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# A bundle of treasures for a wandering therapist:

## *An exploration of personal and professional resources to sustain a therapist on a systemic journey*



Karen Partridge

This article is based around a workshop entitled, *Capturing the essence: a woman's therapeutic medicine bundle* that I gave at the KCC Foundation conference, *Training in a Woman's Voice* in May 2009. Since then, I have been on a journey from KCC to Luton and the Tavistock, and I am very glad that I put together what I called my "medicine bundle", back in May last year. It is a set of "rich stories" which speak to my experience of learning and teaching at KCC. At the time of putting it together, I did not know how important it would be in sustaining me on this journey. This bundle, or "box of treasures", as my client, Iris, has called it, symbolises the rich heritage that I have been privileged to be a part of through my relationships with Peter Lang, Susan Lang, Martin Little and all the students and fellow tutors I have worked with throughout the glorious years of KCC. It is characteristic of Peter that he, as a man and a Director at KCC, should have had the idea of creating a space for women to explore their contribution to training.

In this article, as in the workshop, I will use the Native American idea of a medicine bundle to share stories and objects which speak to my sense of being a woman and which have informed my identity as a therapist and as a trainer. I hope to indicate how these closely held inner ideas and values shape my work and recursively connect to outer discourses of practice and politics. I will also describe the "box of treasures" that my client, Iris, and I put together during our work to sustain her through her experience of what she prefers to describe as a bi-polar diagnosis. At the end of the article, you, as reader, will be invited to make your

own connections to valued ideas about femininity or masculinity, to your cultural heritage, to teachers old and new, and to your own training organisation to explore how these inform and create your practice as a systemic therapist.

For many years, I worked as a tutor and, latterly, as co-director, on the MSc programme at the KCC Foundation. I am also a consultant clinical psychologist and systemic psychotherapist, and have just arrived at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust from Central and North West London where I trained and supervised health and social care professionals across a wide range of settings and client groups.

### What is a medicine bundle?

The medicine bundle is an important possession in traditional Native American culture, in which it is considered sacred. It is a collection of objects that have special significance and spiritual value to the owner. The medicine bundle was considered holy by the community, and was passed on from father to son. It was protected by prayers and rituals; the contents were not supposed to touch the ground and women were not allowed to touch them. Special prayers and rituals were necessary in order to open the bundle and, if these were not carried out, the bundle would lose its sacredness. Bundles were often buried with their owners but could belong to a whole tribe. Tribal medicine bundles would be larger and handled only by significant members of the tribe. The Navajo Indians, for example, would add objects like feathers or stones that resembled animals; these would then become fetishes, imbued with magical and spiritual powers (Griffin Pierce, 2003).

### Why create a woman's therapeutic medicine bundle?

I had been inspired by the description of a therapeutic medicine bundle that Jane Lethem, who I met whilst working in Central and North West London, had put together in her book *Moved to Tears, Moved to Action* (1994), and I thought I would like to have a go at putting one together for myself. This idea stayed silent for some years until three years ago when I visited the USA for the first time for a holiday. I was struck by the experiences of the Navajo Indians and, whilst driving through a reservation, we stopped to look at jewellery that some young women were selling by the side of the road. They were effervescent, full of life and humour, and keen to talk, at odds with what I had feared for their culture and identity. They told me I could ask them about anything I liked, so I asked about their spirituality and beliefs. They told me about their connectedness to the landscape and their belief in the sacredness and spirituality of each mountain and stream and the way in which this was shown in the animal symbols they incorporated into the necklaces they made. They inspired me to put together this bundle.

In the kitchen at KCC, where many ideas have been born whilst tutors and students came in and out for milk, I have shared conversations with other women where we have noted that, when we came to list the systemic therapists and thinkers who have influenced us, the names of men came to mind more easily than those of women. We became curious about this and realised there were significant contributions from women who had greatly influenced our work, but that it seemed to

me their contribution easily slipped into the background, becoming part of the fabric, as it were, much as women's work has always done. The *Training in a Woman's Voice* conference provided the possibility of foregrounding what it means to me to be a woman, to be a woman therapist and to celebrate the contribution of important women in my life and work. I thought that putting together a medicine bundle that signifies these ideas and influences would be one way I could privilege the feminine in my work. I now realise that KCC enabled this re-description for me.

### How is this relevant to therapy?

The process I went through in putting my bundle together could be seen as mirroring the process one might go through in therapy. I thought of words that had special meaning to me as connecting to the essence of being a woman. I then thought of aspects of my own practice that I felt embodied these valued notions of femininity. I grounded these episodes in the context of significant relationships with women, personally in terms of family and friends and professionally in terms of women therapists and thinkers who have influenced me. Next, I connected these values to art and literature, fragments of text, and poems that held meaning for me and to political movements and figures whom I felt embodied these values in terms of social action. Finally, I chose objects that could hold all these embedded meanings for me symbolically. I placed all these objects in a bag made by a women's project in India. It is made of fragments of finely embroidered cloth that have been sewn together and re-worked to make the bag. This seemed to me to be symbolic of women's work, utilitarian and grounded, threads woven, unpicked and re-worked to create something new and useful. In use, it is easy to overlook the intricacy and beauty of the original embroideries, which take their place in the background, in the fabric of life, as women's work so often has. This reminds me of the thoughtful, careful, attention to detail in Susan's work at KCC, where we, as tutors, were constantly amazed at her ability to hold in mind every student and their particular stories. It also reminds me of the work of the admin staff in creating a welcoming, hospitable space for clients, students and staff.

The process I went through in creating my bundle shows the construction of

stories. Through recursive connections between meaning and action, I have woven together fragments into my own personal story of being a woman therapist. In inviting you to unpack my bundle, I am asking you to participate in a process of deconstruction, where narratives are unwound, as you unwrap the fabric (here, the story of my journey), that contains my objects, which then can be seen as symbols or metaphors in the text. You will hear some of my connections to these symbols and, hopefully, make your own. Through the process of reading this article, you will have the opportunity to begin the process of putting together your own therapists' medicine bundle, or box of treasures, which I hope you might choose to continue.

### What is in my bundle?

My bundle contains:

- The figure of a black woman to symbolise **deconstruction and construction**

The seated figure of a nursing woman was a present from my husband when I was pregnant with my daughter, bought on a camping holiday in France. Before I had time to open it, he managed to run it over in the car whilst putting up the tent! When I was away in Sweden, teaching with Martin Little, he stuck together the seventy eight fragments with the help(?) of my small son, to create something much more precious than the original. This reminds me of the task of commissioning which Martin originally taught me, the careful (though not on my husband's part!) taking apart of the presenting story to unpick threads to weave into something new. It seemed to me to symbolise what we are doing in therapy in the deconstruction of problem-saturated stories and construction of alternative and preferred versions of self.

- A crystal ball for **imagination and creativity**

This stands for future dreaming and the transformative power of an appreciative posture in the creation of hope, my greatest lesson from Peter and Elspeth. It reminds me of my grandmother, who managed to create magic in everyday events, "You have to make time", she used to say, and I imagined her with a sort of engine, enthusiastically pumping the handle, and of my old headmistress, Miss Woolf, who first gave me courage to dream.

- A sandstone carving of a parent and child to symbolise **gentleness and deep listening**

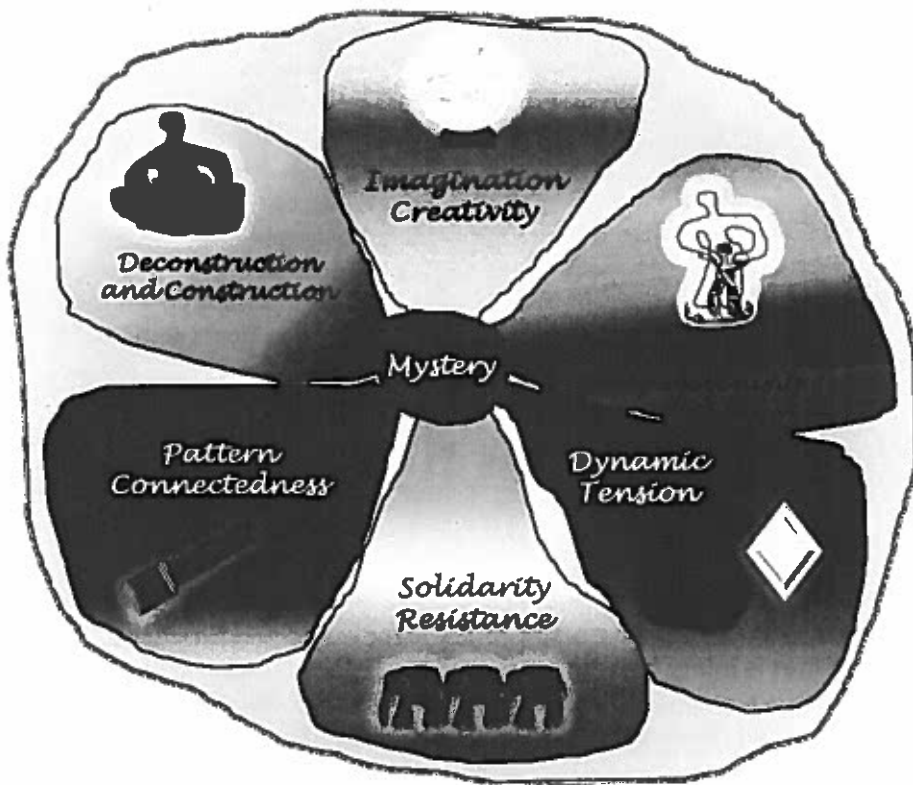
This reminds me of my children and the firm gentleness of parenting, and of my fellow tutors at KCC from whom I have learned so much; and also of Sue Johnson, a wonderful psychodynamic supervisor who enabled me to be systemic. It connects with the contemporary Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron (2008), and the idea of deep listening which mirrors Cecchin's curiosity, listening from a position of stillness, without prejudice and without attachment to either the past or the future (see also Nhat Hanh, 1993).

- A crystal and a piece of coal to symbolise **dynamic tension**

The "diamond" and "coal" represent dynamic tension and the importance of "*holding the difference without trying to resolve it*", as Peter used to say. This preserves the complexity by searching for the common context that unites the opposites, in this case carbon, rather than striving for a compromise, which collapses the distinction. David Campbell used to say, "*Upend the context and think of the opposite*", which adds a dialectical aspect to listening. Imelda McCarthy and Nollaig Byrne inspired me as they spoke to these ideas in the *Fifth Province Approach*, (2006), based on the Celtic legend of the fifth province as a place where the four warring kings of the ancient provinces of Ireland could meet and hold council. In this article, the dialectic I am exploring is the "richness" of stories of the medicine bundle versus the "mean frame" that my client enters into when she is depressed. Imelda and Nollaig brought spirituality strongly into my thinking and being.

- Three ebony elephants to symbolise **solidarity and resistance**

These elephants stood on my grandmother's mantelpiece and were common ornaments at that time. They remind me of the colonial past of the British empire, built on slavery and the abuse of power, but also of the richness of difference brought to this country through generations who have come to sustain our service industries, public transport and the NHS. With the collapse of empire, the elephants have now lost their ivory tusks, which is a great relief to me. They remind me of the continuing importance of solidarity and resistance to oppression; "*small acts of resistance*", as Allan Wade would say (1997). They also evoke the wonderful women (and a few men) of colour who I have had the privilege to work



My bundle of treasure from KCC

with as fellow tutors and colleagues, and of what they have taught me about how to talk about culture, race and racism and the creativity of difference. They remind me of great activists, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Rosa Parkes, Emily Pankhurst, bell hooks, and the pride I feel to have been part of an organisation known for its attention to "the graces" and social difference, and the lived experience of working with students and tutors from many cultures.

• A kaleidoscope to symbolise **pattern and connectedness**

This reminds me of Miss Palmer, my art teacher at school, who taught me the skill of concentrated looking and seeing, in a way that acknowledges and appreciates the detail and pattern in everyday objects. Peter taught me tight questioning around an episode using CMM. I learned this in the early days at KCC, when Cecchin and Boscolo ran live sessions with families and we learned about curiosity and the idea of "fit". It also reminds me of "exoticising the ordinary", as Michael White would say, and the way in which I could be sure that every week at KCC would bring something new and special and interesting, creating new connections and meaning.

• All these are held together by mystery

Mystery reminds me of CMM, and sessions with Vernon and Barnett, the excitement of strange loops and

multiple levels of meaning. Early days in Kensington, unconstrained by criteria and tightly documented course-requirements, long conversations with Peter, and videos in which we all seemed to be endlessly eating. The mystery of connectedness. This also reminds me of feminine creative power, the divine feminine, lost and forgotten goddesses and Mother Earth; the mystery of what can be achieved when a few people come together with what Maturana would call a "passion for being together".

### Iris's box of treasures

*"It's as though there is a box of treasures on the floor between us and you are constantly reminding me of it and taking them out and showing them to me"* – Iris

Iris, my client, lives with what she prefers to call bi-polar disorder and, as we work together, we are gradually pulling together what she has recently started to call a "box of treasures" to help sustain her through the low times. These include:

- A poem; *The Journey* by Mary Oliver
- A prayer book from the Iona community
- A quote from a quiet day, "Where is God in this and where is this in God"
- Letters and cards from friends
- An extended family tree with friends, her "family of choice", with friends who are particularly helpful in low times identified

- The vicar from her church
- The rethink worker
- Her social worker
- Me
- The psychiatrist
- A leaflet written by an old psychiatrist which calls depression, "the curse of the strong"
- Her ginger cat
- The ducks she feeds
- Her gentleness and integrity and attention to detail
- A bracelet inscribed with a quote from Julian of Norwich, "And all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well"
- The value of "slowness" in our fast society
- The process of what she calls, "re-finding the richness"
- The counsellor from The Lighthouse project

In low periods, Iris struggles with remorse and suicidal ideas and, in particular, what she feels was her neglect of her partner in the last weeks of her life. At these challenging times, she feels beyond redemption and forgiveness and can be plagued by what we have called the "mean frame", a terse telling of her life, relationships and abilities. One way of thinking about the medicine bundle is that it is a trigger to re-connect to an audience for the performance of preferred versions of self.

*"It's making a difference you know Karen. It's like a spring of water, very small to start with, gradually trickling through the rocks; the possibility of forgiving myself and telling the story in a different way in which I am not the arch villain, but as behaviour that can be understood and accepted."* – Iris

### What would you place in your bundle?

Take a few minutes

- Think of "rich words" which express qualities you would like to embody in your work
- Choose one to work on first
- Think of a recent episode in your work where you have come closest to embodying this quality
- Who would appreciate this quality in you?
- Who are the people who you hold close who embody this quality?
- Who do you admire who shows this quality?

- Who from your past and present teachers most embodies this quality?
- What theoretical ideas speak to this quality?
- You may like to think about your cultural heritage and your gendered stories in thinking about this quality
- What from your cultural heritage supports this quality?
- How does your gender and sexuality enhance this quality?
- What pictures, poems, music, lyrics, art, films speak to this value for you?
- What social and political figures and what religious leaders dead or alive hold this quality for you?
- Think of an object which can symbolise all these meanings for you
- Place this object in your medicine bundle or box of treasures
- Enjoy these fruits in your life and work
- Good luck on your journey!

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Karen Partridge is a clinical psychologist and systemic psychotherapist now working at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and in private practice.

# Systemic practice: “Getting out there”

Helen Mahaffey and Mark Chidgey

At a recent celebratory gathering with KCC colleagues, Peter Lang, who we have known as a director of KCC, trainer, workshop facilitator, and tutor, told us how KCC developed as a respected training centre from the 1980s onwards at a time when social constructionist ideas gradually began to be taken seriously within the therapeutic community. He also gave us encouraging words about sharing systemic ideas in our everyday personal and professional relationships; what he described as “getting out there” in the worlds we occupy. We have always appreciated Peter’s openness, warmth, and fascination about how language can create different meanings. He talked about this in his own unique and humorous way.

Over time, many KCC graduates like ourselves who greatly benefited from the training, have gone on to occupy positions as systemic family therapists within the public and private sector. We work specifically as CAMHS therapists within a family placement service of an inner London borough. Since coming together two years ago, we have adopted a systemic approach to our work with looked after children, their parents, foster carers, social workers and managers in appreciating the patterns, interactions and language spoken between individuals in relation to their networks of relationships. By way of a case study we will demonstrate how, by focusing on the many relationships around the child, change can be created. This is not only for the young person but also in terms of how professionals can work collaboratively. This has been an organic development which has stemmed from our practice. We pay attention, therefore, to helping the family and the professional systems come together in order to bring about positive outcomes for the looked after child. We use different therapeutic models of intervention depending on what might ‘fit’ for the carer, parent or child. Social workers and foster carers have sought our support in areas including:

- Managing and planning transitions (birth family to foster care and foster care to permanency)

- Coping with foster carer stress
- Relationships between foster carers and social workers
- Relationships between social workers
- The effect of fostering on the birth family and on the birth family’s relationship with the child

What has evolved has been a growing interest in our practice from our CAMHS and social care colleagues. This has made us really fascinated about how we develop systemic practice in a social work context. This has called us to name and describe what we are doing. We see that our job is to enable each part of the system around the looked after child to function at its best. We try to act as a bridge to other services, acting as a stabilising force on the overall placement. When we mentioned our work to Peter, he talked about the need for systemic and appreciative ideas to develop across organisations and into the broader public domain, and this has inspired us since to carry on.

#### Case example:

Keira, a 15-year-old female of Sudanese heritage, lives at home with her parents and has stopped attending school. Her father recently came to England from Africa and has become involved in her life again whilst an older cousin has left England to make a new life abroad. We are informed that other pupils at her school have teased Keira about her weight, clothes, and general demeanour. She is described as rarely able to speak ‘above a whisper’. There are also concerns that Keira’s emotional and physical needs are being neglected by her parents. More recently, Keira has been refusing to come out of her bedroom and she is reluctant to meet her psychiatrist who went to her home to talk to her.

Social services have since gone to court to gain a care order as a response to ongoing parental neglect and the fostering team alerts us that Keira will be coming into care. Immediately, we are warned that the potential foster carer will need our assistance in helping Keira to settle into her new home. This is because, up until now,