

A DIFFERENT WISDOM
Reflections on
Supervision Practice

GUIDE TO SUPERVISION VOLUME 1



PENNY HENDERSON

 ROUTLEDGE

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Reflections on Supervision Practice

Penny Henderson

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This book contains some stories to show vividly how the supervision I have received has influenced me, and how much I have learnt from my own supervisees. These experiences have formed the heart of my learning, without which the book could not have been written, and I thank those concerned for permission to share them, and for our interesting exchanges as we debated them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Henderson is an accredited Counsellor and Supervisor, and Fellow of BACP. Her career has encompassed many years of Open University work as a tutor and tutor-counsellor, developing adult learning materials, and institutional research. She has been a training officer in Social Services, offering in-service and group work training there, and then a staff counselling service. Her self-employed work, in addition to counselling and supervision, has included consultation to organizations and teams, and development of training materials for group work, exam anxiety, experiential training methods, counselling in Primary Care, and supervision. She is the author of many articles, chapters, and books on these topics.

For over a decade she has also been involved in education for medical students, and latterly in supervision of doctors.



Introduction

I have a favourite fountain in the University of Cambridge Botanical Gardens, which has five spouting upright features from which the water falls into a small pool of water, made turbulent by it. This is edged with a ring of steel, and then there is another larger circle encompassing the whole, which has still water in it, some water plants for oxygenation, sometimes a duck paddling and seeking food hopefully. A low, wide wall encircles the whole, around the top of which children sit, skip, or march. Supervision can be like the outer layer, a separate reflecting space, offering a sense of being contained, holding what might otherwise spill over the edge. A gardener there told me that the ring of steel had to be inserted after initial building, because, like a supervision contract, it stops the turbulent water from disturbing the roots of the oxygenating plants and the reflective space. Positioned on the wall that also buffers what is within, a supervisor of supervision can get an overview of systems and a perspective on details as well as the whole, despite being at a distance from the experience of the turbulence.

Counselling supervision is generally defined as a space offered by one practitioner to another, in which an account of therapeutic work is given and reviewed. It is an educative, co-operative and

rigorous process, useful when permeated by encouraging professional values.

Proctor's definition (1997, p. 192) is widely used:

A working alliance wherein the counsellor can offer an account or recording of her work, reflect on it, receive feedback, and where appropriate, guidance. The object of this alliance is to enable the counsellor to gain in ethical competence, confidence and creativity, to give the best possible service to her client.

A core aim of supervision is that the supervisee feels enabled to ask for what they want and need, without shame or intimidation. At best, this entails a sense of partnership, so that supervisees also share responsibility through preparation beforehand, reflection afterwards, and playing a part in negotiating and sustaining the working alliance. Supervisees need practice to give a coherent summary account of a session, incident, or relationship. When the supervisee feels stuck or emotionally challenged s/he needs support to take the risk to be honest. A key issue for both supervisor and supervisee is to keep our hearts and minds open as we continue in the work, by dint of "fearless compassion, the courage to both speak the truth and yet do so with respect and compassion for the other" (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006, p. 220).

Effective supervisory work is built on a foundation of agreement about pragmatics. Practitioners are encouraged to get the beginnings and endings in supervision right so that power is equalized as much as is realistically possible, and agreement is negotiated on focus, style, mode, and balance of work. Reviews and opportunities to speak the unspoken can be wrought into the fabric of the sessions in ways that invite the supervisee to take responsibility for their learning and practice. Any structure that can limit the negative impact of supervisee deference is welcome. Both supervisor and supervisee need to be clear that the work of the supervisor is in service of the development of the supervisee, and the best work with and for the client.

Playful seriousness, or possibly "serious playfulness", makes the work go well. Creativity, the use of all the senses, and the inclusion of rigorous reflection combine in differing measure depending on temperament and philosophy of supervision. This play space allows thoughts or feelings to emerge in service of the work.

Carroll (2001a) calls supervision “a way of life, a value system that drives us as much personally as it does professionally” (p. 78).

Sometimes, humour can help, too. When supervisees feel powerless I quote the late Anita Roddick, who wrote on a Body Shop leaflet: “If you think you are too small to be effective you’ve never been in bed with a mosquito”.

I find that metaphors can usefully capture an element of the work. For instance, Waskett (2006) describes supervision as “treasure hunting”, looking for the jewels that are in the unaware competence of the client and the counsellor, thus supporting the counsellor to become more aware of her inner resources to be in the work.

A safe and restorative space can sustain and support the emotional resilience of the practitioner in the teeth of challenging work, their personal reactions to it and to upsetting life events. Much supervisory writing highlights the importance of the supervisory relationship for satisfying and effective supervision. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) use Winnicott’s metaphor of a supervisor being “like the father ‘holding’ the nursing mother” to describe, vividly, the containment provided by a supervisor. Often, this is invisible emotional work by a supervisor who responds to the spoken and unspoken needs of the supervisee. This restorative function will be familiar to all readers who have had good supervision, and know the feeling of leaving a supervision session feeling emotionally lighter as well as intellectually or practically clearer. A primary bonus of this restorative function lies in encouragement, to give courage to the worker (Millar, 2007). This necessary containment is not just about emotion. It is also a result of explicit supervisory contracts and unambiguous lines of accountability, protocols for risk assessment, understanding of the legal and moral base for the work, and thought or audit about outcomes (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Keter, & Stone, 2004).

To offer a developmental space that is respectful of differing learning styles, the supervisor takes the stage of personal and professional development of a supervisee or a group of supervisees into account. This will encourage the emergence of a unique “internal supervisor” (see Glossary) in each supervisee. The supervisor may help the supervisee to sustain confidence, to grasp the realities of the context, and to appreciate the different contributions of members of a multi-disciplinary team.

Ethical and effective counselling work is supported by sharing an interest in monitoring this. Supervisors need to explore work and its consequences without attacking the self worth of the practitioner. "Supervision works best when it is respectful, collaborative and pragmatic", writes Waskett (2006). In the early stages of practice, it is a complex process, and a difficult yet necessary balancing act, to encourage supervisees while also helping them to identify the *limits* of their own competence. Specific feedback and both keeping a record of supervisory feedback helps supervisor and supervisee to monitor the competence demonstrated in both roles.

For experienced supervisors, supervision of supervision can be the most collegial, delightfully interesting, developmentally challenging opportunity, as pairs or groups wrestle with complex ethical dilemmas, or the risks of authentic and idiosyncratic relating, while respecting the boundaries of professional practice.

CHAPTER ONE

Building a strong foundation

“What we think we are coming for is not always what we need”

(Hewson, 1999, p. 77)

Contracts for supervision involve negotiation. Negotiated contracts create and sustain working agreements to suit both parties as they begin a relationship, or as they begin a session, and even as they change tack in the midst of a piece of work. For each eventuality the aim is to clarify whatever is necessary in connection with expectations, roles, and responsibilities, preferred methodology and desired outcomes. A new working relationship involves getting to know each other, to begin to build the trusting base for safety.

If the parties are willing to discuss their prior assumptions and hopes or fears, this can reduce the arena of undeclared expectations. Discovering how a supervisee chose me or was allocated to me, who made a recommendation, or in what other environments we may have met, sometimes hinted at items for further exploration about our hopes or fears as we began.

As the years go by and practitioners work with a series of supervisors, each may become more and more clear about what they do or do not want, and therefore more confident in negotiating about it. Flexibility is desirable, and, as the need for focus changes in a session, the existence of an explicit agenda and agreement for what the supervisee wants makes this more obvious. A review at the end of a session about what were the most and least helpful exchanges in the session highlights differing perceptions and gives feedback to the supervisor, and performs a really valuable shared monitoring function. A report of supervision research that made this enquiry (West & Clark, 2004) so impressed me that I arranged to include this in my future sessions as supervisor and supervisee.

First steps in creating a contract

Generally a potential supervisee makes the first contact by phone or e-mail, and the pair initiate some enquiries about whether it is possible to meet and work together, on the basis of available times to meet.

I have habitually offered a free first session, to see if we are compatible. Houston (1995) also recommends this, but others believe that, as this is work, they should be paid for the session.

I suggest we both bring a CV. This immediately provides considerable information for each of us, and clarifies that the choice goes both ways. In a recent beginning with a very experienced potential supervisee, as we each looked at the other's patterns of education and experience we could see writ large that I like to read and think and write, and she likes to work intuitively and reflect on experience. We could comment on this being something we would review in six months, if not before, to see how well we were bridging these different styles. It is also a useful reminder with trainees who might have a lot of experience in another role or setting that, although they may be full of novice feelings in this role, there are transferable skills to call on.

Proctor (1997), Hewson (1999), and Inskipp and Proctor (2001) all detail the pragmatics that initial supervisory contracts must address. Agreements need to include:

- form of supervision (frequency, timing, one to one, or group);
- focus and functions: that is, the desired balance between time spent on normative, formative, and restorative tasks (see Glossary for definitions of these terms);
- roles and responsibilities;
- pragmatics about an appropriate venue, payment, and the potentially difficult issues about missed sessions;
- clarity about to whom the supervisor is answerable, and for what;
- clients or other work to be brought, whether there is to be discussion about contextual matters like management of a waiting list, how many clients might normally be presented in the session;
- whether notes, tapes, videos, or transcripts of sessions are expected;
- what sort of preparation each considers useful and necessary for the process.

Where the supervision is paid for by an organization, clarity is essential about feedback to it, and when this may be required, such as in annual appraisals, or in an expectation to contact the organization if fitness to practise issues arise.

Where the supervisees are trainees, requirements for reports, relations with the course or placement, clinical responsibility for clients, and details about frequency of supervisions per number of hours seeing clients all need to be spelled out. Proctor calls this purpose and preference stating (1997, p. 194), distinguishing what must happen from what might.

If there is to be some flexibility on offer, such as the possibility of telephone calls or e-mail contact between sessions if required, there needs to be clarity about when that might suit, why it could be necessary, and what extra fee, if any, is to be incurred.

This long list indicates that the supervisor might need written prompts to remember to cover every element. Often, the process is not completed in one session, but enough must be done for the decision to be mutually made whether or not it seems right to begin. At the same time, a subtle dance of relationship building is progressing in the process of the negotiation, and that element is as important as the pragmatics for creating a safe learning and

reflection environment. Houston (1995) always encourages newcomers to go away and reflect after the first session, and then call after a few days to affirm a wish to continue. This makes clear that they are making a positive choice. Planning to review after three or six sessions also allows either party to decline to continue should they so wish.

This summary simplifies a complex process. Even in contracting about session lengths, some theoretical modalities work to a fifty-minute hour as therapists, while others choose to work to a sixty-minute hour. Do both people know how long an hour of supervision is to be? Not unless it is spelled out. Some training courses specify one supervision session to every six counselling hours, but is this those that the counsellor offers, or those that are taken up? How do cancellations and clients who do not attend count here? It might be useful to check the requirements of the organizations involved, as well as between the supervisory pair or group.

I have decided not to supervise someone after the contracting session only on rare occasions. Usually, it was because it became clear that the supervisee's learning style was too different from mine, and I could not discipline myself not to feel judgemental about it, or because I felt the course was unsound, or the supervisee was too unreflective and unaware of their limits to competence. King and Wheeler (1999) discovered that many experienced supervisors take the same route, and choose not to work with someone whose practice or potential they do not feel confident about. In my experiences, I knew I could not sustain my part in creating a safe space unimpeded by my judgemental preoccupations, and so it was better for the supervisee to seek another supervisor. With experience, I became willing to own it in this way, while also telling the person about what my difficulty was in relation to their learning or practice.

Psychological contracts

I have had supervisees who began with me after previously difficult experiences in supervision, and who thus conveyed a wish not to be challenged in any way that would feel like an attack. I had to earn the right to probe or push as trust grew, aiming to be sensitive

to what the supervisee could bear before becoming defensive or upset. I had one recently qualified counsellor from a poorly organized course who had managed to get through her whole training without presenting a client in the group supervisions. It took us almost six months, in which she gave me enormous amounts of details about each client so that I could barely comment, before she felt safe enough to tell me this, and say that she was terrified I would be unbearably critical of her work. Once that point was passed, the relationship was on a working footing at last.

Hewson (1999) uses the image of the iceberg to note that the supervisory pair must find out what is below the waterline if they are to stay sensitive to covert agendas. Sensitivity is important to pick up subtle shifts in expectations of each other. Courage is required to enquire about what such shifts might mean. "Parallel process" also occurs (see Glossary) when unconscious elements of the counsellor–client relationship are reproduced or enacted in the supervision or from the supervision back into the client–counsellor relationship. Contracts and regular feedback and reviews in relation to them are useful to disentangle personal agendas in the relationship from enactments of unspoken themes within the therapy.

How long is "too long" for a supervisory relationship?

How long can supervisees usefully stay with the same supervisor? (Henderson, 2003). In its early years, the British Association for Counselling (BAC) debated a two-year norm, at another time a five-year maximum, but neither was included in their original code of ethics for supervisors or put into the subsequent ethical framework. Two to three years is thought appropriate for trainees. For more experienced people, Inskipp and Proctor (2001) suggest "change every three years or so", though they emphasize that there is no ethical requirement to do so. However, informal discussions among supervisors, my current research project studying experienced practitioners, and my own experience, suggest that once supervisees are very experienced, especially when they are working in a specialist area, and particularly when they live in an area sparsely populated by supervisors, 10–15 years is not uncommon. Some supervisors confess that they will have to retire to be released from long-term

supervisees who are reluctant to let go. Since the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) includes some very experienced supervisors and supervisees and requires accredited members all to be in regular supervision, it is worth reflecting on how to stay lively in such supervisory work. A danger is that both rest comfortably on their individual plateaux, and the client or service is also the loser. An annual contract and review provides a vehicle for explicit conversations about what each party is learning from the relationship.

Inskipp and Proctor (2001, pp. 85–86) indicate that it is time for a change when any of these factors apply:

- starting work with a new client group, or in a new context which has different demands and challenges;
- becoming aware of a developing collusion, shared blind spots, merging perspectives, or the supervisor becoming predictable;
- moving locality or one of the pair retiring;
- becoming aware of serious mismatches between supervisee and supervisor;
- being promoted into a role with more managerial responsibilities, so the balance of needs from supervision changes;
- reaching a new stage of professional development—seeking new training or a supervisor who works from another perspective;
- personal development—seeking a different balance of challenge and support, or wish to work with a supervisor of another theoretical orientation, or gender, age, class, sexual orientation, or race;
- wishing to change from a group to one-to-one, or vice versa.

The supervisor has needs, too, and these are relevant to any decisions to change supervisees.

- To deepen expertise in specialist areas: this might lead to a longer span of work with a supervisee, or to seeking new supervisees from a speciality.
- To extend the variety of supervisory work, with supervisees of different genders, ages, or stages of development.
- To meet emotional needs for a new or different relationship.

Supervisors who insist a reluctant supervisee leaves because the supervisor is ready for a change can fear being seen as rejecting. This provides rich material for discussion about handling endings and relationships where each party wants something different.

Metaphors might signal what is happening emotionally in such supervisory relationships.

- Does the collegiality remind us of sibling relationships?
- Does it remain teacher–pupil, to the detriment of both?
- Does it become like a marriage, with predictable ups and downs, but deep intimacy?
- Does the increasing knowledge of each other lead to a relationship more like that of friends?

Certainly friendship can be one aspect of the relationship in long-term supervision, especially between peers. It behoves both to keep a sharp eye on the rigour with which they stick to boundaries for a useful working space.

The hazards of a too long relationship

Indicators to suggest the relationship has gone on for too long include fuzzy boundaries, boredom, predictability, and over-identification. Collusion can arise, avoiding being open about some thoughts or feelings, or assuming both feel the same. A prolonged idealization of the supervisor is not healthy, and there are dangers in feeling special. Page and Wosket (2001) assert that dependency over a long term indicates that the supervisor is failing to point out the degree to which the supervisee has his or her own wisdom. They think that the ethical principle of autonomy requires that when supervision has lasted “a number of years”, the supervisor should *actively* encourage supervisees to move on and find another supervisor, and face the discomforts—and opportunities—of letting go. Personal histories of abandonment or vulnerability might create such a strong wish to cling to the known person that other needs for development can be disregarded. It is also debatable whether or not it is more difficult to exercise supervisory authority: the power of familiarity is great, and both parties might slip into familiar interactions that could make it less likely that difficult issues are addressed. Challenge *can* occur effectively within an established

relationship. It can also come from meeting a new supervisor who can offer it from a new framework.

Sometimes, supervision persists because of a reluctance to travel further, or a lack of expectation that anyone else would be better, even when the current arrangement is not satisfactory.

The benefits of a long-term supervisory relationship

Mutual challenge and playfulness enable good supervision. The plus side of a long-term relationship comes from trust, familiarity, and building sufficient emotional capital for the relationship to survive uncomfortable conversations. Knowing each other for many years as unique human beings allows better assessment of risk during difficulties arising from life events such as bereavements, accidents, marital changes, and health crises. The supervisor may come to understand how people and systems affect the worker in a specific organization. The supervisor can encourage the supervisee to remember, in moments of gloom, how s/he has developed over the years. There can also be acknowledgement of the existential realities that inhibit or limit development.

Accompanying a supervisee on their journey of professional and personal development is very enriching, and a privilege. When it works well, the supervisor can understand the implications of an issue referred to in shorthand, like the allusions made by old friends, and the multi-layered nature, resonances, and implications of some of the supervisee's reactions.

To ensure a long-term supervisory relationship remains appropriate, the pair should usefully commit themselves positively to regular reviews, at least annually. In these, a learning focus can be named, probably for both of them for this relationship, leading to a shared commitment to monitoring and discussing progress. When the supervisee has a large caseload, it is up to the supervisor to plan these reviews, and ensure that they do happen. It is too easy to let the urgent push out the regular discipline of taking stock.

In addition, regular supervision of supervision might help the supervisor to notice issues they are reluctant to address. If the topic of ending becomes taboo or heavily emotionally charged, it is important to raise it, however uncomfortable, because there may be parallels in the supervisee's practice in relation to ending with clients. If either party is considering ending, it is important to say

so. If neither is, and it has been discussed in supervision of supervision, perhaps they should be positively encouraged to continue.

Issues about money

As I was listening soporifically to the radio one day, I heard about a London restaurateur who offers a menu with no prices at all, and asks customers to pay what they think is appropriate once they have had the meal. He relies on the quality of his product, on customer satisfaction after the meal, their sense of fairness, and, to a certain extent, guilt and embarrassment, to ensure his restaurant thrives, and so far it is doing well. It reminded me of Carl Rogers, whom I was told used to ask clients to pay him whatever their hourly earning fee might be, and he, too, trusted that he would thrive with a mix of high earners and poorer clients. He acknowledged that people are not necessarily straightforward in the emotionally laden arena that is payment for services. Some temperamentally overpay, others look for ways to justify withholding, some are oblivious to the extras they are receiving or carefully monitor that they are getting every “mouthful” of their just desserts. I have found it necessary to review my own arrangements to be paid for supervision at various points, and some of my assumptions underlying them, and still find that I “forget” initially to mention payment for missed sessions until it happens, and then feel caught in unprofessional behaviour and dilemmas about how to balance my need for predictable income with my reluctance to be paid for sessions that are missed, because I have not then “earned” it. Sometimes, insight about such “forgetting” is not enough, and it takes repeated coaching to shift such deeply held patterns or values.

Originally, I thought of the supervision payment as a flat fee that would cover all associated “services”. I set the fee higher than the hourly rate I charged for counselling, partly to take into account the greater time I routinely spent on preparation, and partly because it seemed a more “grown-up” activity to be engaging in, only available to the more experienced practitioner and thus worthy of a premium. I did assume it was worth more. I was startled, some years later, when a colleague said she charged less for supervision because she enjoyed doing it less, and as a counselling psychologist she thought she did much more preparation for clients. This made

me realize again how individually we approach even the most apparently straightforward rationale for decisions.

No market rate

I have found few references about money and supervision. Without good knowledge of what other supervisors charge, except for the fees described in the professional directories, there is little sense of being part of a community of supervisors who all might charge roughly the same, and thus create a local “market rate”. Peer group discussions can be very useful to share such details. Interestingly, powerful organizations such as the National Health Service (NHS), which pays for supervision for counsellors who work in a variety of settings, has, in my locality, set their own rate for reimbursement below current norms, and fail to keep pace with inflation, so the supervisee has to “top up” from her own pocket to meet whatever the supervisor charges or the supervisor has to charge less. Voluntary organizations struggle to pay a commercial rate, and usually expect supervisors to offer some reduction in recognition of their battle to sustain funding. Many supervisors offer a reduced rate for trainees. Generally, courses expect supervisors of student placements also to attend college meetings without pay for time or travel costs, even when no one else is paying for their time. Large organizations and salaried employees often do not recognize that the supervisor is offering a commercial service, too, and fees for attending meetings and providing reports are appropriate. Supervisors are entitled to clarity about what services are to be included in invoices and who will pay.

Payment for “extras”

Increasingly, I found that there were extra requirements depending on whom I was supervising. For instance, students on initial training courses, post qualifying training courses, or seeking accreditation, often sought support with written work or listening to tapes, which could be time consuming. I began to realize that I was making decisions “on the hoof”, which therefore did not allow supervisees to know in advance what costs they might incur if they requested extras beyond our normal time spent together, and which impaired the ethical basis of “justice” when I accepted payment

from one person who offered to pay, but not from another just because they did not offer.

My hardest challenge: short notice cancellations

My initial lack of system was most excruciating to me when people cancelled at short notice. Some assumed they would pay the whole fee, others offered half, a few expected not to pay at all, even if they had given me barely a few hours' notice. I would say, if asked, that they should pay half if they gave me minimal notice in advance, as I could get on with something else. Yet, if I had more than one cancellation in a day, which did happen on rare occasions, and especially close to Christmas, when people seemed more often to get ill or be overwhelmed with the pressures of life, I was left feeling that my calculations for my income were wrong, and so I noticed that I did have feelings and my own needs about this.

I compounded this confusion, as sometimes I wanted to be paid if I was feeling anxious about income, and sometimes not, because I had just been paid well for some other work, and felt calm about it. With some people it was easy to ask for the fee, for others my knowledge of their financial circumstances inhibited me and affected what I did. It took me some years to sort this out. A colleague who commented, "Plumbers don't ask before they hand you their bill", helped me. Eventually, it became important for me to be coherent and predictable and fair to all, including myself, but I can still catch myself being inconsistent with someone who will not pay, or cannot pay, or is simply disorganized about it. Now I can say later, "I made a mistake; this was our agreement." I do not have difficulty saying this once a supervisor has reminded me, yet seldom think of it myself.

This led me to develop an explicit document, outlined below. I consulted some peers for their comments and a view of their practice before giving it to my supervisees.

Supervision

Hourly rate: £40 per hour.

The hourly rate includes, from my point of view, planning and preparation, and reflection afterwards, completion of accreditation or re-accreditation reports, references for courses or jobs, and brief

e-mails or phone calls. That is, basically, anything that takes less than a quarter of an hour extra, and is occasional as well as our face-to-face time.

Normal financial arrangements for non-attendance: if you do not attend without prior contact, a full fee is payable.

If there is a cancellation with more than forty-eight hours' notice, no fee is payable, if less than forty-eight hours' notice, a half fee is payable.

Elements attracting an extra fee at the same hourly rate:

- planned telephone calls lasting more than fifteen minutes;
- planned e-mail exchanges in lieu of meetings due to illness / crises;
- feedback on course essays or audiotapes, or assistance by reading drafts of accreditation documents.

NB For a "monthly" supervision contract I expect that we will meet for a minimum of nine sessions a year, depending on holidays and health, and a norm of 10–11 sessions. If many cancellations occur during a year, it will be important for us to discuss the pattern and its implications, professional as well as financial.

Giving this out to supervisees was straightforward, and greatly improved the situation, but I still found I might forget to do so with a new supervisee and not notice until there was a difficulty, usually arising from a short notice cancellation. Old habits die hard.

Gifts

An extra element which is much more difficult to address in advance with a new supervisee relates to gifts to the supervisor. Some have brought gifts at Christmas, or gifts or flowers to say thank you for help after achieving accreditation or graduation, or as a kindness to me after an illness or operation. Others have brought cards. Many did not do either. This seems more common in female pairs of supervisor–supervisee, but some male supervisors have had a present or flowers, they tell me, though this is rare. I have not yet found a form of words that would clarify with supervisees that gifts are not expected or necessary, and perhaps not appropriate, without sounding pompous. It seems portentous to