**The Dance of Diversity**

**Abstract**

This paper is based upon the author's understanding of the dynamics, or “dance”, of diversity as they arise in “helping” relationships. It takes in psychological, social and transpersonal aspects of diversity. It is offered not as an authoritative statement, but as “thought-provocation” to coaches and mentors trying to understand, and work effectively with, diversity in their relationships with clients. The main body of the paper consists of an exploration of the intra- and inter-personal dance of diversity. The paper employs concepts of denial and projection, informed by social perspective and enriched by a transpersonal dimension, as tools for the practical analysis and competent handling of these “dances” of diversity. Finally, the paper outlines the author’s approach to “dancing with diversity”: “deep equality”, which lies at the heart of her work with diversity in coaching relationships.

**Locating the Dance**

The question of diversity can be viewed at different levels of “magnification”: the “whole sky” lens of global history charts the great trajectories of difference, such as gender, race and class, over time; the medium telephoto of the social & economic history helps us understand group phenomena, such as class struggle and the women’s, Gay and & civil rights movements; the greater magnification of the lens of social psychology reveals social group dynamics; the microscopic view facilitates a consideration of inter- and intra-personal dynamics. Finally, there is the holographic, potentially all-encompassing, transpersonal, which is, photographically speaking, off the page.

This paper is concerned with the last two of these levels: what happens within (intra-personal) and between (inter-personal) individuals, and how it relates to the greater, transpersonal, reality. It suggests that dynamics, or “dances”, of diversity are best understood as embedded, or enfolded, in the greater realm. Care should be taken here, since the “transpersonal” level is not equivalent to the others, being beyond normal concepts of the individual self.

Each level of magnification is a level of reality, with its own science of inquiry and art of understanding. My experience, personal and professional, has led me to believe to be a “diversity specialist” is to pay attention in some way to every one of these levels.

You will now understand why I recommend you treat this essay with caution. It is neither a comprehensive summary of the diversity “discipline”, nor a full elaboration of a theory, nor a complete statement of an existential position. Nevertheless, it is founded upon years of diversity practice and reflection, and reaches for all of these things. As such, it is more than a set of clever ideas.

This paper emerges from a sense of the way our minds work, based upon personal and professional experience, as well as study and spiritual reflection. Coaching and training as if our minds do indeed work this way has transformed my professional practice. Here I ask “Could it do something for yours?” Whether it is useful is not measured by how convincingly it is argued, but by how helpful it is
in increasing the depth and dimensionality of your understanding of yourself, your client, relationship and the systems in which we are all immersed.

Defining Diversity

Diversity cannot be escaped by the coach or mentor: it is always present and often relevant. An effective treatment of diversity is therefore a core coaching and mentoring competency - part of being a competent, not a specialist, coach or mentor.

Let me say what I mean by “diversity” - a term so frequently used and so rarely defined. Its fundamental meaning is value-neutral – referring to difference and variety. However, this very neutrality easily slides into blandness. Hence, I use the term “diversity” with a more charged meaning, to refer to differences that connote social group membership, where the groups in question are experienced by members as having differential access to power.

“Power” is a highly contested word, with a wide range of different meanings. Here, I use power to mean access to control or influence over, people, money, resources moral capital and (political, social and cultural) representation. As shorthand, it may be said that I am employing the term “diversity” to denote socially significant difference (the significance being conferred by power). I have set up the argument this way for a reason: it is precisely because of the experience and perception of differential power in the world that we invest so much in issues such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion and disability – enough to kill, or die, for; and why anything but the most superficial treatment of diversity elicits strong emotion.

In my experience of diversity work there is a depth of feeling these issues seem to engender to which no definition does justice. Myself and my “diversity specialist” colleagues are often confronted in our work with levels hostility and defensiveness that cannot be explained by anything we have actually done. Conversely, it seems easier for many people (who would rather not be hostile) to opt for a bland “this-has-nothing-to-do-with-me” approach to the subject than to confront what lurks beneath it.

In her excellent article “Understanding Diversified Mentoring Relationships: definitions, challenges and strategies” Ragins (Clutterbuck & Ragins (eds), 2002) hints at some hidden, dynamics of diversity. She highlights an important inequality of awareness that tends to exist between the experience of inclusion in “the norm” (where group membership entails privileges for an individual, as compared with others), on the one hand, and the experience of exclusion, or “other-ness”, from the norm (where a particular group membership entails penalties), on the other. Ragins characterises these positions as “privilege” and “being the ‘other’”. Whilst experiences of other-ness or discrimination are often both unpleasant and evident to those experiencing them, the same often cannot be said for those enjoying privilege, or inclusion. Speaking of diversified mentoring relationships, she writes:

One of the more difficult consciousness-raising tasks in... is coming to terms with the nature of privilege. Privilege refers to the fact that some group memberships give individuals privileges and advantages that they may not ask for, or even recognise, but certainly enjoy
[...] Since privilege is usually unacknowledged by its recipient, insights into the nature of privilege is one of the most daunting tasks... (Clutterbuck & Ragins (eds), 2002, pp 36-7)

This statement is, I believe, equally relevant to a wide range of helping relationships. Ragins does not put forward a theory about why it should be so difficult for someone who “enjoys” privilege to notice their advantage. But the answer to this question would surely assist us in our inquiry. To approach it, we need look more closely at the mind.

The work of coaching and mentoring requires an understanding of diversity that admits, yet goes beyond, the recognition of social inequality. Such an understanding would deal directly with the nature of the mind as containing areas that are within-, out-of- and on-the-edge-of awareness. It would enable the coach or mentor to reflect upon herself in the light of the relationship with the client. It would offer helpful insights into the connection between what seems to be happening in this relationship on the one hand, and what seems to be happening in the client’s – and her own world one the other. It would allow the “reading” of these complex dances, and the examination of their choreography to reveal the forces that drive them. This is an understanding for which my work has for some time been reaching.

The fact is that, whether we like it or not, we are in the diversity road-show: we cannot not dance. Even if we don’t see ourselves as belonging to social groups with differential access to power, others do. They see and respond to us on the basis of their (often poorly formed) ideas about those groups, just as we do with them. Everyone is invited to the diversity dance. But not everyone recognises the invitation, and still fewer are free to accept or decline it, or modify its terms.

The most problematic aspect of diversity dances is that many of our ideas about diversity are hidden, out-of-awareness, much of the time. In his excellent, research-based book The Value of Difference (Kandola, 2009), the author offers a wide-ranging review of research which points to the existence of unconscious bias, even amongst those who are personally committed to eliminating prejudice and discrimination. That’s the bad news. The good news is that our bias can be placed out-of-awareness by none other than ourselves: it is still within the mind that dreamed it up, and can, under the right conditions, once again be surfaced and transformed. This, after all, is a cornerstone of so many generic approaches to human psychology - why should it not apply to questions of diversity?

In case we think acts of submerging and re-surfacing ideas is an essentially individual drama, we should pause: they happen within a social, cultural and historical context - and so does your coaching/mentoring relationship. It may be that this relationship has, at its best, the potential to provide the right conditions to re-surface and transform submerged ideas. Once this has happened, perhaps the client can use the power of decision to begin the work to free herself of the urge which made her want to hide them in the first place. Your understanding of the social, cultural and historical context of your relationship may be key to creating optimal conditions for this to occur. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to focus upon the coach or mentor’s competency at this social-historical level of “magnification”. I only note it here as an important area for learning and development.
Returning to the workings of the mind, re-surfaced ideas themselves can be really useful information for understanding self, relationship and systems. For example, say my view of blind people was adversely influenced by the (now-submerged) jealousy I felt about the “excessive” attention my parents gave my younger brother, who was born visually impaired. When a blind work colleague requests reasonable adjustments which I resent, I may not realise why I feel so angry. At the same time, I may notice that the phrase “political correctness gone mad” is being bandied about at work in response to news of new legal rights for disabled employees. The invitation to “dance” could be magnetic: I feel I have a genuine grievance, reinforced by collective perceptions. However, if I re-surface the roots of my discomfiture, I can see the roots of my prejudice. I could spot the “invitation” and respond with a different dance.

At a social level, when society is shocked into understanding the depths of its own prejudice (and its consequences), there can be a collective shift of awareness. It may be that the uncovering of the Shoah, or Holocaust, has had this effect in the West.

Finally, a point about multiplicity: each of us has, at any one time, an almost endless list of interweaving group memberships (eg female, heterosexual, white, working class, short, childless, northern). Which of these is most significant to us at any time is dependent upon both individual and collective history and our “choice” of personal narrative. What is “socially significant” varies across time and place. It changes literally before our eyes. For example, the identity of being “a Muslim” has undergone a transformation in recent years. This, conversely, has had an effect upon an emergent non-Muslim identity. The notion of the “West”, for example, has itself been transformed through repeated media depiction of a battle between “Islam and the West”.

To give a different example: if I make my way home from work of an evening, I am not necessarily aware of being “a woman” until I notice a man walking along the road behind me. At this moment I may feel the fear which, as a female, I have been schooled all my life to feel in such situations, whether or not this particular man is actually a “danger” to me.

Group identities invite our self into being through the lived process of relating to others. This process cannot be avoided – but it can be denied. Each time we experience socially significant difference, we are invited to respond: how we do is the subject matter of effective diversity practice.

Social forces help sculpt individuals, but it is important not to be deterministic about identity. At some level we experience choice, however constrained. We have some leeway in constructing our personal narrative. However, it is also important to be cautious about such statements. Our degree of choice may be far less than we imagine. Determinism is problematic because it does not admit individual will. On the other hand, there are trends in how group members think of themselves, which do seem to create fields of “probability”. Hence, individually, no two Muslims and no two women will see their identity in an identical way. However, we can still trace trends in the way groups of people tend to see themselves in time, reflecting events in the social world.

A Dancer’s Tale – a digression
“Imagine a dancer in a World of Dancers. When he was little, our dancer acquired a splinter in his left foot. Try as he might he could not remove it, nor could he explain his predicament to those around him. As he walked upon it clumsily, he drove it deeper into his flesh. The pain was at first intense. But, through experimenting, he found ingenious ways of reducing, even avoiding, pain. He gradually honed this skill until, each time he made to step onto the injured foot, his body automatically adjusted to minimise pain. The residual discomfort blended into his “normality”, and his, once awkward, gait became his “personality”. At first deliberate, his avoidance of pain became habitual; at first starkly in awareness, it shifted past the edge of awareness out-of-awareness, into the submerged mind. It became occult pain. The injury was unhealed, the pain now unfelt. Yet it had crucially shaped his identity as a dancer.

“Viewed from a non-injured perspective, however, our dancer’s ingenious strategy has introduced a perversity into his movement. It limits his trajectory to prescribed areas of the entire sphere of movement-possibility which was his birthright. This does not stop his movement from having a charm of its own. It certainly makes him idiosyncratic, individual. It is his “signature gait”. Though he may have made a virtue of injury, the original wounding remains unhealed.

“The injury has not only affected how he looks from the outside, it also affects how he sees the world, and what he sees as he moves. Because he is a dancer, he sees a dancing world. Because his trajectories are warped, so is the world he sees.

“Whilst growing up, our dancer notices that everyone he meets has their own distinctive set of trajectories – their own signature gait. However, life teaches him that people with certain types of gait enjoy comforts and privileges over others with different types of gait. This is the beginning of his awareness that differences in gait hold social significance. This engenders anxiety in him, and he begins to compare his own gait with those of the more privileged and those of the less privileged. Where his own gait seems similar to those of the more privileged, he accentuates these traits, feeling this will give him an advantage. If he feels any guilt about this decision, he submerges it. When his own movement trajectory seems at odds with those of more privileged people, he learns how to change those traits.

“Sometimes, both these decisions (that to accentuate and that to alter) result in him choosing movements which re-activate the pain from the original injury. In these cases, he learns more techniques of pain management, such as avoiding certain people, staying close to others, making tiny refinements to his choreography, and developing addictions.

“Our dancer has learned to internalise the original injury and make a virtue of the consequences of his strategy to minimise the pain it caused. This resulted perverse movement, which is unnatural to him, but distinctive to his personality. The next layer of perversity was introduced through the fear of the penalties of not being like those who enjoy privilege in his world, and the guilt of enjoying advantages denied to others. Like his pain, the fear and guilt are also submerged and occult in their effect. Only in his dreams does he touch all three: his sleep is periodically troubled by characters that would snatch his privileges or expose his deceits. Sometimes this discomfort spills into waking time, and he finds himself adopting political opinions which emphasise the need to protect the majority way of life from the many threats it seems to be subject to. Both experience and response have
produced his adult “signature gait”. This gait not only determines how others are likely to perceive him, but also what he sees in, and how he sees, the world. The world is dancing because he is dancing; if his dance is perverse, the world he sees is correspondingly so.”

Author’s note: when our dancer sustained his original injury, he thought he was alone in his misery. However, he could not know that an injury of this kind was a rite of passage into the World of Dancers. Whatever their choices, the paradox is that each dancer in this world is likely to be so closely identified with their signature gait (having learned it as their personality-in-the-world), that they seem to have more invested in retaining their occult pain than in healing from it.

Submerge-Deny-Project

One of my assumptions is that human relationships are, by and large, a dance of projection and counter-projection based upon “occult pain”; and that some of our most highly charged, and trenchantly defended, projections concern diversity. This assumption has served well in my personal life, in contracting with organisations, in the training room and in the coaching relationship. The dynamic of projection seems to work as powerfully on an organisational and societal level as it does on an individual level. It appears, in this sense, to be holographic.

What do I mean by “projection”? I use it here to denote a three-stage intra-psychic mechanism, which is similar in many ways to the Freudian, but also significantly different. Let’s look at the three-stage mechanism.

In the first instance, the awareness of an emotion is so painful that a “decision” is made to submerge it (and the memory of its cause), in the out-of-awareness (unconscious) part of the mind. This is similar to what Freud called “repression”. Once out-of-awareness, the occult emotion neither disappears, nor remains entirely dormant. Nothing in the mind can be made to disappear.

In the second move, what has been repressed is protected by denial.

In the third instance the repressed emotion is projected unawares outward into the world, appearing to the ordinary, conscious, mind of the individual (like an actual projection on a screen) as part of the “external reality” with which she interacts (and of which she may consider herself the “innocent victim”). This is close to Freud’s own use of the term “projection”.

My usage here of the terms “denial” and “projection” emphasises different aspects than the Freudian:

Firstly, this approach applies to “normal, healthy” people, not just those with a “problem”; secondly, it does not have a specifically sexual focus (sexual feelings may be involved, but so may non-sexual feelings); thirdly, the mechanism described does not necessarily involve “dangerous pleasure” (though this could be present); fourthly, it applies to groups as well individuals.

The three-stage intra-psychic mechanism (“submergedeny-project”) outlined above has the doubly protective action of (1) defending awareness against unacceptable emotion, and (2) alienating the
offending feelings and perceived cause from its true author (self), making them appear to have an independent existence for and over which the self seems to have no responsibility or control.

When the unbearable emotion is guilt, and the cause a real or imagined offence perpetrated by the self, the mechanism of projection can neatly reverse the victim-perpetrator polarity (with which you may be familiar from transactional analysis). The occult guilt is projected out into the world as “malicious others” intent on attacking an “innocent” self. Hence, the denial and projection of guilt creates fear. Fear separates us from others, tending to make the separation their fault.

This mechanism seems to me to explain Ragins’ observation about privilege – namely, we make a decision at some level not to notice our privilege, because to do so would surface unbearable guilt. However, this decision can only result in the projection of that guilt (in the form of fear of reprisal) onto “others” who “want to take from us” what we – consciously - believe is “rightly ours”. Out-of-awareness lurks anxiety arising from the notion that we gained our privilege at others’ expense. I am not making a case for power, or resources, as a “zero sum game” – I am only making the case that this is the way the guilty, and therefore fearful, mind sees it.

Clearly, this entire thesis would only be true if the mind had an inherent nature of oneness and connection; and that anything short of the experience of oneness and connection (which I call “deep equality”) with the “other”, induces existential dis-ease. However, the good news is that you do not have to believe it is true in order to work as if it were true. Working as if this thesis were true has completely changed my approach, eliciting a significant qualitative change client response and feedback.

As the term “deep equality” suggests, I am asking you to move beyond a notion of formal, or superficial, equality. Deep equality goes beyond being “different, but of equal value”, to being one, fundamentally inseparable, whole – a single creation, where this can only be because that is. This holy idea has been buried throughout our history beneath thoughts of separation, anger, fear and discrimination.

Before moving forward, I’d like to look at social aspects of projection. In order to understand collective, not just individual, phenomena, and our place as a species in the diversity of life, we need to go much further than Freud. In the service of this goal, I believe it is helpful to break out of an ethnocentric focus upon consciousness as an essentially individual affair. What happens if we admit the possibility that projection happens not just between individuals, but at a group, social and global level?

Thought systems from areas as diverse as Aboriginal thought (Chatwin, B 2008), Buddhism, shamanism (Mindell, A 2002), Jungian psychoanalysis (Stevens, A 2006), the Hindu Vedanta (Easwaran, E 2007), some interpretations of contemporary physics (Haisch, B 2009), so-called “new age” metaphysics (Wapnick, K 1999) and some approaches to systems thinking (Senge, P et al 2005), have an interesting area of convergence: the idea that, while ordinary consciousness appears to be individual, the field of consciousness is far vaster, and somehow enfolds the individual self. Albert Einstein, for example, suggested that the individual self was a kind of “optical illusion” (Tolle, E 2006, pp27-8) of consciousness.
This idea of consciousness implies that much of our mind, whilst individually experienced, *does not in any meaningful way “belong” to us individually.* Of course there is dimension of mind which is irreducibly individual – which makes being alive so remarkable. However, once we admit the possibility that much of our mind is simply not under individual authority much of the time, it is not hard to see that individual projections can actually be expressions of projection at collective levels: family, caste, class, nation, religion. They can be said to belong to a web of consciousness in which we are all implicated. Put another way, much of what arises in the individual mind originates largely from a non-individual level of consciousness in which we collectively share.

This idea challenges the commonly held notion in our trenchantly individualistic culture that individuals are the authors of thoughts. It proposes that the reverse is somehow closer to the truth – that collectively held thoughts are at the very least the co-authors of our individuality.

Importantly, one implication of this way of looking is that to blame an individual for their thoughts and their projections is to miss the mark. How can you sensibly blame someone who is labouring under ideas which are not under their conscious control? Individual responsibility must lie somewhere else, but where? Well, the phenomenon of individuality arising from a dancing web of oneness implies a “decision-maker” - one who decided *to be an individual*, and to build individuality upon, amongst other things, the choreography of diversity. It is the decision-maker in one individual which decides to deny and project something which another, otherwise similar, individual decides to confront and deal with. It is that decision-maker with whom each of us can learn to re-acquaint ourselves. Going one stage further, it is that decision-maker *for whom each of us can ultimately learn to be fully responsible*. Achieving this is a lifetime’s labour of increasing awareness and skill.

Apart from managing our denial and projection, our decision-maker also decides (a) what to do when submerged emotions are surfaced; (b) whether to believe projections, treating them as real, (c) whether to act upon those projections and (d) whether to punish self or other for poor decisions in the past (or whether to forgive these, understanding that they were based upon illusions that seemed real at the time).

As any therapist knows, surfacing what has been out-of-awareness can be risky. What is hidden has been submerged for a good reason. Hence, the way in which this is done in a professional setting requires a great deal of mindfulness. However, this caution notwithstanding, the act of surfacing reveals to us what thoughts are running our show whilst we “slumber”. It looses the tethers tied to our dancing feet by our unaware urges.

Moreover, it does not take years of therapy to begin to reveal the decisions through which we forged our personal narratives. A consideration of our “earliest memories” of noticing socially significant difference (class, colour, gender, religion etc) can quickly yield potent memories. I have done exercises of this kind hundreds of times in a variety of group and individual situations.

An examination of these simple questions, with the support of skilled “helper”, invariably yields material that re-surfices our past decisions. We quickly unearth experiences which taught us that the world was divided into categories of people, each with associated qualities, each hierarchically
ordered. The invitation was to agree (a) that we are separated (b) that each group has distinctive characteristics (c) that one group is better than the other and (d) to locate ourselves accordingly. Hence, an experience of being encouraged by parents to fear a mentally-ill neighbour invites us to (a) separate “mad” from “sane”, (b) associate “mad” people with danger and “sane” people with safety, (c) accept the superiority of “sane” people and (d) associate ourselves with the “sane” group.

Faced with thousands of such invitations, we develop our “signature gait” - our ingenious, creative individual response to dancing with fear, anger and guilt-inducing situations. Everyone experiences repeated invitations, but how they respond varies. Every time we respond by submerging unbearable emotions we increase our store of out-of-awareness information, our tendency to project and the likelihood we will become beguiled by our projections as they appear “in the world”. Our “occult pain” thus comes to dominate our perceptions of the world.

Once projections have been accepted as reality we have a curious situation: the individual interacts with his projection onto another individual, not with that person. Groups do the same thing. But shadow-dancing with the projected contents of our own mind is a poor substitute for really meeting the “other” in the present moment. When the “other” responds in kind, consenting to, and colluding with, this situation, we have a perfect two-step: projection, counter-projection. This happens between individuals, and between groups.

Illusion can proliferate endlessly through projection and counter-projection. This is often the more comfortable choice of both parties, no matter what the apparent form of the relationship. You think I’m stupid, because secretly you fear your own “stupidity”; I think you’re smarter than me because you have power, and I do not – a fact I justify by disowning my own intelligence - and I resent you for it. We dance the dance of tacit or angry collusion (mutual accommodation or mutual destruction). To interrupt and challenge these perverse dances of collusion is push to the surface that which was hidden for a reason that seemed compelling at the time.

However, the thesis of projection and counter-projection also contains the promise of escape: using use my decision-maker differently, I can my mind about the “reality” with which I think I am interacting. If existence is indeed holographic, an individual decision-maker may, paradoxically, have more power than we think to transform reality globally.

**Projecting and Counter-Projecting Diversity**

Diversity dances are rich in collusion due to the perception and experience of power inequalities with attendant emotions of guilt, anger and fear based upon superiority and inferiority. Race, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, religion and other diversity characteristics are hierarchically ordered delineators of difference. Much of what the world offers in relation to them invites us to see “this” as better than “that, and to form our identity in relation to those same lines

I am not saying the world is only characterised by division, separation and hierarchy. But unless one is very determined, it is not easy to detect messages saying “this is of equal value to that”, much less “this cannot be without that because together they are one”.
The choreographic forces arising from the lived experience of diversity can be deeply uncomfortable. If I fall the “wrong” side of a line of judgment, I am invited to defensiveness, self-hatred or anger; if I fall the “right” side I am invited to supremacy which must be defended, or guilt which cannot be assuaged. Fear of the “other” and righteousness about having been “wronged” are both features of this emotional landscape. I am bombarded with invitations that are perilous to negotiate.

To get more concrete, let me offer a coaching example:

Mairin is the client, one of the few senior women in her organisation; Steve the coach. Mairin is facing what she perceives as sex discrimination from her peers. She starts to get spikey and unco-operative in coaching sessions because unconsciously, she projects onto him: she feels victimised because of her gender, he is a “soft target”. The unbearable feeling is humiliation. It is a common phenomenon that those who are victimised frequently feel ashamed themselves – though they appear to have done nothing wrong. Mairin is not consciously choosing this strategy, she just feels out of sorts. She feels the humiliation only long enough to trigger the intra-psychic mechanism learned from the past. If asked about it, Mairin might deny everything – or justify her behaviour toward Steve on the grounds that he’s a man and could not possibly know how it feels. Ironically, her underlying impulse out- or at-the-edge-of- awareness, is to attack Steve so he can feel the pain and humiliation instead of her.

Steve has received Marin’s invitation to dance. Now he has to decide how to respond. If he decides to make Mairin’s projection real by accepting her invitation uncritically, he will no doubt collude with her in a counter-projection dance. In order not to do so, Steve will have to be self-aware and deft in his footwork. There are a number of possible collusive two-steps in this case, of which the following are just two:

- Steve feels injured. Deep down he feels guilty about what men do to women. Projected, this guilt looks like Marin attacking him. So he attacks back, using his status as “coach-man” to confirm Mairin’s victim status. He faces her down, telling Mairin (in code) that she is weak and needs to shape up in the corporate environment. He invites her to be more like him – to take a “male” strategy to see off her detractors.
- Steve finds the idea of being associated with Mairin’s persecutors (macho or sexist men) too much for him (unbearable guilt); he needs to see himself as blameless, so projects his feelings outwards. Using covert footwork, he depicts Mairin to himself as innocent victim, not of him (a “good” man), but of “other, bad, men”. Making himself superior to them by feeling pity for Mairin (more manageable than anger of fear) he is more comfortable. He uses his powers of “empathy” and charm to persuade her that he is not like the “other” men persecuting her: he is the “good” man who can save her from them. Note that, in reducing other men to less than his equal, he has done the same to Mairin.

Note that both these options demand that Steve first divide himself - between the “harder” and “softer” man – and then privilege the one he finds more acceptable: intra-psychic inequality is perfectly mirrored in inter-personal inequality.
In the world of tangibles, by contrast, note that none of this is an indicator of whether or not Mairin is actually being discriminated against in the first place. But, whether or not she is, the mechanism of inequality is a live choreographic force. Let us say the discrimination is occurring: with Steve's collusive support, Mairin could win a sex discrimination case, and both coach and client could feel vindicated with their projections and counter-projections intact. Remembering the unitary nature of mind, this interpersonal collusion helps keep intact the collective social collusion with gender-based inequality, despite an apparent “victory” at the level of social equality.

That is not the kind of coaching I am reaching for. If we are one, then mind is also one. And everything we think and do arises from and affects that mind: our decision about how to think and act can either work with the impulse to heal and be whole (the mind of oneness); or it can bury our wound still deeper beneath new layers of grievance, fear, pain and denial (the mind of duality and separation).

In our example, the surface victory (winning the sex discrimination case) is, I believe, a diversion from the main action. I honour that victory as a step forward in the world. But I want to ask for so much more from (and for) my coaching relationship. I want to know what would happen if I were to refuse to collude with my own, and the client’s, projections. What would happen if I insisted upon working with my client from a point of view of deep equality?

Dancing in Deep Equality

Our “Dancer’s Tale” hinted at a process by which an individual sculptures his being-in-the world through the self-activity of his own mind/body in relation to others. The concept of self-and-other so formed is layered and complex. How do we use the very self which has been built up through the interplay of shadows and light and layers of illusion to unfold the same? How do we grasp the ungraspable? If doing this solo seems an impossible task, doing it in relationship with another (coach, mentor, therapist) makes it at least worth attempting.

“That’s all very well”, I hear you say, “but even if I accept your proposal, what does it mean for me professionally? What should I do differently?” At which point I am compelled to ask myself: What would I include in the Dancing with Diversity Instruction Manual? What competencies make it possible to be genuinely helpful, non-collusive and of real service?

At this point I must stand squarely on my own experience. I have worked in and studied diversity for nearly three decades. I have had a passionate interest in equality and justice all of my life, and consequently acquainted myself with the struggles of social groups for freedom from oppression. This is an essential part of the competence I bring to my work. And yet it is only recently that I have come to live the truth that working effectively with diversity “out there” means dealing with, and healing, it “in here”. This was made possible by personal experience which persuaded me of the essentially transpersonal nature of reality, and – critically – the need to integrate this realisation into my professional life. I am essentially at the start of that journey.

I make sense of the development of my current approach to diversity as a five-step process. I believe this process is worthy of your contemplation. Take for yourself what makes sense, and discard the
rest. It is not a universal prescription. You neither have to take the steps in order nor wait for the completion of one step to go to the next. For me the steps work together, intertwining to form a strong, supportive rope, drawing me on. These five steps crystallise what is a dynamic, unfinished trajectory of professional development, which has so far led to greater effectiveness in service of my clients.
**Step 1: The Mind Of Oneness**

For me, this learning came last, but it is logically first. Allow yourself to believe that both you and others are facets of a perfect unitary web of life. There is nothing wrong with you, nor with anyone else. This belief establishes the mind of “oneness”. This mind is open to the infinite unknown of the transpersonal realm.

Whenever you see yourself or others as fragmented, conflicting and competing, you both make and believe a reality in which there is something wrong with you and/or others. This is the mind of “duality”, which feeds upon the dynamics that beset diversity. However, what the mind of duality perceives must not dismissed out of hand: just as it seems real to you, it seems real to others. This mind is where the entire history and dynamics of diversity sit, and where the dance of diversity is played out. Honour these perceptions – but keep in contact with the mind of oneness, staying free of the idea there is something wrong with you/others. Allow that mind it to guide you.

Whatever personal, professional or spiritual, practice you employ to get in contact with, and receive guidance from, the mind of oneness, do it consistently. The more you practice, the more real it will become to you. The attitude of deep equality springs from the mind of oneness.

**Step 2: Personal Archaeology**

This “step” has lasted my whole lifetime – but only recently have I approached it with the mind of oneness, and with profound effects.

Keeping contact with the mind of oneness, look deeply into your own “diversity history”. It is important not to approach this history with the mind of duality and judgment because doing so will result in self- and other-hatred. Going back as far as memory permits, lovingly excavate and examine life experiences relating to diversity: age, caste, class, disability, ethnicity, religion, sex/gender, sexual orientation, migration – whatever was prominent, and whatever was hidden, in your life. Discover your diversity “hotspots”, and “no-go zones” – places where you experienced pain, guilt, anger, fear, loss. It is likely you will also discover positive experiences, which you can include in your learning. You can do your digging alone, but it is safer and more powerful to share it with your coach/mentor or supervisor. Treat your history, particularly its barbed moments, gently and forgivingly. Do not give in to, but consciously release, guilt or anger about the past. It is over.

**Step 3: Session Preparation and Review**

Before every single coaching or mentoring session, consciously step into the mind of oneness. Afterwards reflect upon the diversity content of the session and review how you responded to it – were you invited to dance? Did you collude, or did you dance with awareness?

**Step 4: Spot the Invitation...**
When you are with your client, notice all the aspects of diversity in the space: those that are spoken and those that are not; those that seem important, and those that do not. Whether or not diversity is the topic of the dialogue, proactively ask questions *internally* such as:

“What am I being invited to think and feel about [colour, sex, class, disability etc.] in this moment?”
“What type of dance is this? What projections or counter-projections are present?”
“What would collusion look like in this dance?”
“What would a loving refusal to collude look like?”
“What wants to be revealed here?”
“How can I be helpful?”

Whenever you touch a diversity “hotspot”, an invitation to a collusive dance is present. You will know this from your emotional response. For example, your client – a white person – complains of a culture of “fear” in which they “can’t say” what they think for fear of being accused of racism. This is the moment to return immediately to Step 1 – at the time when you are least likely to do so! However, unless you do, whatever your colour, it will be very hard to avoid entering a collusive two-step. Once you are back in touch with the mind of oneness, you can start to ask the questions listed above.

*Step 5: …and Learn to Listen*

Learn to discern the guidance the mind of oneness offers you from the advice given by the mind of duality. The mind of oneness does not shout, never employs fear as a weapon and always points to a better outcome for all concerned – the client, you and anyone else involved. This is the opposite of what the mind of duality teaches about diversity - lessons of inequality, separation, conflict and fear. In the example above, depending upon your own history, you may be advised by the mind of duality to align with a camp: for, or against, political correctness. Follow that temptation and you are lost – spinning away in a collusive choreography. Gently turn away from it, and allow the mind of oneness to guide your understanding and your responses, and you will remain fully available. And truly useful.