



The four realms of **nowhere**

by a nowhere catalyst

There were 13 of us. We had been working together for a year on the inspiring-innovation training programme. Now we were sitting in a circle in a room dating back to the thirteenth century in a retreat near Oxford. Focusing on a single breakthrough question, we were spending two days in creative dialogue and then a day making sense of the experience.

The first words seemed like a pebble being dropped into a still pond in the space between us. I noticed my immediate visceral response to the words and then my brain catching up, noticing what lay behind the words and what unfolded from them – so many possible lines of enquiry and yet none moved me. So, in between the words, we sat in the silence and waited for the next pebble.

And so it went on. Some pebbles created ripples and some sank without trace. And gradually a sense of the flow seemed to emerge. I felt as if I knew when the flow was with me. Each of us, at some point in the dialogue, knew we had the flow and, in that moment, we had to choose whether to give it our voice. Or not.

Patterns of flow started emerging. Some words were following the flow and others were seeking to describe and explain our shared experience. And so each thread would come to its natural energetic climax and then we would again be left in silence.

At one point I was overcome by a sense of both the intense joy and the deep sadness of life and felt my eyes filling with tears. At another point I felt I was seeing through what was being said to the elegant pattern that lay underneath. And emerging through this was the sense that I was held, that we were all being held, by something bigger than all of us.

After two days of exploring through dialogue we spent a day trying to understand what had happened. Time had a different quality. We were now working to a specific deadline. The listening was different. There was less silence and a growing sense of excitement that we were onto something. Slowly a shared sense of meaning emerged and crystallized into a model of our experience together.

This experience has stayed with me. At home it has slowed down the way I listen to my wife and my teenage children. I'm more aware of my assumptions. As a family we have had conversations about creating holidays that excite all of us – exploring our likes and dislikes until 'our' perfect holiday emerges. At work it has enabled me to be still and wait for breakthrough ideas to emerge and not to get triggered by disagreements but just probe underneath them. I'm more aware of when a line of enquiry feels right and I have the confidence to follow that instinct.

