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ISSUE Contents

Artist (front cover) Backstory  
**Patrick Slattery** ..... 2

(Senior) Editorial:  
**R. Michael Fisher** ..... 6

Teaching About the History of Fear  
**Peter N. Stearns** ..... 9

An Experiential Opportunity: Using Mindful Stories in the Mindful Consideration of Fear  
**Simon Bell** ..... 17

Fear & Fear Politics (2 Poems)  
**Bhawani Shankar Adhikari** ..... 31

Constant Cravings  
**Madelaine K. Joss** .....

From Fear to Action Research, to Enhanced Activism Using R. Michael Fisher's  
"Fearlessness" Research  
**Christine Legree** .....

A Rejoinder to R. Michael Fisher's Critique: "The Love and Fear Problem: A Response to  
Michael Bassegy Eneyo"  
**Michael B. Eneyo** .....

Fisher's Response to Michael Eneyo's Rejoinder  
**R. Michael Fisher** .....  
56

Fear in Bhutanese Nepali Diasporic Poetry  
**Ramji Timalisina** .....

Corona Virus (Poem)  
**Bhawani Shankar Adhikari** .....

Select Bibliography .....



# *An Experiential Opportunity:*

## *Using Mindful Stories in the Mindful Consideration of Fear*

Simon Bell

(UK)

### **Abstract**

In this article the issue of fear management practice is discussed in terms of the discourse around mindfulness and an experiential engagement is provided. The article describes two heuristics and then brings them together in a process which the author invites you to engage with. First, in terms of fear analysis, the heuristic for fear diagnosis called the Paradigm of Fear is introduced. PoF relates to concepts of Weapon, Target, Emotion, State. These are described in overview. Secondly, a heuristic relating to mindful assessments is reviewed, concepts of Meaning, Relevance, Value, Insight and Action are introduced. Following this, readers are invited to engage with a Mindful Story, a story which already contains the fear heuristic. Following reading the Mindful Story, the reader is asked to further engage with it using MRVIA and make their own personal assessment of their fear analysis and any reflections or actions which might arise. A discussion of the likely and useful outcomes of such assessment follows and finally, the paper closes with conclusions on the potential value of Mindful Stories in engaging with fearful situations.

### **Introduction and Background**

This paper is intended to provide an experiential engagement with a form of mindfulness as a means to engage with situations of fear and terror. In what follows I will briefly introduce two heuristics developed separately to consider:

- a. A pattern for fear weaponization: The Paradigm of Fear or PoF
- b. A method to using and assessing stories in order to enhance capacity for action: MRVIA

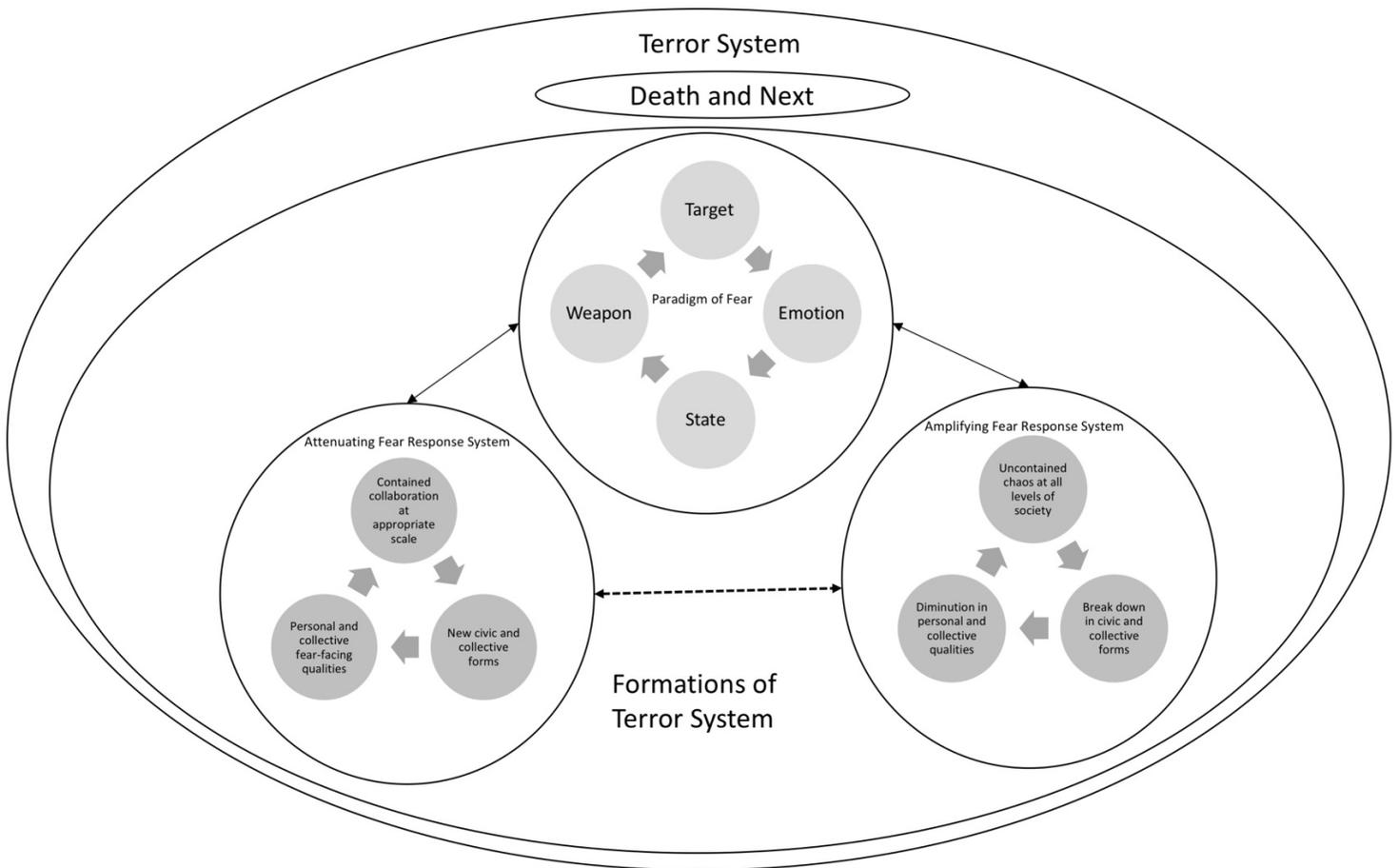
The intention is for this paper to be primarily an experiential learning opportunity and not a theoretical description. For this reason, the preamble to the experiential element is minimal.

### **The Formations of Terror**

In previous papers and articles (Bell, 2017, 2018 and 2019), Bell has described the emergence of the heuristic involved in the assessment of fear. The heuristic (referred to as the Paradigm of Fear, PoF) emerged from a comparative study of fear emergence in the climate

change debate in relation to fear as a social phenomenon noted in biological, social, anthropological, political and civic contexts (see: Adolphs, 2013, Becker, 2011, Bourke, 2015, Brown, 2011, Davis, 1999, Diamond, 2013, Eales, 2019, Fisher and Subba 2016, Furedi, 2006a and 2006b, Gardner, 2008, Gladwell, 2000, Glassner, 2010, Marshall, 2014, Phillips, 2015, Solomon, Greenberg, et al, 2015, Steimer, 2011 and Tuan, 1979 for an overview of this literature).

From a comparison of the direct experience of fear in the climate change arena and the literature addressing the fear phenomena a suggested heuristic, the Paradigm of Fear: PoF, emerged as a means to problem structure the fear phenomena. PoF as set in the wider Terror System is set out in Figure 1.



(Above) Figure 1. The Paradigm of Fear in the Formations of Terror System (Bell, 2017, page 233).

The PoF heuristic was intended as a means to assess a fear context by means of a series of diagnostic questions: If you are feeling fear,

- a. What (if anything) is being weaponised consciously or unconsciously?
- b. Is there an identifiable target for the weaponised fear?

- c. What, if any, emotion is being produced or resulting from this targeting?
- d. Is the emotion becoming normalised as a state of fear?

The Formation of Terror method proceeded to look at means to attenuate or amplify fear but that is not the basis of this paper. Key to the current work is the concept of the PoF heuristic, it is this which is explored in the mindfulness exercise.

## **Assessing Mindful Stories**

If fear is prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century living, then one important contemporary means to push back on this has been the advent of deeper senses of mental self-control. Core to this has been the literature on Mindfulness. Jon Kabat Zinn (Zinn, 2013) arguably set the high-water mark for self-help and Mindfulness is now well established as a powerful process to achieve personal and group clarity. Sam Harris (Harris, 2014) has shown in his book 'Waking Up', that 'no frills' Mindfulness without allusion to religious legacy is possible and powerful. Although there is now more push-back against the thoughtless acceptance of mindfulness as a self-evident good and, some claim it provides a basis for passive and accepting attitudes (a particularly spikey example is given in: *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* by Ronald Purser, (Purser, 2019) the experiential evidence of value is hard to deny. The at times contentious interest in the subject continues to animate wide diversities of exponents and a correspondingly intense interest and application by the general public.

Mindfulness is connected to a range of extremely interesting and related approaches which the use of mindful stories described in this paper draws upon. Nancy Marguiles (Marguiles, 2008) provided a means for groups and individuals to capture personal narratives by means of pictures and art. Nick Owen has written two superb books making use of metaphor and story as a means to help individuals get unstuck and move forward (Owen, 2001, Owen, 2009 ). The mindfulness practice included in this paper builds on both of these types of approaches, braiding them with the more narrowly conceived mindfulness literature.

Mindfulness is famously about removing the self. The approach to mindfulness adopted in the Mindful Stories (MiSt) approach set out in this paper takes a step back from this. The core of MiSt is to establish a 'safe place' for personal reflection by making use of fiction as a basis for progress. Mindful Stories are more about preparation for exploration rather than engaging in more formal types of mindfulness (such as that advocated by Zinn, Harris, etc.) or detailed change making. It can be noted that the area of priming individuals and groups as preparation for deeper analysis is covered in a range of books (e.g. those by Owen) but few make effective and nuanced use of fictions.

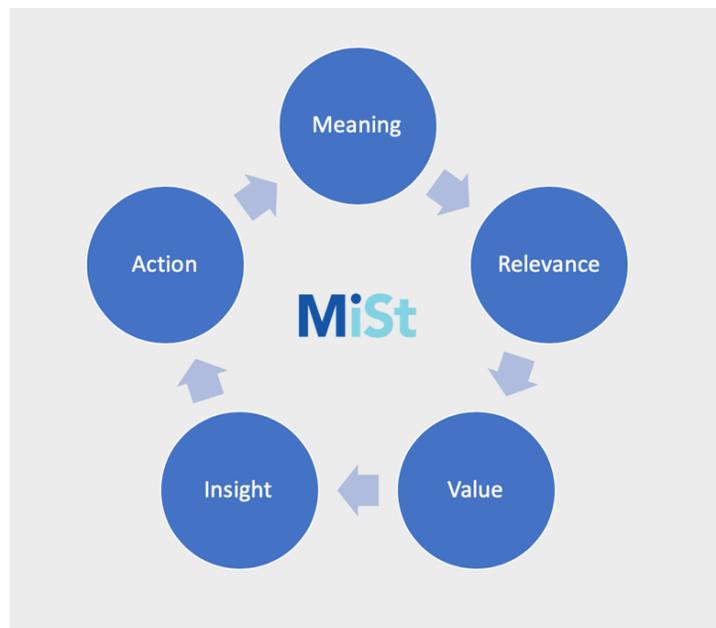
The subject of self analysis via the use of metaphor has been widely discussed over many years (See for example: Horney, 1942, Gray and Brown, 2010, Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, Bawick and Weegmann, 2018, Matousek, 2017). Some authors and practitioners use visual metaphors, others make use of the written word, but none use stories as sequential means to

explore complex realities across our various fields of experience. In the MiSt approach these fields are generalised as self, personal world, group world and group. Nor do these authors apply a graduated method in exploring the stories. This is very much the mission and province of the mindful stories.

The specific heuristic applied in the MiSt approach and which is introduced later in the paper is the five-fold method for reviewing the stories content. This five-fold method is:

- a. Meaning, identifying the key personal meaning in a fiction
- b. Relevance, consciously noting the relevance of this meaning. Why is it important?
- c. Value, recognising the value of the meaning. What might this important idea relate to?
- d. Insight, assessing the insight gained
- e. Action, identifying the practical, real-world actions which may follow from the insight.

This five-fold cycle is set out in Figure 2. The figure demonstrates the cyclic nature of the analysis, indicating the option to review meaning following an action phase. An important point to note is that the five stages of MRVIA may occur out of sequence and may be highly porous. Meaning may flow without boundary into identification of relevance. Similarly, relevance can be almost synonymous with value and insight. The stages are included to ensure that some conscious activity happens to leverage an idea from the fiction from identification (in meaning) to any potential action.



(Above) Figure 2. The MRVIA cycle for story assessment

## **An Opportunity to Practice With a Fear-based Mindful Story**

In the next section you will find a mindful story themed on fear. I suggest the following process for your engagement with the fiction.

Find a quiet space. A place in time and space when you are clear enough and undisturbed enough to be able to engage with a story. Spend a little time in reflection.

\*\*\*\*\*

Consider your present circumstances.

Consider where the pressure is in your life right now.

Separate out what are the most pressing issues.

Identify but try not to associate too closely with, any items which are making you feel anxious or fearful. Just identify them, don't pursue, analyse or try to fix them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Take a couple of minutes over this.

\*\*\*\*\*

You will need about 20 minutes in order to engage in the Mindful Stories process. Try to set aside 20 minutes. You have all the rest of the day to do all the other things that your busy life involves. Dedicate this 20 minutes to being mindful and nothing else.

I suggest that you place the story in a peaceful setting. So, settle down in a comfortable place and take a few seconds to control your breathing, focusing on the in-breath and the out-breath. Give this a couple of minutes.

\*\*\*\*\*

When you feel ready, let your mind wander over the issues of your day, the thoughts of the moment and your main concerns. Try not to hang onto any of these elements, just try to let your mind wander, like a bird flying over a great landscape of trees and mountains. All of it is important but it is all below you. Stretching out. No single element is necessarily more important than any other part.

Now read the story.

### **The Mindful Story: Fear**

(as published on <https://literallystories2014.com>)

“Standing in the necromantic pit, in the depths of the crypt of his tower the Dark Lord could feel the Wyrd Work of the King. He could sense the deceitful and untrustworthy akashic

forces leaving him and coming under the King's command – inexpertly at first but with growing confidence the young monarch wove the patterns.

As the light of the fires of Hell flickered uncertainly around the walls of the chamber and the floor moved suddenly under his clawed feet the Dark One could not help a sallow smile from crossing his thin, cruel lips.”

“What is a necromatic pit Daddy?”, the small voice issued from the snug confines of the midnight blue sheeted bed by which he sat.

Still be-suited, hair tousled from the daily-slog experience of commuter heat and sweat rather than fashionable cool, he put the book down.

“I think that is probably enough for tonight” he said. He had been late in (again), rushed into reading prior to supper and not known the book. What was this stuff? He was concerned that this really was not an appropriate night-time read for Ben. For goodness sake how had he got hold of this book?

He had had a long and cruel day and he really did not need to be reading about Dark Lords and necromantic pits, nor did he need the intense job of trying to explain what it was all about to an innocently curious, wide awake ten-year-old.

The bed-time read curtailed he slipped into his study prior to the descent to kitchen, supper and cross-examination. Some days it really was not ‘good to talk’.

In the comparative safety of his study, behind the Ikea desk and the Mac desktop, he felt a little command and control coming back to him. He seemed to have been running scared, out of control for most of the day.

An evil process seemed to be at work. Sitting back on his ‘venom’ games/office chair (“Good for work and play” he had explained to his disbelieving partner when Amazon had delivered it. It was a half decent office chair but great for games and maybe she guessed more than she let on about his main occupation in his study). He rubbed his eyes tiredly and pondered the sequence of events which he summarised as; being targeted, weapons being used, emotional consequences and ensuing state of mind.

*Target.*

To say he had been targeted was an understatement. He and his crew had all been simultaneously victimised by what they had experienced as a wicked internal office process. From seemingly innocuous beginnings they had gradually found their work streams closed down, undergoing evaluation and then gone. Just gone. The H drive did not lie and nor did the Dropbox folders. Weeks of work was as if they were not and never had been. No explanation and no responses from line management, they had sat about in incredulous disbelief as they had seen their computers taken away, their hot-office space closed ('for cleaning and hygiene') and had been nudged more than thrown out of their usual office space. Huddled together they found that their ID badges no longer functioned. They had to ask for help from a Security Officer to get the lifts to accept them as legitimate denizens of the eighth floor and grant them a ride down. At ground floor, more Security Officials questioned them about their status, took their badges and, finally harried them out of the thick glass doors.

### *Weapon*

Uncomprehending and panicking they had stood like idiots, clustered on the pavement in front of the twenty-story office block, a group moved from power, competence, coherence and purpose to lost sheep in the space of 30 minutes. Even now, standing in the wind of the street they did not fully understand that they had been targeted and that a potent weapon had been deployed against them. All that they knew was the entry conditions of fear, that things had happened and that the world which they had known an hour ago was no more. From being secure, well paid professionals, they were now reduced to an uncomprehending rabble, anxious, angry and confused. Their task in their former role had been as a shock, SWAT team of software engineers, tasked to manage an aberration in the company's digital record. They had been making progress and had identified what seemed to be a huge anomaly in the digital build of some parts of the legacy architecture. Some of this stuff was beyond them in that it had been put in place years before they were born. Assembler code and FORTRAN skills needed to be understood. They had identified that the digital equivalent of a mega city had gradually arisen upon the ancient foundations, they were also beginning to think that the foundations were not only faulty, it could well be that there was stuff going on in the crypt-like depths of the code which was suspicious and potentially corrupted, or in the process of being corrupted. Unknown

agencies seemed to have been at work. They were zeroing in on what seemed to be a hot spot of current illicit activity when the world had gone crazy. They and their mission had been revoked.

### *Emotion*

When the numb shock had passed, they began to jabber. His team-lead role was the natural starting point for questions to begin:

“What is going on Steve”, “Did you know about this?”, “Has Chantel been in contact?”,

“Why are they doing this?”. “What did we do?”.

“What did we do”, Steve repeated to himself.

The team were no longer a team and panic was eating them from the inside out. Some of the younger members were in tears and an over-whelming need for information, frustrated in act, was working its way out in a range of emotions, anger, rage, fear, horror, panic and; increasingly dumb despair.

What was becoming obvious was; there was no cavalry coming to the rescue, history would not rewind, and they were sacked. Tears, rage and confusion amplified in the absence of no information, no leadership and no shared group point of focus. Not yet anyway.

### *State*

They had repaired to the local Costa, ordered coffees and clustered around two tables hastily joined. Steve had tried to impose his authority (which he no longer had as he no longer had a job) and seek an answer to the question: “what did we do?”. But in question and answer it became increasingly obvious that no one had done any thing which could have been construed as treasonous or illicit. Far from it. The whole team had been super-cautious as it found the crypt (that is what they called the anomalous area of code), wary of their lack of knowledge of the antique code and anxious not to make matters worse or give away their investigation. Add to tears, rage and confusion conspiracy, distrust and a yearning for it all to end.

One by one they had dispersed. They could not go back to the office; the only options were endless cups of coffee or going home. Steve and two of his more senior team members stayed, made futile efforts to enter the office block, call their Line Manager Chantel and find

new and revealing parts of the story so far untold. Failure met them on all fronts and, at 6pm they had decided to leave it for the day. With no plan they dispersed to their various residences.

So, he found himself back at the house, so he found himself numbly reading a child's story and so, at last he found himself in his study looking with incredulity at the messages appearing on his computer screen. The words came together slowly to form a meaning he already knew and indeed had read but did not understand. Now, perhaps he did understand the fear that had gnawed him all day and the likely cause, unbelievable but irrefutable. He could not look away. He was the target. The code was the weapon. Confused panic had been the emotion but the state, the state was nothing, but fear and this fear had no end in sight. Indeed, this seemed to be amplifying on a logarithmic scale. He read his computer screen again and again. The message could only be from one system:

“As the light of the fires of Hell flickered uncertainly around the walls of the chamber and the floor moved suddenly under his clawed feet the Dark One could not help a sallow smile from crossing his thin, cruel lips.”

### **Analysis of the Mindful Story**

Now, read the story again. Two reads is preferable, new ideas and thoughts will emerge in the space provided by the second read.

Read carefully and try not to judge the content too quickly. Let the story seep into your mind. Then, take a moment to breath and reflect and with the story still fresh in your mind, consider your responses to each of the following questions:

*Question 1.* What do you feel is the main meaning of the story?

What message or core or essential meaning does the story hold for you? There may be many meanings which occur to you but for now try to prioritise just one. The various forms of fear described in the story may resonate with you or you may find them alien. Be clear on how you relate to the fear. When you feel clear on this, read the next question:

*Question 2.* How is this meaning of relevance to you?

How does the story impact on your life and your challenges right now? Why is it important to you at this point in your life? What element emerges as being most relevant? Do you recognise the sense of a target, weapon, emotion or state?

Again, give yourself time to think of your response and when you feel prepared try the next question:

*Question 3.* Think about what is the main value that you can draw from this relevance of the story. What does this value bring to the concern you identified earlier?

Don't rush your response. Take time to think about the value. The word 'value' is an interesting word. What do we value and what of value is here? When you are set try this:

*Question 4.* What insight does the identified value provide for you? Is there something here that you had not thought of before. Finally:

*Question 5.* What action might you engage with as a consequence? Might you now do something differently? What? Why?

\*\*\*\*\*

When you have considered what you might do next, spend a couple of minutes just breathing and thinking about nothing at all.

\*\*\*\*\*

See what changes this day as a result of thinking about the story. You may like to swing through these five questions two or three times. Each time you may get to a deeper level of meaning and this could result in deepening senses of relevance, value, insight and action. How might you react to being targeted? What weapons are used against you and how would you react to them? What emotions are drawn from you by fear? How is your current state of mind influenced by fear processes?

## Discussion

The mindful stories are intended for face to face use and the results of engaging with them vary considerably. It is almost impossible to generalise responses but here are a four which I have witnessed as common, relating to four levels of story interpretation: literal, metaphor, cause and personal.

- The story is the story. It is interesting to varying degrees, but it remains a fiction with little real purchase on the individual experience of fear. It is an interesting thing but conveys no conscious message.
- The story is a metaphor and corresponds to some generic sense of fear which the reader has felt or is at present feeling. The formations of the story are in some way recognisable and relatable. This can lead to an uncanny reaction or a sense of unease.

Progressing with and dealing with this unease can be considered at arm's length, as building on the fiction.

- The story is suggestive of deeper causes which lie at the root of the metaphors and these causes are active or potent in the readers experience. There may follow an urgent sense of need to address deep causes of unease in the readers current lived experience.
- The story is recognisable in a highly personal way. Some elements chime personally and graphically. Wider lessons may be involved, and time may need to be spent unpicking the correspondences between fiction and reality.

The author would be delighted to receive your thoughts and comments on your experiential engagement with the fear/ mindful stories opportunity. All comments and thoughts can be sent to [simon.bell@bayswaterinst.org](mailto:simon.bell@bayswaterinst.org)

## Conclusion

The experiential exercise contained in this paper is an opportunity to consider personal responses to fear. The exercise has an embedded fear heuristic (PoF) and makes use of a mindfulness heuristic (MRVIA). One of the major issues for fear management is the capacity to look meaningfully at that which alarms or frightens us. By use of fiction we can place the context of fear at arm's length and consider fear by means of metaphor. By this means it may be able to engage, gain agency and some control in situations where fear is a cause of debilitation or feeling frozen or 'stuck'. The author is at the time of writing finalising a book on this subject which contains 100 stories for use in fearful contexts as well as many other.

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## **Bio**

Simon Bell is a writer and professional group facilitator and has been helping communities achieve sustainability for more than thirty years. Simon is a natural storyteller and has used stories in over 40 countries, with over 100 organisations ranging from the United Nations and the European Union to small charities and NGOs. He has published over 200 items including books, graphic novels, journal papers and short stories. He was until recently Professor of Innovation and Methodology at the Open University and retains the position of Professor Emeritus as well as Chief Executive Officer of the Bayswater Institute in London <https://www.bayswaterinst.org>. In his work for the Institute he makes use of the Mindful Stories in personal coaching and group work – primarily in the Bayswater flag ship: Wisdom in Groups. Much of Simon's current work relates to the identification and alleviation of fear in personal, group and organisational settings – his recent book: *The Formations of Terror* sets out a thesis on the basis for and the management of fear.

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