



Finding refuge: A travelling 'Tree of Knowledge'

by Alikí Meimaridou

Alikí Meimaridou is a Greek therapist and supervisor who previously worked at clinic offering medical care and psychosocial support for victims of ill treatment in Cairo. Alikí 'met' narrative therapy a few years ago and has developed a passionate interest in practising it and getting to know more about the various ways it can be applied. Alikí can be contacted c/o aliki.meimaridou@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper traces the journey of a 'Travelling Tree of Knowledge'. It represents an endeavour to identify, honour and exchange knowledge about what sustains interpreters who have previously been refugees and who are now working with refugees. Emerging from the author's engagement in narrative therapy, it details a budding practice of documentation and exchange.

Key words: *collective documentation, refugees, enabling contribution*

This project holds a special place in my heart. Canvassing the development and sharing of a collective document, this paper identifies and honours a range of wisdoms and knowledges of refugees. Originating in Cairo and then migrating to Greece and Serbia, this project has stretched across diverse contexts.

Where this project began

In my work at a clinic offering medical care and psychosocial support for victims of sexual violence and torture in Cairo, I was responsible for supervising a team of interpreters. With many of those accessing the clinic coming from Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, interpreters from these diverse linguistic backgrounds are required. These interpreters are themselves often refugees and occupying precarious positions. Reporting that local people in Cairo mistreat them on grounds of their foreign ethnicities, many interpreters shared with me challenges in getting a job, securing a house and making a living. In contrast, the clinical psychologists and doctors are most often from Egyptian heritages, whilst expatriate supervisors are most often of Western origin, coming from European countries with advanced educational backgrounds. Coupled with organisational rules which see the role of supervisors, clinical psychologists and doctors accompanied by significant power and authority, these considerations create complex and sometimes fraught power relations in teams. At the same time, water politics and long-standing disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over building a dam in the Nile are also significant factors in shaping experiences of Ethiopian and Sudanese refugees and interpreters. Many people in Egypt, heavily reliant on the Nile for agriculture and drinking water, fear that the dam will decrease their water supplies. However, many in Ethiopia and Sudan claim that the 'Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam' will generate a fairer share of Nile waters.

Re-positioning - Coming alongside

Considering the powerful position I occupied as a supervisor and the issues described above, I actively tried to attend to re-positioning myself 'alongside' interpreters rather than remain 'above' them. In doing so, I tried to communicate my intentions in supporting them in their work and to convey that I experienced them as valued colleagues. These efforts included:

- inviting interpreters to general staff and case discussion meetings,
- encouraging interpreters to suggest ways their daily work could be improved,

- presenting interpreters with the current challenges of the project and asking for their thoughts and feedback,
- organising regular meetings of the interpreters and providing time for them to discuss issues arising from their work,
- requesting feedback about my role and what they need or are missing from it.

Acknowledging particular relations of power and making efforts to re-position myself alongside interpreters seemed to have hopeful effects and the group started sharing their concerns with me. At times, I wondered how this might affect my supervisory duties. I quickly discovered, however, that not only did this re-positioning not hinder my role and the successful delivery of services, it assisted them.

Why a collective narrative practice?

After some time, the group of interpreters began discussing with me the problems they were facing. These included how their situation as refugees made them feel unwanted, hindered them from enjoying life and social interactions, and how racism and abuse often tried to talk them into thinking less of themselves and that they did not deserve better treatment. Some of the interpreters were also facing the effects of long-standing sadness and feelings of desperation that attempted to stop them from pursuing their hopes and dreams in life. When I heard these stories, the idea of creating a collective document (Denborough, 2008) came to mind as I considered:

- That there must be a set of responses they have been making to these hardships which have been 'neglected' or 'forgotten' somehow in the face of problems. I wondered how these responses might be connected to families and cultures and thought about how developing a 'double memory' including not just the problems faced but also buried skills and knowledges, might be helpful in enhancing peoples sense of agency (White, 2004).
- How these problems were not just personal but were representing a social issue facing communities of refugees in Cairo (Denborough, 2008). As such, unearthed knowledges would be of benefit to people, both personally and collectively.
- That providing opportunities for people to make contributions to the lives of others by sharing knowledges and skills might alleviate some of the isolating effects of the problems being faced.

Introducing collective documentation

Meeting with the group, I gave a brief explanation of what engaging in a collective narrative documentation project could look like. I explained that nobody should feel in any way obliged to participate, and communicated that even those who only wanted to listen would be welcome. I said that I would be facilitating discussions by asking some questions aimed at bringing forth the ways that each one of them has learnt to respond to difficulties. I was also clear that this was in no way related to their usual work duties but rather something that might be of help in the concerns and challenges they had been sharing with me. I spoke about collective narrative documentation and gained permission to share the outcome of our work.

The group discussion – A picnic

When I asked if the team had any ideas about how we could organise this discussion, someone suggested that we could do this during a picnic after the end of the working day. Everybody agreed to this idea, and as such we found ourselves sitting in the garden of the clinic in a circle, with snacks, drinks and items people had prepared themselves. It was in this way we started talking. I began by asking them to see me as a messenger, as someone who would be able to share and exchange skills and knowledge that we documented with other people who were in similar situations.

In the first part of the discussion, I asked the team questions around their understandings of the political and social context of their experiences. These questions included: 'What are your ideas about why you might be facing such difficulty here?' and, 'How is this occurring?' It was in response to these questions that the dispute over the Nile dam was described. I said, 'It sounds like a difficult situation to live with. May I ask a bit more about how you manage this?', and then began to ask questions aimed at generating information in line with developing a 'double memory'. In doing so I was guided by the questions that Denborough (2008) suggests:

- What is the name of a special skill, knowledge or value that sustains you or your family through difficult times?
- What is a story about this skill, knowledge or value: a story about a time when this made a difference to you or to others?
- What is the history of this skill, knowledge or value? How did you learn this? Who did you learn it from?

- Is this skill or value linked in some way to collective traditions, familial/community and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledges are linked? (p. 29).

Often as people started to respond to these questions they began to go off track, usually by talking about specific events of aggression they had faced or their sadness and anger about them. At those times, I would give time to what they were sharing and acknowledge the significance of these, and then try to reconnect them to the purpose of our meeting by saying something like, 'That sounds like a scary situation ... I was wondering what kind of skills, from the ones you described to us before, or others, you used in that situation? Where have you used such skills before? Or have you seen someone else using these skills?'

Laughter and teasing was also part of the discussion! We all laughed about how one of us is always on their phone at work and the group teased them by saying that the phone is an 'extension of their hand' and as such this is their favourite skill! It was through such 'laughing breaks' that we actually discovered more skills, for instance the way the group supports each other as a team, even by something as simple as making jokes, so that others who might feel a bit down-hearted can laugh.

Preparing the document and sharing it with the team

As I had to leave Cairo shortly after this meeting, I informed the group that I would share the documented discussions through email. Although I would have preferred to share it and get feedback in person, everybody received a copy at a team meeting and their feedback was sought. Surprisingly, the group believed that it was a complete reflection of what we had discussed and they had no corrections or additions to suggest. You can find a copy of this document below.

Finding Refuge

Sharing and even crying

Living in Cairo as a refugee is not easy. Especially if you are from Ethiopia, it gets more difficult because of the long political conflict between the two countries. They do not welcome us here. I had to move houses all the time because the landlords would suddenly increase the rent to force me out. They look at us as if we are not normal. When we have to live in a situation like this, it becomes a routine, something like a way of living. And every now and then, it feels like it is getting too much. At those times, some of us want to share our feelings with a friend and try to find a solution with them. We want to share with someone, because sharing helps. If we cry too, we feel much better. If we keep it in, we get a headache and our body might hurt.

Listening to my favourite song and believing things change

Listening to my favourite song always calms me down. I have one specific song that I listen to when I am sad or stressed. It is a soft and sentimental song. I take time for myself and listen to this music while I think and say to myself 'it will pass'. It is hopeful to believe that hard times will pass and things can change. I remember music is something important in my culture, and also important for me personally.

Walk and talk to someone

When it gets too much, I invite a friend to go out. We walk a lot, and at the same time we talk. I find it comforting to have someone listen to me. At the end of this walk, we sit somewhere for a tea and continue talking about more positive things. After that, I go home with a 'lighter heart'. It all goes back to how I remember life in my community and knowing that it helps to connect to others.

Feeling clean

Living here can be very isolating. We cannot socialise with local people because they think less of us. When we become stressed or think too much, it helps to stop doing anything else and just take a shower... it is like the water takes away with it all the bad energy. Feeling clean, fresh and then changing clothes is like we are new and fresh. Even back at school, when reading a lot or having a heavy mind, I remember how it helped to pause, take a shower and change clothes. Also, talking to a friend after that helps a lot. It is friends who are a bit older than us and who have been through the same difficulties, who gave us this skill.

Talking to a tree

In the supermarket they ask, 'Where are you from?', and they often get aggressive when we say we are Ethiopian. They shout, 'You want to steal the water of the Nile from us!' Sometimes they throw stones at us in the streets. They make fun of us, trying to speak in our own language but in a ridiculous way. When I have something stressful like that in my mind, I prefer not to talk to someone. Back home, I used to go and talk to a tree. It was a tall tree, with purple flowers, in the yard of my home. People find it funny, but for me it works. Often, I would hug the tree in the end. My family knew, when they saw me there, that something was wrong. I learned this from my older sister and I remember her sitting in the grass, under a tree, with something to drink and a book to read. She would do that alone and take time for herself. Whenever we saw her there, we knew that she was sad about something and wanted to be alone.

Dancing

Since we came here, we think a lot. There are many problems for us and the main worry is how to survive, how to find a job, how to cope with the hostility people sometimes have towards us. At times, when it gets too hard, I have to decide what to do. I usually don't prefer to talk to someone as friends always say 'it will be okay', and things like that. I prefer to dance. To go somewhere nice, meet new people and dance. I remember from my country, dancing is what can make you happy! Weddings and other moments of joy where people would gather, dance and laugh, these things were the antidote to stress and sadness. Besides, some things are difficult to say, or even forbidden. But dancing is easy, it takes no effort, just joy!

Taking 'quiet time' and sleep

As we grow up and become independent adults, we learn ways to cope with situations. Solutions have to come from inside us. This is something our families taught us. We should accept that in life, problems exist. Some of us, when we have a problem, we need a quiet environment to think, to give time to ourselves. Other times, it helps to get some deep sleep. When I do that, I wake up with a solution, calmer and more confident that I can cope. Everything is clearer after some sleep.

Not forgetting the other side of the story

We were forced to leave our countries because of the problems there – poverty, violence and fear. Apart from the negatives of life here, we have to accept the truth and not forget the other side: This country hosted us and took us in during a very difficult time of our lives. Thinking that can help some of us feel better about the situation.

Taking pride and comfort from our work

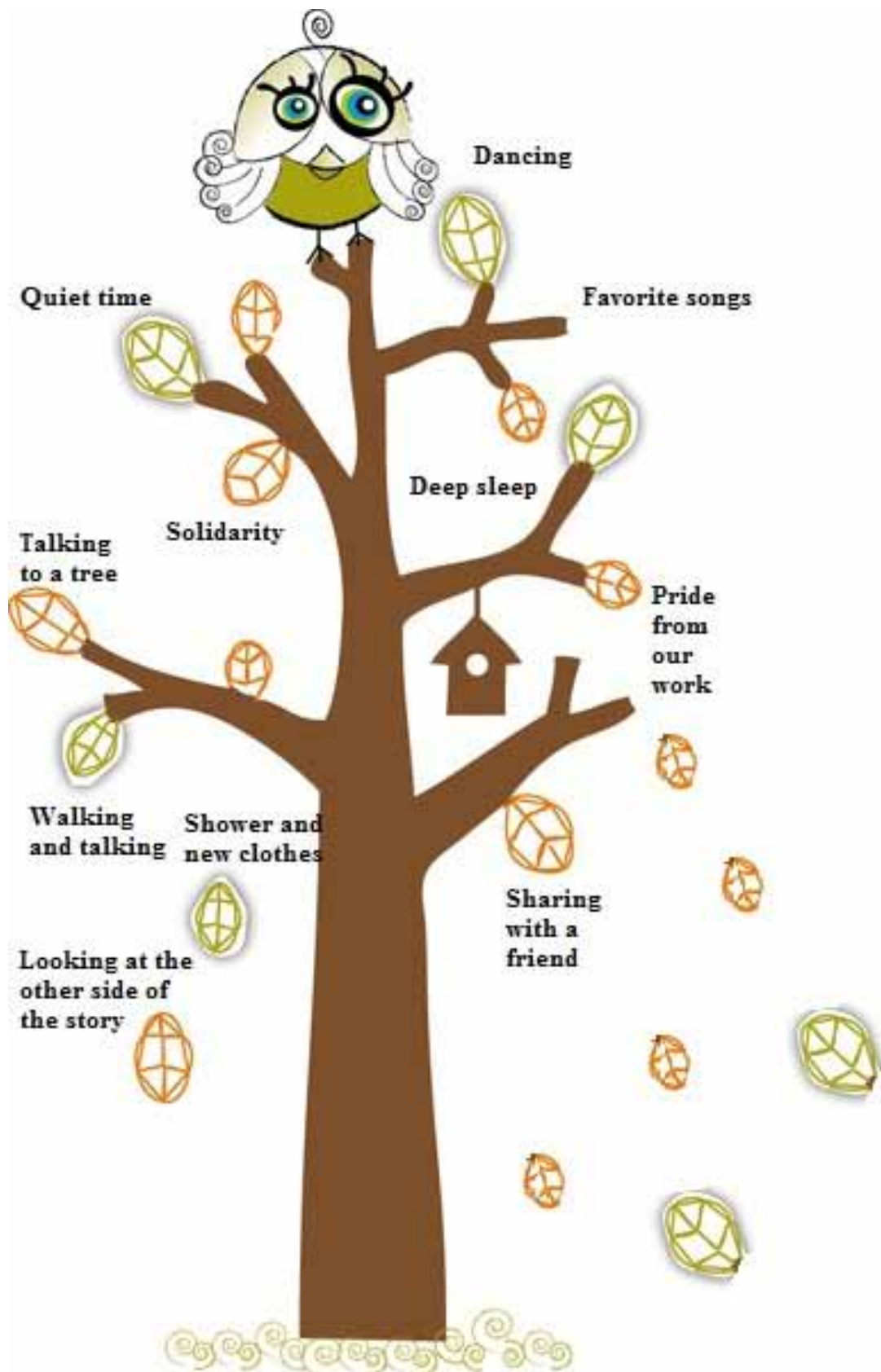
Our work here as interpreters offers us comfort and pride. We feel happy that we can contribute to assistance and care given to people from our countries. It can also get heavy on us, as their stories are so similar to our own, and we often get really sad to translate those stories to the clinical team. We also get sad if people cannot get the help they seek here, it brings tears to our eyes to see them feeling so desperate. The happiness is greater though when we see people relieved from their pain somehow. It is like there is a scale and this gives some balance to our suffering.

Solidarity and helping others

In our countries and within our families we were taught the importance of respecting all people. This we grew up with. We learnt to respect and offer help and care to foreigners and people in need in our community. Solidarity, towards all people, is an important value where we came from. We live our lives trying to honour this value, despite the fact that it is not something we meet here all the time. Sometimes, I go inside the office and find everyone sitting there, quiet and serious, absorbed in their thoughts. I always then do something to cause some noise and make everybody laugh. We spend time laughing and it feels better. We try to support each other by talking together and by laughing together or by simply being there for each other!

Collecting all we have learned in one image!

As one participant had evoked the image of talking with a tree in times of difficulty, it seemed appropriate to use the image of a Tree of Knowledge to convey the groups' collective knowledge about what sustains us:



You can see that we left room for more ideas to be added to this tree of knowledge.

Enabling contribution - The travelling tree

During the picnic with the group, we also discussed the possibility of sharing the outcome of our meeting with people facing similar problems and wondered about the effects this might have. The group was very interested in this idea. To do this, I focused on a way to convene a definitional ceremony in which people could act as outsider witnesses and engaged participants at the same time (Denborough, 2008). The document was finally shared in two locations: Kos, a Greek island, and Belgrade, Serbia.



I used the following questions informed by Michael White's (2005) outsider witness process, to guide definitional ceremonies, and to facilitate these exchanges:

- 1. Identifying the expression:** *As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the document, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you?*
- 2. Describing the image:** *What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?*
- 3. Embodying responses:** *What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?*
- 4. Acknowledging transport:** *How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have? (p. 17)*

Kos, Greece: First sharing of the document

Two people working as interpreters in Kos (one of Greece's Dodecanese islands) were available for a definitional ceremony around the collective document. The team there was part of a project providing medical and psychosocial help to refugees arriving by boat. Both of the interpreters who witnessed the collective document were male, in their thirties, with one coming from Morocco and the other from Afghanistan, and who had originally arrived in Greece as refugees themselves. After some discussion with these two men, I spoke of the work we had recently completed in Cairo and invited them to read our collective document. I explained the training purposes involved and that they had no obligation whatsoever to do this unless they wanted to. I was not a direct supervisor of these interpreters and, as such, different power relations made it much easier to engage them in a 'friendly' context. I then explained a bit about the process and that I hoped to convey messages back and forth between them and those who had written the collective document, as well as invite new people in similar situations to participate in sharing knowledge about what sustains them. I also said that I would be facilitating the conversation with a set of questions that have been proven useful in forming messages that unearth forgotten knowledge.

As they read the document, both men became absorbed by it and they agreed that 'it left a sweet feeling in their hearts'. They were surprised that a group of people so far away 'had some of the same ways of relaxing and dealing with difficult situations'. I then wondered which of the words or phrases had captured their attention. One man said that:

'It reminded me of the situations I faced when I first came to Greece ... so many similar things ... when I didn't know the language, it was especially difficult for me. People looked at foreigners differently and I felt this. People have difficulty accepting strangers. Someone coming in a new country, he starts from zero, he has to count on himself, the State does not help.'

The 'talking to a tree' touched one of them more specifically and they said that:

'I really liked the idea of talking to a tree, it shows someone who is interested in looking into himself and improving himself if possible.'

After these initial comments, I wondered about any images that these expressions might have created. This seemed difficult for them to answer and I had to repeat the question.

'Image? I don't know, maybe of people living in a hostile environment, having to defend themselves, not giving up.'

'I have an image of people dreaming of a better future ... I like this ... It inspires me because that is how I want to think in my life.'

When I asked about what part of their experiences resonated with these expressions, each interpreter found this easy to answer. With almost one voice they said '*our own migration to another country!*' Both elaborated on this by saying that the document had them thinking back on their beginnings in Greece. When asked if and how they were moved by reading the document, one said that it got him thinking about the ways we all respond to our problems somehow and we must not forget that we can have an influence on them.

'I recognise their difficulty, I have been through that ... the way I found was to try to know the culture and learn the language. I was not discouraged by bad behaviours ... good and bad people are everywhere! An Arab proverb says, 'He who has good language, has everything'. When we are having difficulty, we must help ourselves, not making it more difficult by focusing on the bad things only. I am thinking now on how I should keep this opinion in my life.'

The second interpreter agreed with the above and only added that:

'Egypt is a difficult country, we all know this. I hope they stay strong. I am in a better situation now finally, but I shouldn't and I don't forget where it all came from.'

I was inspired by the encouragement they gave in response to the document and added their ideas and responses on the 'Tree of Knowledge' in blue letters.

Belgrade, Serbia: Second sharing of the document

Serbia is one of the countries along the journey many refugees take in trying to reach Europe. I have a work connection with a project in Serbia and it is interesting to consider that refugees who arrive in Kos often travel on to Serbia and, as such, the two teams might come across the same people, without ever knowing it! One interpreter participated in reading the document in Belgrade, a single mother of a six-year-old son, who has lived in Belgrade for the past eighteen months and is of Syrian origin. She has been working as an interpreter for several months now and

has heard many stories from people about difficult things they have been through before they arrive in Serbia. She was intrigued to learn what was written in the document and ‘a message coming from so far’.

The phrases that struck a chord for her were especially the first two in the collective document. She shared that:

‘They are, and especially the first one, so practical, close to reality, a quality I appreciate in my life in general. It is what I find helpful too. Although I sometimes prefer to avoid putting a burden on my friends ... Instead I prefer taking a piece of paper and writing ... just writing whatever comes to mind, feeling free, without worrying about mistakes or how I will express myself. And also nobody to worry about their reactions. The words about the song also caught my attention, I have favourite songs too that I listen to when I am not feeling well and it helps. There are some things, private things like music, that nobody can take away from us! They are forever ours! It brings me comfort to think that.’

The image that was created in her mind was of:

‘An African girl, putting lots of colourful decorations in her hair, you know that traditional hairstyle they do in Africa ... she is smiling, revealing her perfectly white teeth ... her eyes are sad. But her smile is beautiful and fills me with optimism.’

She explained that this image is related to a time she lived in the Fitzi Islands:

‘The people there changed my mind for beauty with their smiles transferring warm emotions and optimism. You feel they are light, not burdened by problems’.

Engaging with the collective document also had her thinking that she would like to focus more on acceptance and balance in life and not trying to ‘kill’ the pain. She went on to say:

‘You never know what life can bring. We have to accept and adjust to what life brings if we want to continue. Being here today got me thinking that this is the way to go. I learned this from my son you know ... he has been through so many changes, and I have to work so much, and

yet he patiently accepts that, trying to make the most of the time we have together instead of complaining all the time about it. I think acceptance is related to balance too, balance between worrying too much and not worrying at all. Because when you focus on ‘killing’ the pain, you also end up ‘killing’ the joy too, it is like anaesthesia. So, don’t hate anyone, don’t judge ... they are who they are ... anyone is. We have the option! Accept or get distance from it.’

I believe her responses represent another important contribution, one full of courage for life. In the same manner as the other interpreters, she responded in ways that might encourage other ‘recipients’ of the message. Her contribution to the tree of knowledge can be found in orange letters.



Next steps

I think of this project as an ongoing process and the present work as merely the beginning of more and more exchanges. The next stage of 'The Travelling Tree' is the 're-telling of the re-telling' with the initial group in Cairo which is yet to occur. I am looking at identifying other groups or individuals for further sharing to be explored, and of course any suggestions are more than welcome!

Acknowledgements

This would not have been possible without the invaluable openness, sincerity and heartfelt sharing of the people who contributed to the creation and the travels of the tree. This includes participants in the groups and supervisors who embraced this effort and showed a willingness to consent to a new way of sharing that they hadn't met before.

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