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Stepping into the clearing: A researcher's challenge to make sense of phenomenological philosophy

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Abstract: Philosophical texts have much to offer the phenomenological researcher. However, these texts can appear remote and somewhat esoteric to novice researchers who are not versed in philosophy. This paper engages philosophy by exploring the writings of Martin Heidegger, by drawing on the author's experience of conducting a phenomenological inquiry, and by attending to the voices of those psychologists and psychotherapists who have struggled with Heidegger's texts. Specifically, it examines the topic of how philosophy can inform phenomenological research. It is an invitation to pause, to take a step back and consider the benefits of engaging with philosophy and developing poetic sensibility towards research. The author's research into openness in psychotherapy provides the backdrop and source material for much of the discussion. Reading Heidegger is not easy, but with an embodied stance of openness, patience and curiosity, comprehension is possible. The concept of poetic sensibility in phenomenological research is also discussed by taking Heidegger's metaphor of the clearing for the openness of Being.

Keywords: Heidegger, phenomenology, philosophy, poetic, openness, reflexivity, research

As an existential-phenomenological psychotherapist, I believe my work involves creating space; offering a place where clients can tell their stories, hear their narratives and explore their worldviews. Above all, the therapy space is a place to *Be*. In order to *Be*, space must be created as we open to the other – a clearing must be found. To this end I spent six years researching openness in psychotherapy (King, 2017). What follows is a story describing two aspects of that research process; a) the challenge of reading philosophical texts and b) cultivating poetic, hermeneutic sensibility. I deliberately use the word 'story' here to describe the narrative quality of this paper. I want to signal up front that this paper is not a typical academic research paper in terms of structure or format. Instead, I tell my story of *engaging with phenomenological philosophy* with references to philosophy, quotations from other scholars, photographs, and from my own reflexive research journey where I quote directly from my thesis (shown in italics). This word 'engaging' signifies my dialogue with the texts and the fascinating – if frustrating - challenge of making sense of ideas to inform my research practice. The reflections that follow, will hopefully inspire the reader with some confidence to return (or discover) such texts and – as I did – find inspiration and meaning in them.

Philosophical Texts

Since pre-Socratic times, philosophers have reflected upon the nature of human existence. Phenomenologists too concern themselves with lived experience and the phenomena of consciousness. Philosophy and Phenomenology share a common theme – the 'how' of living. Therefore, it stands to reason that philosophical writings are a good place to start any phenomenological inquiry. However, all too often these texts lay forgotten or ignored because the language and concepts they contain can be too complex and impenetrable and involve many frustrating hours of reading.

I believe reading philosophy is important for three reasons: a) it offers inspiration and insight to the researcher on how others have thought about the world; b) it makes the reader question the nature of their existence; and c) the dialectic with the text brings to light the reader's assumptions and affords new opportunities for exploration. Reading philosophy encourages reflexivity, as Qualley explains: "Reflexivity is a response triggered by a dialectical engagement with the other – an other idea, theory, person, culture, text or even an other part of one's self" (Qualley, 1997, p.11). Given the role of philosophical texts in research it stands to reason to consider the ways in which practitioners understand this valuable resource.

Poetic Sensibility

C.G. Jung believed much of psychological life relies on the conjunction of opposites (Jung, 1971). The result is not a solution or resolution, but a synthesis. The emergence of a third way, something greater than the sum of parts - growth of new awareness. Bachelard highlights the relevance of this to phenomenology by saying: "In my opinion soul and mind are indispensable for studying the phenomena of the poetic image" (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxi). This paper considers the conjunction between philosophy (mind) and the poetic (soul) in phenomenological research. I will argue, through personal example, how the product of such conjunction enriches the findings of a phenomenological inquiry. Poetic sensibility is primarily achieved through reflexivity, writing anecdotes being an example (van Manen, 2002; 2014) and working with metaphors, myths, and imagery. These are the 'numinous' (i.e., mystical, spiritual, divine) aspects of a phenomenological inquiry.

Phenomenological Inquiry

Phenomenology is a powerful tool in qualitative research - as such psychotherapists are drawn to it as a methodology, for it enables them to explore lived experience and elucidates personal meaning. "Existential phenomenology can be defined as the method for describing and interpreting lived experience as it is revealed in the life-world" (Brooke, 1991, p.7). As a methodology it provides a creative and flexible framework for investigating complex life issues. Unfortunately, there is no single phenomenological methodology – there are many (Finlay, 2011). This provides the researcher with a predicament. Lived experience does not lend itself to the neat parameters of research. Therefore, each research journey requires thoughtful consideration and careful crafting before selecting the most appropriate methodology rather than the most popular. By engaging with primary texts, the researcher can gain greater understanding of the philosophical ideas that underpin phenomenology which, in turn, offers a way to discover the most suitable methodology.

The following discussions are based on my experiences as a psychotherapist and researcher. As I mentioned earlier, I undertook a phenomenological inquiry into openness in psychotherapy. I turned to the writings of Martin Heidegger for inspiration and discovered an extraordinary world of both frustration and insight. I took ideas from Heidegger's philosophy and combined with my experiences, and those of my participants, to shed light on the phenomenon of openness. Unexpectedly I became beguiled by Heidegger's image of the forest clearing. By developing the poetics of this image, I was able to deepen and expand my investigation into the phenomenon of openness, through the writing of anecdotes. The anecdotes I wrote complemented the participants' descriptions and brought an extra dimension to the exploration of openness. As Adams & van Manen point out: "A phenomenological anecdote is not intended to serve as an illustration but as an evocative example of a possible human experience" (Adams & van Manen, 2017, p. 788). I intend to show how cultivating poetic sensibility enables these evocative aspects of human experience to be brought to light. Before I discuss my experience, some background information is required to set the context.

Heidegger and Psychotherapy

"How might philosophy enrich the practice of psychotherapy?" is the opening line of *Heart & Soul* (Mace, 1999, p.1), which explores the influence of philosophy on psychotherapies. My modality, existential therapy, is one such example informed, as it is, by the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. These philosophers were collectively known as the 'existentialists' although they did not all identify themselves as such. The word *writing* is key here and highlights an obvious, yet crucial fact. Philosophically informed therapies are built upon the foundation of

philosophical texts. These were not written specifically for psychologists and psychotherapists. They were writing for other philosophers as well as the curious and perplexed. As such, the practitioner must develop a meaningful relationship with philosophical ideas by engaging with texts. What they take away from this engagement is likely to be different to that of the philosophy student.

In this paper I concern myself with the writings of Martin Heidegger, arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th Century, much of what follows is applicable to reading other philosophers or theoreticians. The opus of Heidegger's writings, and the writings about him, is vast – spanning everything from the meaning of Being to pre-Socratic philosophy by way of building and dwelling and the origin of works of art. Even within the realm of psychology and psychotherapy the reader is confronted with a huge array of primary and secondary sources. When reading Heidegger with a specific aim, getting that initial foothold is tough.

Perhaps Heidegger is most well-known for the term *Dasein* or 'Being-in-the-world'. It is hyphenated to represent the situated-*ness* of the human condition. In other words, I cannot extricate myself from the world. I am immersed in all that surrounds me. The reciprocal nature of Being-in-the-world means I influence, and am influenced by, everything around me. By acknowledging this 'life-world' stance I seek to avoid, as much as possible, seeing things in terms of a subject/object split. A split which creates distance and artificial boundaries.

Heidegger's influence on psychotherapy can be seen in the extent to which his philosophical ideas have informed a number of modalities – existential therapy, psychoanalysis and gestalt come to mind. In the field of psychoanalysis, the Swiss psychiatrist Medard Boss, following on from the work of Ludwig Binswanger, was the first to combine aspects of psychoanalytic theory with Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein* to create *Daseinsanalysis* (Boss, 1963; 1979). Later in his career, Boss would collaborate with Heidegger directly in the *Zollikon Seminars* (Heidegger, 2001), in order to train psychiatrists and psychologists.

In my own field of existential therapy, Heidegger's influence developed through the writings of Cohn, Spinelli and van Deurzen. In *Everyday Mysteries* van Deurzen (2009) introduces a range of existential thinkers to therapists, eloquently linking theory with practice. In *Heidegger and the Roots of Existential Therapy*, Cohn (2002) makes Heidegger's dense and complex ideas accessible to therapists through his clear, concise writing. In *Practicing Existential Psychotherapy*, Spinelli describes the cultivation of the phenomenological attitude towards exploring a client's worldview – by articulating the three stages approach: the rule of bracketing, the rule of description and the rule of horizontalisation (Spinelli, 2007, p. 115-116).

Heidegger's major work of *Being and Time* (1927/1962) is the foundational text upon which many of these therapeutic modalities draw their inspiration and insights. Before I go further and explore how philosophy can inform phenomenological research, the thorny issue of Heidegger's past needs to be addressed.

Heidegger's Past

Heidegger's involvement in the rise of National Socialism in Germany and his membership of the Nazi part from May 1933 to his resignation in April 1934 has cast a long, black shadow over his life and works. In particular there were aspects of his philosophy during the period of 1932 – 1945, which gave voice to extreme ideologies. "It is disturbing to watch Heidegger use concepts from *Being and Time* to justify an authoritarian and nationalistic vision" (Polt, 1999, p. 155).

In her book *At the Existential Café* (2016) Sarah Bakewell expertly weaves the biographical lives of existential philosophers with their thinking, of Heidegger she writes this statement:

> Reading Heidegger again, I feel the same gravitational pull. But even while sliding back down into his dimly lit world of forest paths and tolling bells, I find myself struggling to get free, for reasons that have nothing – and everything – to do with his Nazism (Bakewell, 2016, p. 320).

In 2017 the publication of Heidegger's 'black notebooks' revealed his Antisemitism and anti-Christian sentiments (Bjork and Svenungsson, 2017). Heidegger was also guilty of disowning colleagues and failing to help them while Rector of University of Freiburg (1933-34). While I read about these episodes, I reflected on how my thinking had become compartmentalised towards Heidegger. As a result, I had to re-evaluate my relationships with Heidegger given his values and behaviour were incompatible with mine.

Cohn highlights two common approaches towards Heidegger's past - either total rejection or minimisation of his political actions (Cohn, 2002). The situation is compounded by Heidegger's later silence and refusal to apologise. Much has been written about Heidegger's actions and their incompatibility with his philosophy. Cohn sums up the situation by saying. "But this connection, in my view, is not one in which the philosophy validates the behavior but rather it is

one in which the behavior is a betrayal of the philosophy" (Cohn, 2002, p. 4).

The more I read about Heidegger's war years and his subsequent silence, the angrier I became, because so much of Heidegger's philosophy is predicated on his concept of authenticity. I believe it was his blindness and hypocrisy, in this respect that angered me the most. Cohn's phrase rings true – "the behaviour is a betrayal of the philosophy" (Cohn, 2002, p. 4).

The ability to hold difficult, sometimes irreconcilable aspects of a person is familiar stance for a psychotherapist. This does not mean I condone Heidegger's view or behaviour; rather I acknowledge him as a flawed, imperfect human being (as we all are). Critical thinking encourages the reader to reflect and digest rather than swallow ideas whole. Cohn was a Jewish therapist who wrote openly about these issues and how they affected him (Cohn, 2002). I believe his writings provide a model for frank and open discussions where Heidegger is concerned. I put my early, compartmentalised view of Heidegger down to an imbalance of knowledge. I had read too much of Heidegger's philosophy and not enough about his life. By undertaking research which drew on Heidegger's later writings I redressed this imbalance. The experience gave me a more rounded understanding of the man.

The irony was not lost on me – I was researching openness in psychotherapy and by reading Heidegger the texts themselves were challenging me to stay open to the conflict and uncomfortable feelings that arose from reading about his life. I learnt to hold the conundrum that was Martin Heidegger – one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century and yet a supporter in the rise of National Socialism. These two aspects of Heidegger cannot be reconciled. I remember during my existential training we had two tutors: one tutor taught us Heidegger for a whole term while the other refused to read a single word of Heidegger!

The above has provided a brief overview to Heidegger's enduring influence on phenomenology and psychotherapy. Ultimately, each practitioner is faced with the choice - whether or not to read Heidegger. What is to be found when the reader does engage with his writings? To answer this question, I will examine a selection of experiences, in the form of quotes and an anecdote, of reading Heidegger.

Reading Heidegger

The aim of this section is to show how each reader takes something particular and unique from Heidegger's philosophy. In other words, there are many ways to interpret Heidegger's philosophy. Each depends on the intention and worldview of the reader.

> It is possible, and surely legitimate (countless people have done it), to engage creatively with the Heideggerian texts in a search for original insights, without direct concern for the precise meanings Heidegger may be deemed to have intended in these texts (Crotty, 1996, p. 76).

> *Books are ready-at-hand, to use Heidegger's famous term, allowing me to dip in and out of them at a moment's notice. These books, my books, are covered in marker-pen, scribbles in the margins and a profusion of coloured post-it notes. Each book tells a different story: an insight learnt, a frustration experienced, an idle afternoon spent browsing or a desperate search for just the 'right' quote. Heidegger constantly confounds, all the while tantalizing with something profound. Philosophy seduces – there is always an intoxicating need for more. Gradually the reader becomes disassembled by the complexities of philosophical thought. Eventually the Self is cast into a state of flux. For that is what good philosophy does - it makes you question the very nature of our existence* (King, 2017, p. 37).

This anecdote illustrates how there is something about Heidegger's philosophy enshrined in dense pages filled with obtuse quotes and esoteric language that attracts and repels in equal measure. I have found myself returning to his works time and again, only to be frustrated and infuriated. It is difficult to pinpoint why his philosophy has such a draw. Perhaps his gift is to name something blurred, on the edge of consciousness - he brings it into the light of awareness. "Reading Heidegger, and feeling (as one often does) that you

recognize an experience he is describing, you want to say, 'Yes that's me!'" (Bakewell, 2016, p. 60). Heidegger has the knack of expressing his philosophical ideas by using strange words and poetic imagery. Throughout this paper I wish, wherever possible, to use the voices of those who have described their experience of reading Heidegger so to give the reader an understanding of how philosophy can inform research and practice.

During my research one thing became apparent from the outset. When psychotherapists described their experience of reading Heidegger, they were not simply applying Heidegger's ideas to their work. His philosophy *informs* therapeutic understanding, making the reader question what it means to be human. However, there is a danger of taking Heidegger too literally – what Spinelli describes as 'psychologising' Heidegger (Spinelli, 1996). He does not deny Heidegger's influence but urges therapists to keep the philosophy in perspective. Noting that Heidegger's primary concern was the abstract concept of Being and not therapeutic practice. I find Cohn's view a helpful way of understanding this process.

> This was not a question of 'applying' Heidegger's existential concepts to the practice of psychotherapy – rather it was the realization that some of his understanding of the way human beings exist reflected my own and therefore underlies my therapeutic practice (Cohn, 2002, p. xviii).

Medard Boss, an existential psychiatrist, had a similar experience when reading Heidegger. The quote below is taken from the preface *Zollikon Seminars* and describes his first encounter with Heidegger's work.

> By chance, I came across a newspaper item about Heidegger's book *Being and Time*. I plunged into it, but discovered that I understood almost none of its content. The book opened up question after question which I had never encountered before in my entire scientifically orientated education. For the most part, these questions were answered in reference to new questions. Disappointed, I laid the book aside only half-read, but strangely it gave me no rest. I would pick it up again and again and begin studying it anew (Heidegger, 2001, p. xv).

Boss's description highlights a number of salient points. Firstly, there is the familiar struggle – "I understood almost none of its content" (Heidegger, 2001, p. xv). Heidegger is not an easy read, especially his later works. The inexperienced reader can often fail to appreciate this point and quickly succumbs to feelings of inadequacy. It is worth remembering that practitioners and researchers are not academic philosophers. Secondly, despite his struggle, Boss became enticed by Heidegger's thinking rather than being deterred by it. Thirdly "The book opened up question after question" Heidegger, 2001: xv) – a sentiment which echoes Heidegger own thinking, "questions are paths towards an answer" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 431). In short Heidegger frustrates – he deliberately makes you work. It is as if he is always striving to achieve a state of perplexity in the reader (Cerbone, 2008). However, in the process of reading, something is revealed, an insight gained that makes the challenge worthwhile. *Struggle* and *gift of struggle* were two themes identified by Smythe & Spence (2020), who explored the topic of reading Heidegger by investigating the experiences of philosophers and doctoral students in Nursing.

After reading the *Zollikon Seminars* preface I became curious as to how other psychotherapy practitioners described their experiences of Heidegger's philosophy. I conducted a short literature review. In 2013 The *Humanistic Psychologist* (volume 41) published a special symposium entitled 'Bringing Heidegger Home: A Journey through the lived worlds of psychologists and philosophers'. This collection of papers proved a rich source of material, where the editors' objective was to make: "Heidegger's thoughts more accessible in everyday language, and to demonstrate how his philosophy and ideas are relevant to real-life human experience" (Khong & Churchill, 2013, p. 201). Using quotes from this special issue along with other references, I have built up a picture of what it means to read Heidegger and engage with his ideas.

- In 1962, I found myself adrift at the University of Pittsburgh, taking dreary 'Introduction' courses in a mishmash of areas, with little energy or enthusiasm. 1962 was important because it was the year that Heidegger's Being and Time first appeared in English. Having the text, itself, to work with (as opposed to hearsay and secondary sources) set me on a course of thought and questioning that eventually *overturned* my narrow sense of what education was all about (Guigon, 2013, p. 204).

- I discuss the important ways that Heidegger's philosophy, daseinsanalysis, and the Buddha's teachings *inform* and *ground* my Being as a therapist (Khong, 2013, p. 232).

- I hope to have conveyed the most poignant ways Heidegger's Daseinsanalytik has *clarified* and *influenced* my understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be the human being I happen to be (Craig, 2013, p. 253).

- I take my task here as a kind of *weaving*. I wish to throw the net wide and show how Martin Heidegger and Medard Boss have offered me an understanding

> of the human realm, and its grounding in Being that has intimately *informed* how I am as a psychotherapist (Todres, 2007, p. 110).

- I aim to show that Heidegger's work provides a crucial point of departure for psychotherapy. I shall argue that it supplies a *blueprint* for human existence that has far reaching implications for the way in which we perceive human distress and happiness (van Deurzen-Smith, 1995, p. 13).

- My concern is not to propose a "synthesis" of Heidegger and Jung but, rather, to suggest that Heidegger is especially helpful in *elucidating* some of the fundamental concerns of Jung's work. The task, then, is simply to let Heidegger *illuminate* Jung – and, perhaps Jung, Heidegger (Capabianco, 1993, p. 50).

In these quotes the italics are mine and used to emphasize themes that emerge from reading these personal accounts. It would appear that each practitioner takes something different from Heidegger's writings. Yet certain themes recur in relations to reading Heidegger: overturn/challenge, stimulate, inform, ground, blueprint, elucidate, influence, illuminate and clarify. Heidegger's influence would appear to be subtle and yet profound. In all cases there was a fundamental shift and reflection on what it meant to be human. I believe the reason for this lies at the core of Heidegger's philosophy – a single question: "we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being?" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 1). This seemingly simple question is enormously challenging. "It is said that 'Being' is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such it resists every attempt at definition" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 2). Perhaps this is the hook that catches the unsuspecting reader and keeps them coming back for more. Each reader is called to answer the question of Being*:* "The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of Being" (Heidegger, 1927/62, p. 27).

The way I engage with Heidegger's ideas determines what I seek to learn from them in relation to my research. Each reader develops a particular kind of contextual relationship with a text, one that is challenging yet creative and insightful. These are the qualities of 'inform' and 'elucidate' seen above. I use the phrase 'engaging with Heidegger' to convey the dynamic quality of the process.

As part of engaging with Heidegger there is an acknowledgement of what I term 'owning' Heidegger. As a practitioner, I cannot extricate myself from the phenomenon I choose to investigate or the interpretations I make. Transparency matters: I am always part of the interpretation and this cannot be avoided. Likewise, I approach the task of engaging with Heidegger's philosophy from a certain view. This view frames my understanding and interpretations. I have selected two quotes which illustrate how practitioners 'engage' with, and 'own' their relationship to Heidegger.

- It is also important for me to clarify that I am presenting "my Heidegger" who is probably not the same as your Heidegger or my fellow presenters' Heidegger. Nor, I suspect, is my Heidegger the same as my first Heidegger teacher, Medard Boss's Heidegger (Craig, 2013, p. 247).

- Our stance was not as philosophers, nor as historians of the time, but as a midwife and a nurse who sought to break through the 'theories' about how practice 'ought' to be, to reveal how practice was in lived experience. Heidegger offered us a platform from which to do that (Smythe & Spence, 2020, p. 2).

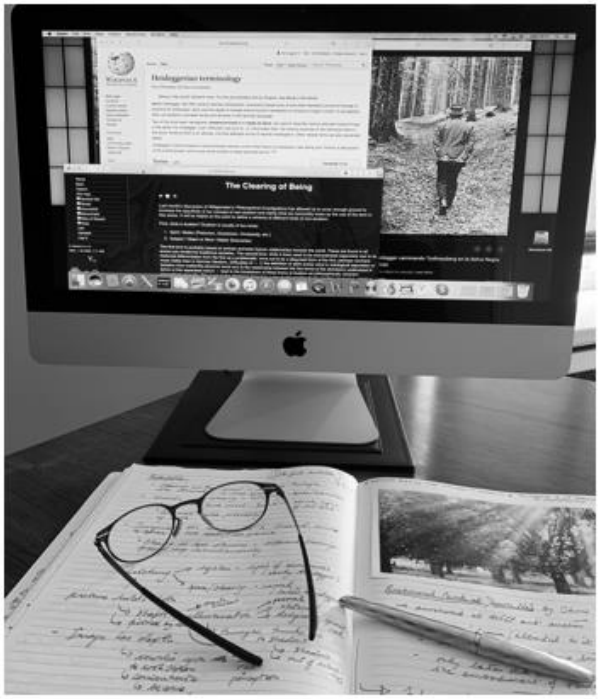
What can be learnt from attending to the voices of these practitioners? Two points stand out for me: firstly - reading Heidegger raises questions about what it means to be human, which is a core feature of all good philosophy; secondly - every reader approaches Heidegger from a certain standpoint and that position informs what they take from Heidegger's writings. The vocabulary of the quotes above share familiar themes of 'challenge', 'curiosity', 'alignment' and being 'informed'. In other words, it was not a matter of applying Heidegger's philosophy to practice, rather it was subtle process of transformation. A reflexive process which begins by engaging with ideas and in turn leads to a questioning of beliefs. The subsequent dialogue between text and reader informs practice in a tacit manner.

In summary, the novice researcher may well ask: "What can you do with philosophy? Heidegger replies: we do not do anything with philosophy, it does something to us" (Harman, 2007, p. 106). The 'something' in question has preoccupied practitioners and researchers alike, for it is through questioning that philosophy transforms thinking. The effort can be worth the reward as this quote illustrates:

> I decided to do some reading to get my creative juices flowing. I started with Heidegger (1971) because he always seems to help me get my head back in the phenomenological game, so-to-speak (Hughes, 2018, p. 802).

Having set the context and reviewed the experiences of others, the time has come to give a more in-depth account of my own experience towards sharing insights that may benefit other research-practitioners. Finlay says: "As we embark on our research journey we go into unknown territory" (Finlay, 2011, p. 181). Therefore, any help along the way is a signpost in the unknown.

Setting Out



A phenomenological inquiry begins with insatiable curiosity. The need to discover and reveal - mine started when I read about Heidegger's elusive 'clearing' and the openness of Being. I went in search of the man himself and before long, my desk was covered in books and notes - browser open at multiple webpages. Trawling the Internet, I came across a black and white photograph of a figure walking in a forest. A ubiquitous image of Heidegger in his later years. We cannot see his face, yet know it is Martin Heidegger. Anyone familiar with his life will recognise the setting - the Black Forest Mountains. Where Heidegger retired to his beloved hut to thinking and write. There is something simple and everyday about this image. Yet the walking stick held horizontally acts as a warning not to get too close. We are being invited to join Heidegger on a walk. A journey into the esoteric nature of Being, the pace is slow, and we cannot see too far ahead. The old man guards his secrets giving us just enough to entice us further into the woods. The forest lends an air of mystery to the task. Where is Heidegger taking us? To a place where language became a liability, an image can be a beacon and metaphor is a refuge. And the best thing to do is dwell in the mystery. Perhaps if we ponder this a while longer all will be revealed?

Hindsight is a wonderful thing as this summary makes clear. Unfortunately, life is rarely that simple as I discovered in my first year of research. All journeys start with a departure - leaving the safe haven of work and heading out into the open expanse of research evokes feelings of vulnerability. At this point, I had no specific research topic in mind. A foolhardy stance some might think. I saw it as an opportunity to work creatively on a number of ideas, which had arisen during my years of work. Those early months of research I spent in a heady rush of ideas. My journal was filled with notes, reflections, quotes, newspaper cuttings and pictures. It became my most treasured possession. I was like the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' conjuring up all kinds of ideas that soon took flight – relentlessly marching in every direction, pulling me here and there. As a result, I was completely unfocused. What I take from this reflection is how the initial contact with philosophy was both intriguing and confounding – it fired up my passion, setting all kinds of creative ideas in motion.

One year on, the pressure to meet a deadline brought things to a head. I struggled to formulate a coherent research topic. At this point feelings of panic set in, culminating in the realisation I needed to stop and accept I was stuck. What had I learnt? The first year of research had been a struggle, filled with all kinds of frustrations and excitements. In short, the first year of research requires the researcher to hold the tension between the creativity and academic discipline – mind and soul. To achieve this equilibrium, I would be called to surrender to some event or part of the process and be invited to stay with the feelings of not-knowing. I soon discovered the research process itself would teach me much about my topic – openness.

Engaging with Philosophy

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

(Dante, 1994, p. 71)

The beauty of great writing is that it timeless and captures an essential aspect of human experience. These words by Dante, in three lines, capture what I will now struggle to convey in many pages. A clear demonstration of the power of the poetic.

In my desperation to find a research topic I had turned to Heidegger, in particular his later works, for inspiration. In these later works, Heidegger makes extensive use of a metaphor - *die Lichtung* or the clearing, to describe the openness of Being. Even in these early stages of the research I knew intuitively that this metaphor was critical to my study. One essay in particular proved invaluable *The Origin of the Work of Art* [OWA] (1993). As I have already stated returning to primary philosophy is an essential step in grounding any phenomenological inquiry. A position advocated by Churchill: "It is important to note that there is a significant amount of

time spent reading and reflecting upon primary source texts in phenomenology" (Churchill, 2018, p. 209). So it was that reading OWA proved another lesson in how to cultivate openness.

I have entered a labyrinth, one of Heidegger's later works. Hours spent poring over text and highlighting sentences always end in the same way – a self-induced fog of misunderstanding. Heidegger's ideas diverge like the paths in a wood, and I am sent off at tangents ending up in dead ends – tangled thickets of incomprehension. The language is metaphorical. Heidegger makes frequent reference to a forest clearing to describe the openness of Being. The irony is not lost on me, for I am truly lost in some hellish vision of Dante's wood. I am trapped and ensnared by branches of tricky thinking and convoluted logic. I have difficulty staying focused. Each paragraph builds layer upon layer of meaning, only for the next one to bring the whole edifice crashing down. I have become bogged down in Heidegger-speak - 'worlds were worlding' and 'presences were concealing'. I begin to doubt my sanity – midway upon this reading, I woke in a dark wood, to find the right road was wholly gone.

In truth I am like a drowning man flailing about causing further confusion. In total frustration I surrendered and accepted I am lost in a dark forest of not-knowing. My current approach hasn't worked, in that moment of acceptance light floods into the forest. I have let go of my struggle for perfection. Rather than rushing for answers and resolution I stop, breathe and allow a clearing to open up. I surrender to the not-knowing. I put away the journal articles and secondary sources and return to the text. Slowly I read each line, allowing the sentences to flow over me, not worrying if they make sense. Gradually I become familiar with their tempo. I am learning a new language, the poetry of Being.

Reflecting on this experience of reading Heidegger I start to question my intention – was I seeking to understand the text or was I trying to find THE correct interpretation? Scholars, researchers and philosophers had found answers (secondary sources) and made sense of Heidegger. Therefore 'the answer' MUST be found - somewhere. The realization slowly dawns on me. These secondary sources are not going to give me the answers I seek. I have become too attached to the idea of 'resolution' - a finished state where all difficulties have passed. My perspective has become too focused, too narrow - seeking definitions and understanding. In order to achieve my understanding of Heidegger I must let him speak to me. I cannot hear his voice if I am worrying about getting it right. When I finally let go of this need, the fog lifts and a certain beauty is revealed (King, 2015, p. 106-108).

I believe this anecdote is both an account of reading Heidegger and a reflection on the numinous qualities of Heidegger's clearing of Being. As I read the OWA it informed my understanding of the task I faced. Through my confusion with the text, "Heidegger's foreign and obtuse tongue" (Craig, 2013, p. 250), I came to a place of surrender and openness – the clearing. I developed the ability to hold both comprehension and bafflement. In doing so I experienced what Heidegger terms *aletheia* or unconcealment. This is the dialectic of reveal and conceal in awareness (Heidegger, 1993). For Heidegger this is what phenomenology does it 'brings things to light'. However, what is revealed will remain partial and a mystery. "There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 178).

The anecdote of Dante's wood illustrates two other features in a phenomenological inquiry. Firstly, the act of writing is a form of research (van Manen, 2002; 2014). My written reflection on the struggle to read OWA gave me insight into a crucial aspect of openness – the ability to surrender to not-knowing. Secondly, the importance of engaging with Heidegger directly (primary sources) and not to rely on secondary sources. Had I used to secondary sources, these texts might have 'sweeten' the pill, made Heidegger easier to understand. Thereby, robbing me of the struggle and the important lesson I learnt - to surrender and become open to the text.

Later I shared my anecdote with a research participant who made the following observation:

> It wasn't until I actually read your article that I thought I've never followed that; I've never done it myself. I haven't felt there was any permission to do that. Your article really gave me permission. Permission to be-with the philosophy (King, 2017, p. 119).

This exchange highlights a common misconception amongst practitioners who come to philosophy with the mindset of *'I should understand the text right away*' and '*I'm not good enough if I don't understand'*. In my attempt to read Heidegger I had unwittingly turned to something familiar in my work – the open stance of the phenomenological reflection to help me grapple with a difficult text.

Cultivating Poetic Sensibility

The writings of Bachelard inspired me throughout my research. His ideas on the 'poetic' aspect of phenomenology encouraged me to take risks and trust in the numinous qualities of the inquiry. Here is a perfect example of that encouragement:

> The image, in its simplicity, has no need of scholarship. It is the property of a naïve consciousness; in its expression, it is youthful language. (Bachelard, 1994, p. xix)

I understand this quote to advocate a stance of dwelling with not-knowing and being open - naïve consciousness. In this section, I will discuss the importance of poetic sensibility in phenomenology research. What do I mean by this statement? I believe Romanyshyn explains it best:

> A poetics of research makes neither research into poetry nor researcher into poet. Rather, it deepens research and makes it richer by attending to the images in ideas, the fantasies in the facts, the dreams in the reasons, the myths in meanings, the archetypes in arguments, and the complexes in the concepts (Romanyshyn, 2007, p.12).

Given the poetic can be a somewhat esoteric topic, I will address the discussion by example instead of falling to far into abstract, theoretical discussions. As Bachelard points out there is no need for scholarship, likewise Hillman says: "we sin again the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts" (Hillman, 1992, p. 39).

Heidegger's clearing metaphor, as the embodiment of the openness of Being, can be a difficult concept to understand. My previous attempts had resulted in over-intellectualisation. In the past, when I had read about Heidegger's clearing, the same image came to mind - a neat, circular, empty space. In fact, if you Google 'forest clearing' a large number of the images conform to this stereotype. The more I read Heidegger the more confused I became. This notion of a neatly delineated open space did not make sense when I read: "Light can stream into the clearing, into its openness, and let brightness play with darkness in it" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 442). How can you have shadows in an open space? There was certainly something more nuanced at play here. As I have said the interplay between light and shadow – the dialect between awareness and concealment – *aletheia* - is a crucial aspect of Heidegger's thinking on Being. To recap - the clearing metaphor alludes to human Being as *open* presence. "In the spatial forest 'clearing' as discussed by the late Heidegger, both light and dark are present to us, the full experience of aletheia" (Capobianco, 2010, p. 97).

Although rationally I could understand the concept of 'the clearing', I still felt something was lacking. There was an absence of resonance with my topic. I had caught tantalising glimpses of it while reading Heidegger. Even so, I continued to grapple with my dissatisfaction of not being able to realise an essence of openness. All this changed when I had an experience – a 'lived experience' of standing in the clearing and watching the dappled sunlight at play. In that moment Heidegger's metaphor finally made sense and came to life. A moment where Heidegger's philosophy became an embodied experience. This happened quite unexpectedly while I was on holiday in Japan.

Gio-ji, Kyoto - one sunny afternoon I was walking in the hills North West of Kyoto and came across a simple stone staircase leading to a remote Buddhist temple. I paid my fee and entered. I followed a narrow path lined by a tall hedge that ran down the side of the temple. On turning the corner, I was struck by the most unexpected sight.

A beautiful jewel box of a garden. An emerald carpet of moss spread before me, with elegant maples. These sentinels of silence caste ethereal shadows on the garden floor. I was captivated by the dappled sunlight soaking into the soft surface. The stage was set for a dance, a duet between light and shadow, however fleeting the performance maybe. The calmness and equanimity of this secluded glade filled me with a single thought – everything was as it should be, nothing more was needed. I simply dwelt in the unfolding shadow play.

At that moment, in the garden, I understood what Heidegger meant when he said: "In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 178). On my first reading of OWA this quote had shone out like a beacon. Gradually over time it would change the whole direction of my inquiry encouraging me to become more attuned to the poetic sensibility of my research topic. The clearing image *was* the conjunction of philosophy and the poetic. The clearing as a poetic image evoked the ineffable qualities of openness not readily expressed by rational thought.

The photograph above beautiful illustrates the dappled sunlight, the clearing has become a theatre (an open space) for the dialectic of light and shadow. How best to describe the moment of standing in that moss garden clearing? Bachelard in *The Poetic of Space* beautifully sums up what it means to dwell in such a space: "if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the houses allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6). The openness of the clearing creates space for playful freedom, it allows things 'to-be', it opens up a world for both the certain and the uncertain. I believe Heidegger's metaphor works because it is a symbol. By this I mean it contains that which cannot be named. It has a unifying power, allowing it to hold the ineffable qualities of openness. Etherington says:

> Through the use of metaphor we can communicate what is abstract – that which we perceive or know (tacitly or intuitively) but for which we have no direct translation into words. (Etherington, 2004, p. 135)

By embracing the metaphor poetically – allowing myself to connect with the numinous qualities of openness, I was able to resist the urge to reify the phenomenon too early through naming and definitions. I was able to hold the various emergent meanings lightly; ready to revise them at the next hermeneutic iteration. Heidegger's philosophy is full of poetic imagery as a means of working with complex philosophical concepts. If the researcher is able to embrace poetic sensibility, then a rich dividend of insight is paid.

Mind and Soul

Returning to the text of OWA - why did a single quote have such a powerful impact on me? Van Manen says: "the reader must become possessed by the allusive power of text – taken, touched, overcome by the addressive effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience" (van Manen, 2002, p. 238). My experience of reading OWA is a good example of that addressive effect. I felt Heidegger's quote "In the midst of beings" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 178) resonant with my topic. I did not know why at the time. It was only when I experienced the moss garden clearing and later reflected on the image that all the elements came together – words, image and experience. This is my understanding of van Manen's "reflective engagement with lived experience" (van Manen, 2002, p. 238). I realised a sense of achievement when I was able to constellate meaning and reveal an essence of openness in my findings through this conjunction of mind and soul (King, 2017). It was an epiphany moment, I knew the process had worked when something clicked; what had been on the periphery of awareness took centre stage.

> To practice phenomenology is always to be surprised by the epiphanies of experience, by the extraordinary that bewitches the ordinary, by the invisible world that haunts the visible (Romanyshyn, 2002, p. xix).

Phenomenology is an invitation to explore, to immerse oneself in a phenomenon and understand what that phenomenon means. Phenomenology brings forth, into the light of awareness, something that has always been present yet been concealed. What is experienced as familiar and every day is re-experienced with wonder and humility.

Relevance

The use of phenomenology as a method for qualitative research has increased over the years. What has also come to light during this time is a paucity of understanding in the underlying philosophy (Norlyk & Harder, 2010*).* I suggest the challenges identified in this paper, and in the works of Horrigan-Kelly, Millar and Dowling (2016) and Smythe and Spence (2020), shed light on the reasons why this might be. My research into openness was enriched by returning to Heidegger's writings.

I take four learnings from my search for Heidegger's clearing: Firstly, in order to engage with philosophy it helps to adopt the phenomenological attitude of openness towards the text where we let go the need for immediate comprehension and surrender to the flow of the prose.

Secondly, the clearing itself offers a model of openness for the researcher to hold in mind. "To be open means to conduct one's research on behalf of the phenomenon" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 98).

Thirdly, dialoguing with Heidegger's metaphor of the clearing illustrates the potency of poetic sensibility. To be guided by such an image proved a powerful ally in my research journey.

Fourthly, the interplay of light and shadow in clearing shows the ambiguous nature of awareness. Research findings can never be complete. To believe so would be a mistake. The clearing is a model for acceptance. Looking again at the photo of the moss garden it is possible to appreciate the subtleties of overlapping shadows, picked out in the dappled light. The image communicates the magical quality of *aletheia*. The dispersed nature of the clearing means it is never possible to get a complete sense of it. There is always a degree of ambiguity. It is neither an open nor closed space, always in a state of flux. The *clearing* is a liminal space - an insight summarised by van Manen:

> Conceivably, the universal theme of the various traditions of phenomenology is indeed that phenomenology is an inquiry that involves a dynamic play of showing and hiding – our attempt to be attentive to the primordialites of meaning as we encounter and live with things and others in our lived-through experiences and everyday existence (van Manen, 2014, p. 28).

It was only by engaging with Heidegger's philosophy and attending to the poetic sensibility of an image that I was able to gain these insights into the nature of openness.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has highlighted the relevance of the writings of a mid-20th Century German philosopher to psychotherapy research. More specifically, I have demonstrated how phenomenological research involves engaging with philosophical texts, learning to dwell with uncertainty and developing a poetic sensibility towards the images that arise, in order to elucidate the phenomenon of study. In Heidegger's clearing I found a motif that fulfilled all these aspects.

I end with some questions of my own: How often do we return to these philosophical texts and relate them to our research or practice? How often do we give ourselves permission to dwell with uncertainty and connect with the poetic? Perhaps we are too busy or simply too relieved that studying is over - but at what cost? To engage with philosophical texts can be a challenging task, as the voices quoted here testify. However, much is to be gained from the rich material discovered and the replenishing effect it has on research and practice.

In this paper I have followed Heidegger down his beloved woodland paths, took a number of false turns and eventually stumbled into a clearing. I have described what happens when a researcher cultivates openness to uncertainty and shone a light on the elusive topic of poetic sensibility. I invite the reader to do the same. To create space, to dwell in the clearing, attend to the images, sensations and questions that arise. In doing so you may fall under the spell of philosophy:

> When I first read Heidegger in my early twenties, I fell under the Messkirch magician's spell. My whole way of seeing the world was influenced by raw amazement that there is something rather than nothing, by his way of looking at landscapes and buildings, by his notion of humans as a 'clearing' in which Being emerges into the light, and more (Bakewell, 2016, p. 320).

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Note: Heidegger's essay OWA can be found in a consolidated source of Heidegger's works - *Basic Writings* (1993) edited by David Krell]

[All photographs taken by author]

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