**Still, On My Way**

Seán Gaffney Ph.D

Abstract: Another of life’s coincidences shows me that not only are we entwined threads in the complex weave of life, but also that patterns emerge and connections are made and we find ourselves in them, using both meanings of *find*. These new patterns and connections are clearly not effects of any linear causality, with a past and present. They are rather emerging synchronous syntheses, making perfect InnerSense to those who experience them. Here is my experience of one such event, drafted as it happened…and its connections to other such experiences in my life. This is a description of the emergence of an utterly new pattern in the weave of who I am…

Introduction

In two previous InnerSense articles (Gaffney 2007; 2009) I have traced major events in my life which have formed me as I experienced them, as well as the seeds they sewed that blossomed in me, and the mixed bouquet of weeds and flowers both cultivated and wild that are who I am today. The first describes my time as a novice in a Cistercian monastery and the novice-master’s steadfast decision that I should leave the enclosed life. “You are a teacher, a communicator” father Ambrose told me. “If you want to be a priest, join a preaching order”. The article continues with how I became a trainer, a language teacher, and then a senior lecturer. (In fact, I have since become an Assistant Professor!).

The second article is centred on the death of my youngest son, Dara, of leukaemia at the age of fourteen and the turmoil of my life before, during, after and since that event.

These two formative experiences in my life came together unexpectedly at a workshop at a Gestalt Therapy conference in Manchester, and then in an interview with me later in the week (Harris, 2008). The topic was how I came to choose to be a Gestalt therapist. Well, a therapist is the nearest I will ever get to being a priest, and it clearly involves caring for people and communication – not to forget that I am faculty/guest faculty at about seven Gestalt institutes worldwide. And also a widely published Gestalt author – so yes, a kind of “preacher”?

And then came my introduction to therapy. My wife and I and our two sons were in family therapy, which slowly fell apart. My wife left therapy, and each of my sons was appointed a specialist youth counselor and I continued alone with the two family therapists. And then came the illness and death of my son. I continued in therapy for a period, and then signed up for a 3 X 4 day Gestalt therapy residential group, determined to be a better man and father than I had been. This in turn led to my being accepted on the four year Diploma course in Gestalt Psychotherapy by the Gestalt Academy of Scandinavia. I am currently a teacher at this and many other Gestalt institutes. Becoming a Gestalt practitioner seemed so clearly to be the intertwining of two dominant threads in my life: leaving the monastery and becoming a teacher - almost accidentally, though a perfect fit; and the death of my son and its impact on me.

It was indeed this interview that gave me the inspiration and courage to write so openly about my son’s death and my 22 years of grieving.

Another thread explored by Belinda Harris, my interviewer, was my obvious pride and delight in being Irish, and my unabashed joy at expressing my Irishness whenever possible. This too had become entwined with the encouragement to self-expression intrinsic to good Gestalt training.

Within weeks after the conference, I was back in Sweden and at my country house awaiting the 22nd anniversary of Dara’s death. That was when I wrote the final poem in *A Journey Through Mourning*, where the intended double meaning of “Through” became so apparent. I felt confirmed in this when his 2009 anniversary came and went with a kind of wordless meditation on our lives together, his death and my long and thorough grieving.

Which brings me to 2010, its emerging patterns and connections, still ongoing as I end this introduction and find a suitable title coming into my awareness for the continuation…

It All Started with a Phone-Call

“Hi, Seán. It’s Andreas Svensson”

I cannot say that I was surprised by the call. Andreas is a former student of mine from the 1980s who has kept in touch ever since, usually with about two phone-calls a year, more when the topic is urgent. He has been involved in various projects at the university since I left in 1996, and has often requested my help with the internal academic politics and its Machiavellian intrigues. In recent years, his focus has been his doctoral studies and all the complexities of Academic Committees and supervisors. I recollected that the previous time Andreas had called, he was well on his way to finalizing his thesis.

Now, he was in crisis. His thesis was ready, the printer was booked – and the copy-editor had fallen ill suddenly. Since English is his second language, he really needed a native speaker to read through the thesis to check its readability, intelligibility and standard of academic English. Naturally, I was his choice.

And so I found myself agreeing to read an exceptionally complex study which combined economics, primary health care infrastructures and psychology. A very impressive achievement, which, as I write, is still going through the checks and balances of the academic examination system.

Suddenly, in the midst of statistics and charts and policy statements, I found myself reading about the psychological theories of Edith Stein, a central pillar in the theoretical edifice Andreas was building. “Edith Stein…Edith Stein…now where have I heard that name” I thought. “Am I confusing her with Edel Quinn, the famous Irish Legion of Mary member? Edith Stein…”

And then I made the connection: both professionally and personally I regularly find myself in the company of both religious and secular Jews – that’s where I remember the name. And then I did ‘what one does’ these days: I Googled her. What follows is a very condensed summary of an extraordinary life.

Edith Stein, born and raised in a practicing Jewish family in Germany. Became an atheist in her teens. Studied first psychology and then philosophy. Assistant to Edmund Husserl, the founding father of a branch of phenomenology. Refused an academic career in Germany on the grounds of her being not only a woman, but also Jewish. Influenced by her phenomenological reading of Saint Teresa of Avila’s autobiography, she converted to Catholicism and became a teacher in various Catholic schools. Entered a Carmelite convent and continued writing, now with a decidedly Catholic choice of topics – though still in her own rigorously honest voice. Was moved from a German to a Dutch convent as anti-semitic Nazi activities increased. In an action focusing on former Jews who had converted to Christianity, she was taken from the convent by local SS and sent by train to Dachau. She died in the gas-chambers of Birkenau, August 9, 1942. Beatified by the Catholic Church in 1987 and canonized a saint in 1998, by Pope John Paul II.

I avidly read further about her early work, especially with Husserl, whose influence on Gestalt therapy is both vicarious and relatively recent. Also, the subject of “empathy” has been in the air at recent Gestalt conferences – and Edith Stein’s dissertation is called *On The Problem of Empathy.* I immediately wrote to the mailing list of the New York Institute of Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT), of which I am a member, and excitedly told the strange tale of my re-acquaintance with Edith Stein, her connection to Husserl, and a possible subject for a virtual Study Group. Two people immediately expressed an interest and a third has since joined. We have been reading and commenting on her work since, and have managed to enlist the support of major Edith Stein experts who follow our exchanges and help us with clarifying comments and references. I became a member of The International Association for the Study of the Philosophy of Edith Stein (IASPES), based at the National University of Ireland, at Maynooth College, County Meath, Ireland.

And then, out of everywhere and nowhere, an epiphany. I was musing quietly to myself about the coincidence of her death in August, 1942 being the month and year of my birth…when, almost in flashing neon, the date of her death – August 9 – broke from the page I was reading and became still in front of my eyes.

My son died on August 9.

In that instant, I knew that Dara Gaffney, 1972 – 1986 and Edith Stein, 1891 – 1942 would always be celebrated together by Seán Gaffney, 1942 - ? on August 9 from now on. And I am writing **this** sentence on August 6, 2010. Three days to go…

A Message from Down Under – or Up Above?

I have a very good friend and Gestalt colleague in New Zealand who works with healers, including Maori elders. I have previously been at the receiving end of messages from their Healing Circle, one solicited and astonishingly accurate. My doctor is still impressed that a group of people in New Zealand, only one of whom I have met, could pinpoint the source of poison in my body and thus support his diagnosis, even if his treatment failed.

The unsolicited message was on my mobile phone as I crossed a bridge on Nevski Prospekt, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation – and again they very accurately put their finger on my unwillingness to see some aspects of my life more clearly.

And now, on August 1 I get a message from my New Zealand friend, from which the following are extracts, with some paraphrased remarks to connect them. The message extracts are in *italics* and my remarks in standard font:

*My friend X was glancing through your book and asked me if I would pass on a message to you. I said I would.*

*She said she had some information for you and that she thought you had a son who had died when he was young and if he had lived he now would be a young man. I agreed that was accurate.*

*She saw you sitting in a big, dark wooden chair, possibly a rocking chair, and Dara was on your knee and you were reading out loud. She had just opened your book at one of the pages with poetry on it and she said that was the moment she connected with Dara.*

Yes, we had a black-framed rocking chair, and Dara would certainly have sat on my lap there.

*She wondered if the room he had died in had been shut off.*

Yes, his mother took over his room after his death and nailed blankets over the windows and kept the door locked.

***Message from Dara via X.***

*‘I want you to stop hiding in the dark and to stop being so harsh. Someone in the family is having a baby. It is time for me (Dara) to be reborn.’*

Unsure about “hiding in the dark”…I need to give this one more time.

And okay: I can be harsh, though increasingly less so…I believe. Worth looking at.

And yes, Dara’s cousin in Boston is expecting a baby “mid August”…

*‘I am sending you messages and you are not getting them. I am sending feathers and you are not taking any notice. They mean I am around you. “I’m here Dad”. They are many coloured —purple, green/gold and you know the green/gold has a special meaning and importance.’*

I am still open to understanding more of this. The feathers are a mystery. The colours are less so: purple is the colour for martyrs (Edith?) and green/gold is another though less obvious Edith connection. Maynooth College is in County Meath. The Secretary of IASPES is a local man and a follower of Gaelic football – as am I. When Dublin is playing and he is responding to some comment I have made, he will often type my name in blue – the Dublin colours. I will reply by typing his 5-letter name alternately in green and gold, the Meath colours.

*‘When you talk and meet someone with the same name as mine — Dara — or someone who looks like me, you shift your energy and realize you do so.’*

Yes. I become confused. My son, Dara, takes pride of place completely – exactly as he did when I first saw August 9 as the date of Edith’s death. Until the instant that the date flashed itself at me, it was exclusively Dara’s.

*‘If you are ready, bring me out into the light so I can move on.’*

I honestly thought that was what I was doing by publishing “A Journey Through Mourning”, not only in InnerSense, but also in my collected papers, *Gestalt at Work.* So maybe **this** article is bringing you further out into the light, Dara…certainly more of your own voice, anyway.

1. *‘You have a book that we read together and you have kept it.*
2. *There is a metal toy —it is in the dark and it needs to be on display because it was part of the family and existed.*
3. *The death certificate was wrong. Something on it was wrong. I give you this piece of information so that you will know it is me, Dara, who is providing this information.’*

I am in the country house at present awaiting the two anniversaries. When I get back to Stockholm, I’ll check these out.

*‘I don’t mince words. You need to move on to allow me to move. I am not going to leave you’.*

Dara, I know you are not going to leave me. My feeling is that you need me to release you from my mourning over you, to release you by getting on with my life and letting you get on with your death. Maybe that’s why Edith dropped by to see me…

*‘This is sent to you with love and either you accept it or you don’t.’*

I accept it. Believe me, I accept it.

*X wondered if the green/gold had to do to with Ireland, and would be interested to know what it does mean. Also what the Gaelic words for green/gold are. Dara was really emphatic that it was green’/gold not gold/green. She also mentioned that she thought English was not the first language for Dara as she found it hard sometimes to understand what he said. The accent was thick.*

Yes, definitely an Irish connection. Green in Gaelic is *uaine* (oo-ahn-eh and in some dialects oo-ahn-yeh) and gold is *ór* (ore with a prolonged “o”). Interestingly – now that I see it – the cousin about to give birth is named Áine (aw-ine-yeh said quickly!) and almost contained in *uaine*. Anyway…

And yes. English was very much Dara’s accented second language.

*The metal toy; she wondered if it was the figure of a soldier.*

Yes. So did I. Though now I suspect it might turn out to be a toy car.

The InnerSense of it All

When mentioning this morning by e-mail to my friend Brian that I had a possible piece for the journal, I called it “Round 3” in my wrestling match with spirituality, the first two InnerSense articles being rounds 1 and 2 respectively.

Despite the attraction of the content in Rounds 1 and 2, I like to think I won each round by a technical knock-out – the telling of the story, the writing. Somehow, this article you are reading has written and is still writing itself and me. I had no idea until early afternoon today that I had it in me. It appeared, suddenly. I welcomed it, and here you are reading it. And, of course, if you are reading it, then it has gone through a number of filters from my First Reader to the editor and maybe more…

I have absolutely no doubt but that you, dear reader, have seen patterns and connections that I have not and I welcome any comments you might have via e-mail. For my own part, allow me to reflect on the patterns and connections I see and feel and even wonder about – in every sense of the word *wonder.*

An introductory comment: I call her *Edith.* Someone who appeared so fully in my life as I approach my 68th year, and who is connected by so many threads – teaching, phenomenology which connects with Gestalt, her death/my birth same month, same year, died the same date as my youngest son, Dara, is about to share an anniversary with him... I cannot refer to her as *Stein*, and *Edith Stein* becomes stilted after a while. So Edith it is. My recently found friend, Edith. And I will honestly try to be humble, despite having a saint as my friend…and maybe mentor?

A most obvious pattern for me is: monastery – father Ambrose – “teacher” – Andreas my former student – Edith.

Another is: monastery – father Ambrose – “teacher” – Dara’s death - Gestalt therapist and trainer and author – Edith – NYIGT Study Group.

August, 1942 – Edith dies, I’m born. August 9 – Edith dies, Dara dies. August, 2010, Dara’s cousin about to give birth in “mid August”.

An unsolicited message from down under connects to Dara very directly, and possibly indirectly to Edith, and probably connects me, Ireland, Edith and Dara in ways which are still unclear to me.

Reflections and Conclusions

My first thought here is the amazing way in which this paper is my current version of my annual Dara poem, which I kept space for from 1987 until 2009. In 2009, no words came, as I have mentioned. My 2008 poem seemed to have closed the mourning. Dara was

“where you are in me with me now

everywhere and always”

And now, here I am alone and waiting, not only now for Dara, but also for Edith…

And, Dara, in allowing Edith to share our day together, maybe I am releasing you and moving on…so maybe your wish is being granted also in these patterns and connections…

A Final Connection

If my closing image is displayed in black on white, I ask you to imagine it in whatever pattern of purple, green, gold and blue which makes InnerSense for you:

S

E E

DARA

I N

T

H

References

Gaffney, S. (2007). On Finding my Way. *InnerSense – A Journal of Spirituality, Vol 1.1.* (p. 42 – 47). Wollongong NSW. Ravenwood Press.

Gaffney, S. (2008). A Journey Through Mourning. *InnerSense – A Journal of Spirituality, 2.1.* (p. 9 – 29). Wollongong NSW. Ravenwood Press.

Gaffney, S. (2009). *Gestalt at Work – Collected Papers of Seán Gaffney.* Anne Maclean, Ed. New Orleans LA. Gestalt Institute Press.

Harris, B. (2008). In his own Voice – An Interview with Seán Gaffney. *British Gestalt Journal, 17.1.* (p. 51 – 56). Bristol. Gestalt Publications Ltd.