

Home and Hearth: Tending the Fires of Psychosocial Changes

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Abstract

While it is generally agreed that family time nourishes the young, gives purpose to those in middle years and accompanies the elders, the reality is that family time competes with contemporary social trends such as increased use of social media, the reality of dispersed families, or contends with the need or wish of caregivers to work outside the home; all of which create a life-in-the-fast-lane pace of living. However, “hearth-time”, as a metaphor for a warm place to arrive at and feel a sense of belonging, is alive with potential in Aotearoa New Zealand. This paper aims to identify and highlight the potentials that support the benefits of the hearth and time spent together and, by reviewing the origins and purpose of the hearth, build awareness of already existing hearth potentials; including our consulting rooms and the hearth-tending dynamics that abide within. To support the notion that hearth and subsequent primacy of heartfelt experiences needs more centrality in our homes, communities and even our thinking, I will draw on and extrapolate from the Greek myth of Hestia, Virgin Goddess of the hearth, drawing parallels between the principles of the myth and the value our profession and cultures offer.

Whakarāpopotonga

Ahakoā, ki tā te nuinga, e whakaaehia ana ko te wā o te whānau te wā poipoihia ai ngā kōhungahunga, whai hua ai ngā pākeke, whai takahoa ai ngā kuia, koroua, ki te āta matawaihia e whakataetae kē ana tēnei wā ki ngā mahi omaoma haeretanga ki te whai orange i roto i tēnei ao hurihuri. Heoi anō, kua whakaritea he “wā takuahi” hai wāhi taunga mahana kia rongo ai i te kiritau o te tūrangawaewae, e torohū ake ana i Aotearoa nei. Ko te whāinga a tēnei pepa he tohu kātahi ka whakahira ake i ngā torohūnga tautoko i ngā painga o tēnei wāhi arā te takuahi, me te wā noho tahi ai. Mā te tātari haeretanga i ngā timatatanga me ngā take o te takuahi e whakarahi ake ngā rongo o ngā huanga takuahi me ō tātau wāhi haumanu me ōna whakahaerenga takuahi. Hai tautoko ake i te whakaaro ko te tauahi me te hiranga o ngā wheako manawapā whakaarahia ake me whai wāhi ki waenganui i ō tātau kāinga, hāpori me ō tātau whakaaro hoki. Ka huri au ki te pūrākau a ngā Kiriki mō Hētia te Atua Puhī o te

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takuahi, hai whakaatu i ngā ōritenga i waenga i ngā mātāpono o te pūrākau me te ūara o tō tātau ūmangae me o tātau ahurei.

Keywords: hearth; internet technology; Hestia; Greek myth; individuation; collective unconscious; reverie; The Self

With a focus on the concept of the hearth (whether as an actual fireplace or a centralised place of gathering), this paper considers the effects — for better or worse — of seemingly inevitable, and possibly evolutionary, changes in the way we live our lives within our homes and communities.

For many cultures throughout history, the hearth has held deep symbolism and cultural relevance as a place to gather, socialise, feel safe, share meals and to engage in reverie. A tended fire symbolically supports some of our deepest needs. The question to consider is what happens to us as a modern, western society when the hearth, that has served the deep needs of psyche over centuries, all but disappears in favour of a more fast-paced life; which is now increasingly expected and greatly stimulated by the digital age.

Within this paper three main, interweaving themes emerge regarding the deeper symbolism of the hearth:

1. The hearth offers a familiar place to gather and share. This theme will be illustrated by a journey through history to our current culture.
2. Regards the one who tends the hearth for others. This theme will be illustrated by presenting the inward nature of Hestia, Greek goddess of the hearth and then link to the role of the psychotherapist.
3. The hearth offers an opportunity for reverie, i.e. to centre and focus. This theme will be illustrated by presenting some of the deeper psychic needs of the individual which then ties back in with the nature of Hestia.

Defining “the Hearth”

With thought to the first theme — the gathering and sharing — and in giving shape and definition to the concept of the hearth (with its subsequent primacy of heartfelt experiences), I outline a few hearths and places of gathering throughout history.

From Paleolithic times, humankind has gathered around a fire. Both the fire and the presence of others assuaged the terror of being separate from the group and, therefore, vulnerable to risks such as climatic conditions and predators.

It is from early times of gathering around the fire that oral history, myths and poetry were shared and passed down through generations. For instance, epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, attributed to Homer (Manguel, 2007), were written to be recited. This was how people felt related to their mythological and actual lineage. The sharing of myths and other oral traditions connects to the consulting room when people orally communicate their history to the therapist.

During the many and various wars throughout history, a nighttime gathering around the

campfire provided a sense of camaraderie. One can imagine soldiers gathering after a day of battle, each finding solace in the company of the other; to erase the horrors seen that day, or to celebrate the victories. Those missing in action could be held in mind collectively and bravado generated in readiness for the next day.

Post World War II rang in new times of sociability. Many homes had a piano. Families and their visitors would enjoy a sing-along. The piano in this scenario becomes the hearth as a place of gathering (this is the first theme), while the pianist holds the centre for others (this is the second theme).

During the 1950s and 1960s, television came along. While it needs to be acknowledged that the TV is the first screen-based device to enter homes, it performed some of the functions of the hearth as a point of location where the family gathered.

The hearth, whether its location was sitting about a camp fire, a 19th-century drawing room or a 1960s fireplace, was because of the shared need for sociability, warmth and nourishment. These hearths were places of human interaction and illustrate the theme of gathering and sharing. Many of us still graciously gather others around our hearths and if not, many of us can still cast our minds back to hearths; whether in the homes where we grew up or perhaps in literature we knew as children. For instance, the fireside needed for Santa Claus' descent on Christmas Eve, or in fairy tales such as Cinderella (Grimm & Grimm, 2002) who is named after the cinders of the fireplace.

Hearths as places of gathering and sharing are in the collective unconscious, as well as our individual psyches, and remain to this day evocative: for example, people still bring in dreams of homes with big fireplaces and coal ranges even though some never actually lived with them. After eleven months of analysis sharing times of deprivation and of being left out in the cold, both physically and emotionally, a very thin, small-boned woman in her fifties brings a dream:

It's beginning to get dark and I'm entering a large house. There is the smell of soup cooking. I walk into a warm room with a very large stone hearth that has a most delightful fire. Sitting beside the fire is an old, grey-haired woman who smiles and says nothing. There is an empty chair beside her.

This woman never had either a fireplace or heating in her childhood home.

Even for those who need or wish to spend time alone, the hearth has the capacity to accompany one's thoughts, reflections and activities. Gazing into the flames brings one into connection with one's Self, thus illustrating the theme of reverie, i.e. the chance to internally centre and focus.

The Greek Myth of Hestia, Virgin Goddess of the Hearth

The relevance of an actual fire is that it has the charisma to gather, bringing either the individual or the collective into their psychic centre. The ambient light from the flames can be a catalyst for vibrant conversations or for soothing one into an almost meditative attentiveness.

But who in our modern times is designated to tend the symbolic, if not actual, fire? The

family roles have changed. Most family members have vital roles outside the home. As Hestia, virgin goddess of the hearth, conveys, tending of the hearth means so much more than gathering wood and stoking the fire. As I introduce Hestia, implicit will be my suggesting that her principles of hearth tending have relevance today as we begin to imagine into contemporary myths around family life, the consulting room and places of social gathering in the face of unremitting societal changes.

Hestia, as a goddess of the early Olympian generation, was the eldest daughter of Rhea and Cronus. She was the lesser known of her more outgoing siblings (Zeus, Demeter, Hera and Poseidon, to name a few) and was therefore hardly mentioned in the myths. She never took part in the political disputes, wars and affairs of the Olympians of the time. Instead she requested eternal virginity, thus averting potential suitors, rivalries and external distractions. Her virginity meant her awareness was with herself, giving rise to the definition of the word Hestia as meaning “hearth” or “focus”.

Hestia became present in the centre of the household, the hearth. Hearths in Delphi were the spiritual centre of homes, temples and the city itself. Offerings were made to Hestia at the commencement and ending of every gathering. Any new dwelling began with fire being carried over from a connecting household. This ritual continues today with the carrying over of the fire from the previous Olympic Games to inaugurate the opening of the current Olympic Games.

Hestia's fire provided illumination, warmth and insisted on the sacred duty of hospitality. Given fires generally stayed lit, the hearth offered continuity and relatedness. I would suggest Hestia as contributing the virtues of being centred and focused with the ability to naturally venture inward. By Hestia wishing to retain her own individuality, her own life, she is in a sense separate.

From a Jungian perspective, I would see Hestia as an image of the Self archetype with the fire being the emotional engagement. She reminds us of the need to preserve and acknowledge one's own fundamental separateness and individuality. Of equal relevance, the fire she tends represents life energy; the libido or life force that emerges with one's coming into being.

It is appropriate to differentiate between the current trend towards hyper-individualism (self-absorption) and Jung's process of individuation. Jung (1964a) posed that the journey of individuation is where one secedes from the phantasies of one's parents and grandparents and finds what is more authentic to the Self. This psychical process works towards creating a balanced relationship between conscious and unconscious levels of existence. The process of individuation, while generally evident at mid-life, happens in stages throughout life beginning with separation from mother. At the same time, there is also the process of understanding one's relationship to the collective, or community. That means becoming aware of the conventions of society and making choices regarding involvement from the position of becoming one's own distinct and authentic self.

I suggest there is an intersection between the task of individuation and the three themes outlined in this paper. To be the one who holds the centre, one needs to be adequately self-aware and able to inwardly centre. To know oneself well means we can productively and effectively engage with sharing and gathering as a group while, at other times, be able to separate to engage in personal reverie. The three themes have the potential to move in and out of each other in the process of being oneself.

Of the Consulting Room

The principles of Hestia are like the principles of therapy, with the frame, the reliable and mutual commitment between patient and therapist, and the predictable presence of the therapist. Therapists are hearth keepers: the one who holds the centre for others. We create a specific hearth for each patient and while, at times, the intensity of the work may drop to mere embers, equally there are times when the flames heighten.

Given the changes in modern living, the question could be asked: is the hearth within the consulting room and the sharing of heartfelt experiences, becoming a substitute for household hearths?

It could be considered that the therapeutic alliance also provides space for reflection that once was taken care of in the church or places of religious gatherings. Whether one went for ritual/worship, learning or just sitting in a space of reverie, prayer or contemplation, it provided the essence of contacting oneself. Perhaps the growing respect for psychotherapy reflects not only the decline of the family hearth, but also the decline of traditional Christian church-based hearths over the last few decades (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Or perhaps, in our fast-paced life, there is growing need for many to have a dedicated time and space away from the external world to reflect and to form a relationship with their inner world.

As therapists, our own time to reflect is vital. The benefits of supervision, accumulated experience and reverence for the growing agency of the patient to handle more of their own vicissitudes generally hopefully allows us to shut the door at the end of each day's work. It does need to be said, however, that we spend our clinical hours in intense sociality with the other and, at the end of the day, we too can return to our homes and struggle to juggle.

The busy-ness of our contemporary life seems to have driven architectural changes and homes are now designed for personal preferences to be increasingly met. Many homes have two plus bathrooms. Various family or group members have different preferences (and medical requirements) with respect to food. Conflicting schedules can mean different eating times. Online and television viewing similarly become an individual preference leading to homes having multiple viewing devices. Screen-addicted people are often living in alternate realities. Online relationships can, while offering much light from the screen, lack the heat and heart of an embodied relationship.

With the traditional ways of socialising at times hanging on by a thread, and new ways of being in the world still evolving, are more and more younger people saying less and less? Are there times in households when people encounter each other more than in passing, given the work day, the school day, after-school commitments, various appointments and evening meetings/social events?

My concern is that the absence of the hearth prevalent in modern lives leaves a void in our homes where there seems less need for the ritual of family gathering. Does the fire in us that protects, provides, nurtures and gathers, risk being snuffed out completely? And if there is a gathering point in the home and times when families are at home together, is anyone speaking and is anyone listening?

A more concerning query psychologically is: what is the Self that is growing out of hearthless homes? Different kinds of relationships can potentially be fostered around the hearth to bring one into being. A hearthless environment where contact is at best fleeting or hurried must surely foster a different kind of Self.

It's important not to romanticise the hearth. Some of us may recall with dread, households and meal times where cold silence reigned, or the continual ruptures without explanation or repair. Or, where no one dared disagree with Dad's opinion. His word after all became law and no personal expression was allowed; not to mention having to eat everything on the plate. Neither do we want women with children to be isolated without the means to access supportive company. We have been, and still are, moving away from those times.

However, I speak of the gold that can be found around the humble hearth with respect to psychological growth. Consider; one bathroom that needs to be fought over, mealtimes that hold joy and despair, homes with one car where request and negotiation are required for use. Situations that require others to pitch in and help, whether in times of sickness or as part of daily jobs. Sacrifice, compromise, the odd tussle, fighting for the biggest slice of the cake, not to mention having to experience disappointment and, at times, loss; and; with all that sociability, learning the ability to be alone. The space to protest until heard and, with hope, others around to pick up on the lacks and attacks.

We hear of challenges faced by the variety of family configurations. For example, families containing multiple parent figures, the inclusion of non-biological, interracial, bilingual and adoptive children, to name a few. Such families have the potential to produce different levels of self-knowledge, self-regulation and a capacity for intimacy; of being known, seen and heard. Understandably, such situations can become overwhelming, but they can also hold a normalising potential, particularly that of being confronted with difference.

With no intention of placing judgment on a schizoid personality construction, there are increasing numbers of silent people who have not been raised with the expectation of representing themselves with words and who have little to say about their inner life. It is perfectly acceptable to have schizoid tendencies but within the topic of this paper I consider that the outcome of many schizoid people not being asked to contribute is that they do not know who they are and therefore develop no agency, no solid base, from which to contribute. Are such people, particularly our children and adolescents, to be left in the company of social media, gaming and such like?

To address, discuss and engage in research around what qualities now need to be held in the hearth and what needs to be left behind (such as the violence and isolation), is the challenge we face in these times of rapid change.

Today's World

Our technological advancements have offered us a life of greater convenience. No longer do household tasks, such as all-day laundry, need a resident homemaker. We can celebrate the convenience that simply pressing buttons will cascade appliances into achieving multiple tasks simultaneously. And yet, we often hear (and/or experience) that we have less free time despite the many conveniences available. These changes seem to be having a crucial impact on psychosocial developments within many family and community spaces where people have traditionally gathered.

To explore beyond my own thoughts, I undertook pilot interviews with individuals — drawing on a cross-section of the life span and socioeconomic demographics — to ascertain their thoughts on the effects of rapid technological development on family and community

life. Those I interviewed had a lot to say about family life, structures of the home, the growing lack of togetherness and, particularly, the increasing use of screen-based devices in the company of others.

Those in their second half of life provided examples of hearth-time as the norm, they spoke of their oral traditions, sharing their recollections of the past that embraced more frequent times of togetherness in the home. They also recalled the enjoyment of visiting each other; simply for the joy of it rather than having to have a purposeful outcome from contact with others.

I asked two questions: what is your idea of a hearth and hearth-time, and do you feel your home holds an essence of hearth? The following are some examples of common responses.

“How we live and the dwellings we live in have all the elements of a family home but seem to cater for individual members of the family or grouping; i.e. multiple bathrooms/en-suites, TV and/or computer facilities in each bedroom, central heating systems and, seemingly, with no main gathering or social place where people spend time together.”

“These changes may have reduced the “frictions” of family life but have also removed opportunities for co-operative living.”

“Young people won’t stay around home; they won’t share.”

“Everyone in our family seems more interested in “friends” on Facebook or going off to various events or appointments.”

“With every best effort to maintain traditional values of gathering, there is a growing challenge in insisting on meals at the table ... and with no devices.”

“We’re doing fine for the moment, using technology to our advantage by having the family around for a Saturday dinner at the table and then a movie.”

Here are three comments from women who intuitively wish to be hearth keepers. The first two comments come from two stay-at-home mums who report feeling guilty for staying at home with children, as if they are a social anomaly.

“Despite the social pressure to be juggling work and mothering, I feel to be in the right place.”

“Not only am I available for my children, I can care for my elderly parents; for example, being able to take them to appointments and to their friends’ funerals.”

At the other end of the spectrum, one woman told me of a deep conflict regarding what she calls:

“the need to stifle my desire to be with my infant. I earn more than my husband so I go out to work and he stays at home to mind the baby.”

While some respondents bemoaned the loss of the good old days, a significant theme arose: we cannot go back. Social media, screen time, and other aspects of the always-on age are here to stay. Along with the many positive attributes internet technology offers, the question becomes: how is technology affecting our homes and communities?

The deep interest the interviewees expressed in how to be with the changes afoot reminds of the deep changes that have occurred throughout history. However, they can leave us feeling quite helpless as we sit in the changes. Are we to do something about the fast-paced changes? What can we do?

In *The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man*, Carl Jung (1964b) told of an exchange with a patient who, in the face of the changes of the time anxiously asks him, “What can I do?” Jung responded: “during the course of evolution ... no one knew what to do ... And then suddenly things somehow began to move again, so that the same old humanity still exists, though somewhat different from before” (para. 314).

Alongside this seemingly relaxed approach Jung also suggested we be aware of what does affect us as a society:

When we look at human history, we see only what happens on the surface, and even this is distorted in the faded mirror of tradition. But what has really been happening eludes the inquiring eye of the historian, for the true historical event lies deeply buried, experienced by all and observed by none ... In our most private and subjective lives we are not only the passive witness of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers. We make our own epoch. (Jung, 1964b, para. 315)

Considering that we make our own epoch, what epoch-making changes can be observed in our communities so far?

Community Hearths

For a child growing up in a home with a hearth, it is implicit that the child becomes aware of the protocols of home and hearth. Similarly, when that child visits other homes with hearths, he/she will hopefully be exposed to and know to observe the protocols of that hearth.

There are the consistently held hearths in communities and what comes to mind immediately is tikanga Māori. Tikanga Māori has strong parallels with hearth principles but, being strongly protected, is less prone to the erosion we see in the western world. I am not qualified to speak of the marae in depth, but I will relate a story that reflects my admiration for the willingness to hold to principles.

My friend’s father, Jack, had passed away and we attended the funeral service in the main centre of town. Jack was a pillar of the town and surrounding district and had fully embraced Māori culture; learning te reo and attending various meetings

and events on the marae. To acknowledge Jack's bi-cultural perspectives, a marae which was some distance out of town wished to have Jack and his mourners visit the marae before the burial. Being a hot day my friend's son thought that, because of the distance between town and the marae, he had time to pop into the pub for a pint or two and still make it to the marae in time. A bit late, he begins to walk onto the marae and is stopped by a kuia and reminded that he cannot come onto the marae because he has clearly been drinking. An exchange of indignation from the son and well-held principles by the kuia gives the sense that this marae is a well-tended hearth.

There are further examples of hearth-centred living.

Not everyone has a family or an extended family. Many families, for a variety of reasons, live apart. A hearth-filled environment developed in Denmark in the 1960s is cohousing. This form of intentional, community-based living is now active within New Zealand. Unlike the exploitative nature of some communes, cohousing communities are architectural entities with both private and community spaces where one must be approved of to join. These form as created families where children get to know other children and where adults can form supportive arrangements and schedules. This concept appears to offer a self-regulation of how much or how little community one may wish to engage in. Cohousing may be a transformation on what the extended family offers. The presence of a hearth, or many hearths, as well as providing the space for separation and, therefore, the opportunity for reverie. Such a concept moves us away from the hyper-individualising trends that ultimately risk us becoming isolated.

Hearths can be formed in unlikely places. A colleague tells me of a film made of a family who lived on the outskirts of Bangkok. The family would begin the journey to Bangkok central, eating breakfast in the car and similarly gather at the end of the day and eat their evening meal in the car travelling home. The car, therefore, becomes the hearth with an interesting twist that they are side by side rather than facing each other. Side by side conversations would seem, therefore, less confronting, perhaps like having therapy by phone or even on the couch with seemingly less pressure from having to face the other. The added value of the ambient, flickering light of a camp fire is another situation that makes being with the other less intense. The couch, the phone, the car, the camp fire are all possibilities for deeper conversations.

At a governmental level, trends in the workplace to always be available are being noted. For some years, France has had an employment law (*Labour Code 2017*) that gives employees a minimum time-off period of 11 hours continuously. However, that time-off period was being thwarted by the always-on nature of email and mobile phones (SMS and calls). Hence last year France introduced a new law (Smith-Vidal & Dauthier, 2016) — “The right to disconnect” — that is designed to make family life sacred and to ensure a goodly period of not being connected to work. An item on Newshub (Dexter, 2017) in January of this year asked whether such a policy could work in New Zealand, but cited no indication of any demand for such a law here.

Communities can be rich in hearths where people can gather, speak and be heard. For example, NZAP Conference, Branch meetings and committees all provide valuable professional hearth spaces to build community as well as to address issues.

Conclusion

We are clinicians. And it is from this place we can exert influence; by, as mentioned previously, holding the frame and offering the enduring commitment to see the work through — and these can be very long commitments. Along with individual analytic work, a growing development within my practice is working in depth with couples. It is my hope that this area of work makes a significant contribution not just to couples, but to families and communities where we begin to develop a language that says we are a known “we” and not just an isolated “I”.

This paper has examined a concern that seems alive and topical in our modern age: that the effects on each of us of rapid internet technology development and the increasing use of various screen-based devices seem to dilute the essence of being together in a central point of location. I have referred to this central point of location as the hearth. While embracing digital and societal changes, most acknowledge that to sit unpressured with oneself in reverie is rare with the speeding up of our lifestyles.

In examining some of the changes in family dynamics that have accompanied the fast growth, it is noted that the design of the modern home appears to cater for the individual at the expense of a hearth or central place of gathering. Additionally, the ways in which many families are constellated can leave less opportunity for hearth-time due to the fast pace of life.

This paper examples some contemporary changes afoot to honour family and community values. In consideration of the three themes of socialising and gathering, becoming the one who gathers, and inwardly focusing, it seems relevant to consider the values of Hestia to support the efforts of households who provide a sense of belonging: a place for the young to feel nourished physically and emotionally as they develop, and to contribute as their sense of agency grows; to support homes that provide limits and expectations from where adolescents can springboard into their more independent lives. The hearth provides purpose to those in their middle years as contributions are accepted to sustain home and hearth and, where possible, the hearth offers a place for the family elders to offer and receive support. The hearth, whether as an actual fire or known place of gathering, provides a warm place to arrive at, whether alone or in the company of the other(s).

And finally, this paper acknowledges the vital role of the psychotherapist where I propose our consulting rooms provide hearth-like qualities that go some way towards meeting the deep longing of the human being to feel connected with the other and known.

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