? We wrote about practices as diverse as journaling, dancing in a discotheque, sleeping under the stars or sitting on a bench by yourself. Also, the stories 'windows in time' and 'your last day' as well as a shortened version of the encounter with the fox appeared in it. The emphasis was on the small moments of everyday life, and how to appreciate them fully or turn them into something meaningful. And most of all, it was an invitation to live and explore questions rather than search for answers. Writing and sharing the book was also an attempt to blur the boundaries between 'work' and 'life', 'consultant' and 'human being'. To show sides and parts of ourselves that we normally would not show, to our colleagues and our clients. But also, for seeing ourselves as instruments of which we need to take care by taking care of ourselves. The book was not exactly a commercial success, but writing it was very meaningful to us as writers, and did deeply resonate with some readers. It has also seemed to shift the collective story in our own company, if only because nine out of fifty colleagues showed through writing this book that they thought these questions and practices were important.

## 5.6 Concluding thoughts

At the end of this chapter, I find myself considering how all of this is related to wonder. How have the experiences and explorations above contributed to my understanding about and theorising of wonder? Upon reflection, the central term in this chapter seems to be vulnerability. From my intention to be more precise with language, I wonder what I actually mean when I talk about vulnerability. I look up the definition and etymology of 'vulnerability' and discover that it derives from the Latin word for wound, and that it actually means: that which may be wounded or is open to attack. If wonder can be thought of as a wound, an opening, might vulnerability be thought of as an act of exposing or opening yourself up to the possibility of wonder? I wonder if there are certain gestures, such as showing my vulnerability, that might more likely invite certain more wonder-full

responses. And might help to enable human-to-human conversations and encounters, in organisational contexts where that is unfortunately uncommon. And with that bring a little of the 'life-world' back into the 'system-world' (Habermas, 1987).

One of the most important insights of this chapter is therefore my own shift in thinking about what my role is or could be as an OD practitioner. A shift from focusing on others to focusing on myself, from being separate from the group to becoming a part of the group, from an emphasis on methods to an emphasis on my presence. This was an important first step in my emerging art and practice of creating wonder-full space, upon which I will elaborate in Chapter 7 and 8. In fact, without the blurring of the boundaries between my private and professional self, I would most likely not have sought to create spaces of wonder with and for others in the first place.

The idea of wonder as a form of living and carrying around inquiry questions furthermore seems to enable and support the possibility of wonder in contexts where that is not self-evident. Especially if the inquiry question contains a generative metaphor or image that opens new possibilities for thinking and acting. This seems to be a way into wonder in everyday and organisational contexts, for you can carry the question with you everywhere. As well as a wonder that is evoked by a connection with *people*, rather than the more-than-human world. This shows that an approach of enchantment by emergence can indeed work.

*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*  
*All your life*  
*You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

## 6. Wonder as foraging for beauty

~



2/6/2016, 7.36, Ashridge Forest

### ***Talking to trees?***

*2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2016*

*I step into Ashridge forest, leaving Ashridge House and the rest of civilisation behind. Entering the domain of the forest. Of beeches and oaks, deer and squirrels. Of the mossy and muddy earth and the wind rustling through the trees.*

*It's still early, the morning fog has not disappeared yet. A few drops of rain leak through the grand umbrella of the forest. I turn left on the little path heading into the forest. Ha, I feel I can breathe freely again. Just as I am about to ease into the embrace of the forest, an unexpected sound stops me. Craackkk-creaakkk, craaackkk-creaackkk.....*

*A creaking sound, as if the wind is trying to bend a tree with all its might. I stop to feel the wind, search for the wind, but can't find it. The sound returns. I walk back to where the sound seems to come from. A large beech tree. I hesitate, and slowly lay one hand on the bark of the tree. A force of energy seems to travel down from the top of the tree to where my hand is. I feel it approaching. It*

*stops, and pushes lightly to meet the force of my hand on the bark. A high-five of sorts. Two forces meeting, connecting.*

*A bit startled, I stagger back. Continue my walk, while looking hesitantly back over my shoulder to the tree. What did just happen?*

*In the next thirty minutes, four more trees quietly call out to me with their creaking voices. I touch them and feel a response, subtler than the first tree, but definitely there. It feels as if the trees are using me to connect with each other. Use my legs, because they have lost their own. I feel the lingering presence of their energy on the palms of my hands. And pass it on to the next tree.*

*I step back out of the forest and see Ashridge House ahead of me. My thoughts move on towards practical matters: how much time do I still have for a shower before breakfast? What time does the workshop start again?*

~

In this chapter, I will focus on my morning walks and argue that one way of thinking of this practice is as a daily attempt to ‘forage for beauty’. I will explore how the notion of ‘the appreciative eye’ might be related to wonder, as well as how this might be a way into intimacy. I will also particularly pay attention to the relationship between (a daily) routine and wonder, between the physical act of wandering and wonder and how photography might invite an appreciative eye.

I will start with briefly exploring the notion of the appreciative eye (section 6.1) and will continue with sharing how my morning walk practice evolved (section 6.2) and about a first attempt to invite others along on a morning walk at Ashridge (section 6.3). I will then make sense of these practice stories through the lens of wonder (section 6.4). In the final part, I will share a short story of the appreciative eye in my OD practice (section 6.5) before ending with concluding thoughts (section 6.6).

## 6.1 The appreciative eye

Appreciation, like wonder, largely seems to be about seeing the world in a certain way – through an ‘appreciative eye’. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) first described this appreciative eye as the ability to ‘see the ordinary magic, beauty and real possibility in organisational life’. In a recent interview, Cooperrider mentions the appreciative eye once more as one of the essences of AI, but this time describes it as a ‘sense of awe, surprise, and wonder about what gives life’ (Grieten et al, 2017). Both understandings seem to describe a way of seeing organisational life, but it seems to me that you might also choose to look at other areas of life in a similar way. Ecological and Buddhist thinker Joanna Macy explicitly seems to do so when she argues that there are four different ways of looking at the world: world as battlefield, world as trap, world as lover and world as self. Her worldview of world as a lover, in which you think of the world as ‘an essential and life-giving partner’, seems closely related to Cooperrider’s appreciative eye. In fact, she even argues for an appreciative eye herself:

For when you see the world as lover, every being can become – if you have a clever, appreciative eye – an expression of that ongoing, erotic impulse. It takes form right now in each one of us and in everyone and everything we encounter – the bus driver, the cop at the corner, the leaping squirrel. (Macy, 2007:27)

The language she uses might be different, sensual and even slightly erotic, indeed not unlike how you might describe your lover, but in this view “the one beloved becomes many, and the world itself is [your] lover” (Macy, 2007:27). And again, this seems to be about seeing beauty, wonder and possibility, not so much in organisations, but in every living being. Is this appreciative eye similar to an understanding of wonder as seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary, of Vasalou’s idea of wonder as ‘truly seeing’? But if the appreciative eye is about seeing beauty and possibility, does that not imply that there are also things you might choose *not* to see? The question seems to be whether appreciation is about seeing the possibility and beauty in everything you encounter – another human being, a street in Amsterdam or a forest – or whether it is about shifting your gaze to *only* see those things that are beautiful or life-giving.

Rachel Carson explicitly argued natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. Moreover, she seems to equate beauty with ‘the natural’: “I believe that whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man’s spiritual growth” (Carson, 1954/1998b:160). Carson herself was deeply influenced by Albert Schweitzer’s idea of having a ‘true reverence for life’. Might that be the same as viewing the world as a lover? Although Carson does not argue explicitly for the appreciative eye, she did argue for ‘opening our eyes to unnoticed beauty’, and when I listened to the audio version of her books about the ocean and life on the shores (Carson, 1951;1955), I felt as if I could temporarily *see* the world through her appreciative eye. She describes the shore so lovingly and attentively and displays a deep commitment to get to know these places and its creatures more intimately. I am interested in the relationship between appreciation and intimacy. Might you only choose to open yourself up if you appreciate something or someone? Might seeing something or someone with an appreciative eye awaken the desire to get to know that other more intimately? Questions I will start to explore in the remainder of this chapter.

## 6.2 My morning walks

But first, I will turn to how my morning walk practice evolved into its current form. Again, we have to travel back to May 2015, to the time of my burnout, to understand why I started to walk, and how significant these walks came to be.

### Starting to walk

My GP gave me one important piece of advice in my first week at home: go for a walk each day, for an hour or preferably two. I did, and this proved to be incredibly nourishing, allowing me to continue ‘to move’ as well as ‘to ground’ myself. It saddened me that I would no longer be able to make my daily walks if I would go back to work. At this point, my colleague Pieterjan\* sent me a podcast by Hal Elrod about the so-called ‘miracle morning’. And even though his ‘self-help language’ did not necessarily appeal to me, nor his promise to ‘increase your productivity and (financial) success’



(Elrod, 2014), some ideas in his story did: that how you spend your mornings influences how you spend your day, and that a fixed routine can support that. And I started to walk every morning during my second week back at work, and this daily morning routine was something of a lifebuoy that I could hold onto in these first turbulent weeks and months. Pieterjan and two other colleagues were also experimenting with their own variation of the miracle morning, and I created a WhatsApp group to exchange experiences and learn from each other, another 'temporary constellation of inquiry'. I sent them photographs of my walks early in the morning, and they sent some in return. We inquired together via WhatsApp: how might you create a miracle morning routine that fits you? When does it support you and when does it hinder you? Can you decide to skip a miracle morning? I pondered the latter questions:

Does it give me more energy or stress to do the Miracle Morning? I am doing it for myself, so I could also NOT do it if I don't want to do it. My insight (for now) is that it is better for me to always do the Miracle Morning. And that it is a kind of daily fight between my short-term self and my long-term self. (WhatsApp message, 5/11/2015)

Although I was clearly seeing the value of the morning walks, I also had to convince myself every morning to get up earlier, and continuously remind myself that a walk would make a difference for the rest of the day. A daily fight, and a daily choice. There did not seem to be a specific 'method' to my walks: after I had switched off my alarm and put on a comfortable pair of shoes, I stepped out of my front door and simply wandered the streets. But perhaps that *was* the method, to have 'empty space' at the start of the day, in which I did not have to do or think about anything specific. As the months went by, I slowly seemed to become more used to getting up early, and started to enjoy it more:

I had such a great morning! Getting up at 7, on a Saturday, on a holiday... And I loved it! Being in the city before any of the other tourists, enjoying that magical moment in the morning. What is it that I love so much about the morning anyway?

- whole day ahead of you

- start/waking up/beginning of things
- my secret moment
- calm/quiet: “alone in the world”
- The light: vulnerable/fresher/clearer
- The air: fresh (Journal entry, 5/3/2016)

### Wandering in search of nourishment

The activity in our WhatsApp group slowly died out, but I had continued to take a photograph of most of my morning walks. Perhaps mostly to treasure these secret and intimate moments. Occasionally, I would include one of them in my writing for supervision, such as one of the Flevopark\* covered in white flowers.



*Figure 1 Wild garlic in the Flevopark, April 2016*

To my surprise, my supervisor wrote her feedback in response to my photograph rather than my writing:

Wild garlic in the early morning is a lovely thing isn't it (try making it into a rub for chicken or a pesto, or a dip for mezze and see if you can bring your love of the outside into your body as a different form of nourishment perhaps?). Makes me wonder about foraging as a form of

inquiry? Do you forage? We might think of your wonderful photographs this way, as nature foraging? (Email Kate McArdle, 21/04/2016)

Admittedly, I had no idea that the beautiful flowers I had photographed were wild garlic (even though I did write about a garlicky smell in the park). A few days later, I returned to the park and somewhat hesitantly picked some wild garlic to turn into a pesto. The whole experiment made me feel slightly awkward and made me realise how little I knew about (the edibility of) plants, but at the same time it felt strangely intimate to 'eat the park' in which I walked almost daily. Nevertheless, the metaphor of foraging appealed to me more than the actual practice of foraging. According to an online dictionary, foraging refers to 'the act of looking or searching for food or provisions', and more specifically 'to wander in search of food' or 'to search for a particular food or foods, often in the wild'. Wasn't that what I was doing every morning? Wandering in search of nourishment of some sort? Perhaps not physical nourishment, but nourishment for the soul at least? And was I instead of collecting mushrooms or strawberries, collecting glimpses of beauty that would nourish me? This metaphor gave a new meaning to the walks, but also gave a greater significance to the photographs.

### Getting to know my photographs

A month later, I received an invitation to bring an 'artefact of my knowing' to Ashridge, 'something illustrative of how you know, how you seek to know/be known'. I did not have to think long: I know and seek to know during my morning walks. I searched through all the files on my laptop for morning walk photographs, printed all of them and spread them out on my table. And only then, while seeing all of them together, did the photographs gain their full significance. These literally were the moments when I 'knew wonder' and 'knew beauty' each morning – however fleetingly. And I was overcome by the feeling that the presence of beauty and wonder still lingered within these photographs. I pasted them in a small booklet, with the date, time and place written underneath them by hand, which took much longer than anticipated, and carefully packed the booklet in my suitcase afterwards.



Figure 12 *Creating a morning walk booklet, May 2016*

Placing the booklet next to other artefacts and allowing people to browse through it was a big step. These were my secret moments, that I was suddenly sharing with others. Perhaps this was not only an artefact about how I seek to know, but also about how I seek to be known by others. Both wanting and not-wanting to share the intimacy, longing to see and be seen. Dancing around the edge of private and public. The form in which I had chosen to present them, seemed to allow others to explore the photographs intimately, booklet in hand, carefully flipping the pages. I had a long conversation with Steve Marshall\*, both professional photographer and ADOC faculty, about the photographs. He seemed to see something in them. And through his eyes, I could also see that the photographs were interesting to look at in and of themselves, not just as an illustration of a morning walk practice. Did I need the confirmation of 'an expert'? He nudged me several times to share my photographs with the world via Instagram, before I felt confident enough to post that morning's photograph, even if at first only on a private and anonymous 'mymorningwalks' account with one follower: Steve. Three years later, it has become a daily ritual to post that morning's photograph on Instagram. And I am now 'followed' by colleagues, friends, family and even some people I do not know.

## Stepping into the day

Only after having gone through the process of creating this booklet and coming to know my own morning walks more intimately, did I seem able to articulate my morning walk practice. Perhaps this was an upward movement from experiential knowing via presentational knowing to propositional knowing? I nevertheless still wrote about my practice in a semi-story form, for the book 'Living your time', with the intention to share my morning walk practice with others.

~

### *Stepping into the day*

*June 2016*

*The rhythm of my footsteps determines the rhythm of my day. Step... step... step-step-step. Don't think too much: left foot, right foot, left foot. And see where my feet will take me. Which thoughts and places they will show me today. As long as I make sure that I step into my daily walk each morning. Sometimes as early as 6.30, sometimes as late as 9 when I have a day off. Rain, sun, winter or summer. Just every day. If I am lucky I step right into a forest, but hey, the red-light district in Amsterdam also has something magical about it at dawn.*

*Magical, yes, that is actually what it feels like. The air feels different, as if it contains more oxygen.*

*Breathe in deep. Marvel at all that I see around me. And light, the first rays of sunlight have a magnetic effect on me. Almost no one out there. A rabbit in the Flevopark, a squirrel in the forest, a lone tourist or tramp alongside the canals. Pigeons and seagulls, those as well. Freely picking at the torn garbage bags. The start of something new: today. I look around me, and am suddenly touched by something: the sun rising behind the Old Church, the wild garlic in bloom... I grab my phone from my pocket and take a picture. One for each day.*

*When I arrive home, I feel like I have been on an adventure. Strange, how much a half-hour walk can mean. The day no longer waltzes into my life with all its abundance, but instead I consciously and surefootedly step into the day. Reversed roles. I and my footsteps now determine the rhythm of the day. Together my daily morning walks create a rhythm in my week and my life. Predictable, and different every time. Each day a new ode to beginning.*

~



*27/4/2017, 7.42, Ashridge*



This story still captures the practice as it is today. In fact, the (meaning of the) practice does not appear to have changed much since. I now wonder whether I could only articulate the practice in language because it had by that time evolved, ripened and formed, or if the act of writing this story was what 'fixed' the practice into a certain shape.

### 6.3 Hosting a morning walk

As part of my doctoral programme, I had to host a session for my peers 'to further my research'. I chose to invite them on a morning walk with me on the Ashridge grounds, to both share as well as learn more about the practice. How might I invite others into my intimate inquiry practice?

#### **What is nature calling you to do?**

The 'seed' for this session emerged while I was walking along the canals of Utrecht with a fellow change practitioner who was visiting from South-Africa. I started telling her about my growing affection for three specific places: the Flevopark, the Ashridge forest and the Sant Aniol valley. She asked me different questions than I was used to, giving places and things a voice of their own. And for the first time, I heard myself articulate out loud what I did perhaps already know before but had not put into words yet: "Nature, and these three places specifically, have become like friends to me. When I am in nature, I feel like I am finally home. As if I can relax and ease into a natural state of being. A movement of just letting go. And at the same time all my senses awaken when I am in nature. I feel more alive, but it takes me less effort to be fully alive." She acted as if it was perfectly normal to befriend places and asked: "And what do you offer nature in this friendship?" I had to think about this for a while, am I offering her anything in return at all? "Well..." I continued, "I think I appreciate her and really see her. In all her beauty and wholeness..." She nodded, "Truly seeing someone or something is a powerful gift to give." She seemed to consider this for a while before she continued: "So what is nature calling you to do?" This question took me by surprise; was nature calling me to do anything? And what could I possibly do for her? And while these thoughts were still whirling around in my head, I heard myself say calmly and determinately: "I think nature is inviting

me to become an even closer friend to her. And to help others to really see her as well. Perhaps to introduce my friends to her, as I would introduce different friends to each other.”

And that is how I came to write an invitation to the group to join me on: ‘a morning walk into Ashridge Forest. She has become like a close friend to me during our ADOC time and I would like to introduce her to you. If you have not already met that is’ (Session invitation, December 2016).

### **Wandering the Ashridge grounds**

The day before the actual session, I noticed people wanted to know more about the walk. How long are we going to walk? Will we have to walk through mud? Are we really starting at eight? These seemed like fair enough questions, yet the anxious undertone surprised me somewhat. How radical and different was it to host a session outdoors and start an hour earlier? I realised this was probably the first time we would ever go outside of the building during a workshop. Just because I had spent most of my time during these workshops exploring the grounds and forest, did not mean others had. As a result, I decided last minute to wander the, close by and considerably less muddy, grounds of Ashridge itself, instead of entering the forest. And again, I wrote another moment-story of it shortly afterwards.



*Figure 13 Opening the session, January 2017,  
photograph by Steve Marshall*



### **Warm winter coats and muddy boots**

January 2017

*People start to arrive, dressed for the outdoors. Woolly hats, big brown and already mud-stained boots. I can hear the sound of their chatter, and see the steam coming from their hot coffee and tea mugs. Notice the slightly excited energy in the room. It reminds me of school trips. That combination of wanting to get going and wanting to prolong the moment of not yet knowing what is going to happen. The idea of doing something different, going somewhere different. Being different perhaps.*

*Or is this simply my own slightly nervous energy that I project into the room? Hosting a session at eight in the morning, going outside in wintertime, and the scariest part of all is that I am going to invite people into my inquiry. Showing my inquiry, being in my inquiry – together with others. Showing myself. What makes it so scary for me to do that in this ADOC context? Because this work is more profound and more personal than anything else I do? Or because I somehow feel I have not found my voice and place yet in this group?*

*I walk back and forth through the coffee lounge, not really here nor there. David made it all the way from London in time, I really appreciate that. And even Catherine joins us last minute, despite her cold. Right. Let's get going. I am aware of Steve's enthusiastic energy, carrying an incredibly intimidating camera, as he walks beside me with the rest of the group following us. A clearing at the edge of the forest seems to invite me to open the session there. I am glad I decided to read something to the group that I wrote down beforehand, because I am not sure what to say right here and now, so many things to choose from. After a short preamble, I start reading the conversation about befriending places out loud, my hands slightly trembling...*

*I invite the group to pay attention to the rhythm of their footsteps, step into the empty space at the start of the day, take in their surroundings attentively and take a single photograph of something of beauty that calls out to them.*

*And we set off, in silence. I slowly ease into the experience of walking together as a group, see people spreading out across the grounds. Separate, and yet connected. I feel the invisible strings tying us together. I spot the circle of trees on my left side. My favourite place on the Ashridge grounds. My*

*place to recharge, almost literally. Whenever I step into this circle, it feels as if I plug myself into an electrically charged field.*

*I wanted to sing. I felt it was really important to sing. Showing 'me', at my most vulnerable and my most powerful. And despite this strong longing and intention, it is extremely difficult to step into this space: this is me. As I start singing, I feel something shift inside me. I am finding my voice, right here and now. It was always there of course. But the act of intentionally deciding to sing this particular song, for this particular group of people, in this particular place, helps me to reclaim my own voice. To own it once more. And to appreciate it for what it is: my voice. I feel as if I have arrived in myself, and as a result I feel I have found my place in the group. I ease into the sensation; my breathing slows down and my shoulders relax. A huge sense of relief washes over me. As I walk away from the tree circle, I notice a new spring in my step.*

~

When we arrived back in our room, I asked the group to take a seat in silence, read my 'letter' to them in the envelope they found on their chair and to write a 'letter' back to me as a response to the entire session and/or my letter. An intentional experiment to 'collect data' in an intimate way, as an integral part of the session that might support everybody's inquiry process rather than just my own. Afterwards, I invited people to form groups of three or four and share the photograph they had taken on the walk: can you tell the story of why you chose to take this photograph? If you were to give the photo a title, what would it be? In the final half-hour, I marked the end of the experience, in order to have a conversation about it from a more scholarly perspective.

### **Shoulders up, shoulders down**

One question that stayed with from this session was: how can I own my work and inquiry more fully as I take it out into the world? I noticed there were a few moments in (the preparation of) the session in which I was dismissive of my own work; with small gestures like making a joke or a comment that dismissed what I said before. Or as Kate pointed out to me during supervision the day afterwards, in the raising and tensing up of my shoulders:

**Kate:** “I am wondering about how you know in your body the work that you do. And, how maybe you can trust us a bit more. To not need to do this [shoulders up]. To go: this is the space of magic and beauty. Not to find a falsehood in it, but to trust your own authentic knowing this is significant and to boldly walk with that significance. (...) something about the embodiedness of that concern. That validates it differently.”

**Joeri:** “Validates what differently?”

**Kate:** “It validates your commitment to the significance to this work. Yeah, it’s magic and I don’t need to... I mean actually there’s something in this communion with nature. And it’s sacred to me. So, pitch in or don’t. But if you are going to be in it with me, I’m going to be in it with you. Cause when you wear it, tree circle, daring to sing, you wear it beautifully.”

**Joeri:** “So I guess yesterday was very interesting from the perspective that I felt I had both. I had the moments of this [shoulders up] and I had the moments of being in there [shoulders relaxed], trusting myself and my own magic in a way.” (Transcript supervision, 13/1/2017)

The two moments I described in the story of hosting the morning walk session capture this difference well. The moment when people started arriving was a ‘shoulders up-moment’, whereas singing in the trees was a ‘shoulders down-moment’. When my attention moved away from myself to others, what they might think of my work and how they might judge it, I became insecure and felt myself tense up. I could almost hear their voices internally: how is going for a walk doctoral research? Befriending the forest, seriously? With the raised shoulders as a physical manifestation of that. Whereas when I started to walk, alongside the others, I seemed to be able to quite literally step back into the moment itself. And the moment of daring to sing especially seemed to enable me to connect to myself, and own my work. I suspect it had to do with the intentionality and determination I brought to it: I am going to do this, on my terms. At the same time, I felt I could hold the singing lightly: it did not have to be ‘good’ necessarily. I was more focused on the act of sharing my singing voice with the group, rather than having clear or high expectations around what it might look like or how it might sound.

## Inviting others into the inquiry



Figure 14 *My view while journaling, 25/2/2017*

‘Inviting in others opens a whole new set of questions: how do I show up? How do I invite? How do I create and hold the space for others? How can I learn to believe in the work I do more fully? What was my intention for inviting others in? To allow intimate and magical encounters to happen? With nature? With me? With themselves? With each other? Re-storying our relationship with the non-human world? Questioning the rhythm & pace, the taken for granted way of doing that in our lives? Was it already disruptive to start at 8.00 am and first go for a walk? Was I simply creating a different experience of how to start the day?

Am I here on the most beautiful rock in Spain? Or am I at Ashridge? Let’s stay here for a bit. I hear the sound of the river, the chirping of birds, and I feel the ever-strengthening morning sun on my body. My right knee especially. I smell the trees and bushes. A hint of lavender, something green and moist, wood, earth. I am here. And I am happy. I feel joy coming from my belly, my chest. And I unconsciously smile. I feel like I’m in love. But not with some-body or some-thing. With life, or with love itself. I could stay here forever. (Journal Entry, 25/2/2017)

Even within this journal entry, I recognise a shoulders-up moment: writing about an earlier experience, questioning it intellectually as if from the outside, piling question upon question. And, suddenly being drawn back into the experience itself, of sitting at a beautiful place and even feeling in love with life, a shoulders-down moment. Perhaps I am/need both.

## Inquiring into intimacy

The letters I received in the session were beautiful, folded coloured papers in different shapes and sizes. Poems, drawings, philosophical explorations and words of gratitude. Reading the letters afterwards touched me deeply. Because they were intimate, seemingly created with love and care and they offered me an intimate glimpse of what the experience had been like for others. In my first paper about this session, I included what I felt to be the most beautiful excerpts of the letters. In one-on-one supervision Kate confessed that this was the only part of the paper ‘that did not work so well from an inquiry perspective’:

**Kate:** “What did you learn from it? How did it feel? What was the intention?”

**Joeri:** “I really enjoyed reading the letters, and then somehow I wasn’t quite sure what to do with them, or how to include them. (...) Because I asked this of people and there are some beautiful letters, I felt I should somehow put it in there as well. To show that people actually quite liked it, or something like that... [both laugh]. I guess it’s maybe more written from: ‘Look! People got something out of this as well!’”

**Kate:** “[H]ow can you develop a sense of, it’s almost like, nestedness of intention. (...) And then there’s questions about, if the intention was to create intimacy, how do you then engage with the letters in an intimate way? Do you sneak them into your back pocket and go up a hill and sit in the sunshine and read letters and just give an account of that process? How do you not feel obliged to report that?”

**Joeri:** “I think that’s a really interesting question. How can I bring that same quality of intimacy to how I then read or somehow deal in the broad sense with the letters that I got?”

**Kate:** “Open the letters, put some examples down, see what I found... not very inquiring is it?” (Transcript Supervision, 15/3/2017)

While this was an important insight, the letters themselves continued to haunt me. What to do with them? Somehow, I could not completely let go of them, but also could not find a way to know them more intimately. I wished I had indeed done as Kate suggested: sneak them into my pocket and sit with them on a hill. Dwell with them and be open to what might emerge, as she also suggested. But it seemed that because I had already looked at them through a different eye – that of seeing them as proof, and/or of ‘analysing’ the themes in the letters, I could no longer engage with them in this

open way. All this time, I seem to have thought of these letters as second-person voices on my first-person research practice, which invited me to read them as either feedback on the value of my morning walk practice, or my facilitation style. Or even as proof of some sort. I wonder whether they are perhaps less about me, but about people's own inquiries. Which makes them even more intimate. On the one hand, I wonder whether naming/thinking of these letters as 'wonder-full' might have turned them into something 'sacred', and therefore made it difficult to inquire or explore them with an open and curious mind. On the other hand, I wonder whether it might perhaps also be important to mark some things as slightly sacred or to honour the intimacy. Not everything is meant for other people's eyes, nor apparently for a more critical eye. And although it pains me not to include these letters (they are so beautiful!), I think doing so would destroy the intimacy.

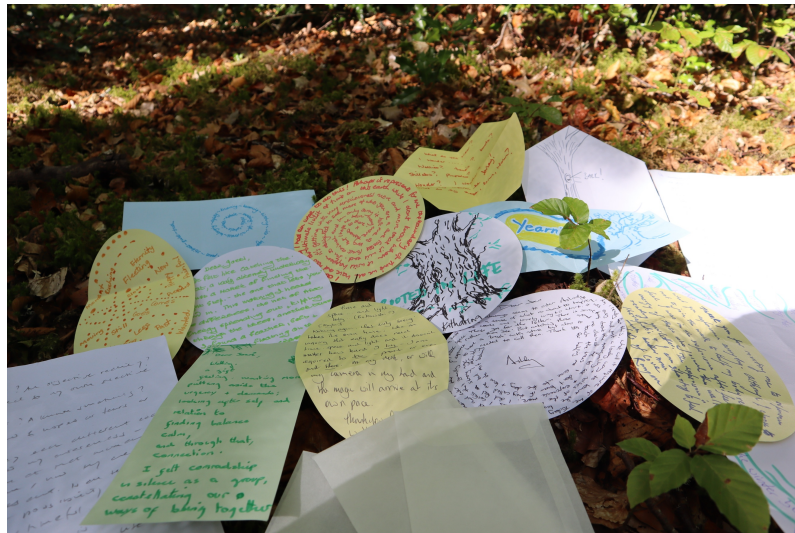


Figure 15 *Letters in the forest*, September 2019

After leaving them alone for quite some time, I brought them out with me to the forest for one last time, to read them once more, and try to do so with an open mind. As I arranged them on the mossy forest floor, it suddenly struck me: these letters were not meant for me at all! These are love letters. Filled with words of connection, beauty and praise, as well as yearning, longing and desire. But they are not addressed to me, but to a tree, the Ashridge grounds or life itself. And perhaps that is all the 'proof' I need.

## 6.4 Intimacy, routine and wandering

In this next section, I want to reflect on the walks by highlighting three themes: the appreciative eye as a way into intimacy, the relation between routine and wonder and between wandering and wonder.

### Knowing intimately

I wondered at the start of this chapter if the appreciative eye might somehow invite intimacy. I notice I abundantly use the word intimacy/intimate in all the section above. But what can intimacy mean in this context? In the dictionary, I learn that it can refer to 'close familiarity or friendship' as well as a 'closeness of observation or knowledge of a subject'. Again, there is the idea of getting to know something or someplace 'as if it were a friend'. I am intrigued that I said in response to the question what I offered nature in our 'friendship': I think I appreciate her and really see her. This was long before I had even read any of the literature on wonder, or encountered Vasalou's notion of 'really seeing', embedded in which is what she calls a 'striving' not to see phenomena with a 'sightless gaze'. She argues that wonder's seeing is a mode of acknowledgment that 'honours the otherness' of that what stands before us, an honour she believes 'we owe' to other phenomena, for it recognises that it is not there solely for our use or enjoyment, but "precedes and outlives us and exists in its separate being, which demands to be honoured as such" (Vasalou, 2015:206). Nussbaum (2003) and Hepburn (1980) argue for something similar when they say that wonder is an 'other-acknowledging emotion'. In Chapter 2, I mentioned how Carson thought that 'once the emotions have been aroused', we would wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. I wonder whether seeing the world through an appreciative eye is one way to arouse that sympathy, admiration or love that Carson mentioned, which in turn might awaken that longing to get to know that other. And is a way of honouring the phenomena on which you rest your gaze, to see them as worthy of our attention, and to awaken this desire to get to know them more intimately.

But how might you do so? I am once again reminded of Seeley and Reason's idea of 'connaître', a knowing with rather than about. In their article, Seeley shares how she once spent five hours drawing part of the floor of a French cathedral:

What mattered to me was that I felt "with" this patch of floor for that time, offering it my full attention as people came and went, peering over my shoulder, seeing what I was up to. I came to know this patch of the cathedral as I might know a friend (connaître, in French) as opposed to knowing "about" it (savoir). (Seeley & Reason, 2008:40)

Do my photographs, another form of presentational knowing, help me to get to know in a similar way? I am intrigued by how carrying the intention to take a photograph already seems to invite me to see differently, to pay more detailed attention. This only seems to work when I am not searching for something to take a photograph of, but rather try to become open and receptive enough to 'hear' something of beauty 'call out to me'. Or that is how I like to think of it anyway. A subtle, but significant difference. Might photography be one of my ways of getting to know places or moments as I would a friend? Can I compare the few seconds it takes me to photograph with the five hours Chris Seeley spent drawing? Perhaps what matters is that it seems to enable a similar way of being/knowing with. And if I pass the same tree two years later, I still remember the photograph I took of it, as I would remember an intimate conversation I once had with a person if I encountered them again on the streets.

Furthermore, I find that each photograph almost functions like a 'portal'. When I look at it, I seem to be drawn back into the experience of walking on that particular day and place, and seem to remember my sensuous memories as well as how I was feeling at the time. If I am in a more sceptical mood, it seems that I am doing no more or less than taking 'photographs of pretty things'. And I suppose the photographs can be thought of as such, but what matters to me is that I take them with a different intention: a longing for connection, to see and know my everyday surroundings more intimately. And this 'foraging for beauty' is a way to develop a more affective attachment to my everyday surroundings.





*12/5/2017, 8.27, Amsterdam*

## Rhythm, routine and ritual

I am intrigued by the relationship between routine and wonder that I recognise in my morning walk practice. In Chapter 2, I mentioned that several authors link wonder to surprise and the unexpected. How might that relate to the predictability of routine? Can routine and wonder go together? Or can wonder possibly even be enhanced by routine? I find that Barrett's (2012) notion of 'minimal structures' helps me to make sense of this paradox. He is both a jazz musician as well as an OD practitioner, and has formulated several principles from jazz that might also be helpful in thinking about organisations. He notes that even in free jazz there needs to be some form of minimal structure, for musicians to be able to improvise: a key, a chord progression... He therefore argues that a minimal structure does not limit but rather makes possible and enhances creativity and spontaneity. He does however not apply this thinking to the structures in an individual's life, but mainly to those in an organisation. Even though this might stretch his concept, I have started to think of my morning walks as the minimal structure around which I 'improvise' my life. This means that I think this recurring routine helps to wonder in the rest of my life, outside of the morning walks, but also that engaging in the same activity everyday somehow allows for more creativity, for seeing and noticing more, precisely because it is the same each day.

Let me first turn to the first point. Philosopher Marli Huijer argues that (collective) rhythms seem to have disappeared from many of our lives, and that without rhythm, all our time will become the same, because there would be nothing that distinguishes one hour, one day or one season from the next: "Daily rhythms, weekly rhythms, monthly rhythms, but also the rhythms of everyday actions are markings that continuously create difference and repetition and with that give ordering and meaning to our existence" (Huijer, 2015:36). I do think of the morning walks as a daily '(heart)beat', the one thing that stays the same in my life, independent of traveling or other changes. After four years of morning walks, I have accumulated around a thousand photographs, which means that I decided to walk for two thirds of the days, but also that I decided not to walk on the remaining four-hundred days. Because I was too exhausted in the morning to get out of bed, or was too restless and busy, or thought I was doing so well that I no longer needed it, or because I fell in love and did not

want to miss those mornings together... Even after four years, I have to face this internal battle every evening and morning: do I set my alarm earlier or give myself some extra sleep? Do I get out or stay in bed just a little bit longer? However, I believe that thinking of the walks as a routine, as a fixed structure in my life or as 'something that I always do', was what often shifted the decision to a 'yes'.

There also seems to be something in the repetition itself, for the practice of walking is always the same, that seems to allow me to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. Because it is the same every day, I see more difference. I see the leaves turning slowly yellow, or the flower buds opening a little more each day, notice how the sun rises a few minutes later each day, or how different the view from that same bridge is, influenced by the ever-changing shape of the clouds... Vasalou notes that the stance of honour she argues for is not easy to maintain:

It is a stance of honour that we may not be able to maintain ourselves in every day as we go about the circuits of our practical lives, and may need to cultivate in disciplined forms if we are to inscribe it within our lives more securely. (Vasalou, 2015:206)

I think my morning walks are one way of doing so. The morning walks are a daily routine, but also a daily ritual. Whereas thinking of them as a routine is a way of integrating them into my daily life, thinking of them as a ritual seems to be a way to mark them as 'different' from the rest of my life, and to bring a different level of attention to them. Stephenson (2015) argues that "ritual is cobbled together out of ordinary acts and gestures made extraordinary" (p.76) and that this is what makes ritual more than routine. I like the metaphor Tiu de Haan (2016) uses to explain the function of ritual: when we put a frame around a piece of art, we automatically pay more attention to what is inside the frame. Ritual is essentially about 'putting a frame' around a specific moment in order to look at it and experience it more attentively. Stephenson also explicitly thinks of ritual as a way of knowing, of understanding and making sense of the world, that came to be viewed as 'suspicious' and 'primitive' from the Enlightenment onwards. As I already mentioned earlier, I also explicitly think of my walks as a way of knowing and being known by the world.



*15/8/2017, 10.07, Amsterdam*

## Wandering and wondering

I am intrigued by the similarity of the words 'wandering' and 'wondering'. How might the physical act of wandering allow me to wonder? Rebecca Solnit describes the relation between walking and our way of thinking beautifully:

Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. [...] The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts (Solnit, 2001:5).

If the rhythm of walking indeed *generates* a rhythm of thinking, and passing through a landscape might *stimulate* passing through a certain series of thoughts, then which rhythm of walking might invite the kind of thinking I am interested in, that is to wonder? Perhaps this is why the metaphor of foraging, of wandering in search of beauty, appeals to me. As I already mentioned, I am not setting out directly to look for a photograph or moment of beauty, and when I do, it does not seem to have quite the same effect. It seems like I need to wander, to walk aimlessly, without direction, in order to find the beauty I am searching for. This reminds me of Solnit's related idea that in order to find something, you need to consciously 'lose yourself'. While these words can be taken metaphorically, as I at times do, they can also be taken quite literally: to physically lose yourself. And while I must admit I do not often completely lose my bearings during a morning walk, the 'aimless wandering' does seem to invite a different kind of presence.

The morning walks helped me to inquire into questions around my own rhythm and pace experientially, by paying attention to the rhythm and pace with which I walk. Simply to notice it, without necessarily having to change it. However, most days when I catch myself rushing or walking at a fast pace, the very act of noticing already lets me slow down. I ask myself: why hurry? Who or what is telling me to do so? Or, at times, I do decide to enjoy my fast-paced energy for a while. Explicitly slowing down and wandering aimlessly becomes a political act, however small, in a time

when efficiency, speed and productivity are often valued more than reflection, contemplation or 'wasting time'. Or as Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it: "Every step is a revolution against busyness. Each mindful step says: "I don't want to run anymore. I want to stop. I want to live my life. I don't want to miss the wonders of life" (Hanh, 2016:73). The seemingly simple act of noticing my rhythm and pace, and specifically how I feel them in my body, was quite radical for me. I used to be quite unaware of the rhythm of my footsteps, of my heart beating, or of breathing in and out. So, the morning walks are also a way to get to know my own body more intimately.

Busyness, living life at a high pace or without rhythm seems to make it less likely to stop and notice, to pay attention and be surprised by everyday beauty. These rather big questions manifest themselves in my daily morning walk practice, for the empty space at the start of the day supports me to not only notice my own bodily rhythm and pace, but also to *choose* whether I want to step into the rhythm and pace that I feel is expected of me, or that I choose to deviate and stick closer to my own rhythm and pace. Or simply to allow me to *feel* what sort of rhythm and pace my body is craving for, rather than automatically start the day 'at a trot'. Again, this helps me to ask myself: how do I really want to live my time? How can I choose more radically for what I find important? In that context, it seems especially relevant that I begin my day with this connection to myself, in order to choose how to spend the rest of the day. And as Annie Dillard (2013) puts it: 'how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives'. An obvious point perhaps, but one I seem to constantly need to remind myself of.

## 6.5 The appreciative eye in my OD practice

The morning walks are perhaps the most tangible and visible manifestation of my research. Because it is relatively easy to explain, and because friends, family and colleagues see my photographs on Instagram. I have also written about it and told the story of my morning walk practice to groups I work with, as a way to introduce myself. Nevertheless, I was caught off guard a few times when I learned people were inspired to start a morning walk practice of their own because of this. However, the story that I want to share here is not about walking at all, but about my appreciative eye.

I was asked to facilitate a team-day with 35 teachers, about which I heard beforehand that they were 'difficult', 'unmotivated' and 'underperforming'. As I drove to the session early that morning, worried and anxious that I was underprepared, knew nothing much about their educational system and should have brought another colleague with me who was better at dealing with 'difficult teams', I caught myself in time. I consciously decided I would radically choose to believe that this was a group of people who were at heart passionate about education. People who were good at their job and wanted to make a difference for their students. And who were the experts of their own work and organisation. I was consciously going to look at them with my appreciative eye. And they were all that I imagined. Yes, we shared stories of difficult moments, but mostly they showed a passion for their work and an energy to change things.

At the end of the day, a teacher who worked in the team for over forty years came up to me: "there have been many people like you that tried to work with us as a team, and I never cooperate with this kind of thing, but I don't know how you did it, but you really put me to work!" I can think of a number of ingredients that might have contributed to this, and I could tell a longer story of the different forms I used, but the most important ingredient seems to be that I chose to let go of everything I thought I knew about them, and instead chose to get to know with them. I knew and acknowledged things were far from perfect, and I still chose to focus on the possibility and beauty in this group and within these people. And doing so seemed to re-source and empower them to change things themselves. At the time, it felt as if I had practiced that shift in seeing through my morning walks. I do think it is interesting that seeing the beauty in my more tangible everyday surroundings, seemed to support me to see the beauty and possibility in something less tangible, such as 'a team'.

## 6.6 Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, I explored wonder as a form of seeing and seeking beauty. Based on the above, I also want to argue that wonder as a form of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary indeed seems to require a continuous effort. My morning walks are a practice that help me to continue to see and

experience wonder daily. I want to argue that having a daily routine 'to wonder' is one way to integrate in and allow for the possibility of wonder in everyday life. Creating an 'extraordinary moment' every day, seems to help to truly see the ordinary as extraordinary. This seems to be supported by choosing to look around me with an appreciative eye which helps to honour, see beauty and possibility in the other, as well as awaken a desire to get to know them more intimately. One way of doing so that worked for me was through photography as a form of presentational knowing. Another way in which a daily routine or ritual helps to see the extraordinary within the ordinary is because I believe my morning walks are a practice that re-sources me every morning: it connects me to some inner source within myself, and it also nourishes me, by offering a beauty-full or wonder-full start of the day. Because I think of the walks as 'empty space' that is 'different' or 'separate' from the rest of the day, I create a moment every morning where I can become more aware of taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas and expectations of others versus my own desires for how I want to spend the day. Instead of meeting those expectations automatically, this practice allows me to 'see' them and choose more consciously how I respond to them.



*Something in the way she knows  
And all I have to do is think of her  
Something in the things she shows me*

## 7. Wonder as wholesome

~



*View while journaling, Sant Aniol Valley, 26/2/2017*

### ***Looking the eagle in the eye***

*Journal Entry, 26/2/2017*

*“I should come here more often,” I write to myself as I take in the mountains around me. “At least a few times each year, this could really become like a second home to me...” At exactly that moment my eye is caught by a flurry of movement in the distance. Five, six, seven, no wait, fourteen birds of prey are circling the mountain on my right.*

*As I write this in my journal, I hear a swishing sound close by. As if something is passing by at high speed. I look up and see an eagle, or vulture, who knows the difference, swish by. Right in front of me. So close! It is quickly followed by another. I feel tears welling up, touched by the pure magnificence and beauty of this huge bird of prey. The strength and power that radiate from it, as well as its graceful and seemingly effortless movement through the sky. I follow the two birds with my eyes and they turn around. They fly right at me. Pass over me, only a few meters above me. They are huge. They are beautiful. They are terrifying. I can see the texture of their feathers, the expression on their faces, the look in their eyes. I am in awe. I feel tiny, exposed. I start slightly trembling, from the beauty of it, mixed with a tinge of fear. The two birds linger for a bit, circling above me before they move to the edge of the forest, into which they disappear.*

*Slightly shaken, I pick up my journal and resume writing, of my encounter with the eagles. As I write this, I catch myself thinking: did this really happen? It almost feels as if I have written them into*

*visiting me, written them into being. I was just about to write how the fourteen birds might be a sign of sorts. But before I could write down the words, these two emerged. What does it mean? Does it have to mean anything for it to be meaningful? An encounter of such force and power, with such force and power.*

*A reminder that I should not write about or analyse magical encounters of the past too much perhaps? But rather be open to experience them, to live them, in the here and now? There's something ironic about while trying to capture and write about magical encounters of the past, I am forcefully drawn into the magic of the present by this encounter.*

~

In this chapter, I want to explore Rachel Carson's statement that wonder is a 'wholesome emotion'. Might that also mean that wonder can be a way into experiencing yourself as part of the whole? I want to explore how getting to know physical places intimately, as you would a friend, and especially how moments of magic, as experiences of interconnectedness, might do so. I will explore these ideas through the story of introducing my mother and sister to the Sant Aniol Valley in Spain, one of the places I love deeply.

I will first explore the notion of a wholesome wonder theoretically (section 7.1), before sharing how I got to know and fell in love with the Sant Aniol Valley (section 7.2) and share the story of facilitating an experience of sitting still in nature for my mother and sister (section 7.3). I will then reflect on this story, by paying attention to what I learned from it about moments of magic as well as creating and holding a wonder-full space for others (section 7.4). I will end with how I integrated this in my OD practice (section 7.5) and my concluding thoughts (section 7.6).

## 7.1 Love for the world

In the previous chapters, I have argued that a sense of wonder is a way of seeing the world which can be directed at every aspect of life: an encounter with a fellow human being, a walk in the streets of Amsterdam... Nevertheless, I believe that my relationship with the more-than-human world is central to enchantment and wonder. Not only because ‘the natural’ remains one of the strongest ‘sources of enchantment’ for me, but mostly because enchantment and wonder presuppose that you think of and experience your relationship with the more-than-human world differently: that it is alive and you are part of it. Carson argued for an ecological worldview that acknowledges that we are all part of an interconnected world:

Contrary to the beliefs that seem often to guide our actions, man does not live apart from the world; he lives in the midst of a complex, dynamic interplay of physical, chemical, and biological forces, and between himself and this environment there are continuing, never-ending interactions. (Carson, 1963/1998b:228)

She believed that this belief that we are apart from the world was one of the main causes of the destruction of the world which led man to:

insulate himself, in his cities of steel and concrete, from the realities of earth and water and the growing seed. Intoxicated with a sense of his own power, he seems to be going farther and farther into more experiments for the destruction of himself and his world. (Carson, 1952/1998b:94)

She argues that there is ‘no single remedy’ for this condition, but she believed that the more we can focus our attentions on the wonders and realities of our universe about us, the less taste we will have for destruction. In this context, she argues that wonder, and humility, are wholesome emotions that ‘do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction’. Hannah Arendt also notes that “world alienation (...) has been the hallmark of the modern age” (Arendt, 1958/2013:254) and that ‘love of the world’ was “the first to fall victim to the modern age’s triumphal world alienation” (p.264). A

shift she mostly attributes to Galileo's invention of the microscope rather than to Descartes, because the microscope eventually led us to doubt and distrust our direct sensory observations of the world – the eye had apparently deceived us all this time, for it had not shown us 'what the world was truly like'.

A similar argument has been made by Berman (1981) in his distinction between a participating and a non-participating worldview. In this former kind of 'original participation' the world was 'a place of belonging' for: "rocks, trees, rivers and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment" (Berman, 1981:16). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, he believed the Cartesian separation made us think of the world as lifeless. We no longer believe that the world is wondrous and alive, and hence we no longer feel at home in it. Thomas Berry (1988) also argued that we are only talking to ourselves and stopped listening and speaking to the rivers and trees and have therefore 'broken the great conversation'. How have we lost the capacity to be in connection and communication with the world around us? This is one of the central questions that David Abram asks himself in 'the spell of the sensuous':

Direct, prereflective perception is inherently synaesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies. And yet, most of us seem, today, very far from such experience. Trees rarely, if ever, speak to us; animals no longer approach us as emissaries from alien zones of intelligence. (Abram, 1996:130)

His response is to argue for a renewed sensuous participation in the world. Elsewhere, he argues that we have to 'own up to being a creature of the earth' by "Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner fully human" (Abram, 2010:3). What might it mean that objects are 'expressive entities', and that we have a 'conversation' with them? Berman (1981) concludes that: "it is not merely the case that men conceived of matter as possessing mind in those days, but rather that in those days, matter did possess mind, "actually" did so" (p.93). Does that mean it still does but that many fail to see it because of a Cartesian worldview? Or that it has stopped possessing mind

because many no longer think it does? Thinking and reading about these questions was, and sometimes still is, quite challenging for me because of how far removed it is from what I thought to be true for most of my life.

As I tentatively read some contemporary texts on animism, I learned that it does not necessarily mean that phenomena have ‘spirit’ but can also refer to “a way not of thinking *about* the world but of being alive *to* it” (Ingold, 2013:214). This suddenly does not seem so far removed from my own thinking about and experience of wonder and moments of magic. However, Ingold also argues that it is impossible to be alive or sentient to an insentient world. I already mentioned Bennett’s similar argument that it is difficult to develop affective attachment to the world if we think of it as lifeless in Chapter 2. She goes to great lengths to argue that the world can be a place of enchantment without being created by a divine being, by drawing extensively on the Epicurean notion of ‘enchanted materialism’ – a view that sees matter as alive, or ‘enchanted’, but without divine purpose, meaning or command.

## 7.2 Falling in love with the valley

My inquiries into wonder increasingly seemed to awaken a deep longing within me to connect with the more-than-human world. To spend time outdoors, at or with places that held some significance for me. However, there was one place to which I was drawn over and over again: the Sant Aniol Valley in Spain. I visited the valley for the first time in October 2012, when my then K&S colleague Andres invited me there to do a ‘24-hour solo in the wild’. It is a long-honoured tradition in many cultures to spend time alone in nature to mark a significant transition, for instance as a rite of passage into adulthood, or to seek for answers or guidance. These traditions are being reinvented by many contemporary practitioners under different names, such as ‘nature quest’ or ‘wilderness retreat’. Bill Plotkin (2013) is one of these practitioners, and he notes that there are some elements that have largely stayed the same: you spend a considerable amount of time without human company in a remote wilderness setting with direct exposure to the forces of nature. You usually refrain from eating, and engage in some form of ritual practice to focus your attention.

This first visit to the valley and this first solo made a big impression on me, not in the least because I suddenly 'knew' I wanted to end my five-year relationship whilst sitting on that mountainside. When I came home, I wrote a blog about the experience for the Kessels & Smit website:



*Figure 17 My first solo, October 2012*

Somehow the sensation of just sitting there and staring at the (magnificent) horizon with nothing at hand does something to you. You literally change perspective. You instantly know what is important in your life and connect to your inner self: what do I really feel? Contemplating your life, the hours pass by. The night brought a totally different sensation with it. All of a sudden being in the wild was a bit scary. What was that sound over there? Are there any animals nearby? The campfire and bats flying over my head were my constant companions. The night seemed to last three nights instead of one. Daylight brought such joy, that the solo turned into a blissful experience after all. When the facilitators came to pick me up, I was a bit shaky due to the lack of food but beaming nevertheless. (Blog, November 2012)

Perhaps spending time on my own there, was what sparked my affection for the place, but in my memory it was more like 'love at first sight'. I came back for a gathering with fellow change practitioners, then for another solo, and another. In the meantime, I had become friends with Korbi, who lived nearby the valley. He realised his dream of building a house in the valley itself just after I started with my doctoral research. I became a regular inhabitant of the apartment underneath his house and spent between eight to twelve weeks a year there. To read or write for my doctoral research, but also to endlessly walk the paths of the valley or sit still for hours at a beautiful place.



*28/11/2017, 8.22, Sant Aniol Valley*



I seem to hear my own thoughts and feelings loud and clearly there, without all the background noise from the city. Both the constant noise of cars and the general buzz of the city, as well as the less tangible noise from other people's opinions and stories. In the valley, all this seems to move to the background, and I am invited to simply be, in my body and in the landscape around me. The valley almost feels like my literal place of magic, a different state of being that can be accessed through geography, patiently waiting for me in another country. The mere knowledge that this place existed elsewhere, could brighten my mood on darker days. Whilst searching for wonder and magic in my 'everyday life' often seemed like hard work, with distractions and difficulties at every corner, it came naturally to me in the valley. Living and writing there for part of the year are of course also part of my everyday life, yet I always thought of it as somewhat separate from the rest of my life, as an 'easy' or 'effortless' way into wonder.

Which might not quite do justice to the practice of choosing to spend a significant amount of time with a place of my choice, and how I went about spending my time there. Walking there for hours and hours on my own, often trailing the same paths. Dwelling and lingering, to take in the beauty around me, write in my journal or take photographs. I have my favourite places in the valley. To some I go when I feel sad, to others when I need to clear my head... I often find myself making up small rituals at these specific places, taking a bit of rosemary and thyme to bring it home with me, singing a specific song or creating a little sculpture from things I encounter there... Perhaps these can be thought of as 'place practices': my way of trying to connect and be in relationship with this place. To get to *know* the place, by looking at it, touching it, smelling it, listening to it, eating it even.



Figure 18 **Garlic butter**, May 2016

*Another food experiment; I picked some rosemary, thyme and oregano from my solo spot when I left, and carefully wrapped it in toilet paper. With the intention to take something back home with me from my – in my eyes magical – solo spot. And cook a meal back home seasoned with ‘a little bit of solo’. I ended up using the herbs to make a delicious garlic butter and ate it together with my mother. It felt like quite a special way of sharing the solo experience, apart from just telling stories about it. My mother felt the significance of it as well, and said she felt honoured that she was allowed to eat it and share this meal with me. And I don’t know whether I imagined it or not, but I never tasted a richer home-made garlic butter before... (Writing for Supervision, May 2016)*

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### 7.3 Introducing my mother and sister to the valley

The valley felt like a sacred place to me, the place where I could connect to different parts of myself and explore at the edge of my knowing and thinking – perhaps precisely because my ‘normal life’ felt far removed. It was therefore not self-evident to invite people from my life in The Netherlands to the valley. Would others see the same beauty in the valley? Would I be able to continue to ‘be’ this way, once they were there with me? Again, I thought back to the metaphor of befriending places, and of introducing my human-friends to my place-friends, when I was discussing a holiday

destination with my mother and sister. I was still slightly hesitant, but suggested the idea nevertheless: why don't we go to the valley together? It was meant to be a holiday, but a special holiday at that. One that would introduce two of the people that matter most to me to the place that had come to matter most to me, and all that it had come to stand for.

When I picked my mother and sister up from the airport, they told me they had discussed the possibility of doing a solo themselves. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since I had told them many stories of my time spent alone on the mountainside there. However, my first internal response was: perhaps better not. I did not think of doing a solo lightly, and there was nobody in the valley who could potentially facilitate the process. And I also wondered whether they had fully considered what sitting on a mountainside for twenty-four hours might entail and evoke. Nevertheless, we revisited the idea several times in the next few days. The idea had slowly grown on me, and on them, but with it had grown a quiet determination: if they were to do a solo, I wanted them to have the full experience. I was convinced someone needed to create and hold the space for them, as Korbi and Andres had done several times for me. And I wondered, would I be able to do so? I had never facilitated anything like a solo before, yet I had experienced the process several times myself. Of course, I knew how to facilitate a session in an organisation, but that was indoors, and with people I did not know so intimately. Would it not be too strange to 'facilitate' my own mother and sister? And did I have enough experience to create a safe enough space and guide the process well? On the one hand they were about the only people I could safely entrust with and invite into the intimacy of my own explorations, whilst on the other hand I felt anxious precisely because they knew me so well. Would I dare to step into my role as facilitator? We discussed and 'contracted' this beforehand, but they seemed less worried about it all than I was.

We chose a day, and a place for each of them, as well as what we felt to be a fitting amount of time: eight hours, from sunrise until three in the afternoon. I want to tell the story of this moment in a slightly different way than in the previous chapters, namely through a letter correspondence between myself and both my mother and sister. I did not write a moment-story of the experience

afterwards, but rather told the story numerous times. And over time, I found I kept revisiting the experience together, especially the moment when I introduced the practice to them and ‘opened the space’ while doing so. I could not shake the feeling that I somehow experienced the essence of what my professional practice was about – however different the setting was from my normal work context. My supervisor invited me to articulate what this difference was about. I found this extremely difficult. I *knew* I was/did something different, and I also *knew* that a different way of relating to each other and the valley became possible – and I suspected that the two were related. But I found I could not articulate what the difference was about, or how I knew, even after several attempts. The only way I could explain it was through the image I had in my mind’s eye during that moment itself: of not only opening a window in time for myself, but widening this window for my mother and sister to step through it, and somehow keeping it open between the three of us for the remainder of the process.



*Figure 19 In the valley with my mother and sister, May 2017*

I felt that my mother and sister had each experienced a moment of magic of their own during their time on the mountainside, but how could I really know this? I considered several ways to ask them for feedback about the experience, but each form seemed too formal, and too much like an evaluation. How might I hear more about what it was like from within the actual moment, even if

the moment occurred some months ago? How might I find a form that would start a new cycle of inquiry for each of us rather than close the inquiry down? I was carrying these questions when I went back to the valley. During one of my first days there, I walked to the place where my mother sat during her solo and started thinking of her there. I took out my journal from my pocket and started to write a letter to her, which I sent to her later that same day, accompanied by a photograph of my view while writing the letter. A few days later, I did the same from my sister's solo spot. I received a response from both my mother and sister in the same week.

Reading these letters still deeply touches me. For me, they vividly bring back the experience in all its richness. And show what I am trying to convey in this chapter about wonder as a wholesome emotion. But at the same time, I cannot help but wonder in what way reading these letters might help you know the experience – if you have never visited the valley nor met any of us, nor were there with us. I have to resist the temptation to offer all kinds of background information, to describe the whole process in-depth, or to pay detailed attention to all the micro-moments and choices. If it is only possible to get a glimpse of any experience I try to convey anyway, then what would offer the 'richest' glimpse? I have chosen to include the letter correspondence here in its entirety, even though it might be quite intimate, for I think it comes closest to the experience itself, as told from three perspectives. It is also an example of yet another experiment of 'gathering data' in an intimate way. I have only taken out some parts of the letters that I judged to be too personal and less relevant for this context.



*23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2017, Sant Aniol Valley*

*Dear Mom,*

*I am now sitting on your solo spot, next to the little church. This is the second time I have been back here since you spent eight hours on your own here. I'll never forget picking you up here, with Luna & Mathilda running ahead of me. You had such bad luck with the weather, sitting still in the cold and the fog all day! As I am now sitting here, I see a blue sky, the sun is starting to set, painting the mountains to my left in a golden light. It is totally silent, except for the soft chirping of birds, the sounds of the leaves rustling through the trees and the distant rumbling of stones rolling down the mountain. It feels like your presence lingers here.*

*There are two moments from your solo that specifically stood out for me. How you got lost and tangled up on the way here. Probably because I felt responsible for you as a 'first time solo facilitator'. And partly because it seemed like your solo started on the way there, something you had to go through somehow before you could get there. The other moment was the one that you retold me this Monday over dinner: totally letting go and being held by the earth. You said it was a transformative moment that you often think back to. I wonder if you would be willing to write something back to me about that specific moment? What did it feel like? How does it continue to resonate afterwards?*

*You know I am curious about these special moments, the windows in time, as I called them. How can I invite those moments for myself, but how might I possibly also invite others into those type of moments. In that context, I am also curious to hear a bit more about your comment that I somehow seemed to create a magical space in which I invited you and San, if I am not misquoting you here.*

*Thanks so much. Also for trusting me back then and joining me in the inquiry. It was really special to have the experience here with you and San. I feel it has deepened our bond even more as a trio, if that is even possible. Big hug from this beautiful place, the sun is almost gone, the rocks are pink by now, time to head back home.*

*Your daughter*

Castricum, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2017

Dear Joer,

[...]

*First in the evening your beautiful introduction, in which you changed before my eyes from a daughter into a wise woman, who opened a window in time. And created a possibility for us to step into that magical world. The expression on your face became softer, but also more self-aware. You brought me along into a bigger story. Through your words, tone of voice and the images you conjured up, you created an opening to step into that. It felt as a special, almost reverential moment. I was allowed to be part of a mystical world with rituals.*

[...]

*The most enjoyable was to lie on the earth, the sun was carefully starting to shine through the clouds and I fell asleep several times. In the end, I could really surrender to mother earth and to 'the Valley', the delicious smells of thyme. Reflected on how I try to do everything myself, try to do it alone, but that I am also allowed to lean. Lean on a bigger whole, lean on the earth, but also lean on other people. That I am really allowed to ask for that. It felt so comforting and delightful.*

[...]

*Then the sharing at The Paradise Pool, the beautiful form in which we kept repeating "I saw a woman who... that is what I heard" I was moved to tears. By how loving and respectful you were for us. By the pain and emotions of Sanne and later of myself. I was so proud of the two of you, loved you so much, and Hidde as well. I felt so deeply connected with the three of us, but also with the four of us, with life and the earth.*

[...]

*Now I think/feel the solo to be one of the magical moments of my life, in which I have felt earthed and can totally surrender to the earth, really to mother earth. I can feel it in my body; the total surrender, being held by the earth. It is a refuge, to which I can go back any time. Thank you for that, dear oldest daughter from Hidde and myself, thank you.*

Margreet



*3rd of December 2017, Sant Aniol Valley*

*My dear sis,*

*I am now sitting on your little rock chair, feeling the early morning sun on my face, enjoying the quiet. I am imagining you sitting here, for eight hours. It is a beautiful spot, yet also quite rough, or tough in a way. No patch of grass to lie down on, no space to walk around. A fitting spot for you though, since you enjoy beauty so much and are not easily discouraged by some discomfort or a challenge standing in between you and the beauty.*

*I feel myself sinking into the rhythm of this place... the soothing sound of the river, the slight breeze of wind lightly tickling my cheeks, the rustling of leaves and chirping of birds. A robyn on my left, a crow on my right.*

*When I think back to your solo, I remember that I was a bit scared beforehand what it would bring up for you. Somehow you seemed fragile at that moment in time, mourning the loss of Jarl. And yet you emerged so powerful, beaming and radiating strength and joy. I was touched by how strongly you could feel the rhythm of the seasons in your life, feeling the things that are ending or have died in your back, there to support you. Your spiritual side that you got to know again there. And how you could feel me, your sister, as an eagle guardian.*

*I often think back to the whole experience, and feel it was such a beautiful thing to do with the three of us. Or as mama said, the four of us, because pap was there as well somehow. Thank you for sharing that experience together dear sis! And for sharing the love for the valley, I have a feeling we will come back here together often!*

*I know that you wrote quite a bit about the solo in your journal. I wonder if you want to write something about the experience for me, or share some of your writing from back then? How did it feel at the time? How does it continue to resonate in your life? Were there any moments that you particularly think back to often?*

*Thanks a lot, sending you lots of love and sunrays from this beautiful place!*

*Your sister*



6<sup>th</sup> of December, Amsterdam

Dear sis,

*It is unbelievable - in the literal sense of the word - to me that you were sitting on that rock a few days ago, that you are between these mountains at this very moment. Sometimes I have a hard time comprehending that while I am here, such a place exists. Mountains exist while I am in this low country. Glaciers exist while I bike through the city.*

*You introduced me to the valley generously, showing me the monasteries and the turquoise pools. You are so present there. Every rock and sprig of thyme is a dear friend to you. I felt the valley opening up to me when I most needed it to.*

*[...]*

*I think I needed to be in a rough spot that day, no patch of grass to rest on, no space to move. Only that hard rock, protruding from the mountain, with its beautiful view. In the beginning there was no mountain facing me, can you imagine? It was in a cloud - it took its time to wake. Next to me there was a caterpillar that struggled and took its time. The river flowed. Time. And yet there was no time. I drifted away and with eyes closed, I saw an eagle flying above me. Very close, very strong, it was looking after me. It was you, my strong and ever caring sister. I know it was.*

*When given the opportunity to talk about what happened to me, what happened in me, I felt the words flow. It was so much! Only eight hours, but more powerful insights than I had in months and months... The way we shared this was magical. I was allowed to let out my waterfall of words uninterrupted before hearing my story come back to me through the voices of the two people I love most in this earth. It felt like a gift, truly. A generous, heartfelt gift.*

*Again, you are giving me a gift by asking me to go back to the solo, to inwardly be there again. I should do so more often. While I will never ever forget the powerful experience of that day, sometimes the strength of it is close, sometimes I lose it. In my body there is the rock, the eagle, the two men behind me, the strong spiritual woman in me, the searching moment in the present, the acceptance of it all. It is here, in me, even in Amsterdam, not only in the valley where you are at this very moment. Though how I wish to be there with you today and smell the thyme.*

*Thank you so much, my eagle sister.*

*Sanne*

## 7.4 Widening windows in time

What these letters show for me is how between the three of us we seemed to have created a space in which wonder and magic were possible – and more so than on other moments. All three of us describe, in different words, how the time from the introduction until the story-sharing had a wondrous and magical quality to it. My mother and sister describe moments that seemed to have a similar quality to them as my ‘moments of magic’: my mother’s description of leaning into the earth, and my sister’s description of the eagle and the feeling of the two men at her back. Moments in which they both seemed to experience this feeling of interconnectedness, beauty and stepping through a window in time that I described in Chapter 4. And while I had experienced a number of those moments myself by then, I was still struggling how to ‘create’ or ‘invite’ more of them. I did not quite know how to do so for myself, let alone for others. What enabled these moments to occur here? Did I in some way contribute to this, or was it simply the act of spending time alone in a beautiful place that did it?

### Creating and holding ritual-transformative space

One way to make sense of this experience is through the lens of ritual. William Ayot (2015) writes in his book about ritual how you can temporarily create ‘ritual space’ as a practitioner, in which “you are likely to find yourself stepping away from the normal rules, constraints and hierarchies of society and suspending your normal thinking and behaviour” (p.46). He does so by temporarily defining a physical or metaphorical space as ‘sacred space’. Whereas you might think of certain physical spaces as sacred, from shrines to churches, he argues you can also set aside a metaphorical sacred space in time. I am a bit hesitant to use the word sacred, especially while working in organisational contexts, but Ayot’s understanding of creating ritual space nevertheless offers a helpful lens to understand my emerging practice of creating wonder-full space. And I recognise that I did explicitly mark the time from the introduction to the story-sharing as sacred or different, something my mother wrote about in her letter: your introduction allowed me to step into and be part of a mystical world with rituals.



*26/1/2018, 8.16, Amsterdam*

I wonder whether it was easier to create this kind of ritual space that is 'different' from the normal rules of society because we were literally quite far away from society. In his ecological pilgrimage in search of moments of grace, Reason also questions whether it is necessary to "go on a long and arduous journey to open such experiences" (Reason, 2017:18). I do think he makes an interesting point by noting that travel might support these experiences because it 'takes you out of the taken-for-granted structures and habits of everyday life'. And I suppose that this argument holds for a week in the valley as well as a sailing journey. Ayot describes five stages of ritual in his practice: purpose and planning, preparation and logistics, opening and invocation, action and expression and closure and grounding. This reminds me of Seeley's notion of creating transformational space – and how there is an art to creating, holding and protecting these spaces, as well as how this space is in 'the invisible realm'. Was that why I found it so difficult to give words to it afterwards?

A somewhat similar concept to creating and holding (ritual) space, is the notion of 'hosting and holding containers', as Corrigan (2015) describes it: "containers are intangible yet real spaces in which the potential and possibility of a group can unfold. They have boundaries that are physical and psychological" (p.291). Bushe (2010) wrote an essay titled 'being the container' in which he shares his own evolving understanding and curiosity of what a 'good container' might be: "I began to think that perhaps containers are co-constructed by the groups inside them with the leader or facilitator playing a pivotal role through their very being" (p.11). He introduces several ways of doing so, one of them is through creating what he calls 'ritual-transformative space' by 'invoking images that activate the unconscious mind's dormant readiness to change' through ritual. Bushe finds this the most difficult to put into words, and uses a personal example of feeling a tingling at the back of his neck while feeling a shift in the group's consciousness at the same time: "I am still groping to find ways to explain what makes it happen, but I am sure it does happen" (p.14). And this makes me think that I am apparently not alone in my struggle to know, develop and articulate this art. When I ran into Gervase Bushe at a conference earlier this year and we started talking about ritual-transformative space, he asked me: where do you know it in your body? That I could answer: I know it in my lower belly, and imagine I have an internal hourglass there, and during these moments the sand seems to

be moving slower and slower, until it almost comes to a halt. There were several moments where I felt something like this happen in Spain, perhaps most clearly during my introduction, when I visualised creating and stepping through a window in time. My mother wrote how I changed in that moment before her eyes ‘from a daughter into a wise woman who, who opened a window in time’. She describes how she saw something change in my physique, in the expression on my face and how this indeed created a way to step into that window in time for her through my words, voice and images I conjured up.

And then there is the perhaps even less tangible act of ‘holding space’. How might I have held the space for my mother and sister when all three of us were physically in different spaces for most of the time? Is that even possible? Although we seem to refer to ‘holding space’ regularly as OD practitioners, it remains an intangible and somewhat mystified craft. Ayot also notes that there seems to be little agreement amongst professionals what this might actually entail, but in his words it: “seemed to involve throwing an envelope of care and attention around the whole group, as a parent would a child, or as a great performer would an audience. It’s actually an act of *caritas*, of love” (p.49). Elsewhere, he describes it as ‘a state of wholly loving attention’. To me this caring and loving attention suggests a high level of intimacy, as does the metaphor of holding something or someone. Am I holding the space or the people in it? Or both? In this case, it was relatively easy to call forth this loving and caring attention, for I was directing it at the two people I care about most. I was struck by my sister’s description of the eagle that she interpreted as me looking after her, almost as if the love and care I was sending her way had reached her somehow. Corrigan argues that the ability to hold a container, and with that the quality of the process of inquiry that might unfold, largely depends on the facilitator’s ability to *embody* the container. I wonder if part of my ‘preparation’ for doing so was through spending two days entirely on my own in the valley before my mother and sister arrived, exploring questions around interconnectedness myself through various presentational forms.

## Wholesome emotions

But was this an experience of a wholesome wonder? I think I can say with some certainty that it was wholesome for the wellbeing of my mother and sister, and myself. Sharing this experience seemed to have deepened our relationship even more, if that was possible. Ayot talks about the possibility of ritual to 're-wire' or 're-align' yourself, to give a felt sense of what it means to be alive, in connection with the world and to put you in direct contact with the mysterious and awe-inspiring. This does seem closely related to my understanding of moments of magic. But it also reminds me of Shotter's argument that 'living moments' can ontologically move us. I understand that to mean that they can both touch and resonate on the level of being, as well as potentially shift your way of seeing and thinking of the world. Perhaps it is also similar to how Hansen thought of wonder as 'an ontological homecoming'. I find it quite difficult to know for certain if this experience, and specific moments within it, might have had a transformative effect. And how it has reverberated on the long run.

I am nevertheless struck by how both my mother and sister wrote how they carried these moments with them somehow. The moments are 'integrated' in or 'imprinted' on their bodies, similar to how the moment with the fox seems to have functioned for me. My sister said: 'in my body there is the rock, the eagle, the two men behind me..' and my mother wrote of it as a 'refuge to which I can go back any time'. The story-sharing method that we used to make sense of and later close the space seems to have been a way to 'lock the experience into the body-memory' as Ayot calls it, a way to acknowledge and lock the 'ritual shift' that has taken place within someone in the ritual space. Especially, telling the story in your own voice first and then hearing it back through the voices of others seemed to do so. The letters half a year later were an invitation to tell the story again, with more time in between, and to revisit that body-memory while doing so. My sister wrote of it as a gift that allowed her to inwardly go back to the solo.

Paul Kingsnorth recently argued on Dutch television for the importance of 'sitting still' in landscape:

“If you go to any landscape and you just sit there quietly and listen: what do you hear? What song is the sea singing? Is it different from the song that the sky is singing? And how does it change throughout the day and throughout the seasons? They’re not trivial questions. Actually, these are the questions that societies were asking long before we turned in on ourselves.”

He states resolutely that this is necessary work, and that the practice of going to a place, be quiet and listen, might well infiltrate into your work and conversations in unpredictable ways. Robert Macfarlane recently shared in a lecture that landscape has increasingly lost its innocence for him: he can no longer look at any landscape without seeing the violence that has taken place there, both to humans and to the landscape itself. He nevertheless stressed that this does not mean that landscapes cannot also still be places of wonder. I recognise his feeling, and increasingly think that becoming aware of the wonder in the world is both wholesome and painful. Or perhaps that is precisely what Carson meant when she said that wonder was a wholesome emotion that could not exist side-by-side with a lust for destruction. She never said that wholesome meant ‘pleasant’, and it seems to me that since I slowly started to feel part of the whole, I feel the destruction of the world more deeply and keenly.

Reason (2017) argues that “opening oneself to the wild world and describing what one finds with love and passion is a political and spiritual act” (p. 19). He argues that it is not a sufficient, yet necessary response that might in turn inform the practical and the political dimensions of our ecological crisis. Abram (2010) similarly argues that some sort of ‘necessary work of recuperation’ needs to be accomplished before or alongside work in the political and social spheres. It is not enough, but I do think that falling in love with the world and becoming aware of the wonders of the world is one possible way to ‘mark the world for our concern’ as Nussbaum (2003) puts it. For as Thich Nath Hanh notes, we do whatever we can for those we love:

When we’re in love with someone or something, there’s no separation between ourselves and the person or thing we love. We do whatever we can for them, and this brings us great

joy and nourishment. When we see the Earth this way, we will walk more gently on her.  
(Nath Hanh, 2016:84).

### Falling in love with specific places

I do not know if I have fallen in love with the earth as a whole, but I do know I have fallen in love with the valley. And that sharing this love with my mother and sister made them fall in love just a little bit with the valley too. In indigenous and animist ontologies there seems to be a much stronger tie with a specific place or landscape. Abram (1996) describes how local songs and stories about a specific landscape informed people's understanding of the world. These local stories did not take place in a distant or imagined land, but in specific places that you walked by daily, or the mountain you could see in the distance from your home. Whenever you walked past such a place, you would remember that specific story. I think it is interesting that revisiting the actual places where my mother and sister spent their time alone, offered a way into coming to know their experience through the letters.

Snyder (1990) calls a place with which you have a deep tie a 'home place', and already argued thirty years ago that most Americans do no longer have such a home-place of which they not only know the natural territory, but also the place songs and stories that used to be passed along from generation to generation: "recollecting that we once lived in places is part of our contemporary self-discovery. It grounds what it means to be "human" (etymologically something like "earthling")" (Snyder, 1990:31). He also stresses how our relation to the natural world always takes place in a *specific place* through spending prolonged time in and with a place. His argumentation seems somewhat obvious; of course, my interaction with nature takes place in actual places rather than in some abstract place called nature. Yet, I seemed to have forgotten this until recently. I am not sure I have anything that resembles a home-place though, especially when it comes to a connection to place that spans generations. Reading Snyder and Abram almost discourages me, my attempts to spend months with a place I love, however radical for some, including myself, pales in comparison to spending several centuries in/with a place. Can you *choose* which place becomes your home place?





*23/2/2018, 8.46, Sant Aniol Valley*

Does it have to be one place? Snyder (1990) says about this: “To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made up of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in” (p.41). Might the valley be the part in which I am whole?

## 7.5 Sitting still

How have I integrated these insights in my practice with organisations? I think the most tangible insight that I could immediately use was the idea that I was deliberately creating spaces of wonder. This shifted the understanding of my role, and I started to pay much more detailed attention to the opening and closing of a space, as well as the more intangible art of holding space. As a result of this experience, Korbi and I also initiated a five-day inquiry into ‘natural rhythm’ in the Sant Aniol Valley for which I invited several K&S colleagues. We asked our friend Jed, who is a musician to co-facilitate the week with us. Some of the questions we explored together were: What are the rhythms with which you live your life? Is there such a thing as a natural rhythm? What can we learn from nature when it comes to rhythm? And is rhythm something individual or do we collectively need new rhythms as a society? We explored these questions with twelve people, most of them K&S colleagues through different forms - by walking, making music, spending time alone in nature, having meaningful conversations... and ‘just’ by spending time together in a beautiful place. I loved hosting this inquiry, and this was the experience that perhaps came closest to my once imagined ‘day in the life of a BFF consultant’. I was facilitating, but also playing the guitar, making campfires, walking in the mountains, and only with people I had personally invited and cared about. Afterwards, I was set on hosting more of these inquiries. However, I have now tried two times to put up a new edition of ‘natural rhythm’ but there were not enough people. Perhaps this is also partly because the magic of the experience was in creating something new, and I have unconsciously not been as enthusiastic about later versions.

I have found it even more difficult up until now to invite clients to go for a solo with me, in Spain or elsewhere. Positioning this as serious and necessary work within organisations does not seem self-evident. And yet, this has also forced me to be creative and taught me that much more can happen

in a small amount of time or in unlikely contexts than I thought possible. An example that comes to mind is a 'mini-solo' with country directors of an INGO in Cape Town. In a week-long meeting that was part of a longer leadership programme, I offered a solo as part of a day with many different offerings. Each session was only 1,5 hours long, but I decided to try anyway. Five people joined me for an hour-long solo along the pier, facing the endless ocean. During the short walk to the pier, I asked them to share a place that they loved deeply. And again, I asked them to contemplate the directions/seasons in their life and we used the story-sharing method of 'I hear the story of a woman who...' afterwards. I was quite amazed how much sitting still for one hour evoked. One director's tears were flowing freely, she said she connected to the bigger force of love in the world for the first time in years in this hour. Another shared how he had suddenly realised he was part of the bigger universe, how he contained the whole universe within him, but was at the same time just a tiny part. Like a drop in the ocean, at which he had been staring for an hour.

## 7.6 Concluding thoughts

Whereas in the previous chapters, I have argued for a wonder that is part of everyday life, for instance in a daily routine, this chapter stresses the importance of also allowing the possibility of a 'deep wonder' in the form of moments of magic by deliberately going away from your ordinary surroundings and spending time alone in nature. This might also support you to see your life more clearly, by looking at it from a distance. I want to argue that wonder, and specifically moments of magic, can have a wholesome effect and can be a way into experiencing yourself as part of the whole. And while this can evoke a wholesome feeling in the more everyday use of the word, it can also awaken a feeling of loss or grief. It seems that I cannot plan or predict these kinds of moments of magic. I did not know beforehand that my mother and sister would have such a meaningful experience, with moments of magic of their own. And whilst I did not intentionally set out to create these kinds of moments for them, I did hold the possibility of their emergence as well, without focusing on it too directly. As Sherry (2013) notes, it would not work to say: 'now wonder!' or as Fisher (1996) argues: if you already have the expectation to see something wonderful, it will decrease its potential effect. I want to nuance their positions somewhat: it does not seem that you

can go after or plan for what I would call magic directly, but believing in the possibility of magic and lightly holding the intention for it to occur, does seem to work. I therefore argue to approach these moments of magic *obliquely*, by holding the intention and possibility to experience them in the corner of your eye.

I do however seem to become better at recognising the opportunities for these moments, or for potential weaknesses in the fabric of time that might allow me to create a window in time, as I once imagined it. And instead of actively seeking them out, making use of the opportunity as it emerges. As Peter Reason concludes in his quest for moments of grace: “[t]he challenge, the creative opportunity, is quite simply to be open to these moments when they arise” (Reason, 2017:190). And I think that sitting still in nature is a practice that helps you to create a certain openness, and that therefore might make it more likely for these kinds of moments to occur. As does developing some sort of affection for the world. My way into falling in love with the world, seems to have been through falling in love with specific places, and most of all with the valley. And sharing my love for this place, seemed to have enabled my mother and sister to fall a little in love with the valley too. Schinkel (2018a) notes that while these kinds of moments, what he calls deep wonder, might indeed have a morally (trans)formative effect, these experiences might also lead to an ‘egocentric search for more’. I do recognise this feeling of wanting to experience this feeling more often, but I do think this comes from a deep longing for connection and not simply to give myself a ‘boost’. And for me, the power of wonder as a wholesome emotion, is that it can be both wholesome for yourself and the world. And that awakening to and experiencing wonder, beauty and connection, is as valid and important a response to the ecological crisis as making people aware of the facts.

*One thing I can tell you  
Is you got to be free*

## 8. Wonder as staying in the in-between-space

~

### ***Thoughts on the in-between-space***

*MADE Magazine, June 2017*

*At the start of MADE<sup>1</sup>, I shared the story of my grandmother's journey to Curaçao, how I admired her courage to travel to an unknown destination on her own. Perhaps I should have also told you the story of my other grandmother, who spent most of her life travelling from one place to the next. First with a wagon and a horse, later with a trailer. For her, the in-between-space was not a temporary adventure, but her home. With all the joys and struggles that came with living in that space.*

*The joy of struggling forward, one of the phrases from MADE that will stay with me. Perhaps that is what I love most about being in the in-between-space. The richness of it. It was not always easy, nor was it always perfect. But I did feel fully alive in this space, there was a certain magic to it. And it taught me so much about what I find important in work and life.*

*This speaks to why I think such spaces of inquiry are relevant and important. I think they help bring back (small moments of) wonder to our lives, to question our taken-for-granted beliefs and to see new possibilities. To reflect, and to reconnect to what we find important, the essence of things. And if we think of this MADE event as an experiment in creating such a rich space of inquiry for a large amount of people, I think we most definitely succeeded. And I for one feel like to create more of such spaces, in which we get lost together and find unexpected gifts along the way.*

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<sup>1</sup> MADE (make a difference event) is the name of the Appreciative Inquiry Summit on Radical Connectedness.

In this chapter, I will share an attempt to widen the circle of my research by combining my research agenda with organising a three-day Appreciative Inquiry summit (MADE) together with colleagues on ‘Radical Connectedness for human flourishing’ with 250 people. This was both an experiment to create an experience of intimate inquiry for a large group of people, as well as to create a bigger impact on the world by inviting everyone present to design initiatives for change. I will particularly pay attention to the art of creating and holding, as well as staying in ritual or transformative space, what we called ‘in-between-space’.

I will start with introducing the idea of wonder as ‘staying’ or ‘dwelling’ (section 8.1) before sharing some stories of the inquiry on Radical Connectedness (section 8.2). I will then reflect on those stories and on how the metaphor of the in-between-space might have supported staying in the unknown and what this staying might have asked of both myself and others (section 8.3). I will end this chapter by sharing a story from my OD practice (section 8.4) and summarising the insights from this chapter (section 8.5).

### 8.1 Not-knowing, mystery and uncertainty

People often ask me how a sense of wonder is different from curiosity. For quite some time, I was not sure how to answer this question. Perhaps curiosity was a component of wonder? Or a slightly more secular way of describing wonder? Schinkel (2017/2018b) argues that curiosity is typically directed at something specific that is new or unknown to learn more about it and where possible explain it, whereas wonder contemplates the bigger questions in life without searching for an answer and can just as well be directed at the familiar. This difference between curiosity and wonder resembles Rubenstein’s (2008) distinction between Socratic and Aristotelean (or Cartesian) wonder I introduced in Chapter 2. She finds a more contemporary version of Socratic wonder in Heidegger’s work who criticises curiosity for its attempt to understand everything by objectifying it. She stresses that Heidegger was not so much against curiosity, but that he “characterises curiosity’s frantic self-sabotage as a persistent not-staying” (Rubenstein, 2008:27). In his work, she finds the

confirmation that wonder depends on ‘keeping it open’, rather than ‘closing it off after a momentary spark’.

Hansen (2012) adds that the essential difference between curiosity and wonder is whether we remain in control of our intentionality or not, whether we seek to know or have no specific want to know:

Even when we are curious, surprised or interested we remain in the control of our intentionality and on firm epistemological ground. We know what we know, and expect to know, and want to know, although we might be surprised and lose our footing for a moment. However, in wonder we do not know and have no expectation or specific want to know something. In wonder, we find, so to speak, a footing and joy and beauty right in the midst of not-knowing. (Hansen, 2012:159)

In doing so, Hansen also builds on Heidegger’s notion of ‘dwelling’ as an ‘openness to mystery’ which relates to seeing or experiencing ‘the unfamiliar in the familiar’. In Chapter 2, I already described Vasalou’s and Rubenstein’s notion of a ‘wonder that dwells’ by ‘exposing itself to the raging elements’ and ‘enduring the vertigo of epistemic vulnerability’. Ladkin has attempted to translate this more abstract notion of ‘dwelling’ to organisations and the role of leaders. She also interprets Heidegger’s notion of dwelling as a ‘staying with’, as a ‘mode of attention’ that requires you to suspend your sense of self. In her words:

to really “stay with” another, we must let go of our own interpretations, analyses and most importantly, our judgements, in order to be fully available. Through this quality of openness, the other can reveal aspects of him or herself which might otherwise remain hidden. (Ladkin 2006:93)

I wonder if John Keats’ idea of ‘negative capability’ resembles this wonder as staying with or dwelling. He once described it in a letter to his brothers in 1817 as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. Parsons



(1969) ends his essay on wonder with interpreting Keats' negative capability as a 'will to wonder': a 'readiness to hold one's mind open'. Seeley and Reason also mention negative capability when they argue for 'suspending' as we move from experiential knowing into other ways of knowing, to avoid "prematurely rushing in with a show of certainty, planning, and a quick answer to dispel the anxiety of dwelling in complexity and unknowing" (Seeley and Reason, 2008:35). They note this 'holding back requires discipline' but that doing so can create space for a more fundamental or essential kind of knowing.

In this chapter, I am mainly interested in how I might create a space to invite others to stay, dwell or suspend. However, this is where most articles seem to stop. Hansen for instance ends by saying: "questions remain concerning how we can prepare or create an 'inviting space' for the event of wonder and a Community of Wonder" (Hansen, 2012:15). And Carlsen and Sandelands end their argument for wonder in organisational research by saying that "instead of only wondering at and about the field, we should wonder with people in the field" (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2014:12). They think this might start when the researcher takes a position of not-knowing, and name Appreciative Inquiry as a potential methodology to wonder with others.

## 8.2 An Appreciative Inquiry on Radical Connectedness

Triggered by our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we organised an Appreciative Inquiry summit with Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company for colleagues, clients, friends and family, with the intention 'to honour our past and celebrate our future'. But:

it was not a birthday party, nor a 'strategic conference', but an attempt to create space for collective reflection and inquiry for ourselves and others into the question: can we make a difference in new ways in the future? (Saskia, Luc & Joeri, MADE Magazine 1)

We invited AI founder David Cooperrider\* to design and facilitate this summit together with a small team consisting of my colleagues Luc, Saskia and myself as Appreciative Inquiry experts. However,

almost every colleague was involved, for example by choosing the venue, writing stories about the event or deciding upon the affirmative topic (Cooperrider, Stavros & Whitney, 2000). I think it important to stress that I did not initiate this summit as part of my doctoral research, and that it was a collective effort. However, I consciously chose to think of this summit as part of my research:

*If I am not careful, this is just one of the many initiatives or projects I am engaged in at the moment. Whereas it is actually closely related to my inquiry and a really great way of experimenting with inquiring together with a large number of people. How can I bring more attention and intention to [this summit]? (Writing for supervision, March 2017)*

The intention for initiating this collective inquiry, for myself as well as for Luc and Saskia, was to 'create the space' for inquiry and reflection, but with the explicit hope that doing so would contribute to making a difference in the world by attempting to create a community of change makers through 'radically connecting our own network'. As we wrote in the invitation to all our fellow inquirers-to-be:

*We choose to focus the inquiry on:*

***'Radical connectedness for  
flourishing human beings, flourishing organisations and a flourishing world'.***

*It's both a statement and a question... and as such it provides direction to our search process. With this topic we express a sense of purpose: with our work we want to contribute to flourishing individuals, to communities and companies that are whole and healthy and doing well - and even to the well-being of the planet. (...) We also deliberately choose to use the word connectedness. Radical connectedness, even... In the sense of strong, fully, without reservation. We regard it as a core value we want to live and work by. One that is more and more relevant in today's world of fragmentation and polarisation. (Invitation, written by Saskia, Luc & Joeri, March 2017)*

Each colleague could invite whoever they wanted to be there, if they could be there the entire three days. It resulted in 250 participants, with people from a range of different countries. Many participants worked in the field of OD as coaches or facilitators, but there were also social

entrepreneurs, school teachers, activists, artists and more, in between the ages of 18 and 70. I had invited a few clients, my mother and sister, one of my best friends and three people from my doctoral programme.

During the three days we went through an Appreciative Inquiry process together, *discovering* existing examples of radical connectedness and human flourishing through sharing personal stories, *dreaming* about what sort of future would become possible if the ingredients of these stories would be there anytime and anyplace, *designing* prototypes of initiatives that could be a first step towards realising this desired future and translating these prototypes into a short- and long term action plan to *deliver* them. Examples of design questions groups worked on were: how might we live and work in the rhythm of the seasons? How might we create a movement of positive education? How can we create room for reflection in organisations? How can we create ways to share the joy of struggling forwards by learning from mistakes and uncertainty? However:

describing the event in terms of the plans that were created together and the initiatives that took shape doesn't really capture what happened. A lot more was going on. Not only did we inquire into how we could encourage radical connectedness and human flourishing by talking about it, we experienced moments of radical connectedness and flourishing as well. (...) People frequently mentioned that this was maybe the most inspiring and energizing aspect of the event. (...) There was a flipside: we also found that it was not always easy to radically connect – there were moments of disconnection and uncertainty as well. What are we here for? Why this group of people and not any other? Am I part of it? Do I want to be? (Saskia, Luc & Joeri, MADE Magazine 1)

### Creating an in-between-space

We realised beforehand that this was not an 'average' Appreciative Inquiry summit – if there is such a thing. For instance, when David Cooperrider sent us the first version of the workbook, and we



Figure 20 *The MADE Summit*, May 2017, photographs by Hanneke Queens

realised that the questions were asking after examples of when Kessels & Smit was contributing to flourishing. However, we did not want it to be about our company as such, but rather wanted to create a movement for change with everybody in the room. David warned us that this might mean that there was no clear ‘core’ to our inquiry, but we nevertheless decided to take the risk, hoping that the purpose of human flourishing would function as a core that would connect people. This did seem to make it more important to create a safe space or container for the inquiry and inspired by the venue of the Rotterdam cruise terminal we came up with the metaphor of the days together as ‘an in-between-space’. Because of my research questions, this was one of the aspects of the summit I was most interested in, and Luc and Saskia therefore invited me to think this notion through and introduce it during the opening. I wrote a blog about the in-between-space beforehand, and later integrated this in my opening speech, in which I started with the story of how my grandmother had emigrated to Curaçao from a similar terminal in Amsterdam in 1949, before applying the metaphor to the time spent together:

A terminal. A starting point for journeys of great significance. The place where you are about to embark, on an adventure or into the unknown. What a fitting location for an Appreciative

Inquiry Summit. Where are we journeying towards? What are we leaving behind? Or how might we allow ourselves to stay in that space of ‘in-between-ness’, having left the familiar behind, but not quite departed to the new. A physical space of inquiry, in which we do not need to rush to a new destination, but can dwell and linger in the unknown. See which new connections, ideas and initiatives might emerge there. A place full of possibility, but also of uncertainty. I feel both as I stand here. (Excerpt opening speech)

At the end of my speech I wondered whether we might collectively find ourselves ‘in between stories’ (Mead, 2011) and observed how some of the ‘big stories’ of our time do no longer seem to work, and we are struggling to articulate a new story. I explicitly framed this summit as an invitation to become an author and create new stories.



*Figure 21 Opening the in-between-space,  
Photograph by Hanneke Queens*

### **Stepping into the in-between-space**

I initially wanted to read my blog about the in-between-space out loud during the opening. However, when I read it to my mother and her partner the weekend before the event, my mother's partner said: "If I imagine myself sitting there, not quite knowing what to expect, perhaps feeling rather anxious: Who are all these unknown people? Would I have enough to contribute to the event? I imagine it is not so much about the content of your speech, but rather about how it can invite people to step into that in-between-space you are talking about..." At first, I felt like casting

their comments aside. It had not occurred to me that people would perhaps feel more nervous than I would, even though I would be the one 'on stage'. The more I thought of it, the more they seemed to have a point... inviting people to step into this uncertain in-between-space and dwell in not-knowing was no small ask. The experience with my mother and sister had made me realise how important it was to open a space of wonder or inquiry. How might I do something similar during this opening? Would I have to *do* something different, or was it more about holding a different intention inwardly? I decided to attempt to embody stepping into the in-between-space myself, by showing up wholeheartedly and doing something out of my comfort zone and on 'my edge': speaking from the heart instead of reading from a piece of paper. As I wrote in my journal the day after the event:

*Luc said he wrote out his speech and was going to read it out loud. Maybe I should also read it out loud then? No need to do something that complicated, or to stress myself out, if there is no need. And a smaller voice in my head saying: no need to outshine the others. So, I bring my printed speech on stage, fold it open already. And then, in a split-second, just decide to go for it, and lower the page. To step into that space. To try to embody radical connectedness. To live and breathe it, by showing up fully. Speak from the heart, and trust that the words will come to me. And they do. It feels like I have tapped into an energy source from under my feet, giving me the strength to step in. To connect radically to myself, and to the group. To be the first to fully step into the in-between-space with all its possibilities and uncertainties. And with that I feel like I am creating a field for everyone to step into... I can almost see it spreading out across the room, like a shimmering carpet. I feel like my hands are covering, no embracing, holding the entire room and group. (Journal Entry, 1/6/2017)*

This was a significant moment for me personally, for somehow, I managed to silence my internal voices fuelled by insecurity to conform to what others did, and I could go back to my original intention. This decision happened in the split-second in which I discarded my piece of paper, a gesture that seemed to have had an unintended dramatic effect for the audience. I wondered afterwards what might have supported me to deliver this speech on my own terms. Consciously contemplating an intention for the speech, as well as sharing this with my mother and sister, who were both present, seemed to have helped most. As did choosing to wear a bright colourful dress

that I bought especially for the occasion. Lastly, the idea that I had initiated this summit together with colleagues, rather than was asked by a client to organise a summit, seemed to have given me a sense of freedom to bring in the themes I found important. It felt as if I had practiced this gesture of stepping in, both while singing in the trees at Ashridge (Chapter 6), as well as during the introduction of the solo with my mother and sister (Chapter 7). And for a moment during the opening, I had a visceral memory of both, and it felt as if my body remembered what to do from those two previous occasions. This gesture has something paradoxical for me: I chose to focus on creating a space for myself to step into and with that I might have contributed to creating a space for others, I chose to let go of certainty and jump in and by doing so I found firm ground to stand on...

### Being in the in-between-space

What was it like to be in this in-between-space? I attempted to answer this question myself afterwards, based on my own experiences as well as numerous conversations, and made a list of the qualities of this space:

- It is about a **radical connectedness/connection with yourself**. As a change practitioner, as a participant. As a human being really.
- It is about **showing up as your full self**. As a fellow human being, with all your imperfections and vulnerabilities.
- It seems to be about **truly seeing the other**.
- It is about **stepping in**, into the process, into the space, into the relationship with others.
- It is a space in which **power is de-centred**. Power still exists of course, but the normal rules of who has power and who has not, do not seem to count as much.
- For me it relates to a way of **seeing things as interconnected**.
- It seems to create **a collective space of possibility**.

*(Writing for supervision, 7/7/2017)*

This is what it felt like for me, but also says something about which qualities I find important. How could I learn more about what it was like for others – apart from the countless conversations with others during and after the summit? Or were those conversations combined with my own

experiential knowing enough to ‘know’ the qualities of the in-between-space? I was struggling again, like in Chapter 6 with the letters from participants, with epistemological questions: what do I consider to be my research data? How do I include the voices of others, and with what intention? My research questions focus on my craft as a practitioner/researcher to create wonder-full space, and I have wondered whether this implies that I should stick to my first-person reflections or that it also need to show, or even ‘proof’, whether others indeed experienced a space as wonder-full. With the support of other colleagues, we have collected many stories during and after the summit in an online platform<sup>2</sup> and two magazines<sup>3</sup>. How could I make sense of and somehow include these stories here? I read through the magazines again with the explicit intention to learn more about the qualities of the in-between-space. Several themes stood out to me: the uncertainty and uncomfortable feeling that came with being in the in-between-space, the experience of radical (dis)connectedness on all levels, the tension between feeling that you are a participant of a pre-designed process versus realising you are a fellow inquirer and can co-create or shape your own process...

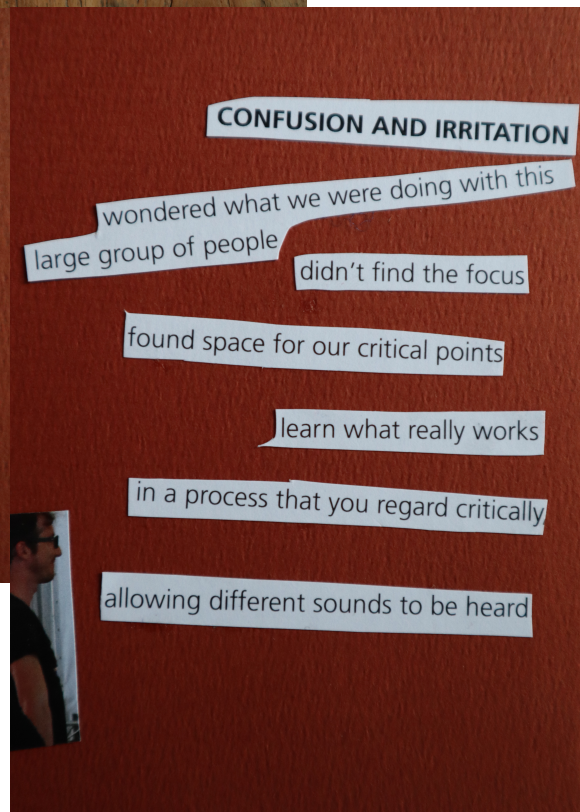
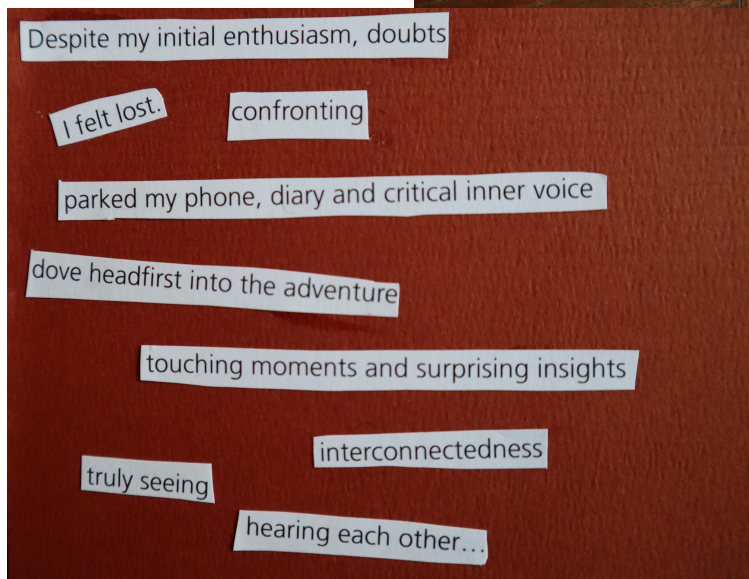
The stories from five of the inquirers stood out most to me, because they seemed to focus most on the experience of this summit as an in-between-space, and about what made this summit different from other AI summits or processes that I have experienced. In an earlier version of this chapter, I included (excerpts of) these five stories, and noticed I was hesitant to shorten them at all and ‘cut and paste’ other people’s words. My ‘mock examiners’ Geoff Mead and Gill Coleman challenged my thinking about these stories and invited me to play with the stories and say more about what they meant to me. I decided to face my fear of editing people’s stories by literally cutting and pasting them into a collage. And I ended up creating five ‘poems’ that convey the essence of these five stories for me and wrote something like a poem in response to the collage I made.

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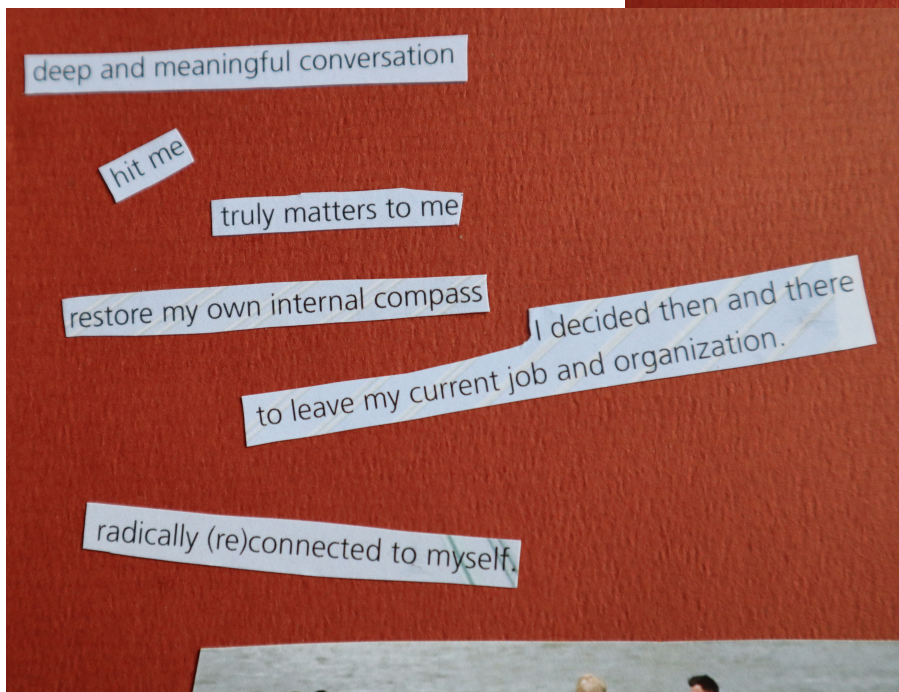
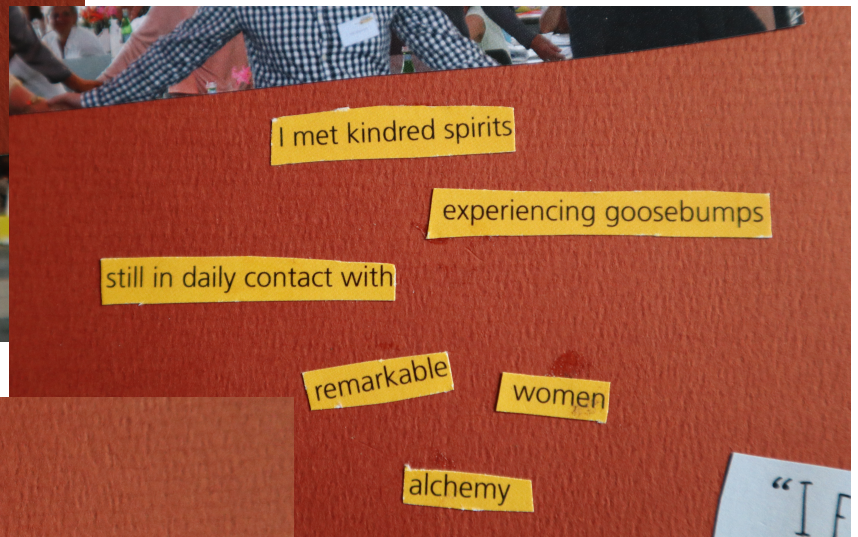
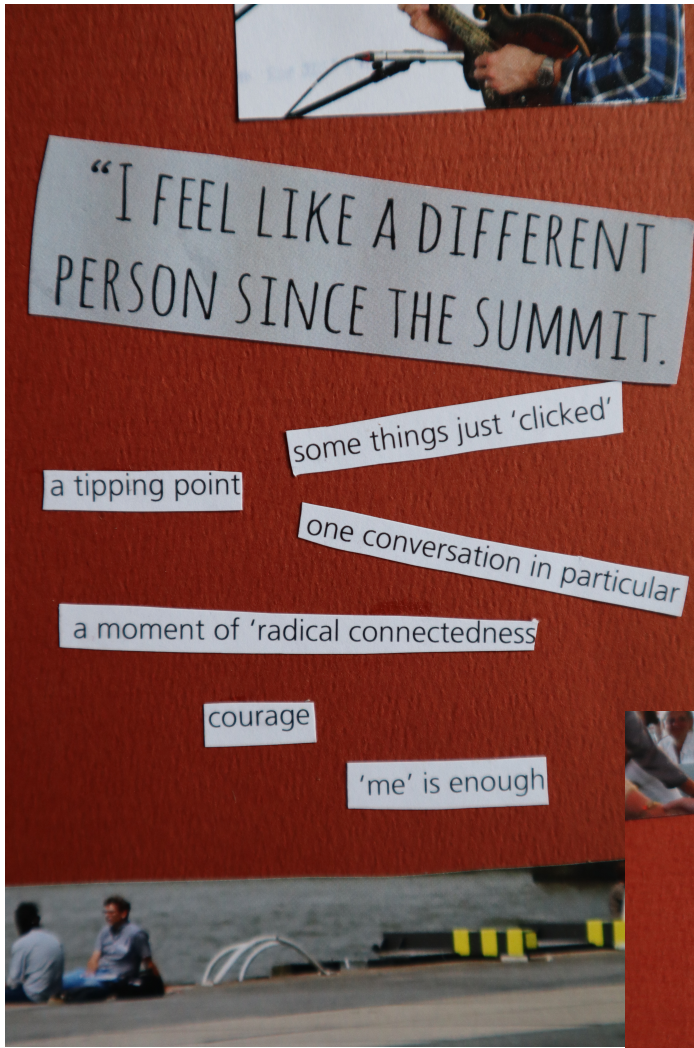
<sup>2</sup> See <https://werkplaatsen.kessels-smit.com/nl/88>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/made-magazine-issue-1> and <https://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/made-magazine-nummer-2>









~

*These seem like  
moments of magic to me.  
Confirming the feeling  
of possibility I sensed in the air,  
not being able to hide  
about what, or who, you care.  
Confronting, beautiful, unsettling,  
all at once.  
Finding the courage to connect,  
and truly see.  
Wasn't that what happened to me?  
Why am I still surprised,  
how much that asked, how  
different it was.  
Getting lost, not-knowing, being present in  
mystery, and above all:  
see.*

~

Creating this collage and poem shifted my thinking about the function of these stories in this thesis: they were not so much intended as 'proof' that wonder and magic became possible in the in-between-space or to claim anything about what the experience was like for everybody present, but to support my own learning and thinking process about what could become possible in the in-between-space: a form of wonder as truly seeing and staying with, as well as some moments that fit my understanding of moments of magic. Had I unconsciously slipped into a different research paradigm while thinking of these stories? Again, using a different form that is less propositional, in this case the collage and poem, allows me to explore the data more freely and intuitively and worry less about what I can and cannot say or claim.



*24/8/2018, 7.46, Amsterdam*

### Holding the in-between-space

Being the container and holding this space of rich inquiry seemed to ask of me to be open to and sense all that was present in the room. I found holding this space considerably more difficult than for my mother and sister. There were so many people and different emotions, that it was quite overwhelming. There was a moment during the second day, in which I could hardly bear it anymore: all the impressions and emotions, the questions and remarks of people about what they would like to see differently, the energy in the room filled with things unsaid... I was taking all of it in, soaking it all up. Several people came up to me to compliment me on my opening speech, confiding in a secretive tone that I was 'the best facilitator', why did I not facilitate the whole summit? Did they mean that as a compliment? Or as critique on the summit for which I felt so responsible? I was quite confused by these comments. Were they touching me because they boosted my ego? Or was there something else going on? I decided to step out, to go for a walk along the pier. Wind rushing through my hair, tears rolling down my face. Were these my emotions or those of the people in the room? Or both? Everything seemed amplified and mixed up. Walking cleared my head, and helped me to distinguish between my own emotions and those of others, between what needed attention now and what could wait. And when I stepped back into the room, I could be there again. It made me wonder: how often do I allow myself to step out? To admit that it is too much? To create space to filter between my own emotions and those of the group?

The entire three days, I was in my role as facilitator/initiator and saw it as my task to hold the space. There was only one moment in which I felt I was being held by others. I had invited two fellow participants and one faculty member of my doctoral programme to the summit. When I needed it most, I spotted the three of them talking together during a break. We stood in a circle, and they invited me to just speak my mind. I heard myself voice all the thoughts and doubts I experienced in an unfiltered way, which helped me to see and accept all that I was experiencing. And they shared their observations and questions, in a way that served my inquiry process. A circle of inquiry, amid all that was going on. I felt an enormous wave of gratitude towards the three of them. It does make me wonder, how much attention do I/we pay to thinking of ways to support a facilitator as well? To



create spaces in which the facilitator is being held by others in order to hold the space for the whole group, especially during a multi-day event with so many people?

While thinking of this summit as part of my research had made it possible to initiate an inquiry on a much larger scale than would have been possible on my own, it also meant I had to continuously negotiate the way of working with others. My tears came partly from a realisation that I placed a different emphasis than David did. This touched me on an identity-level, for I had always thought of myself as an AI practitioner until then, and David *was* Appreciative Inquiry for me. And here he was 'in action', and I realised I would have made different choices. But mostly, I realised he was probably working from a different 'lived paradigm': whereas I thought the most important thing I could do as a practitioner was to try to live and embody radical connectedness myself, and show up vulnerable and wholeheartedly, he seemed to focus on conveying the content and guiding us through the process steps of AI with care. And where I had started to think of this summit as a rich experience of radical connectedness, he seemed to focus more on ideas for future action.

I was taken aback, because I had not expected this difference beforehand, and realised I had been more influenced by my own inquiries, and an Action Research paradigm more generally, than I thought. And that my theory of change had subtly shifted as a result of this: from focusing on change through conversation and language to change through experience, from focusing on guiding others through a change process through starting with living/being the change myself, from focusing on ideas for action to questions of being, from focusing on 'big change out there' to 'small change in here'... I recognise all of these in my list of qualities of the in-between-space. This insight was so powerful because I could suddenly see clearly what I found important in creating and hosting a space like this. And, it was of course impossible to immediately change the way the whole summit was being facilitated, since I was only one of four facilitators, who each had different preferences and styles.

Finally, the time had come to close the in-between-space by inviting people to reflect back on what it was like to be in this space before stepping out of it once more, by exploring two questions with their neighbour: What are you most grateful for? What is the intention with which you are leaving this summit? Perhaps this was another way of reflecting upon and acknowledging the 'ritual shift' that might have taken place. We did not plan this beforehand, but Luc insisted that I should be the one to do so, despite my lack of sleep after the party the previous night. In my mind's eye, I was visualising standing on the threshold and later stepping out of the in-between-space myself during this closing and doing so seemed to complete the circle.

### 8.3 Prolonging the in-between-space

What might have supported to create this in-between-space? And how do I know whether staying in this in-between-space indeed made a difference or contributed to human flourishing in one way or another?

#### Remaining open

In the previous chapter, I mentioned Ayot's idea that we can create ritual space by temporarily marking a physical or metaphorical space as 'different' or even 'sacred', as well as Bushe's argument that ritual-transformative space can be created through the use of metaphor by invoking images that activate the unconscious mind. I am struck by how framing the days together as 'in-between-space' seems to do both. I think this metaphor worked because it made a connection between the physical space in which we found ourselves – an enormous terminal hall – with the metaphorical space of inquiry we attempted to create. I wonder how this supported us to stay in and dwell with not-knowing. I think it perhaps mostly did so through explicitly marking this space as different from everyday life, and this seems to have invited or given people permission to be different. To stay with and in not-knowing slightly longer than normal.

However, it was not necessarily 'easy' or 'pleasant' to be in this space. It seems to have asked a different way of being than what most people were used to: dwelling and lingering in the unknown,

shaping and co-creating your own summit together with others, experiencing radical (dis)connectedness yourself... Indeed, a form of Keats' negative capability and of Rubenstein's and Vasalou's idea of dealing with the 'epistemic uncertainty' and 'vulnerability' that comes with choosing to leave the wound of wonder open. Perhaps this is why 'the joy of struggling forward' was the design question that attracted most people. A specific ability that it seemed to ask of people was the ability to 'step in' or to become a 'full participant' rather than an observer. To make a shift from 'I *and* the summit' to 'I *am* the summit' as my colleague Luc put it. In the stories I read, these seem to be the turning points: whether it is by parking your critical voices and dive in, using your frustrations as a starting point for inquiry or deciding to skip the last morning to apply for a new job.

I still wonder sometimes: did we fully realise how much we were asking of people, how much it would evoke to be in this space? What is the ethical dimension of asking people to dwell and stay with? Did we make it safe enough for people to be in this space? Or was that not wholly our responsibility? I see a potential tension between containing versus co-creating in my own thinking and telling of this event. Who creates the space for whom? Bushe (2010) ends his essay on 'being the container' with the danger of focusing too much on the image of the facilitator as the container, because this might suggest that the facilitator is the only one responsible for the creation of a container. In fact, a space is always co-created with everyone present. And he warns that it is a thin line between containing and controlling, for instance by not adapting the plan to what is being co-constructed in the group or by taking the ownership of the process away from the group.

This seems related to two other tensions I recognise in all the above. Firstly, design versus emergence. How much can you design beforehand and how much space do you allow to let things emerge during the process? When do you decide to let go of the design? Again, I find Barrett's (2012) idea of a 'minimal structure' helpful. But how do you know if the structure is 'minimal' enough? I noticed how different people seemed to experience this, for some people the AI process felt overly structured and almost oppressive, whereas for others there seemed not enough structure to 'hold onto'. Can you ever get the structure 'right' for everybody in such a large group? Or



perhaps, it then becomes even more important to invite people to create their own summit within the larger framework.

I also see a tension between being fully there and not being there as a facilitator. Mead (2011) writes from the perspective of a storyteller how you need to be self-confident enough to claim the space in front of an audience, yet constantly need to be aware that you do not get in between the story and your audience and that you do not use the audience to bolster your own self-confidence. A risk I see for myself as well, especially while standing on stage for such a big group, and was also struggling with in this summit: when is sharing a personal story helpful and when is it hindering the process?

### **Experiencing moments of radical (dis)connectedness**

While reading and looking through all the material once more, I am struck by how many people refer to experiencing moments of radical connectedness during the summit. I am intrigued by how the notion of radical connectedness seemed to start to live a life of its own during the three days together. If an affirmative topic of an Appreciative Inquiry is chosen well, it is intriguing and relevant for the people involved in the inquiry and says something about what you would want to see more of in the future (Tjepkema, Verheijen & Kabalt, 2016). One of the central assumptions in AI is that every human system moves in the direction of what it studies (Cooperrider, 1990) and it is therefore perhaps not that surprising that radical connectedness was experienced and strengthened as the days moved on. However, during this summit I felt the affirmative topic did even more: it drew attention to the lived experience in the here-and-now and invited people to use these experiences as an opportunity for instant inquiry. And I wonder whether ‘radical connectedness’ again functioned as a ‘generative image’ like ‘friendship in consultancy’ that I described in Chapter 5; as a new lens through which to see both yourself and the interactions during the summit. Am I connected to myself in this moment?

In some cases, it did not only invite people to see themselves differently, but also to experiment with acting different in that very moment – whether it is by choosing to switch groups or to quit your job. As such, two parallel processes of inquiry seemed to have emerged: we were exploring stories *about* radical connectedness and thinking of initiatives on how to increase radical connectedness for human flourishing, and we were *in* an experience/experiences of radical (dis)connectedness and inquiring into these experiences. Again, I noticed that I was most intrigued by the latter, but I do think we needed both, and these two processes seemed to enrich each other and the overall process of inquiry, but also to make it more demanding and at times utterly confusing.

### How do we know it made a difference?

How do you evaluate a space of inquiry like this? How do you decide whether it was worth the investment of time, energy and money? Whether it was ‘successful’ or not? Since we had invested a substantial amount of time and money in the summit as a company, it was perhaps not surprising that some of these evaluative questions emerged amongst colleagues afterwards. As Luc later articulated our insights in the MADE magazine:

It was remarkable how quickly this became a stream of conversation. And how it pushed back stories about moments, plans, people... As such we could see that this type of conversation literally stifles creativity and the spirit of co-creation: by judging an event you were part of, it subtly becomes something that was ‘out there’. It doesn’t even matter if you judge it positively or negatively.

I am intrigued by this observation: where many people – often after hard work – seemed to be able to step into the perspective of a full participant (I am the summit) during the summit itself, they seemed to step out of this perspective once they stepped out of the space (I and the summit). This makes me wonder: what is the effect of asking evaluative questions after an event like this? Can you measure the ‘usefulness’, ‘worth’ and ‘impact’ of connection, inquiry or wonder? And what might be lost in doing so? I had to check-in and be honest with myself: was it unpleasant to hear the critique because I had organised the event? Or did I truly believe that this was an unhelpful conversation? I

wanted to beware of creating a form of censorship and to suppress certain voices. However, by not intervening there were also some voices that were heard more loudly than others. We asked ourselves the question: how might we shift the conversation and invite people to become part of the event once more, even after it was finished, while still giving space to different experiences and stories about the event? The notion of shifting the conversation from 'what is true' to 'what can become true' based on Gergen's (2015) idea of 'future forming research' supported our thinking. We invited people to think back to the event by considering three different questions, via conversations initiated by colleagues of the bigger circle around the core design team: What is the gift from this summit you are most grateful for? Which of the seeds would you like to help grow further? In terms of the question 'What are we in service of as Kessels & Smit community', what insight did you take with you from the event?

The effect was that the conversations seemed to shift from judging to meaning making, from evaluating to reflecting, and helped to once more feel part of the event and the inquiry. But still, the question that remained for me is: how do we know whether we did good work well here? Apart from my 'hunch' that we made a difference for people? The 'evidence' was often indirect, in the form of anecdotes: a new connection that was made, a seed that was sown... how might I know how being part of this summit reverberated over time? How the experiences or insights of the participants might have rippled out to others? It was perhaps somewhat easier to 'track' the twenty-something design initiatives: have you realised your idea? We did not do so systematically but sought out several groups for the second magazine. Some had continued their idea and inquiry, but others did not seem to have done so. Typically, the realisation of these initiatives for action determines the success of a summit. I started to realise that my quality criteria for a 'successful summit' had started to shift in this process. But while I knew quite well what they were during the summit itself, and the days afterwards, I started doubting my own knowing and quality criteria as time moved on. Perhaps I had also unconsciously started to judge or evaluate the summit from a desire to understand it better?



*9/10/2018, 8.23, Sant Aniol Valley*

## MADE REAL: radically reconnecting

One of the design groups of the summit had invited everybody to reconvene in one year's time. Together with some others, I decided to follow up on this idea because of my interest to know how the experience of the summit might have reverberated over time. Around sixty people showed up at this day-long gathering, which I facilitated with my friend Jed\*, who had shared his music as an integral part of the summit itself. The intention was to initiate a new cycle of inquiry into radical connectedness with this group, by sharing what we had learned in the past year and exploring 'next questions'. We started with sharing stories in small groups, focusing on the question:

Can you share a story of a moment – however small – in which the summit has made a difference in your (professional) life? Or the story of something that has 'become real' after the event? An example or experience that contributed to radical connectedness and human flourishing in your life or context?

People shared their stories in three different 'story circles' in order to hear fifteen stories each. Afterwards, I asked everybody to lay their hand on the shoulder of the person whose story touched them most. A constellation of connections emerged, and the four people who had the most hands on their shoulder were invited to share their story once more in front of the whole group. We chose this form because it invites people to collectively make meaning or 'evaluate' the event, but through staying with the richness of personal stories. Someone told the story of how meeting a fellow participant from Syria during the summit led her to not only become active in the refugee movement, but also to take in a young refugee from Cameroon in her house, who had by then become 'her African son'. Someone else shared how radically connecting to himself led him to change tables and leave his group twice during the summit, contrary to what he would normally do. This experience supported him to later leave his job, because he felt he had already practiced this gesture during the summit. In a third story, a colleague told us how she experienced during the summit how explicitly disconnecting from the group, and even from herself, supported her to later connect again, and how that had become an important inquiry in her life and practice the past year. After hearing these stories, people reflected the summit had made much more impact than they

could have predicted and had suspected before arriving at MADE REAL. Not all the group initiatives and ideas had 'become real', but the personal insights, and sometimes even personal transformations, had continued to do its work throughout the year. The small meaningful moments had made the most impact: a connection or conversation with someone new, a phrase or insight that resonated...



*Figure 23 MADE Real, May 2018, photographs by Hanneke Queens*

The people that chose to come to this gathering seemed to have continued to inquire into radical connectedness in their own life and practice, in their own way: consciously choosing to enter new conversations or disconnecting from a group in order to connect again. During lunch directly afterwards, I found myself in a conversation with two people I had not met before, one of them a director of a Flemish school who said: "Perhaps the summit was about something much more significant than thinking of ideas or initiatives for change, it was about discovering the resources and resolve in yourself to make a positive contribution to the world. A shift in yourself that is perhaps even more important and sustainable. Imagine how all the people present have brought that to their own contexts, and are touching people's lives with that, as we have done..." A remark that touches upon the essence of what I believe this summit made possible. And, I now realise that I already

‘knew’ this during and right after the summit, for example in the reflective piece with which I started this chapter in which I wrote that the summit helped ‘to reflect, and to reconnect to what we find important, the essence of things’.

#### 8.4 Creating a space of wonder during a crisis

In this example, I initiated this space of wonder together with colleagues, and people came voluntarily and were willing to step in and explore – even if they did perhaps not quite know what to expect. How about creating and holding a similar space in which people are invited to ‘stay’ and ‘dwell’ in an organisational context? In February 2018, I went to Africa for a week to facilitate the third meeting of a leadership programme for country directors of a large INGO. However, a week before the meeting a story about a sex scandal involving a fellow country director came to light and received world-wide coverage in the media. Large donors were threatening to withdraw their money, the organisation and the whole NGO-sector was criticised in the media.... I was to facilitate this meeting on my own with two internal facilitators but had a call with my K&S colleague who facilitated a different group and my client beforehand in which we agreed to stick to the original meeting design as much as possible. However, as soon as I arrived and talked to people, I felt something different was needed. This crisis touched people deeply, on an identity level: how could this happen in the organisation I have given most of my life for? But also: how come the media and public opinion dismiss decades of meaningful work by so many because of these horrible actions committed by a few? They shared how they had to defend themselves wherever they were, whether it was at a meeting with fellow NGO’s or in their family. Both male and female directors were judged personally: perhaps you also...? They were worried about the financial consequences: would they have to fire staff? What would this mean for the projects in their countries that benefit the people that need it most?

Together with my two co-facilitators, I decided to change the intention and design for the days (and hope that my client and colleague would support this decision afterwards). The first day we mainly created space to tell stories: how has this been for you? We explicitly stressed that the intention was

not to solve or discuss, but to listen and be listened to, and chose forms that supported this. This created some space the next day to engage in the sessions about leading change we had envisioned beforehand, but now in the context of the crisis. The third day, we had an in-depth conversation about what it meant to be a female or male leader in the organisation in three rounds. First, in a male and female group by sharing personal stories in a safe space: what does it mean for you to be a female/male leader in this organisation? Afterwards, we came back together and had two fish-bowl conversations: first with the men talking about their experiences in an inner circle and the women listening from the outer circle, then the other way around. Lastly, we had a conversation with the whole group about what touched them and/or what they had learned. I found this a powerful way to inquire safely, but deeply into these difficult questions around gender, power and leadership. I was touched when we ended the meeting with a check-out round in which each leader was invited to finish the sentence: “My [name organisation] is....” To me it seemed that everybody reclaimed their own authorship and story of the crisis, and the organisation they cared about, by expressing how they wanted to continue to make a difference in/with their organisation.

For me, this was an example of how choosing for wonder as a form of staying with, of allowing not-knowing, but also really hearing and seeing each other’s stories was possible and valuable in a context of crisis. Holding the space again asked a lot of me. Whereas upon arrival I was full of energy and the rest of the leaders seemed exhausted, by the time we left it was the other way around. Afterwards, I reflected upon what enabled to create this space with one of my co-facilitators. He told me he thought I had contributed to this through my presence because he saw ‘a complete absence of a sense of judgement’ in me which ‘made people feel safe’. He asked me what this experience had taught me, and I answered: that this approach also works when real things are at stake, and how much of a difference it can make to tell your story and be heard. But also, how important working with an emergent approach is. He noted that this was enabled by what he called my ‘mastery of methods’: the ability to sense what was needed, frame an intention and immediately design a new (such as the conversation about male/female leadership). I realised that my earlier experimentation with constantly working with different forms really made a difference here.





*15/2/2019, 8.32, Amsterdam*

However, I also felt lonely and insecure. Was I making the right choices? Would it not have been better if a colleague with more experience with crises had been there instead? To this, my co-facilitator answered resolutely: “This comes back to your basic stance of openness and it may be *that* is more important than twenty years more experience... having somebody there that feels the need to control the outcome, would have been a disaster in this situation. Because what we are struggling with are precisely issues around power and control”.

## 8.5 Concluding thoughts

At the outset, I wondered whether intimate inquiry could take place on such a large scale and if it would be possible to experience something like wonder and magic in this summit. I would answer yes to both questions. Where connectedness and intimacy mostly seemed to happen with and through the more-than-human world in the stories in other chapters, here it happened with and through interactions with other people. And there seemed to have occurred some (small) moments of magic in this space together, when things clicked or came together, individually or collectively. Marking this space as different from ordinary life as an ‘in-between-space’, as well as focusing on purpose, radical connectedness and human flourishing, seems to have invited some people to ‘see’ their lives. Having the space and time to ‘stay with’ and ‘live’ the questions that emerged, seemed to have created unexpected new insights and reverberations over time. Perhaps this summit was an example of a ‘community of wonder’ (Hansen, 2012). It seemed to have functioned as a collective ritual where some people felt that ‘re-alignment’. But it was also a rich experience of radical connectedness. People seemed to be able to take some of this experiential knowing to other contexts, like the gesture of quitting a group, that helped to later quit a job. And to continue to inquire and live the questions that had become relevant for them during the summit. It can also be thought of as a temporary community of difference makers, and this seemed to have strengthened many people present in their resolve to continue to make a difference in the world, in their own way and in their own context. As such, it seems to be a way to support enchantment by emergence on a large scale.

Can you plan for any of this to happen? It does not seem likely; we certainly did not expect these stories as outcomes for the summit beforehand. But it does strengthen my believe that creating a rich space of inquiry can have unintended and unexpected worthwhile effects. And instead of trying to design for (moments of) magic directly, my/our role seems to be to try to create the conditions that might support the emergence of a rich space of inquiry. And trust that something meaningful will emerge, even if you do not yet know what that will be. In all the above, I named several of the practices that might support to do so: introducing a metaphor that might support the creation of ritual-transformative space, working with a minimal structure for the days together that invited people to become co-creators of the event, formulating an affirmative topic that invites people to inquire in-the-moment itself. And perhaps most of all, I realised that what seems to help is to create an *experience* of radical connectedness, of inquiry and wonder. A subtle, yet important, shift in how I think of my role and craft.

Despite my emphasis on the ‘presence’ or ‘being’ of the facilitator, I believe a space can only be created together, in the interplay between facilitator – or host or initiator – and those participating. I think there are certain gestures from the side of the facilitator that might make the emergence of a space of wonder more likely, such as showing up wholeheartedly and becoming a part of the process yourself, but that this can only happen if those people participating decide to respond to these gestures by stepping in and co-creating the space. And by continuing to do so throughout the remainder of being in the space together.

*I look at you all  
See the love there that's sleeping  
While my guitar gently weeps*

## 9. Songs of wonder

~

### ***I want to hold your hand...***

*October 2016*

*“Rapping is not my thing, but I’ll sing for you any time!”, I jokingly say to Kate while walking back to the rest of the ADOC group who are enjoying a bottle of red wine. Kate calls me back. “You could actually sing for the kids...” she suggests, “we could record that too!”. My stomach makes a little twist. Right. If I was too scared to do that, I should not have said it. This is Kate gently challenging me again to do something out of my comfort zone, whether she is aware of it or not. And in a split-second, I decide to step in.*

*Together we listen to one of her kids’ favourite songs on Kate’s phone. Never heard of it. Another song then. Any song will do... My mind is blank, not a single song comes to mind. How is that possible? Nerves?*

*Beatles. Whenever I need a song, for any occasion or mood, The Beatles will help me out. I feel Kate’s encouraging presence next to me. Yes. I’ve got one in mind.*

*And before I know it, Kate is calling her husband to ask whether the kids are still awake.*

*“Mummy’s friend is going to sing for you....”*

*And there I go:*

*Oh yeah I... tell you something... I think you understand...*

*When I... tell you something... I want to hold your hand...*

*Time has seemed to come to a halt, or has at least substantially slowed down.*

*My voice seems to have grown in force. I am my voice, and I can hear and feel it fill the enormous space of Ashridge’s entrance hall. I am vaguely aware of Ashridge personnel sticking their heads around the door of the nearby room to listen in. And when I want to stop singing after one verse and chorus, I see Kate nodding me on. I sing a bit more. Notice how beautiful it sounds. And am surprised that I catch myself*

*thinking that, and do not feel the need to immediately downplay it as usual. I feel strangely fulfilled after I stop singing.*

*I hear a little voice coming out of Kate's phone: 'Wow... Is she a popstar mummy?'*

*And a bit later the same voice says to me: 'I love you...'*

*Still dazed, the only thing I can reply back is: 'I love you too...'*

~

My life has radically changed because of wonder. I feel so much more *alive*. When I wander through the forest, I pause to admire the moss swaying in the wind, glistening in the sunlight... When I cycle in the rain to work, I inhale the smell of wet autumn leaves... When I see my colleague's tired eyes, I stop what I'm doing and ask how she is... When I share that personal story with a group, I notice my heart beating faster and my own stories about what I can or can't do... When I wake up next to Peter, I suddenly feel overwhelmed with happiness... When I read in the newspaper thousands of olive trees have died, my belly aches and I feel like crying... It is not always easier to live life this way, or more pleasant. But I *feel*. And, I choose much more consciously how I want to live my life and spend my time, day after day, moment after moment.

And, somewhere along the way, I started to sing again. And not only dare but also enjoy sharing my singing voice. When I sing, I feel most myself. At my most vulnerable and most powerful. But still, that moment just before I start to sing is always terrifying. Do I dare to let my voice be heard? Writing this final chapter reminds me of this hesitant moment, just before I allow the melody to leave my mouth. What is a conclusion supposed to look like? I decide to park this question and use this chapter to sing a final song in praise of wonder instead. By sharing the insights that matter most to me: how daily routines and rituals can help to continue to see the extraordinary within the ordinary (section 9.1), how magic can only be approached obliquely (section 9.2), how I discovered my own art of creating wonder-full space (section 9.3) and how giving words to wonder can help to



3/5/2019, 10.46, *The Lizard*

experience more wonder (section 9.4). I will end by bringing all my insights together and articulating my theoretical contribution (section 9.5) and evaluating the quality of my research (section 9.6).

### 9.1 Routines and rituals to continue to see the extraordinary within the ordinary

Rachel Carson's thinking on wonder has inspired me most: her evocative and sensuous descriptions of her outdoor adventures deeply resonated with me. Now, I think this was because she made me *see* the more-than-human world through her writing: from the lichen on the trees to the starlit sky. Her argument that most people 'look about with unseeing eyes' and you can 'open your eyes to unnoticed beauty' by asking yourself: 'what if I had never seen this before or would never see it again?', touches upon the essence of her thinking for me. After all my wanderings in search of wonder, I have come to think of a sense of wonder as 'seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary'. An understanding that is inspired by Rachel Carson, but that I could only articulate recently, after four years of wholeheartedly *living* my research questions.

This definition matters to me, because it underlines that I can *do* wonder by choosing to see the world in a certain way, rather than wait for wonder to strike. And that wonder can be found everywhere, even in my 'ordinary' life in the city or in organisations. This is where my approach differs from Carson's, I not only tried to see nature but also to 'see' the extraordinary in a team I work with or while wandering the streets of Amsterdam at dawn. Moreover, I now believe that the ordinary *is* extraordinary – if I but know how to look. But most of all, if I but continue to *remember* how to look. Wonder is hard work. I need to remind myself of the possibility of wonder over and over again, especially if I spend time in contexts that seem less wonder-full to me. This is one of the paradoxes of wonder that intrigues me most: precisely because wonder can be found everywhere, weeks can go by without noticing or seeing wonder. Perhaps because it is simply impossible to truly see, remark and question everything I encounter, or because it is difficult to continue to 'see' what I have become used to, whether it an assumption or that beautiful building on my way to work.



Somewhat counter-intuitively, I learned that structure and discipline help me to wonder most. By creating daily reminders and opportunities to wonder in daily rituals and routines. Such as my daily morning walks: walking for thirty minutes each morning, regardless of where I wake up, paying attention to my bodily sensations and my surroundings, and waiting for something of beauty to call out to me to take a photograph of it, one for each day. And, this glimpse of wonder reverberates into the rest of my day.

The different routines and rituals, or practices, I have experimented with helped me to see the extraordinary within the ordinary in different ways. There were **moment-practices** that supported me to think of and see life in moments and see each moment as a potential opportunity for something meaningful or even magical to occur. Honouring a moment shortly after it occurred through a small ritual or writing a moment-story about it seems to prolong its effect by helping me to 'carry it with me' and 'revisit' it internally. Explicitly marking some moments as 'different' to everyday life, such as my morning walks, also helps to live these moments more consciously. There were **sensuous-practices** that invited me to participate in the world in a more bodily and sensuous way. Whether it is through the attentive seeing that comes with taking a photograph, writing about all the sensuous details of an experience in my journal or eating garlic butter with herbs collected from that special place. There were **place-practices** that invited me to spend time in and with specific places: sitting still for hours, visiting the same places again and again, walking the same paths... This supported me to develop affection for these places and awakened a desire to get to know and connect to these places more intimately, as you would to a friend. And there were **authorship-practices** that helped me to become aware of and see taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs and choose how to respond to them. Journaling and writing fairy tales about my experiences was a powerful way to see and play around with these beliefs, as was carrying around an inquiry question that supported me to live life more consciously and choose differently while acting.

All these practices have supported me to become more alive to the world in all its richness and specificity: in specific places, specific moments and specific sensory sensations. The practices I found

most powerful, such as my daily morning walks, seem to fall into two or more of these categories. Apart from daily routines and rituals to wonder, I also found it important to spontaneously create wonder-full practices in-the-moment, such as an improvised ritual. And alongside the practices that helped me to wonder in my 'everyday life, the practices that helped me to distance myself from my everyday surroundings and 'unsee' to see again were also incredibly important, such as spending time alone on a mountainside.

## 9.2 Approaching moments of magic obliquely

*This insight hits me like lightning... a few seconds after I sit down on 'my rock' again, a beautiful and enormous deep-red fox appears out of nowhere and starts to walk straight towards me... time seems to come to a halt and I am touched by the magic of the moment...*

This moment still stands out as one of the key moments of the past years. My first experience of what I call a 'moment of magic'. For me, these are moments when it feels as if I step through a window in time, to a place where time no longer seems to exist. Moments of beauty and interconnectedness, that almost literally offer a new perspective, and leave their mark. Those moments when I feel fully alive in a world bursting with life. I wondered how I could create more of these moments, for myself and others. And not only while spending twenty-four hours on a mountainside, but also in everyday life. Is that even possible?

I found that I can only access magic *momentarily*, in actual micro-moments or glimpses, and that I can only approach magic *obliquely* – from the corner of my eye, by keeping the intention to and possibility of experiencing magic just out of sight. It was difficult, perhaps even impossible, to approach these moments directly. I cannot will magic into being, for myself, let alone for others. Whenever I tried to capture the recipe for or steps that would lead to a moment of magic, or tried to plan for it to happen, it seemed to slip through my fingers. However, if I do not hold the intention to experience magic, nor believe in the possibility of such moments in the first place, it will most likely

not happen either. Apparently, magic cannot be forced. Nor can it be planned, predicted or replicated.

Paradoxically, it was only after I gave up trying to create magic, and instead focused my gaze and attention on practices that might help me to wonder in everyday life, that I started to experience moments of magic again. A street musician that played that special song just as I entered the square... that special connection with a tree during a morning walk... singing 'Blackbird' in a circle of trees for my doctoral cohort... I therefore distinguish between a sense of wonder as something you can cultivate and do and moments of magic that take you by surprise. Both are important and require a different way of seeing: where a sense of wonder is about continuously reminding myself to actively see the extraordinary within the ordinary, I need to remind myself to look at magic obliquely.

These practices to wonder are meaningful and worthwhile in themselves. And, seem to make it more likely for those moments of magic to occur. They led me to spend a considerable amount of my time differently: on my own on beautiful places, wandering the streets at dawn, contemplating life in my journal in a café... settings and activities that appear to be conducive to magic. But more importantly, engaging in these practices resulted in what I can best describe as an 'openness' to magical experiences. An opening of my senses and becoming more open to the possibility of experiences that I cannot quite explain. I became used to the idea that I do not have to understand these moments for them to be meaningful: explain why a fox chose to walk up to me or learn about the possible symbolic meaning of foxes. The fox was there, and it was magical, and that is more than enough. So, I not only approach magic obliquely, but also try to make sense of it obliquely, in order to keep the magic and mystery alive. And although I seem to become better at recognising the potential for magic in the moment, how and when magic appears remains something of a mystery to me – as it should be.

### 9.3 The art of creating wonder-full space

Only after I had extensively explored wonder in the intimacy of first-person inquiry, did I start to become curious how I might also create spaces of wonder with and for others. How do I invite others to explore and strengthen their sense of wonder, or perhaps even experience a moment of magic of their own? And even though I attempted to do so in organisational contexts, the moment that is closest to my heart, was when I was with my mother and sister in Spain and facilitated a solo for them. It was the first time I felt I could create a window in time that we could step through together, into this wonder-full space in which deep connection and transformation were possible. What does the creation of these kinds of spaces ask of me and my role as OD practitioner? The image that inspired me most was Chris Seeley's (2011) appeal to 'become an artist of the invisible realm of transformational space'. And like her, I believe that creating and holding such spaces for myself and others is indeed an art, which I mostly practice through my presence and being, instead of through a method. And therefore, I believe I can only practice this art with and for others, if I continue to create enough space for wonder in my own life.

In the past years, I have learned that my unique art as a practitioner is to create safe ways into intimate and wholehearted inquiry, or into wonder. And I have gradually learned to trust this art. My colleague Saskia wrote in a postcard how she has seen me develop through my research. Her observations deeply touch me, but also give words to my art:

I realised that you are becoming the artist that you are. You touch people. Which allows them to look through different eyes, and set out to explore new things. Want to explore. And you have the power and vulnerability of an artist. The unrestrained and tender energy, storm and breeze. You are of course also a 'scholar', researcher, writer, coach.... But it is as if I have seen a shift in roles. The artist role is getting stronger as part of the whole. And I think that is so beautiful and touching to see. Because it's so rare, someone who can 'work magic' like that. Because it's so vulnerable & strong – a confusing and exciting combination. And because it's so 'Joeri'. Showing your true colours.



*2/8/2019, 7.50, Amsterdam*

I believe the most important thing I can do to practice this art is to show up differently as a practitioner, as a fellow human being. I think there are several ‘gestures’ I can make that can create the conditions for wonder: showing up vulnerable by sharing a personal story or continue to create and experiment with new forms, choosing to look at the people I work with through my appreciative eye by focusing on possibility and beauty, dwelling in not-knowing by suspending my judgements and ideas about where the session might be headed and becoming a part of the group by allowing myself to be touched, surprised and potentially transformed by our encounter. However, I learned I cannot create such a space one-sidedly, it is always a collaborative act. I can make ‘gestures’ as a practitioner, but a wonder-full space can only emerge if others respond in kind to these gestures.

There are some practices that I have repeatedly used to design or create these spaces, such as explicitly focusing on the opening and closing of a space, trying to design a ‘minimal structure’ that offers just enough to hold onto and invites improvisation or preparing a space with care and beauty. Perhaps these are also ‘gestures’ of some sort. However, I explicitly do not want to turn these into a ‘method for wonder’, because what helped me most was to continue to experiment with and be surprised by new forms. And the few times I did ‘copy’ a successful form from one context to the other, the wonder seemed to disappear. I do not think lightly of inviting people to wonder, for I am by now well aware of the potentially unsettling effect of ‘opening the wound of wonder’. These practices help to make it safe enough to step into the inquiry and become open to the possibility of wonder, while still making it possible to co-create the space and to be surprised by what might emerge. Perhaps the biggest shift in how I see my role is that I now try to create *experiences* of wonder, however small, instead of inviting people to think and talk about wonder. And that I can potentially do so everywhere through showing up differently, in organisations or with family.

#### 9.4 Finding words for/to wonder

The question how to create a wonder-full research practice only emerged explicitly when I wrote a first version of this thesis, over a year ago. I had written a thesis devoid of wonder, whereas my papers up to that point had been described by my supervisor as ‘works of wonderment’. What

happened? I had unconsciously written the thesis I thought I should write, with answers instead of questions, instead of the 'wandering and wondering' thesis I wanted to write. How do I write a thesis about wonder without taking the wonder out of wonder? How do I give words to those moments of wonder and/or magic before or beyond words? How can I come to know about wonder as a form of not-knowing? These questions have puzzled me throughout my research, and sometimes still do.

What perhaps helped most was reframing my idea of what it means to know and shifting my intention of knowing: from knowing about wonder to getting to know wonder intimately myself. The metaphor of friendship helped me to 'know with' by trying to get to know moments, places and stories as I would a friend. By choosing to spend time with a place or a story, be open to what would emerge and let the place or story 'speak' to me. And while this meant I mostly got to know wonder through experience, I also found ways to get to know wonder more intimately through presentational forms such as my morning walk photographs and writing moment-stories.

My method of writing moment-stories helped me to write from within the lived experience of wonder by internally revisiting a wondrous moment in all its richness: the sensuous details, the emotions it evoked... Instead of destroying the wonder with words, giving words to these moments increased their wondrousness as well as their importance for me. Re-reading them reminded me that it was indeed possible to experience wonder – at a time when I doubted the very existence of wonder and magic myself. I think that language can therefore indeed have 'the possibility of re-wonderment' as Robert Macfarlane puts it. But only those words that are written from within an experience of wonder and that keep the wonder alive.

On a societal level, we collectively seem to be 'in between stories' and in the process of searching for new stories of the world and our place in it. And although we perhaps have not found 'the' new story yet, I can see an alternative story taking shape. Most thinkers on wonder and enchantment say the same: because we tell ourselves that we are separate from the world around us as human

beings, stand outside or above it, we justify the use and manipulation of the world for our own ends. Without seriously considering the effects on the world *and* ourselves. I think the realisation that 'we are the world' is one of the most important ingredients of this new story. And I believe that the words we use in our everyday lives, whether it is in conversation, while writing a story or when we name something internally, are of the utmost importance to create this new story. Giving words to moments of wonder and connection is a way to practice with this new story and to continue to realise I am part of a rich and diverse world that is alive. And sharing these stories is my attempt to show that these moments matter. To sing wonder back into the world with my words. My supervisor Kate McArdle recently shared what my stories meant to her:

I don't see a fox anymore and not think of you. And I know that it's safe for me to tell you that it blows my mind. Because I know that you had a connection with a fox once. So, it's a way into knowing I'll be met... There are not very many people that we generally have a connection with in terms of moments of beauty, and that we can share them with, in a way that does not make me feel vulnerable or ridiculous or like I need to explain.

And apart from being a beautiful compliment, I recognise that this is indeed what the effect of my stories has been on others: an invitation to notice and appreciate these moments of beauty and to safely share them with me. An excited message when a friend saw a fox, a colleague that tells me she had a special connection with a tree, and instead of dismissing it, noticed and appreciated it after reading how I had a 'high-five with a tree' once. This strengthens my belief that 'linguaging' these moments is a change intervention. And that words can help me and others to wonder, whether it is through reading my stories or writing stories of their own.

After four years of exploring wonder, I have come to believe that wonder is not just important in my life, but also something we need more of in the world. I think that wonder's invitation to pause and pay attention and to see and connect differently in everyday life makes a difference. I believe it is of the utmost importance to live in a world that can startle and surprise you, can *touch* you. A world that is wondrous and mysterious, and above all: alive. I believe experiences of wonder and magic, of



being in real connection with other human beings and the more-than-human world, create feelings of affection or love for the other. I think these feelings of love and affection start with truly seeing the other – whether it is a colleague at work or a tree in your garden. And that these feelings will change your thinking of and actions towards the other, because if you befriend or even love something or someone, you will automatically think of them and treat them with more care and consideration. And I have therefore come to believe that wonder can not only be personally transformative, as it has been for me, but can potentially also be transformative for the planet.

### 9.5 Wonder and magic in everyday and organisational life

I have explored different variations of wonder in this thesis: as windows in time, living questions, foraging for beauty, befriending places and staying in the in-between-space. As I noted in Chapter 2, wonder has intrigued and puzzled philosophers for centuries. Is wonder a dwelling in not-knowing or the starting point for explanation? Can wonder only be evoked by the extraordinary and the novel or can wonder be found in the ordinary? Does wonder only strike unexpectedly or does it require a conscious act of seeing the world in a certain way? Is wonder wholesome or wounding? Here, I want to articulate my own theoretical position on wonder and on these four differences or paradoxes within the thinking about wonder. Most literature on wonder is philosophical and concerned with the question what wonder is. By contrast, I have endeavoured to experience, encounter and create wonder. My contribution therefore lies in translating these philosophical ideas into practices you can do and live in everyday and organisational life. In other words: on the ‘how’ of wonder, with an emphasis on everyday settings.

#### **The possibility of wonder and magic**

In my research, I have experienced many small moments of wonder and some of those rare moments of magic. And I have created settings in which others have experienced moments of wonder, and sometimes even of magic too. I therefore explicitly want to argue that wonder and magic *are* possible in everyday and organisational life, despite the prevailing belief that our world and organisations are disenchanted. And despite what I thought was possible myself four years ago.

I believe this is an important research finding in and of itself. Following in Jane Bennett's (2001) footsteps, my research therefore attempts to challenge the discourse of disenchantment by providing an alternative story in which wonder and magic are still possible in our contemporary world. I find it important to stress that I do not believe you have to turn to religion, spirituality or the supernatural to encounter wonder and magic, but rather that I have come to believe our ordinary world and lives *are* extraordinary, if you but know – or continue to remember – how to see it.

### **Wonder as seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary**

From that perspective, I am most interested in a wonder that is active. A conscious choice to continue to see the world in a certain way: to continue to pay attention, truly see and remark. Contrary to some philosophers, I therefore believe wonder *can* be found in the ordinary. Moreover, the art of wonder is in seeing the extraordinary in something ordinary. And that is also why I believe wonder is a conscious act of seeing and that everything can potentially be a source of wonder: a tree, a colleague at work, a building or a teacup. Whatever stands before your eyes. Daily rituals and routines that continue to support you to see the extraordinary within the ordinary are therefore of the utmost importance to experience and encounter wonder in everyday and organisational life. I have made a distinction between moment-practices, sensuous-practices, authorship-practices and place-practices that each support you to do so in their own way.

### **Unexpected moments of magic**

However, I think there are some moments that have an even a higher intensity to them. Moments of interconnectedness, in which all the boundaries and separations suddenly fall away, and time ceases to exist. These 'moments of magic' arrive or strike unexpectedly. Moreover, if I search for them, or try and plan them, they do not seem to happen. However, if I do not carry the intention to experience magic, nor believe magic is possible in the first place, they do not seem to happen either. Instead, I hold the intention and possibility for magic in the corner of my eye, just out of sight. And continue to shift my gaze and attention to the practices that help me to wonder and see the extraordinary within the ordinary. I do believe that these moments are important and potentially

transformative. As so many ecological philosophers have argued: it is of the utmost importance that we once again start to realise that we are part of the world and that we think of the world as alive. Especially in the context of our current climate crisis. For if we think of and see the world differently, we might act differently towards it as a result. For me, this deep knowing I am part of the world and that the world is alive happens in these moments of magic. I only started to shift my thinking of and relationship with the more-than-human world through experiencing those moments. And I think this works the same way for others and there is important work to be done in creating settings in which others might experience more of these moments of magic.

### Wonder as wounding

I learned wonder can strip you of your certainties and make you question your taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas. Certain stories about yourself or the world function as a harness, and when they fall away you are left much more vulnerable. To be vulnerable literally means 'that which may be wounded or is open to attack' and I believe being or showing your vulnerability is an act of exposing or opening yourself to the possibility of wonder. Some deep experiences of wonder, what I call moments of magic, can be deeply touching. These are moments when something stabs, strikes or wounds you. And these moments leave a scar or a mark. Rachel Carson argued that wonder is a wholesome emotion because it does not go hand-in-hand with a lust for destruction of the more-than-human world. I think that precisely because of this wholesome quality, wonder can also deeply wound you. Wonder can indeed awaken a deep love for the more-than-human world, make you feel more alive to the world and become aware we are all interconnected. And in my own experience, this can also evoke a deep sadness. I increasingly have days when I cannot help but think we are wilfully destroying the world around us. And wonder how I am supposed to do anything about it. I can feel the wound ache. For that is the wound of wonder: if you are in connection and relationship, and if you are more aware of the wonders and beauty in the world, then you also feel the grief, the loss and the helplessness all the more deeply. Wonder is both wholesome and wounding.

### Enchantment by emergence

My methodology of living and loving questions wholeheartedly is an approach that enables enchantment by emergence by supporting me to challenge the discourse of disenchantment individually, by choosing to think, act or respond differently in different contexts – however small. This approach makes it possible to experience wonder and magic even in contexts where the discourse of disenchantment is dominant. For it seems hardly possible to live outside of or not be influenced by this discourse, especially while working in organisations and living in the city as I do. This is also why wonder can be hard work and requires continuous effort and attention. I believe creating temporary constellations of inquiry can be a potential way of encouraging enchantment by emergence at scale, for it invites many people to continue to live their own inquiry questions and carry them with them to their different contexts. Challenging the discourse of disenchantment individually does not have to be something you do alone. As the story of the MADE summit shows in which many people continued to inquire in their own life and practice, long after the summit.

### Creating wonder-full space

Apart from endeavouring to experience more moments of wonder and magic in my own life, I have also attempted to create settings in which I deliberately invited others to wonder, whether it was on a morning walk on the Ashridge grounds or during an Appreciative Inquiry summit. I believe there is an art to creating such wonder-full spaces or containers. And that I have mastered this art through my research, as I hope the practice stories in this thesis demonstrate. Learning my own unique version of this art was incredibly hard work. I developed my practical knowing of how to create such spaces through countless experiments, as well as reflecting on them alone and with others. I believe this art is unique to each practitioner and that discovering, honouring and refining this art is an essential part of our own development and craftsmanship as action researchers and OD practitioners. For only if we master this art in one form or another, can we claim to create settings in which we can safely and wholeheartedly inquire with others. And I believe that this kind of deep and intimate inquiry in which people reconnect to themselves, each other or the more-than-human world is of the utmost importance in a time of ecological and existential crises. So, while I do not

think other practitioners can or should copy my art, I do believe there are some ingredients from my approach that can support others to discover and develop their own version of this art.

### Showing up wholeheartedly

I learned this intangible art by trial and error, by explicitly experimenting with initiating sessions with and for others. And each time I experimented, I learned something that I could bring with me to the next experiment. Some examples from this thesis are inviting my doctoral cohort along on my intimate first-person practice of a morning walk. During this walk I sang a song in a circle of trees, a moment when I felt at my most vulnerable and my most powerful. It was a gesture of fully showing up, without feeling the need to perform. And a gesture of fully stepping in: leaving all the thoughts and expectations I had about the session behind and instead choosing to really be there, in relation with the group. This was a moment in which I realised showing up wholeheartedly, as myself, with all my vulnerabilities, was a powerful invitation for others to join me in the inquiry. And that my gesture of vulnerability and intimacy evoked responses of vulnerability and intimacy from the rest of the group. A few months later, I explicitly thought back to this moment of singing in the circle of trees whilst introducing the practice of spending time alone in nature for my mother and sister. And this time I had a strong sensation that I could create a window in time for both myself *and* my mother and sister to step through. And learned that actively visualising the metaphor of creating a window in time actually supported me to do so. This led me to prepare my opening speech for the MADE summit differently, and intentionally experiment with visualising opening the space by being the first to step over the threshold into what we called 'the in-between-space'. Once again by showing up vulnerable, this time by deciding to speak from the heart rather than use my prepared speech. And in that actual moment, I had a strong visceral memory of both the circle of trees and that moment with my mother and sister. I felt as if I had practiced that gesture of stepping in, and as if my body remembered that gesture and knew what to do.

### Embodying containers

I want to emphasise I not only attempt to create or hold a safe space or container for inquiry, but actively attempt to *embody the container*. I have an image or metaphor in my mind's eye that I actively try to live and embody. Like the image of creating a small 'window' in the fabric of time or the image of being the first to step into the in-between-space while opening the MADE summit. I developed an embodied knowing of how to do this, which remains difficult to articulate. I think of it as a wholehearted invitation to step into that space with me. Whilst strongly concentrating on visualising and embodying such a metaphor, there is also an intentional gesture of complete opening. Of completely letting go of all the ideas I had beforehand about what might happen and step in with a real presence and undivided attention for the here and now. And with a strong love and care for the people I am with. And then I almost literally feel I can open that window, or step over the threshold into the in-between-space. And, others feel it too.

### An internal hourglass

However, it still remains somewhat unpredictable when and if this wonder-full space emerges. This is somewhat like attempting to create moments of magic: when you try to hard or plan for it to happen, it no longer seems to work. But when it does emerge, I immediately know it in my body. I feel the collective energy shift in the room, slower and lower. There is a different quality of attention and presence. The collective focus drops from the head to the heart. Whether it was while facilitating time alone in nature for my mother and sister or during a talk about my research at the World Appreciative Inquiry Conference, I *know* it happens. More specifically, I know it in my lower belly. It feels like I have an internal old-fashioned hourglass in my lower belly in which the sand slowly comes to a halt in such moments. This hourglass metaphor became my embodied quality criterion for knowing when such a different quality of relating emerged. Especially when I could not explain it rationally, it was helpful to be able to trust my own embodied knowing. And extensively asking for feedback of those present, led me to gradually trust my embodied knowing, for others confirmed my knowing. I think many practitioners know this in different ways in their bodies, but

that it takes practice to get to know, recognise as well as trust your own embodied internal quality criteria.

### Regular first-person practice

I think the most important aspect that enables me to create such spaces with and for others is my own strong first-person practice. I am wholeheartedly living and exploring similar inquiry questions myself and engage in my own first-person research practices with dedication and discipline: my daily morning walks, my daily writing, my daily small encounters with the wondrous... These practices inform and influence who I am as a human being and as a practitioner. These are practices that focus on my being and presence and as such supported me to do all of the above: to show up as a fellow human being with my vulnerabilities and to embody containers. Instead of focusing on a specific form or method, focusing my attention on my own quality of being and presence was much more important to develop and enable my art of creating wonder-full space. Moreover, focusing on how I wanted to show up rather than explicitly focusing on creating something wondrous or magical to occur, was once more a way of approaching magic obliquely. I still cannot will this wondrous or magical quality into being, but by now I have learned to trust that it will most often emerge if I indeed focus on how show up and continue to wonder myself.

### 9.6 How do we know this is good work?

Now that we come towards the very end of this thesis, I want to return to the question of quality. How do I know this is good work? How do you know as a reader? In participatory or postmodern approaches to research, there are different quality standards than in more traditional approaches. As Kvale puts it: "In modern social science, the concepts of validity, reliability and generalisation have obtained the status of a scientific holy trinity" (Kvale, 2002: 300). While these concepts are perfectly legitimate in the discourse of modern science, they lose their value and usefulness in other discourses. But what does count as good work in more postmodern research and in action research specifically? How can you reflect upon or evaluate action research? Because action research aims not to merely describe realities but to create new realities, the responsibility of the researcher

becomes even more important, as do ethics and reflexivity (Chia, 1996; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Several authors argue there is no use in judging postmodern work according to modern standards (Chia, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gergen & Thatchenkerry, 2006). Or as Finlay (2006) puts it: research needs to be evaluated on its own terms.

So, what we need are a new set of values or standards to reflect upon the quality of postmodern work, and on action research specifically. There are several authors who have attempted to do so. Kvale (2002) has developed a postmodern notion of validity that focuses on three aspects: the credibility and craftsmanship of the person of the researcher, the development of research claims through communicative and dialogic processes with co-researchers and the academic community and the pragmatic value of the research that enables people to take action with the 'desired results'. Finlay (2006) reviewed different existing quality criteria for qualitative research and notes that even though they all appear to place a different emphasis, they are all concerned with the rigour or trustworthiness of research, as well as with its relevance. The latter consists of impact and contribution but also a certain 'artistry' of the researcher. She furthermore stresses the importance of choosing the quality criteria that fit the intention and methodology of the research.

Which quality criteria do I use to evaluate my research? In section 3.6, I articulated twelve of the quality criteria I found important in my research, in the form of 'design questions' to support me to continue to create quality whilst doing research and whilst writing this thesis. I furthermore mentioned which practices and processes I used on a day-to-day basis to attempt to create quality in section 3.7. However, I feel something different is needed here. Building on both Kvale's and Finlay's criteria, I want to evaluate my research retrospectively on three criteria: rigour (trustworthiness, credibility, craftsmanship), relevance (contribution, impact and pragmatic value) and resonance (artistry, evocativeness and richness).

## Rigour

In my opinion, rigour has to do with the practices and processes I put into place to 'do' quality on an everyday basis, but perhaps even more with my own craftsmanship and credibility as a researcher.



In other words: rigour is situated internally in who I am as a researcher. Naturally, my craftsmanship as a researcher has developed through engaging in this research and especially my ability to articulate my own craftsmanship has radically improved, which I imagine influences my credibility. However, from early on in my research I have engaged in my inquiries wholeheartedly. Even so much so that I had to stay home with a burnout when I seriously started inquiring, which in turn became the focus of my first inquiries. This wholeheartedness translated itself in radically choosing to intentionally inquire whenever and wherever possible and in a high level of attention in/to these moments of inquiry. When I overlook my four years of doctoral research, I can clearly see that I am perhaps first and foremost rigorous through duration and repetition. I have engaged in my most important methods, such as morning walks and writing, on an almost daily basis for four years. But also, through creating continuous cycles of action and reflection by continuing to experiment with new ways of thinking and acting and reflecting on these experiments in my journal and especially through continuous conversations with peers, colleagues, family and friends. I have also continued to actively seek out and experiment with different forms of asking feedback from others, whether it was through letters, postcards or stories.

## Relevance

First-person action research aims to transform the researcher's 'being-in-the-world' (Marshall, 2016) and to improve the quality of their practice by developing a 'reflexive muscle' (King & Higgins, 2014). I can confidently claim that I have changed in who I am as a human being, researcher and practitioner as a result of this research, as I hope my development throughout the practice chapters demonstrates. I have attempted to substantiate this claim through including journal entries and stories written throughout the past four years as evidence. However, I find it important this research is not just for me but is also in service of something bigger. I believe I have touched many people with my research: by initiating so many different inquiries with others and through sharing my unfolding story. And while I do think my research has been most transformative for myself, I also know it has created transformative moments for others. Whether it was during a morning walk together, during a programme in Spain or during an exhibition of my research. The themes of my

research are intimate and personal, and yet I found that my own curiosities and questions around which life is worth living and how I can connect differently with the world around me are increasingly widespread, relevant and important in a time in which many people question their (professional) identity as well as how we can relate and respond differently to the world in a time of ecological crisis. I hope my research has contributed to the thinking and practice of how to live and explore these big questions on an everyday basis, as well as how to invite others to do so.

### Resonance

This is perhaps the quality criterion I find most important for this written thesis itself. Both Finlay (2006) and Richardson (2000) argue that an important quality question is whether the research is vivid, evocative and draws readers in. And furthermore, resonates with reader's own experiences and 'moves' them: emotionally, or to new ways of thinking or acting. I have tried very hard to write a text that is intimate, real and filled with glimpses of wonder. My hope is that this helps to temporarily see the world through my eyes *and* to awaken the desire to explore the questions and themes that are important for you as a reader. I like to think of it as writing stories from a certain vibration, depth and tonality in the hope that reading them will invite a similar vibration in your belly or heart. The only one who can judge whether I have indeed managed to do so is you. I have invited colleagues, family and friends to read sections or earlier versions of this thesis and have used their feedback to try and improve this resonance. And, they shared that there were many moments while reading my work when they indeed experienced what I would call resonance, mostly in the moment-stories. Interestingly, different themes and life questions seemed to stand out for different people: for some it was the experience of burning out, for others giving meaning to the death of a loved one, for another the deep connection with the more-than-human world... Perhaps it is precisely because my research touches upon so many of life's big themes and questions that it has the potential to resonate with different readers. However, it also asks a certain courage from me to share these intimate and vulnerable stories. Responses of readers about how my research moved them emotionally and sometimes also moved them to start a morning walk practice or use a form I described in their own practice, is what supports me to continue to share these intimate stories.

## Coda: how do I continue to wonder?

Finishing my doctoral research feels like both an ending and a new beginning of my inquiries into wonder. Somewhat paradoxically, writing this thesis has at times taken me away from the actual practice of wonder. It has drawn me inwards, and I feel a strong longing to move outwards again. To bring my insights and my developed practice into the world. While writing this thesis, I re-read many of my journal entries of the past four years. And at times, I almost did not recognise my past self. I see this as evidence that I have changed in who I am these past four years. As a practitioner, as a researcher and as a human being. And while change might be inevitable over such a period of time, I am convinced that my explorations into wonder transformed me most. In this coda, I want to share what interests me most now and where my research into wonder might go next.

### A wordless wonder, a whispering wonder

I have explored many of the paradoxical qualities of wonder. Is wonder something that strikes or is it a conscious act of seeing? Is it wholesome or is it wounding? The paradox that intrigues me most at the moment is a wonder that is silent versus finding words for wonder. Especially after having spent so much time writing this thesis, attempting to wonder with words on the page. Can you write about wonder without destroying it? When might silence be the best response? As I pondered this question, I browsed through a collection of speeches and essays by Rachel Carson, because her thinking has such a central role in my work. In one of these essays, she describes a moment when she is looking out over the sea, and says: “We stood quietly, speaking few words. There was nothing really, for human words to say in the presence of something so vast, mysterious and immensely powerful (...) that morning all that was worth saying was being said by the sea.” (Carson, 1958/1998:118). This speaks to the inadequacy of human words compared to the song of the sea. But I also wonder whether we should not be silent more often to hear such songs in the first place. As Buddhist monk Thich Nath Hanh argues in his book ‘silence’: beauty is calling out to us every day, but we do not often hear its call because we are not often ‘still enough’. Days after submitting this

thesis, I went to a writing retreat with novelist and essayist Paul Kingsnorth who also wonders whether we should not be silent more often, especially as writers: “The silence says: now is not the time for words. The silence says: pay attention. Can you write from silence? Could I write a silent book, consisting of nothing but blank pages?” (Kingsnorth, 2019:42).

Do words sometimes stand in-between myself and the experience of wonder? Might they prevent me from entering into this deep connection with the more-than-human world I am yearning for? These are somewhat confronting questions, after having just finished this 70.000-word thesis. However, it also reminds me of David Abram’s statement that language is a way to sing yourself into contact, to bridge the silence, in order to re-enter the great conversation and connect once more. Words or silence? I turn to Rachel Carson once more, and my eye lingers on a speech she gave in 1952, directed at fellow nature writers. She states there has never been a greater need for the reporter and interpreter of the natural world because people have insulated themselves in cities of steel and concrete, far from the realities of the earth, and seem set on destroying the world and themselves with it. Carson believed that the more clearly we could focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the world around us, the less taste we would have for destruction. And that writing should introduce people to these wonders: “in so doing, it may well be a force working toward a better civilisation, by focusing attention on the wonders of a world known to so few, although it lies about us every day” (Carson, 1952/1998:97). I think Carson would agree that the need is even greater today. And I deeply believe that giving words to moments of wonder is not just something that is nice-to-have but is incredibly important in order to really see the world. And to help to fall just that little bit more in love with the world. And I think that doing so, will help us to think about the world differently, and treat it with more care and consideration. Which I think is really important at this moment in time.

I want to make sure that I regularly become still and quiet enough to hear the whisper of wonder. And instead of a wordless wonder, before or beyond words, seek out this whispering wonder. And write down these whisperings, for others to read.

## Ideas to continue to wonder

And I also have some more practical ideas to continue to wonder in my everyday life and in my practice, as well as to share my insights with more people.

## Writing about wonder

One of the unexpected outcomes of my research is that I (re)discovered how much I love to write, and especially to write intimate stories from within moments of wonder. I want to continue to write about wonder and I want to turn this thesis into a book for a wider audience outside of the academic community in the coming year. But I also want to continue to publish about my research in other ways: in academic journals, in practitioner journals, but also in a series of blogs and in a Dutch magazine for a broader audience.

## Initiating inquiries into wonder

I make a distinction between what I think of as my 'commissioned work' in organisation and my 'free work' that I initiate alongside it. I realised that much of the time and energy for what I would call my free work has gone into writing this thesis in the past year. And already in the weeks after submitting this thesis, I feel the ideas and energy to initiate new inquiries start to bubble up once more. I am going to facilitate a programme for young people on human flourishing and sustainability in the Sant Aniol Valley in Spain this year and also want to organise a short programme for family, friends and colleagues there to celebrate and share my research into wonder. And much closer to home, I want to start organising wonder walks in Amsterdam to reach a different audience, in the botanical garden and/or in my favourite park.

## My practice in organisations

And there is of course my practice in organisations. A lot of people ask me: how is your practice going to change now you have finished your research? Beforehand, I imagined that once I was done, my client work would be very different. And that I would perhaps be asked to consult on wonder and magic in organisations. Now, I am not so sure. Because I really would not want to go into an

organisation and do a hundred 'wonder workshops', which I fear would take me far away from my own wonder. What I would like to do, is to create small moments and experiences of wonder wherever I am. A few weeks ago, I for example started an Appreciative Inquiry training at nine o'clock in the morning with a round of stories: can you share a small moment of wonder of this morning? It invited stories about the exasperation caused by a morning with a surly teenage daughter, the beauty of the shape of the clouds above the city and the feeling of alienation evoked by the seemingly dazed behaviour of people during rush-hour on the train station. Half an hour in which we listened to each other's stories and were human together. Does that count as a change intervention? Four years ago, I would probably have answered in the negative. Now I think these are perhaps the moments that matter most. I will focus my attention on creating these small moments and experiences of wonder, wherever I am. And my hope is that these experiences will find its way into people's days and lives, especially in contexts where this is not thought of as the usual thing to do, which is often the case in the organisations where I work.

### **Continue to wonder myself**

And of course, I want to continue my first-person explorations which are not going to stop. I will continue to walk in the mornings. I will continue to journal and write moment-stories. And I will continue to seek out moments and experiences of wonder. I want to end with a recent story of such a moment of wonder and connection that occurred during a 're-wilding your words' course with Paul Kingsnorth. One of those moments that deeply nourish me and that luckily seem to occur more and more in my life.



Figure 24 *Shut up, pay attention and listen*, November 2019

~

### ***Robin comes to tickle my bark***

*November 2019*

*I slowly make my way through the boggy hills. The Irish mud sucks at my boots, trying hard to keep me into place. My thoughts stray back to the folded piece of paper in my pocket, with one handwritten word on it. Oak.*

*“Find what is on your piece of paper, pay attention, shut up and listen to what it has to say to you”, was Paul Kingsnorth’s invitation. And: “Can you imagine what it is like to be part of the land and write in its voice?”.*

*But here I am, twenty minutes later, still searching for an oak. During a moonlight stroll last night, Paul told us there used to be a fine for cutting down oaks in Ireland. It was a sacred tree. How come there are none left? As I continue to wander in search of an oak, a first line enters me: ‘I remember the time we were many, our roots digging down deep, our branches spreading out wide’.*

*And then, finally, I see a young oak in the garden of the Boghill Centre. I sit down on the small path in front of it, and try to imagine what it is like to be this young oak. Time passes by, and I become more and more immersed in simply observing the oak in front of me. A robin perches on its bare branches. What would that feel like for the oak? Before I can finish my thought, the robin flaps its wings and lands again, this time on my left knee. Am I sitting that still? Did I try so hard to imagine to be an oak that the robin mistook me for one? I feel its tiny claws tickle my skin through the fabric of my pants. Did robin visit me to help me imagine the inner life of an oak? To feel what it is like to have tiny claws dig into your leg? The next line comes to me: 'robin comes to tickle my bark, awakening me from sleep.'*

*Later, after lunch, I go back with my guitar, to sing a song to the oak. To thank it somehow for the time spent together. I strum my guitar and start singing: blackbird singing it the dead of night.... And then, as if it is the most natural thing in the world, robin comes to sit on my knee again, to listen to my song.*

~



## Epilogue

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### ***Dancing (with you)***

*September 2019*

*A chestnut tree invited me,  
to come sit in her lap.  
Sitting bones connecting restlessly,  
easing into leaning, inch by inch.  
As I looked up, I thought,  
hey, that hand belongs to me...  
But no, it was the chestnut leaf  
amidst the beeches that I saw.  
And yet I felt it was me –  
how could that be?  
I embraced the tree as I was about to go,  
and felt my roots going down dark and deep.  
Standing on the tree's toes, and,  
suddenly, standing on your toes.  
Dancing, with you,  
dear Dad.*

~

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## Papers

Acceptance Paper ADOC, October 2014

Inquiry Proposal ADOC, June 2015

Transfer Paper ADOC, September 2016

Progression Paper ADOC, January 2018

## Other

Television Portrait Paul Kingsnorth, 'Tegenlicht' 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 , See:

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2018-2019/de-aarde-draait-door.html>

Television Interview with Simone De Beauvoir (1974). Questionnaire. TV Interview by Jean-Louis Servant. Schreiber: "Why I am a feminist". France.

Lecture R. Macfarlane, 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2019, Spui25, Amsterdam

Lecture J. Hermsen, 11<sup>th</sup> of December, Festival 'De Verhalenvvertellers', Tolhuistuin, Amsterdam

MADE Magazine 1, June 2017 <https://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/made-magazine-issue-1>

MADE Magazine 2, December 2017 <https://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/made-magazine-nummer-2>

TEDx Talk Tiu de Haan (2016) 'Why we still need ritual' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umdZlyriW-U>

Blog 'The MADE event as an in-between-space' by Joeri Kabalt <https://werkplaatsen.kessels-smit.com/nl-218/the-made-event-as-an-in-between-space>

Blog 'Change Through Nature' by Joeri Kabalt & Andres Roberts, Kessels & Smit Website <https://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/change-through-nature-a-24-hour-solo-in-the-wild>

## Appendix A: List of people and places

**Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change (ADOC):** A doctoral programme in organisational change at Ashridge Executive Education in the United Kingdom. Since I started in March 2015, the name and design of the programme have gone through considerable changes. See: <https://www.hult.edu/en/executive-education/programs/organizational-development/degrees/executive-doctorate-organizational-change/> for more information on the current version of the programme.

**ADOC peers:** Each doctoral cohort starts with twenty doctoral students, which I refer to as ‘peers’.

**ADOC workshop:** The doctoral programme consists of several workshops, faculty-led and participant-led.

**Curaçao:** a Dutch Caribbean island situated along the coast of Venezuela that is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It is also the place where my mother was born and grew up and where I lived for three months for my master thesis ‘Curaçao, our nation: an Appreciative Inquiry about the future of Curaçao’.

**Flevopark:** A park in Amsterdam close to where I lived in 2015 and 2016 and walked every day for a time.

**Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company (K&S):** a community of fifty independent organisational learning and development practitioners in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and South Africa who jointly own their company. I joined Kessels & Smit in January 2012 as an associate and became a co-owner of the company in 2014 and still work there. For more information see: <https://www.kessels-smit.com>

**The Sant Aniol Valley:** situated in Northern Spain in the ‘Alta Garrotxa’. It is the place where I spent around eight to twelve weeks a year writing, reflecting and reading in the past four years. It is also the place where I spent time alone in nature and where my friend Korbi Hort lives. For more information see his website: <http://active-earth.com/visitor-education-center/>

### People that are mentioned in this thesis (in order of appearance)

Hidde Kabalt, my father.

Margreet de Jongh, my mother.

Sanne Kabalt, my sister.

Kate McArdle, my doctoral supervisor.

Geoff Mead, ADOC faculty. (p.66, p.82) and my 'mock examiner' (p.187).

Korbi Hort, my friend who lives in the Sant Aniol Valley and facilitated solos for me there (p.90, p.92, p.158, p.161) and later hosted a five-day inquiry in the Sant Aniol Valley on Natural Rhythm (p.174).

Andres Roberts, my former K&S colleague who facilitated several solos for me (p.90, p.92, p.157, p.61).

Saskia Tjepkema, K&S colleague and co-author of my book on Appreciative Inquiry. She gave me the fox (p.94) and I designed the MADE Summit with her (p.180).

Martijn van Ooijen, K&S colleague with whom I invited people to write moment stories (p.100) and created the exhibition in silence (p.110).

Nina Timmermans, K&S colleague with whom I edited the book 'Living your time' (p.126).

Pieterjan van Wijngaarden, K&S colleague who introduced me to the miracle morning (p.131).

Steve Marshall, ADOC faculty (p.135).

Luc Verheijen, K&S colleague and co-author of my book on Appreciative Inquiry. We designed the MADE Summit together (p.180).

David Cooperrider, one of the founders of Appreciative Inquiry with whom I designed the MADE Summit (p.180).

Jed Milroy, a friend who played music on the MADE summit and with whom I facilitated MADE Real (p.198) and later hosted a five-day inquiry in the Sant Aniol Valley on Natural Rhythm (p.174).

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## Appendix C: List of song fragments

Before Chapter 2: Dear Prudence – The Beatles (John Lennon/Paul McCartney)

Before Chapter 3: Across the universe – The Beatles (John Lennon/Paul McCartney)

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Before Chapter 5: Eleanor Rigby – The Beatles (John Lennon/Paul McCartney)

Before Chapter 6: Blackbird – The Beatles (John Lennon/Paul McCartney)

Before Chapter 7: Something – The Beatles (George Harrison)

Before Chapter 8: Come together – The Beatles (John Lennon/Paul McCartney)

Before Chapter 9: While my guitar gently weeps – The Beatles (George Harrison)



