

## Being with John

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The invitation to write a short reflection on *how John's ideas have inspired or provoked me in my own writing/research/practice* is not an easy one. John is not so much interested in the patterns and explanations of past events. He is much more interested in future oriented living forms. So my question is: Where is John's voice living inside me? Where is his influence alive in everyday happenings and practices?

When I reflect on this question I can hear John talk, hear phrases, spoken out slowly and articulately with special emphasis on words. Language as a living sculpture. Words becoming wordings John likes to say. I find myself reading out loud the texts of John regularly. 'Shotter again,' my husband, Arthur, supposes as he hears me reading (out loud) in my work room at home. I invented this practice, giving the texts of John a voice helped me to be with him, to hear him speak at the same time and to understand him better. And John helped me to understand my own work better.

My dialogue with John Shotter was a bit more uncertain until 2009 when we met in the first European Summerschool for open dialogical practices in Leuven where we worked together with Peter Rober, Jim Wilson, Jaakko Seikkula and a group of colleagues from many different countries. There I was touched by his words, utterings, attitude, warmth, generosity and laughter.

Talking in the summerschool about being future oriented before seeing a family, instead of analysing past facts in files, John mentioned 'being poised,' being in the present moment, having the body balanced and ready to act, like a skier poised at the top of the slope. Connected to this bodily orientation, John refers to Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher of the imagination. "...I inevitably grasp my body as a *spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964 in Shotter 2011, p.8).

John's mastery in giving many old thinkers a new context was framed as cross-pollination during the celebration *Performing John Shotter*, October 8, 2016, Bedfordshire University, UK. John helps us all to keep everything connected.

When I prepare for a therapy session, before teaching, or performing, I always think of John and being poised. Being open and ready for possibilities to come. This is my understanding of the 'not knowing' position in systemic practices. Not only the beginnings of therapy sessions are unpredictable, sessions are also open ended. When we want to explain what happened in a session we often destroy the life in it. 'I don't know what happened but I feel something has changed' can be the uttering of clients and therapists after a meaningful session.

When poised I can recognise Kairos, the God that John mentioned and who was the favorite God of my father. Kairos is the Greek God of the "fleeting moment;" offering a favorable opportunity opposing the fate of man. Such a moment must be grasped by the tuft of hair on the personified forehead of Kairos; otherwise the moment is gone and can not be re-captured, personified by the back of Kairos's head being bald.

So we need to be poised to recognise Kairos, the opportunity that gives space for new, unexpected possibilities and beginnings. Because only then can we be responsive, be relational, be connected. This presupposes the ability to live with uncertainty. John does another cross-pollination here when he refers to the Romantic poet, John Keats, writing about *Negative Capability*: 'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' (Keats in a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas, 21 December, 1817).

Preparing also involves studying, investigating, reflecting, reading, connecting, thinking, trying, acting, experiencing, feeling and reflecting again in a random sequence. John's books, articles and presentations form a stimulating landscape to hang around, to prepare for new beginnings, becomings. He doesn't search for general truths and analyses of facts but tries to make sense of our daily relational and embodied experiences. And his texts are never determinative but open-ended.

*'My concern is not to provide other people with the completed ends of my investigations, but with possible beginnings for their own inquiries — beginnings that in our everyday are always 'in transition', but which can always be 'gestured toward,' 'pointed out' or 'attended to' in our writing' (Shotter, 2016).*

John loved the well-known phrase of Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." We both love Beckett. John directed his plays. Beckett's plays are open ended as well. Beckett could be amused but not impressed by people who wanted to talk with him about the interpretation of his texts. 'What I want to say is in the plays, they don't need explanation' was his response.

John tells us the same: *'Instead of seeking to understand what we experience and perceive from the outside, in terms of a second, timeless, ideal world of our own creation, our task becomes that of seeking to understand what we experience and perceive only in terms of what we experience and perceive, to explain the situated and time-bound only by the situated and time-bound, to understand our actually experienced world only from within THAT world'* (Shotter, 2016).

For me that is a great and rich challenge.

I had the luck of being with John on many occasions and I can say that our connection, our meetings and written or spoken dialogues strengthened me to develop further my own way of thinking and working with many complex issues around violence in families, that often dissent from main stream views.

John gave Jim Wilson and myself the name: experimentalists. I feel acknowledged, honoured and understood by this title.

Thank you John

Justine van Lawick

### References

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