

Interview about *Talk That Sings*

Interview by Deanne with Johnella Bird re *Talk that Sings* – September, 2005

Deanne: What are the hopes and intentions you hold for readers of this book? What were some important things you hope readers come away with or come to understand?

Johnella: '*Talk that Sings*' was written in response to my teaching of '*The Heart's Narrative*'. Other ideas started to come forward as I began to teach. I began to find the words for what I hadn't previously expressed through text but was present in the practice. We tend to inadequately describe the actual practice. I also felt very passionate about the possibility that languaging differently could provide us (including the people we work with) with a way of engaging with experience that was liberating. We could be liberated from a binary constructed world and this would allow us to place experience in context rather than view experience as either true or not true.

Writing the book was like a liberation for me because I didn't want to feel I had to keep speaking about this. It's now out there and people can make what they want of it. I wanted to be able to move on and go to new places of interest. It feels like a bit of a turning point for me.

Deanne: In what way? What's 'turning' do you think?

Johnella: I feel less responsible than I have in the past and that's reflected in the way I'm teaching at the moment. I feel less pressured for people to 'get' certain ideas. Now that the books are there I don't feel such urgency. I feel like I've contributed enough through these books.

Deanne: What kind of responsibility are you speaking of ?

Johnella: The responsibility came out of my experience of working with people who had experienced sexual abuse or had been involved in Psychiatric settings. I believed that they had often received an inadequate service from health professionals. I felt the responsibility to say to professional groups, 'There is a way of talking to people that allows you to stand beside them, without throwing away your professional knowledges. You can hold those knowledges while you also make discoveries with people'.

Deanne: Have you come across other similar writing or do you believe yours is unique in some way?

Johnella: I think there's a groundswell of interest in New Zealand, Australia, U.S.A., Canada and Europe in collaborative ways of working. This is provoked by the realisation that psychological ideas can contribute to the oppression of people. I think I'm not alone in that at all. However, there is more theoretical discussion around those issues than there's technical or practical ways that we can use to address these concerns. For example, post-structuralism or the concept of the relational self is discussed quite a lot but how is it constructed and reconstructed in the everyday?

Deanne: As a therapeutic practice it's not well articulated although there's a lot of theorising, but not outside of what gets described as 'Narrative'.

Johnella: I'd like some of those ideas I've developed to be useful in the everyday as well as the therapeutic realm. I feel enormous companionship around the desire to make changes in relation to psychological practices and I felt like I had something to contribute.

Deanne: I was picking up on some language you used about hoping people would 'get it'. What are you hoping people are 'getting'? Is it to do with the idea of a relational self and relational

consciousness as you talk about this a lot in your books?

Johnella: Yes, taking up a different consciousness is one of the core principles. My particular angle relates to the way we use language. In particular, the relational use of language allows me to work with the intricacies of living within power relations.

Deanne: I've spoken to people who haven't done training with you but have tried to read your books and they shared some challenges they were experiences in 'getting it'. Was that something you thought might happen given that its unusual to speak relationally?

Johnella: I didn't, because I'm immersed in something that I've been trying hard to articulate and as I articulate what I'm experiencing it appears straight forward. I've come down a particular road that I think is clearly sign posted yet other people don't see the sign posts as clearly as me. They are, of course, travelling in a different way to the way I've travelled. People will often say when I'm teaching it sounds so simple and obvious when it's articulated like that. When we sit with people and try to begin to do this it feels so hard. The movement from an idea into a practice is the thing that people struggle with because conversationally performing an idea is different to articulating a formed and complete idea.

Deanne: I wonder if some of the struggle might be with structuralist thinking. I'm thinking of my own journey here as the first time I did your training many years ago I was still relatively new to post-structuralist thinking. But since I've been doing academic study of post-structuralism in relation to social policy and organisational theory a whole lot of understandings are falling into place. I had to investigate those ideas further in other contexts before I truly 'got it'. I see other people struggling with it similarly, particularly around the understanding of the 'self'.

Johnella: I think people come to things in different ways. I've worked with a number of people, for example, indigenous New Zealanders who come to the text differently because the relational self is very familiar. Consequently it doesn't feel like such a big step. They come to the practice with a certain ease.

Deanne: They might go, 'this fits with my understanding of the world and this fits with how I would speak amongst my people. This sounds really resonant and familiar'.

Johnella: Yes, there may different dimensions to relational languaging or relational consciousness but for some cultural groups it's more familiar than foreign. People's cultural experience and life experience will influence how people come to these ideas.

Deanne: Did you consider that might be a possibility when you were trying to create this 'living text'?

Johnella: I had hoped that the exercises in the book would promote a situation where people would think about the text then go and practice the exercises and then revisit the text. I thought that would be enough. However, people have said to me after a workshop that it was great to hear me speak because now they could read the text differently. I do think that the presentation of the clinical work in workshops is experienced differently to text. Maybe speech promotes a connection between the audience and the speaker and this has a different effect to textual representation. It was very hard for me to adequately convey the therapeutic work through a book. Perhaps this reflects my skills as a writer.

Deanne: I had noticed there were a lot more practice exercises in '*Talk That Sings*' and examples of work. I know that people meet together after your workshops to have discussion groups and can

have a two hour discussion about one page. The way you have articulated your ideas is so rich and opens up so many possibilities for conversation.

Johnella: I really appreciate hearing that. But I think it speaks to how we commonly read.

Deanne: You can't really skim this text as you have to consider 'what does that mean?' and 'where does that take me in my thinking'.

Johnella: After writing '*Talk That Sings*' I have been told by people that I continue to take some things for granted. Consequently, I now believe I could have presented more examples to illustrate clinical practices but that's in hindsight.

Deanne: There were a number of things that I thought about as I was reading '*Talk That Sings*' and at the same time I was reading a book called 'Buddhism for Mothers' and doing some yoga and meditation and thinking of what the text was speaking to me of the idea of 'mindfulness' and being in the 'here and now', the 'continuous present' and so on. I thought the text had some resonance with Eastern cultural philosophies. Has there been some influence there as you seem to be focused in your work on what is happening in the present moment during therapy?

Johnella: People who are familiar with Buddhism have come up to me in workshops and asked similar sorts of questions or commented that this has really resonated with the practices they use. I have subsequently read a number of Buddhist texts however principally I have come to these ideas through my actual clinical work with people who have experienced a lot of trauma and abuse. These people often found it very difficult to engage with the present moment experience. Consequently this demanded that I brought my awareness to present moment experiences. I found this exploration supported the development of new contextual understandings. Again this was a discovery process that emphasised the experiential rather than anything else. This practice taught me to be very focused because people were often disassociating and disconnecting in the conversations. Subsequently I took what I'd learned from that work into other therapeutic work. I do think there are many Eastern traditions that emphasise practices that support mindfulness. I really appreciate these traditions as I come to know them.

Deanne: That could be something about familiarity too because in Western culture being in the 'here and now' is not seen to be as important as where you've been or where you're going to. People's thinking seems to move between those places rather than standing still. Maybe in other cultures they don't struggle with that as much....

When people say to you your ideas sound like other ideas they've heard or they try and pigeonhole you within some orthodoxy or other how do you respond?

Johnella: I think the first thing that people tend to do when they come to any piece of therapeutic work is to look for what is familiar about it. To some extent people are wanting to find some companionship in the familiar, such as, 'I could have a bit of belonging here'. Most of us are looking for belonging and companionship. I'd prefer people to sit with that companionship and from that place move to look at what's different. People are very frightened of throwing away all that has felt meaningful for them and as a result there is an urgency to look for what's familiar. The only time I worry is when the desire to find the familiar overtakes anything that could be or might be different. In this situation there's no willingness to consider that this idea or practice could add to the therapeutic work.

Deanne: Do you find that happens with people that consult you about their work?

Johnella: I find that they are a minority. Unless I'm consulting with a group that for whatever reason needs to hold strongly onto their institutional power and they believe that what I have to say may undermine that institutional power.

Deanne: Gee, I've noticed that too Johnella (laughter).

Johnella: I sometimes have someone say to me after a three hour meeting, 'everything you're doing is fantastic and you're doing it just like me'. I know at that point there will be limited interest in anything further I say. There's another group, a small minority, that don't feel safe enough to notice any difference and see difference as potentially undermining. But there is the vast majority that mostly struggle to hold the familiar while incorporating the difference.

Deanne: We talked a bit about 'journeys' and one of the things 'Talk That Sings' says is that the destination of a therapeutic journey is not necessarily prescribed. It's not as important as what the journey holds and what might happen on the way. Could this be happening in a similar way when people come to your ideas?

Johnella: I think that's very true. Some people really struggle to consider that learning a new practice takes time rather than 'I intellectually grasp a new idea which I've now got'. This is a linear, cognitive process. I prefer people to consider that learning this practice is going to take a bit of time. Believing this limits the judgement that can arise as people try something new. When it's difficult they are tempted to conclude, 'I'm not that sort of therapist...I'm not cognitive enough'.

Deanne: Or 'Johnella enough' (laughter)...did you know that you have become an adjective?

Johnella: That gets very limiting as well.

Deanne: Although there's an exercise I've heard you talk about in your workshop about 'comparison thinking' and how we are constantly comparing ourselves to others and more often than not finding ourselves wanting, measuring up to the norm. That reminds me of Michael White's writing about 'Addressing personal failure'. I hear that in my own work with teams that are responding to violence - invitations to compare yourself unfavourably to others seems to be constant. I find that it's challenging to try to invite people to consider another way of thinking about their work other than comparing yourself to something you've read or what you've seen of someone else's practice.

Johnella: I think it is often easier for us to think about what we're not doing or not achieving rather than what we are. The actual practice of the work is often messier than it appears in text. Therapeutic conversation doesn't necessarily follow a straight line. There are many interjections, lots of movement and lots of emotion in the interviewing process. Consequently people can experience some discomfort when their work doesn't reflect what they see on videos or what they read in texts. Because text doesn't look messy people can come out of a therapeutic session wondering 'What's wrong with me? Why was the interview process a bit of a struggle?' Consequently people can move into a deficit position.

Deanne: One of the other places I was taken to while reading '*Talk That Sings*' was the title - .I really connected with 'singing' as it is a practice I do that means a lot to me. How did you come to the naming of your book?

Johnella: Some of the first names were real mouthfuls. For example, 'Relational consciousness: a living practice'. When I first shared the name of the book with a group of colleagues they thought it

was a bit 'out there', a bit 'intellectual'. It took a while to come up with a name. *'Talk That Sings'* was first referred to in *'The Heart's Narrative'*. I was drawn to *'Talk That Sings'* as a description because in both books I emphasised that talking is an experiential activity. Often an experience was noticed in the present moment, then it was tentatively named and then emotionally experienced through this speaking. This type of conversation takes us beyond our intellectual constraints and for me singing does that. When I move into singing I can connect with an emotion which connects with a memory or a body experience. That's different to bringing forward a memory by thinking about the past. I think relational consciousness offers that same possibility, discovery through the experiential, the body, emotions, senses and interconnection with the mind.

Deanne: I have also noticed that people listen to singing in a different way. People can hear the political content of a song lyric but if I'd said those words in the public domain, I don't think they'd be listened to in the same way. People connect in a different way to something that is 'sung'. Perhaps it is because you use your whole body when you sing.

Johnella: Yes, singing represents embodied life. If people sing in a detached way, then the singing is very strange. People experience singing differently to speech.

Deanne: And be touched in some way... people say to me 'your singing moved me – it took me somewhere'. My partner, Tom, says that it is the music itself that transports the words so the singing becomes a political act in a way. Also that the professional recording of 'singing' that becomes commodified then becomes what other singers try and measure up to and becomes part of people's 'I can't sing stories'. I also thought about the meaning of this 'singing' with others in the creation of harmony (where a series of different notes are sung at the same time to produce a chord) I found an analogy with teams of people I've worked with who perceive themselves as very different, yet all those differences put together can create something beautiful. The difference actually keeps it alive, even if there's a bit of 'discord'. That connected for me in your writings about difference and contradiction and the relationship they can have with each other.

Johnella: Yes, that's a very nice description. I once went to a workshop where everyone was required to take up different harmonies and people moved into the centre to experience what it is like to be at the centre of harmony. It is such a strong experience.

Deanne: And what you hear as you turn your body around and listen to the different voices moving around...so I saw possibilities of extending the 'talk that sings' metaphor as I have come to think recently how powerful it can be, particularly with connecting people and creating companionship, creating a sense of community through singing and music. I haven't found anything else that works so well once they get past the 'I can't sing' story that is dominant in Western culture. In other cultures it is a major form of expression and how people relate to and connect with each other through singing. The Western cultural 'I can't sing' story, I find, is often linked to other deficit stories that people hold about their lives and identities and experiences of being silenced through abuse and so on.

Johnella: Sometimes the people I work with have experimented with moving into the world from a silent and invisible place through singing. It's such a powerful thing to do even if no-one else can hear you sing, you can experience the singing.

Deanne: Liberating, too . . . It reminds me of how we started this conversation, how finding different ways of expressing yourself can be so liberating. It makes me wonder about what steps may be involved in being able to do that, giving yourself or receiving permission from others.

Johnella: People are often frightened to begin using relational language because it might sound silly or funny. I respond to this by saying that people will 'feel' the difference rather than 'hear' the language.

Deanne: Yes, and I guess as people can listen to the same piece of music and get something completely different out of it and be transported to so many different places. I guess that's probably happening to people that come to your workshops. I wonder what it would be like to map all the different places people go to as they're listening to you describe your work... I'm interested in this idea of 'transport' and the thinking journey that takes place while you're listening to something. When I was reflecting on '*Talk That Sings*' I found myself charting all the different places my own thinking went to as I read. A lot of my hesitancy of writing a 'review' of the book was thinking 'how will I be positioning myself' if I critique this work, how can I honour this work and say something that would be useful to others because it may very well transport them somewhere else. That's why I thought this interview may be more interesting and people would get a lot more out of it. This might be a good place to finish. Is there anything else you'd like to say further about the book as readers 'have a go' at it?

Johnella: I believe, like countless others, that we are living at a point in human history where our physical, emotional and spiritual existence is under threat. I also believe that it is possible and perhaps urgently necessary to reorientate our consciousness toward a relationally and contextually constructed world. This involves experiencing both the self-in-relation and the other-in-relation.

I believe relational consciousness allows us to experience the complexity of engaging with the living out of power relations. Consequently, we can step away from the notion that power exists in the realm of ideas. When we believe power exists in the realm of ideas we pursue the holding of 'the right idea' in order to limit the negative effects of power. This inevitably places us in opposition to those who don't carry 'this right idea'.

This position has destroyed many social movements, religions and therapies. I hope I can contribute to the development of practices that protect us from these oppositions.