

Interlude – Other voices on the Story

A story has been offered for your consideration. Now comes the problem of how to 'close' the paper. The temptation is to awaken the dormant methodological issues that abound in work of this kind...(Sparkes 2006) p28

I will come to that, but for now I'd just like to show you something of the energy and discussion this story created, within the community at Roffey Park, through autumn of 2008 and winter of 2008/9. My intention is to let the sound of these voices land first.

1)

Letter:

So to start, reading your story has evoked a lot in me. To say that it is thought provoking just doesn't capture the real experience. Rather, it is evoking and churning deep within me, with a strong sense of synchronicity, given what is happening in my life as I have read your thesis and write now. And also some sense of 'reflexivity', if that's the correct term, in that what you write about has then happened to me in reality in some way, more than it otherwise would – yes, that's about noticing better what is happening all the time because it has been brought to attention. But it is also about how the act of reading something actually re-shapes reality, and creates reality in a new way: an experience for me of "words make worlds".

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2)

Recorded conversation:

I've just noticed: if you have planned it or not, that you evolve in the story, and it is lovely to have the change at the end of the story around that. That person I really respect. The person at the beginning of the story I'd like to argue with but then you moved on. It seems that you have got younger as the story progressed. At the beginning you were kind of an academicky-type person who was professorial, but at the end you were a real human being.

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3)

Letter:

Yes, now that I think about it, my concern in the past around becoming a father has always been around whether and how I will be both nurturing enough and container-creating enough – essentially all about how I will relate to my children. Right now, while there is a small residue of that concern present, mostly I feel hopeful and excited about the prospect of relating to my children. What is making me nervous is my inner wobbliness-feeling about being a stable provider, about carrying the burden of that role, of being fixed into that role, "and what if I can't manage?" I can feel how what you have written in your thesis is playing out for me here.

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4) Notes from supervisor:

Things I notice

Part 1

Section 1: fractals in the opening: writing a PhD about gender by using a story of someone who is writing a PhD about gender
Familiarity of the 'campus novel' format (David Lodge etc)

By p4 I am wondering, is Jim you?
Story p 6 reminds me of those entangled situations, the delicacy of the place of gender
Feels embarrassing. Notice I am trying to make judgements about who was right/wrong
Section 2: Wondering, is this Roffey?
Like this attempt to explicate the detail. Sounds like 2 voices of yours
Section 3: Again, notice I am wondering if this is a real incident
Notice the difficulty of the client relationship, how it controls, how it governs the response by the Institute
Self-pity at the end?
Section 4: Yearning for this kind of unpacking conversation: seldom happens, non -judgemental support. Unpacking micro-process
Section 5: Seems a bit like self-righteousness
Section 6: Friendship, intimacy - so feels a bit risky. The closed world of male bonding. But it's also serious, real.

Part 2

Section 1: Like Oryx and Crake, post-crisis. Interesting connection between resource use and conformity
Section 2: Getting risky, Jim as your alter ego? Exploring
Section 3: Being held in risky territory. Notice again I am wondering if this is a 'true' story. Poignant. I am thinking about normality and queerness, my constraints and fear of difference
Section 4: Not so gripped, narrative explanation
Section 5: Beyond the binary - I wonder if this is what 'you' are really saying. I am trying to imagine this - I can, in a vague kind of way. It feels hippy-ish, but challenging. Doubt how comfortable I would be in these surroundings

Part 3

Difficult to follow, work out what has happened, what the set up is.
Somehow it seems sad, to me: being disconnected from each other (so I am noticing that my sense of interpersonal connection has the assumption of gender embedded in it), the emotional connection at the end reassures me

5) Recorded conversation:

No. And, I mean, some of my stuff's like it's ... well, actually the fact that I might be a relatively young female makes no difference whatsoever to me, but... well, there's just assumptions that are made about that which I kind of sometimes want to scream, "That's a load of bollocks!", you know? Who else has actually spent as much time as me, knowing that I was working on oil refineries aged 21, talking to technicians on Saturdays, I mean, *really*...?

6) Email:

After meeting you at Roffey in January, and reading your story, I have been meaning to get back to you and can't believe how quickly the time has gone.

First to say thank you for the conversation about action learning as an emancipatory force in organisations - it sparked many thoughts. In particular about the impression I leave on people, how this may change over time, and how I am influencing and responding to what takes place in the groups I am part of.

And lastly, for sharing your story. As I read it I noticed how my response to you changed; after our conversation I had felt somewhat 'junior' and lectured at... and slightly distanced myself from you... and yet in the story you share considerable vulnerability (assuming the 'I' of the story has something in common with you). Many parts resonated with me but particularly the part about your conversation over dinner with delegates and the apparent impossibility of disagreeing, as a man / facilitator, with women / clients on gender, without being mistaken.

I also recognised the fatigue that comes from constantly being the dissenting voice in an organisation or a group, and the inner tension that arises for me when I 'tone it down' in response to feedback, but then feel compromised / complicit... As well as the central question about 'what difference am I making'?

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7) Email:

In what concerns your inquiry, what I meant is that what you shared with us last supervision, your story, and especially what you explained to me in our journey by car, opened up a new perspective on my understanding of myself, of gender; in a way, it allowed me to hold things with more lightness, enhancing my capacity of acceptance of self as I am. I mentioned "forgiveness". Well, interestingly I have found this act of forgiveness, with the implied idea of re-beginning, an important concept in my own inquiry (on 'capacity building'). And maybe that is why I used the word. You may equate it with the idea of "acceptance" of self. Not getting too tied to gender categories and concepts and what they usually mean in roles in a conservative society as ours is, anyway, was the main contribution of your ideas to me.

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8) Email:

I have read with pleasure your fictionalisation of your PhD process. Which is to say I know enough about your story to see where you want to go with it - at least I think so. And I think it is a clever device (I wonder if others would call it a conceit?) to bring to life for others the ideas you are wrestling with and trying to bring into consciousness. It is vivid.

For what it is worth, as a piece of fiction, it is the final part that I really liked. There are ideas in there for a good story. Ecoshock - cracking idea! We are all doomed!

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9) Email:

Hi there

Just finished reading your piece. Its gripping and quite torturous stuff! Quite unexpected in terms of a PhD. (My ignorance, probably). If not a good PhD, certainly a great novel! (I'd like 2 read more).

P.S.: Just had a chuckle: James Traeger = Jim Porter [in German]!

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10) Email:

Hi James

I read the piece you gave me on the flight last night and really enjoyed it. It left me feeling that there was a lot more to talk about with you, and I felt like giving you a hug.

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11) Recorded Conversation

It's such a shift from an academic place to a creative, highly personal place and I think you pull it off. To get to that point where the story comes out by itself is almost transcendental. The father-son stuff was the most powerful, I found it incredible moving and disturbing, I was worried about your marriage and I was really worried about you and immensely moved by it. It was so poignant. The first bit I was engaged in an academic way but in the third bit it was much more feeling very challenged by what you were saying, by my own conceptions about gender and where I did I stand on it, about ground being broken for me, in a very personal way. I have just read 'Middlesex' which I loved, I had it sitting around for ages and I was taken back into it by what you were saying, and also feeling really uncomfortable about not wanting to let go of my own gender/sexuality preference, the good bits about being female, you weren't saying to let go of it, but feeling very, very challenged by it. The androgyny was just surreal; I am still making sense of that. By the existence of difference can we ever be equal, is there always a power play but I don't want to be androgynous, I want to be a woman. Very, very challenging. The last bit I am not sure about, it was a classic apotheosis, a classic resolution. It was very Star Trekky, the limits of evolution, where evolution goes, with a touch of 1984. It's a really holographic piece of your PhD journey.

Why am I so disturbed by it? As a woman I have felt discrimination, career disadvantage, being hassled past a building site, but I've always felt, apart from when I was a child when I wanted to be a boy, I am OK being a woman, but I don't like their attitude towards me, it was that that needed to change. But what you

are saying is even my woman-ness is a bit of a prison, but it feels like a very comfortable prison.

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12) Recorded Conversation

My response was at lots of levels. I was very moved by the middle section, where your son is coming to meet you. That was where the connection came from. Through reading it I came to understand you a bit more deeply. I absolutely loved the question, "what is the 'it', before it's a boy or it's a girl?" It is such a powerful question; everything you are trying to say around gender is around that question.

I prefer to operate as what Thomas Barone (2000) describes as an 'artful writer-persuader' who understands the necessity of relinquishing control over interpretations placed on the story, inviting an aesthetic reading whereby readers interpret the text from their own unique vantage points, contributing their own questions-answers-experiences to the story as they read it, as co-participants in the creation of meaning. (Sparkes 2006) p29