

Indigenous and other ways (Denkzettel)

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Some Contextual Stories

I had a long psychoanalysis when I was a young woman. The relationship was a warm, collaborative inquiry but I did not succumb to the threat that making non-mainstream gender normative relationship choices would affect my long term mental health. I remained a lesbian and felt well.

One afternoon, during this period of therapy and while training as a social worker, I was entertaining myself in the psychoanalytic section of Swiss Cottage library when I came across a book by Marion Kaplan on the history of the Judische Frauenbund (Jewish Women's Society) in early twentieth century Germany. I learned that Anna O, the 'subject' of the famous late nineteenth century case study by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer was, in fact, an extraordinary political activist, Bertha Pappenheim who challenged fundamentalist narratives as they were played out in everyday life within early twentieth century German society, within Jewish society. Bertha Pappenheim and her colleagues led the development of extensive national resources for unmarried mothers and unemployed women.

In 1989, with a colleague, I started The Pink Practice, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer therapy project in the UK. It was a form of activism – to make something available, visible, so people who were LGBTQI could see a therapist secure in the knowledge that only theory would be deconstructed as part of the therapy - not people's sexual or gender identity. Systemic social constructionism was an important theoretical and philosophical ally. It pulled the rug out from under gender normative development theories. We used it to show how power in



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society and in professional relationships is played out through linguistic and institutionalised rules and structures. As community activists, we are ready to support the subversion of dominant narratives if they are not in a person's or a community's best interest. "Good practice" means being in a state of readiness to develop new and transgressive practices if a different kind of talk or action is needed that has yet to be professionally sanctioned.

In this piece of writing, I string together some *Denkzettel*, thought-notes, a term created by Pappenheim. These are episodes, memories, stories I have heard and found. I am interested in not just *what* we know, but *how* we know, and what gets passed on across time, place and generations. And *who* picks this up – because not everyone picks up everything. But there is, for me, this string, a string of pearls and pebbles, grit and thorns, perfectly strung together as if for me, perhaps by me. I don't know. So, I share these *Denkzettel* with you, dear reader, and trust you will know what to do with them in your world.

Indigenous and other ways (Denkzettel)

People sometimes think
that *indigenous*
refers to being,
to biology,
to inherent knowledges,
and not
to the more fluid practices
of becoming,

looking after that
which is precious
historical
vulnerable to eradication.

* * *

Many things come to mind.

Firstly,
when people ask me what
being Jewish
means to me,
a thousand images,
a thousand feelings
flash before my eyes,
mostly untellable, unsayable, uncommunicable,
all
positioning me
an imagined
left or right
of the asker.

In my mind's eye,
I am holding the small
square
black and white photo
(greyscale actually)
of Edith Klatchko, my mother's cousin
and her daughter - Féchen
aged five
between her mother and her mother's boyfriend
all holding hands
for the photographer
on a wide,
wide street
in Riga.
1938.

I see the Negev.
(I have never been there.
I cannot go).
And stories of places,
people,
sites,
tribes

and tribalism,
turning points that made their way into history
creating narrative foundation stones
for education
for survival
and ways of knowing -
long since critiqued by me
and others.
Many others,
too numerous to honour in this moment -
this nanosecond of an unfolding life
beyond my body -
or yours...

I see a moment in Swiss Cottage Library
when, in the psychoanalytic section, my hand reached up
and took down
the biography
of the real "Anna O"
- Bertha Pappenheim.
When I realised
who she was
who she really was

I sat down on a library bench
Read till the library shut,
amazed, shocked
angry, relieved to realise that
Anna O
the famous case study
was a work of fiction -
that the description of her
said more
about the describers
than she who was
being described.
Storytellers, biographers for theory
resembling nothing
of the truth of a life lived
ethically
proudly
courageously
knowingly.

This woman is where I come from
whom I have followed.

She is, was
a pioneer
a social worker
a thorn in the side
a truth teller.
She spoke out
at conferences.
She did not lie.
She told problematic truths
as theatre.
She told the male Jewish authorities the fucking truth
about white slavery
the abduction of poor white women
of poor white Jewish women.
And the men
were scared.
Scared
of what was happening around them
to the community,
the threat of Nazis trafficking Jews to their deaths.
Yet Bold and Brave and in their face
She, Bertha Pappenheim,
(for this name needs saying

as often as we can
to douse the fictionalised Anna O.
Those professional theories
live on to keep other women down)
She, Bertha Pappenheim,
pointed to, evidenced,
the oppression of women
of communities;
she pointed
to lies told,
to the systems that support them;
she pointed
to the men
whom she was addressing
who, behind her back, said
“Back to the doctor!
Back to Breuer, to Freud!
to whoever will get her and her uppity
friends
out of our hair!
We have a job to do.”
But the holocaust came anyway.
Despite their best efforts.

And I am here
speaking my truths
because *some* of my family didn't die then,
they didn't perish then.
Not all of them anyway.
They tried to get away.
They tried every which way.
In fact, the eleventh hour came and went,
And they got out.
Just.

And how did they get out?
Because Tante Lulu,
[A family friend who got out earlier
from Berlin
to Bradford,
from a city built on sand
to a city built on Millstone Grit
- cities I know well in this life -]
because Tante Lulu
wrote
letters.
She wrote letters.

She wrote letters at regular intervals
to the Jewish Board of Deputies.
She wrote the facts.
She emphasised the time frame.
She kept writing.
And after several months
- time dangerously spent -
my mother aged 11,
her 13 year old brother
and my grandparents came
to Bradford
to run a hostel
for unaccompanied minors,
refugees,
teenagers who had said goodbye to their parents
and grandparents,
and siblings too,
all knowing
deep down
it was
forever.
And so it was.

* * *

In a folded nineteen sixties newspaper cutting
I read last year,
a Telegraph and Argus interview,
Jewish Chronicle maybe,
with Tante Lulu,
she casually reported that she trained as a young woman
in social work
with Bertha Pappenheim...
Tante Lulu trained with Bertha Pappenheim...

My family was saved by the learning of women that
persistence
is what you do.
You never give up.
You don't hide
your Jewishness.
You don't hide
your humanity.
You don't sidestep
your commitment.
This I learned

and I already knew.

* * *

Indigenous knowing
is not about biology,
it is about history
or herstory;
it is about learning from those
who walked the walk
who trod paths
sometimes in one direction only
sometimes not even walked,
taken
there
out of sight
disappeared...
We know those facts, those figures
but
what
did
they
know

that we
choose
to forget?
What did
they hope
we would remember
and *act on*?
They believe in us
they
the children across the world,
they
the people of all genders
in whatever countries
they whose languages
have been eradicated
whose tongues cut out
whose bodies assaulted
whose lives terminated
secretly
publicly.

Indigenous knowledge
is not just about knowing

it is not about surviving

it is about

living

with a critical awareness

of what has gone before

what is going on

what will happen.

We act

because of our indigenous knowing.

We try to prevent

because of our indigenous knowing.

This knowing

is not in our genes,

it is in our conscience,

in our courage

not to protect old ways

or restricted customs

but human rights

safety

freedoms

possibilities

to right power imbalances

to correct unfairness

to challenge stereotypes
and laws created to constrain and restrain
the best of human energies.

Indigenous knowing is not about creating silos for population groups.

Blood
flows.
It runs
wild through/
beyond the contours
of human life
into confluences
of great
majestic even
scary rivers,
the small feeding into the large
shaping the landscape
cutting it
into left and right banks
and the confusion of tribalised
territories.
The essence of ourselves -
our tributaries

made us so,
separated us
with the land.
And the short-term history
eats our long-term memory
so when we are told to count the grain in our back yard,
sometimes we count;
and when we are taught to sharpen the tips of our weapons,
sometimes we reach for our knives.

Someone here asks
“Who are ‘we’ paleface?”
And they are right
to ask;
they are right
to challenge
the lumped-together-ness
of all.
And yet are we not also an ‘all’,
a collective,
with responsibility for each other?

Gail Simon is a practitioner-researcher, dialogical writer and installation activist. She is editor of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* and part of the Måfå Research Group which hosts dialogical installations on the themes of transgression, welcoming and belonging. Gail uses stanza form in some of her writings which are intended as performance. She leads the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire.

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