

Chapter Five – Taking the Action Turn

the writer's original perception of a character or characters may be as erroneous as the reader's. (King 2000) p69

In this Chapter I want to show you more of how the story evolved; why and how I took the turn towards using it as an inquiring tool, within a community of colleagues at Roffey Park. In some ways, I yearn to let the voices of colleagues and friends as above speak some more, for themselves. But I suggest that dumping all of this research material, the transcripts of recordings, emails and letters in front of you would look a little careless, making you do more of the work than I feel is fair. This seems to me to be *un-mentshlich*. Forgive me if I am wrong in this assumption. Instead, I provided some extracts above, and I below I take two conversations in particular to place before you, with commentary. The choice of these two should become clearer as you read on. For now, I hope they provide some sense of the depth and richness of conversations the story provoked.

I also take the opportunity to develop the characters in the gender future story further. For example, they help me to 'work' the accounts I give a little further, and close the chapter. This opens up a different dialogue, and makes a further turn of story-making and reflexivity that supports the cause of *mentshlichkeit*. Before that, I also wanted to say some more about the framing of the story as futuristic, 'cyber-feminist' inspired science fiction, in order to bring it into the community of Roffey Park, and invite participation in it.

Who is it for?

In writing a text that plays in this narrative space, it is possible to draw together my lived inquiry into gender and masculinity of five years or more, and 'show it' to others who may be able to find it instructive in their own life and work. In writing it, I felt guided by a series of principles that enabled me to make choices as the text evolved. One of these stood out as important to explain in order to frame the others; that is, who was I writing the story *for*?

The choice of audience, the conscious imagining of those who might read our work, will have some influence on who we are in a text. (Lincoln 1997) p41

Primarily, as the story evolved, I had in mind that I would offer it to the community of Consultants at Roffey Park Institute, my immediate colleagues, as way of surfacing the hidden transcripts of gender within and between us, in a process that moved towards 'collaborative' or 'co-operative' inquiry (Heron 1996). This purpose evolved, but by and large this was the next phase of the research.

Surfacing Hidden Transcripts of Gender



I have a picture postcard on my pinboard at work of an image from the Second World War, of 'Rosie the Riveter'. To me, Rosie represents the suspension of traditional gender relations caused by the Second World War enabled some working class women in America to express a different type of embodied power, due to the fact that the men were away fighting, so they were able to produce the weapons, wield the rivet guns and earn their own money. This strikes me as uncanny: a feminist cause, the economic independence of women, is inadvertently

served by the U.S. Government's need to increase war production. I recognise now how Rosie represented for me a Cyborg-like talisman; a queer, unpredictable and uncomfortable reminder of the chaotic possibilities that historical and technological forces can provoke. Rosie shows that such possibilities have always been around, ever since technology has played such a central role in our lives.

In an evolutionary process, seemingly unconnected phenomenon are grabbed and thrust together, with quite unexpected consequences, without necessary design other than to simply grow something, to 'proliferate'. So the postcard, my letters to my children, the need to 'show' my inquiry process, inviting participation of my colleagues at Roffey Park, and Donna Haraway's manifesto act as nutrients to feed the creative process of story-making, surfacing the hidden transcripts of gender.

The process of journaling, reflecting and thinking leading up to the first drafts of the story followed a kind of autoethnographic research process. In this discipline, I was inspired by Andrew Sparkes' use of Caroline Ellis's characteristics of 'heartful' (auto)ethnography (Ellis 1997). As Sparkes continues:

These include the following: the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher's vulnerable selves, emotions, body and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical and political consequences; an encouragement of compassion and empathy. (Sparkes 2002) p210-211

Prompted by the inquiry practices outlined in Chapter Two, I aimed to walk along the edge of disturbance caused in me by the ideas about gender, the performance of it in my work and life beyond, and the recognition that I needed to find a form of inquiry that was symmetrical with my theme: developing a more inquiring masculinity; not just talking about it but somehow 'showing it'.

Using the Future

bell hooks (sic) talks about the 'margin' as a space of 'radical openness and opportunity'. (hooks 1991). One of the evolving principles of my own research agenda in the story-writing-and-telling process was to consider the future as such a marginal space, full of possibility. I have always found science fiction inspiring, and Donna Haraway's writing (Haraway 1991) led me to the work of Ursula K Le Guin, and in particular her story *The Left Hand of Darkness* (LeGuin 1969, 1997). In it, Le Guin uses a fictional planet set far into the future to describe a race of humans who have evolved to a point where each individual can be both male and female at different times in their lifecycle.

Le Guin's book had an interesting impact on me; it helped me realise the plastic possibilities of gendered bodies. Indeed, in my imagination I had a sense of the plastic, waxy and thus pliable nature of the bodies Le Guin was describing. This inspired me to take the vision of the future I was playing with onto a much bigger scale. On LeGuin's imaginary planet, 'Winter', anyone with a fixed gender is described as a 'pervert':

permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormal – normals by our standard. (LeGuin 1969, 1997) p51

LeGuin is using an interesting, ironic device here – to draw our attention to the socially constructed nature of ‘perversion’. I compare this with Dvorsky and Hughes’ discussion of the frequency of what is described as ‘intersexuality’, where people (here on Earth) are born with indeterminate sexual organs:

The incidence of intersexuality is disputed, and it may now be more prevalent than before due to environmental chemicals that mimic estrogen and interfere with foetal genital development (Dumoski, Meyers, Colborn 1997). At the high end of estimates, Brown gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993,2000) has estimated that the incidence of intersexuality may be as high as 1.7% of the population., if all genital abnormalities are included. (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008) p3

Imaginatively, a three-way inquiry space opens up, between:

- 1) A story based on my own experience, extrapolated into the future - to create the personal element that enables interpersonal connection and thereby the possibility of ‘2nd person inquiry’, as I explain below
- 2) Science fiction - which enables our imagination to consider what *might* happen, rather than what we *want* to happen, deconstructing our socialised ‘givens’ and surfacing a hidden transcript of blurred gender identities
- 3) Socio-technological forces, such as intersexuality, co-mingling with ecological crisis

It also enabled me to take Sarah Jones’ challenge seriously: how would this research process have an impact, over the longer term?

These combine to create very fertile soil for what John Heron calls ‘Dionysian’ inquiry (Heron 1996) . Using story, we can cover a lot of ground in a research process, opening up the imaginative possibilities that can disrupt dominant discourses, around gender for example. The form, as Judi Marshall says, is about *accepting and seeking to express What Is rather than What Should Be (Marshall 2007)*. In my case, it occurred to me to use the ecological crisis as a way to enhance the urgency of gender questions. The story asks: how might responses to major climate change and gender interact as interdependent yet unpredictable social forces?

Using the future as stage on which to set my story, I was still able to hold (at least a semi-) autobiographical frame:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens focussing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (Ellis and Bochner 2000) p739

During the five years or so of my inquiry journey so far, (Jewish) ancestry and its interplay with gender has become a recurring theme and using the future enabled me to consider how these ancestral forces might play forward as well as backward, in the way Ellis and Bochner discuss above. This is a critical process. It isn’t just about wondering how my life would or might turn out, but was a deliberate strategy to play with the interrelation between gender and other forces, for all of us.

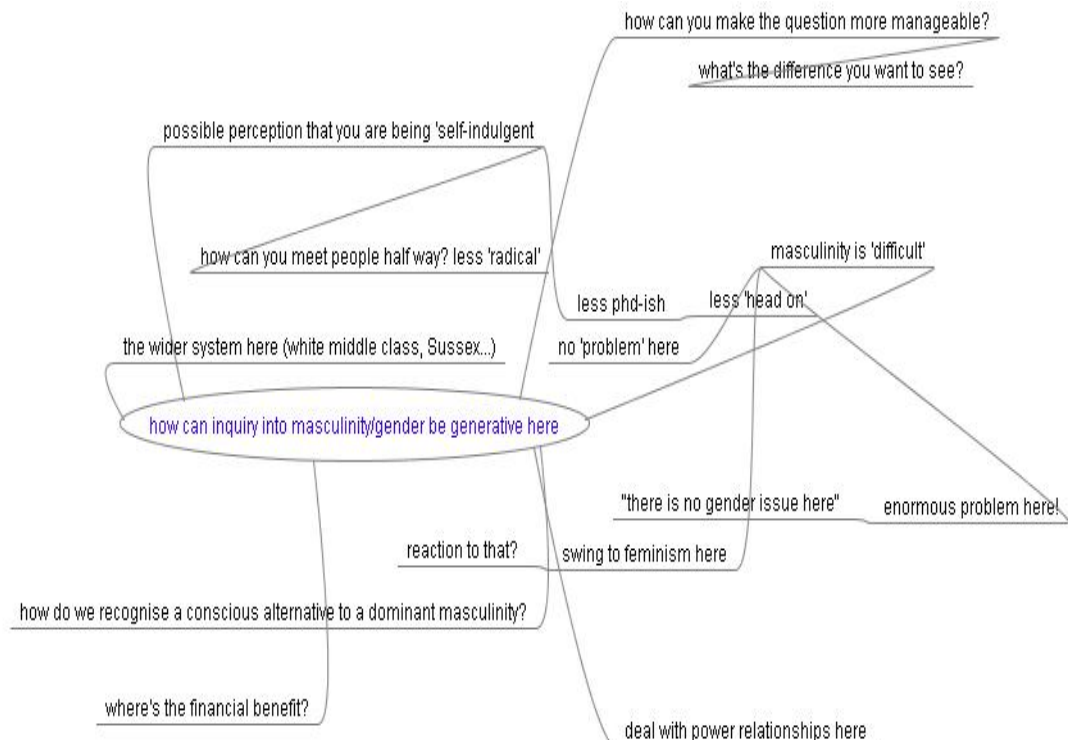
[Critical autobiography] The term is needed to distinguish such writing from standard autobiography, because of the strength of the current cultural norms

that 'autobiography' should be a personal, confessional, individualistic, a-theoretical and non-political linear narrative of a life. 'Critical autobiography', in contrast, makes use of individual experience, theory, and a process of reflection and re-thinking, which includes attention to politically situated perspectives. (Griffiths 1995) p70

A future-based story also invites a suspension of disbelief. This is a useful tool when opening up an inquiry space with people, especially around controversial and emotive areas such as gender, inviting participation, within a community like Roffey Park. If we are going to incite attention to politically situated perspectives, then a narrative set in the future has the power to invite people to *imagine* first, by-passing their own defensive reasoning that suggests such things 'are not possible.' It asks them to consider what *might be* possible, without saying this *shall* happen. It has never been my intention to say what will happen, because don't know! But I am deliberately advocating some interesting and unpredictable interactions between history, biology, technology and gender in a way that will fundamentally disrupt the traditional gender roles so many people hold as fixed and immutable.

Opening up Shared Inquiry Space

Keeping issues like gender on the boil in an organisational or practice context isn't always easy. When I came to Roffey Park in 2006, I was aware that gender questions were quite hard to keep in focus in the everyday discussions. For example, in my first year at Roffey Park, I was a member of a practice group of 'new joiners', all of whom were inquiring into how we would be developing our own specialisms at Roffey. We met once a month, for a day at a time, and during this day, each of us had 'airtime' to discuss our practice, during which we received supportive and challenging feedback from fellow group members. In one such period, I offered to facilitate a group discussion along the lines of my interest in gender. The question I chose was: how can inquiry into gender and masculinity be generative here?



During the discussion, I mind-mapped the group responses, as shown above. I was grateful to my fellow group members, and challenged by the need the group was expressing for a more oblique, subtle approach, in statements like ‘how can you meet people half way?’; ‘how can you make the question more manageable’, ‘less PhD-ish’ and less ‘head on’? The sub-text of the discussion was a challenge from the group to find a way to make this more than ‘my issue’. This suggested to me that I needed to find a way of being less pushy with the inquiry, and to find a way to play with it so that people would feel more invited in. The suggestion that I deal with power relationships, and the question of financial benefit, is something I return to later.

This prompted me towards the story-telling approach and to ‘play’, trompe l’oeil like, with a hidden transcript, along an edge in which others might be more intrigued. So when writing the story, I intended it to have enough recognisable features of a parallel world to Roffey Park, where some of these issues mentioned in the mind map would be visible, without necessarily being too confronting or ‘head on’. This became a guiding quality principle, of reference to this community, in the writing process:

The next set of criteria that are emerging as quality–cum-ethical criteria are a set I would group under the rubric of community. Although we might quibble about my name for this category, this particular set of standards does indeed reference the communitarian nature of research as it is reconceived in new paradigm work. I label it communitarian because it recognizes that research takes place in, and is addressed to, a community; (Lincoln 1995) p280

I intended to draw the reader in, to keep the reader (at Roffey Park and beyond) interested *enough*. It then gave me the chance to use the story as a tool to open up portals of shared, ‘2nd person inquiry’, so that these gender questions were more widely shared, and not just ‘my issue’. (Reason and Bradbury 2001). I wrote and circulated the story with the deliberate intention of walking along the seam between 1st and 2nd person inquiries. I was aware that in a single text, I couldn’t show ‘everything’ but at least it could provide a meeting point for multiple stories, including my own. I couldn’t predict the implications of this, but at least I hoped there would *be some*. As Yvonna Lincoln points out:

Multiple stories feed into any text; but equally important, multiple selves feed into the writing or performance of a text, and multiple audiences find themselves connecting with the stories which are told. What are the implications for this polyphonic chorus of author/selves, subjects, participants, audiences, and texts? (Lincoln 1995) p38

I intended some incitement but not regardless of consequences. As I wrote the story, I was aware of an edge of moving outward, of ‘other voices’ speaking in the text, drawing people into the inquiry, being inclusive, with perhaps messy and unintended consequences but at least with the intention of having some research productivity, in raising the awareness of the selves we bring to *gendered* lives. But how to help the story find its legs? For that, I turned to Jim Porter for help.

Characters that Live

As Stephen King suggests at the beginning of this chapter, I was surprised by the character of Jim Porter as he emerged in my story. Jim is someone who was somewhat like me but also not. His name ‘Jim Porter’ is an anglicised version of my own name (‘Traeger’ = ‘Porter’ in German/Yiddish). I found the character of Jim intriguing: his complexity, his doggedness, his compassion and his almost outrageous responses to the times around him as they related to things and people he cared

about. These are things I could say about myself, but I also think Jim is quite different to me; indeed, what is striking is that he seems to have his own life.

Can a story have a life independent of its author and almost in spite of him or her sometimes? This isn't to disown my responsibility, but to recognise that the authoring process is like the parenting process; at some point, your intimate production develops its own freewill and eventually spins off on its own trajectory. Characters lives can develop in ways which may seem surprising, and even odd, to the author. Take Stephen Kings relationship with one of his most famous fictional inventions, *Carrie*:

I never liked Carrie ... I pitied her and I pitied her classmates as well, because, I had been one of them once upon as time. (King 2000) p74

Stephen King is suggesting here not just that he had a relationship with Carrie within the story but beyond it as well, as it had that power to walk a line between autobiography and universal experience, as fiction does. In my own case, some of the characters in my own story took on a solidity and strength that took me by surprise. For example, I found one of the female characters, Sue (in section 4 of part 1) remarkably grounded and insightful, especially when she seemed to uncover potentially unconscious motives in Jim's behaviour; motives that he himself may not have been aware of (and I had not been aware of) towards Sarah Jones. I was genuinely shocked by what she said when she pointed out Jim's blind spot. And of course, Sarah Jones has been finding her own voice throughout this thesis. The solidity of these characters is a revelatory delight to me.

It could be argued that this is just an exploration into my own (un)consciousness, but I see it as broader than that. It showed me the power of narrative to show the nuances of reflection and action in complex, everyday situations around issues such as gender. The fact that the characters had such solidity (and not just to me) seems to me to be demonstrative of the validity of this form to show wider truths. As an author, I act as a kind of channel for these voices. Perhaps this is a sign of what David Abram calls the 'Chiasm', a reciprocal intertwining or 'criss-cross', between the sensed and conceptualised world. When stories 'come alive', it is not because they are merely vivid, it is because they *as real as the lived world itself*.

this interplay of the different sense is what enables the chiasm between the body and the earth, the reciprocal participation – between one's own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world - that we commonly call perception.
(Abram 1996) p128

The solidity of the story and the characters within it is demonstrative of the power and quality of this inquiring form.

Jim himself has even become a sort of mentor figure for me. I have developed the practice of using him as a sounding board for some of my own thinking. I have found myself wondering what 'would Jim do?' This didn't happen overnight. Initially I found him quite irritating. I promised to myself that I would never be like him, an 'irredeemable academic'. His first dialogue with the female student was too true to life; it reminded me of my own less than admirable habits.

But it was pointed out to me by my supervision colleagues at Bath that I had black-and-white views about Jim. He wasn't perfect, but he was striving for greater awareness in his actions, and that is something we very much share. So my attitude towards him softened. I find that even now it surprises me how comfortable I am writing about him as if he really exists. It is important to consider not whether this is a

simple confusion between fantasy and reality, but rather to consider, as Laurel Richardson said, what claims we stake by making such characters so real? (Richardson 2005). How does a real Jim serve an inquiring purpose?

Reflecting on that question, Jim has offered me mentoring around a particular shift in myself; that of a man 'looking in' at feminism, to becoming a man who was prepared to inhabit this territory. There aren't that many men around who can support this journey. For most men (and lamentably for many women too), feminism and the ideals it stands for are 'over there', at some distance to them, even though they may be quite sympathetic to the cause. But this is a territory I have intended to enter and even to make my own home in some way. Jim has helped me to do that. So how did this work? To demonstrate that I will show you how I kept the inquiry going, by imagining the conversation Jim and I had when we met for a coffee one day.

In the Café with Jim

I arrived first and I sat in the café waiting for Jim. I was excited to meet him: I wanted to ask him about many things, and I was also nervous. What would he be like, really? How would he feel about the story? Would he feel well portrayed, or perhaps exploited? Would it work for him? Would he think it was a good piece of writing? He was an academic after all, and must have strong views on these things, as academics do. But it was important for me to meet him. I wanted his help. I wanted to stay on the 'edge' in this inquiry. I didn't want to go back into my 'head' but keep my heart in it and even get my guts involved; to move it forward and keep it risky, developmental, to explore how this inquiry process had changed me. This meant going further fearwards. I sipped some cappuccino and felt the trembling. I realised also at that point that it wasn't all about inquiry and thinking and lah-di-dah stuff. I also wanted just to thank Jim. He had helped me express something of my own experience in his story and in a way that was safe enough to be risky. I owed him something for that.

A man walks into the café and I know it is Jim, even though I am surprised by this. I stop myself momentarily. Of course it is him. Of all people I should recognise him. Yet he is dressed as a man, and that again takes me back. But who am I to question this? What really surprises me is that he doesn't quite look like what I expected. He is taller, thinner, older-looking, very distinguished, with silvery grey hair, pale skin, striking blue-grey eyes and a long, straight nose. I also notice he has very large, delicate hands; those of a pianist.

- Hello, you must be Jim.

I stretch out my hand and our eyes meet with a life-in-a-moment flicker. His skin is cool and papery to the touch. My silly, racing mind momentarily thinks papery is appropriate for a fictional character. I realise in an instant I am like a gushing youngster, and feel, almost girlish in his presence. This again, takes me back somewhat.

- Please, sit down would you like something...a coffee?

- Yes, please, I'll have...what is that? [He gestures at my cup] - A Cappuccino? That would be lovely.

Again I notice the slight stiffness, the formality. I remain on the back foot. I wonder at it: what is it with a fictional character that gives him such a vivid life of his own? I find the Polish waitress, and sort out the drinks.

- This is a nice area.

Jim speaks with a strong, solid baritone. I sit there wondering what he must look like in a wig.

- Yeah, we like it. It's great for the kids. We like the river, the parks, Hampton Court Palace. It's not too far from London. Doesn't take me long to get to work, even on the M25.

My usual spiel is useful in these sizing-up moments. I notice I am fiddling with my hat and scarf, and stop. Why am I so skittish? If I just paused for a moment, took my breath, I'd realise *I'm* the one with the authority here...

- How about you – where are you from?

- Oh, north of here.

He answers slowly deliberately, in a way which I read as 'this isn't quite what we're hear to talk about is it?' My momentary sense of authority evaporates.

- Oh.

A tumbleweed moment passes.

He turns directly to me - So what is it you wanted to talk with me about?

- Yes, yes of course. Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it. I wanted to...to [I am flustered] thank you for coming and ...ask for your help really. It's about...where to go next and, well, did you read it?

- The story? Yes, I read it.

- Ah.

I wait for a blow, which is odd, because he offers no sign of one. The blows are all mine, self-inflicted.

- It was good. You can write. I found it very...interesting.

My heart sinks a bit further. Interesting...is well...interesting. But did it *move* him?

- Interesting?

- Clearly I am at a bit of a disadvantage here, aren't I? Because it is about me, I can't really comment until I know what it is you want to know. Otherwise I don't really know what role I am playing here. I have said I think you can write. Do you want me to critique the writing a bit more?

- No!

- I didn't think so

- No. Yes, no, I mean, it *is* about you, but it's also about me as well. It's about all of us, us men, in these times. I wrote it to make wider, more general points...but yes it is about you of course, it is...

- So apart from making your 'wider' points, am I here just for you to have a good look? And if so, isn't that somewhat voyeuristic? As it was about me, then I have to say you shouldn't be surprised to hear that I found it, and I find meeting you, mildly confronting, to say the least. It's not often you meet your maker, as it were.

I feel the conversation taking a further turn that I hadn't anticipated.

- Yes, I am. Not surprised, that is.

- So unless you can give me a bit of an angle about what you want to know, then my default position will be to consider you completely off the hook, whilst my foibles are at the centre of people's attention.

I feel the need to get a serious grip. I take a swig of the foamy dregs. Here I was, starting to feel guilty, ashamed, even scolded, by a paper man. Apart from the most part of my attention, which is set off like a one arm bandit by this conversation, one still, small voice in the back of my head is fascinated by the vivacity of this character, by the transcendent possibilities of story: He lives! Emboldened, I move towards the edge.

- Ok. I accept what you say. It was never my intention to display your...foibles. I didn't ask you here to dwell on that. There were some specific things I wanted to ask you. I truly am not interested in being voyeuristic.

- No, to be honest, I don't feel like that. Sorry if I sound a little...testy, but it does take some adjusting to, all of this. Actually, something that really struck me about your story, even though it 'wasn't about you' [I noticed his eyes twinkle at this point] is the love in it. You have a big heart. That alone demonstrated something about the kind of inquiry you are in.

- I can understand if you are angry...

Jim sighs

- No, not really angry. Well, only slightly. I suppose I just feel you owe me a little. I *lived*, even if it was only in a story. And here I am again, invoked back into existence. It is all a bit maddening. What was it you called me in the story? An 'unreformed academic'? In that case, you can't expect me not to have some existential qualms about all of this.

- Yes! Exactly! That's why I asked you here; to thank you. But I also wanted to ask you some things, because I was really impressed by you, by your story. I could just do with a bit of help, to talk this all out. I see you as a mentor actually, as someone who has understanding of this on the inside, as it were. A pause as Jim's coffee arrives, and he helps himself to several spoonfuls of sugar.

- Sweetness, the perk of incarnation...Pardon the pun. Life is wasted on the living.

We laugh and the atmosphere relaxes. I continue:

- I am sorry...this is all a bit weird. Being aware of different subjectivities in the research process is one thing...

- ...but it never occurred to you that you might be treading on the toes of imaginary characters!

We laugh again and the space between us softens a little more. Jim continues:

- I suppose I just wanted you to know I had some feelings about it.

- Yes I can understand that and grateful. Surprised, but still grateful. I feel more connected. This is something your story has helped me with. Moving towards connection with people, even if it is difficult sometimes. I am pleased you feel that way...[Jim's eyes widen a fraction at this point – but I hastily continue]...I mean, I feel vindicated. This is what I wanted to talk with you about. I wanted to thank you, and ask your advice. I wanted to talk things through. I am at the point in the research process when I really need to think about the *difference* this has all made. This is *action* research after all. What change has there been in what I do, or at least in how I am? How can I show it? I thought you could help me take that turn. So I do take you seriously, if you see what I mean.

- So you want to think about the action you have taken as a result of this inquiry? What impact it has had?

- Yes, exactly. It's a bit of a paradox really, because I wrote the story to bring myself 'out of my head', into my heartfelt experience, to show the challenges I face as a man wanting to engage with feminism in my sort of world, and what this man can do about it. But what emerged, unexpected, was how much bigger the whole thing is that the individual.

- The whole thing?

- About gender, and how it can be, or will be changed; how it might evolve. I believe now it *will* evolve. Maybe not in the way I showed it, but in *some* way, an interaction between science, technology, huge social forces. My own individual response is tiny. It has left me feeling...humbled. I am humbled by the compassion in the story, and the size of the stakes. When I started all of this work with men and gender I had a real presumption that people could 'change things'. I haven't lost sight of that, but my understanding of it has

become much more nuanced. I think I was holding onto the power of individual agency, which is quite patriarchal really; well it's where patriarchy meets the Enlightenment perhaps: the 'individualised, self-motivated citizen can save the world'. One man can be a hero. It's where the idea of Superheroes, comes from. But now I can see the complexity of all of this. One needs patience, a sense of connection to a wider flow, playing a part rather than *the* part. My awareness needs to be much wider. It's even shown me the need for a sense of humour, some lightness and fun with it all.

- Yes I can see that, but is that why you needed me here?

- You know, I was just reading in a newspaper that Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in three weeks, on one continuous 120 foot roll of paper.

- I never knew that.

- Yes, but he needed some things to keep him going. Coffee, cigarettes and Benzedrine. That's what kept him on his edge. Yuk. Can you imagine how he felt when he'd finished?

- One cappuccino hardly counts...

- No it's not the coffee that gives me my edge. It's you. I wanted to keep the work, my inquiry fresh. The story was an expression of a yearning; to get closer to the feelings of this journey. Until then the work was 'all in my head'. Lots of long, academic words, and talking *about* being more present than I had found other writers about masculinity. It's good stuff, certainly. Having a head is necessary. But I wanted to show more *heart*. That's where you came in, with your story. And when it was finished, I was keen not to go back into my head again, to keep on the edge. Maybe go down further, to my guts, my legs even. Jim takes a swig of his coffee.

- Go on. Say more. I'm listening.

- You see, writing your story was an attempt to bring real feeling into this inquiry, real stories and bodies, into this work. They often seem so absent in academic writing. It's ironic, but in writing about men and masculinity, the writer can be really absent. It's that abstract, academic voice. I wanted to bring the body in with the voice. Now, I'm concerned I will fall back into an abstract relationship to it, intellectualise it and disconnect from the experience. Writing the story kept me on the edge. I feel a bit stuck. I feel...perhaps even a little nostalgic for that sense of edge. As if I have to give it up to complete the inquiry. For a while I blamed you a bit, saying I didn't want to turn into you, but now I think that's not fair. I think *I'm* the one more in danger of being the unreformed academic. *You* are the one who did something different.

- Yes, it is all too easy to make these things very black and white. Most things in these questions around gender are very nuanced and paradoxical. So let's go back to that question; how has this inquiry had an impact on you? How has it changed you?

- I think it's something to do with solidity

- Solidity?

- Yes I realise that may be a paradoxical thing to say to an imaginary character...

- Careful, you'll hurt my feelings again.

He smiles at this, and I notice how upright he seems, so tall and straight. I consider for a moment how much dignity he seems to have, as if I created him to express something of the qualities I do indeed yearn for.

- Yes I feel more solid in myself. Stronger. It's as if the story showed me how much I worry about what other people think about me and how I can let go of that. So for example, I really worried what people would think about me when they read it: would they think I was weird or stupid, or would they resent being portrayed in some unflattering light if they recognised themselves in some of the characters? But the reaction was mostly positive. It reflected my own

warmth, and my own depth, grappling with the complexity of these questions. It also makes me less...ashamed...to be a man.

- You are ashamed to be a man?

- A little I suppose. I didn't realise that until now, not that clearly. But I realise how easy it is to become really apologetic as a man if you want to consider patriarchy seriously. That breeds defensiveness as well, in response to feminism. I'm the 'good guy', not like the 'other men'. It is strange that, at the same time as helping me to realise that I may have less agency in relation to these vast forces of history, the story has also made me feel more comfortable in this territory; that it isn't all women's territory; that I have a legitimate place in this ground. I know some women might want to fight me on that; that they don't want to share it with me, but I still hope to go there. Not to colonise it, but at least co-inhabit. It has helped me feel that men...that I...can have a real voice in the critical perspectives of gender, from the heart as well as the head. It's as if being a 'feminist man' (if that's the right phrase for this position) meant being answerable to all women. I just don't feel that anymore. I have my own legitimate position in this. I called it an 'inquiring masculinity' but I'm not sure that quite does it justice either. I just feel less defensive, as if I own some of this ground. I think it is defensiveness that keeps men away from engaging with these questions, in their heart and soul. I feel less answerable to 'all women'. That's interesting don't you think?

- Yes that is interesting. I noticed in the story a prevailing sense of being judged; by children, by women, by others generally. That was my characteristic. Perhaps I thought that changing my outward presentation, feminising myself, becoming a 'mystical androgyne', would mean I would be less judged, that I would then be on the good side. Of course that didn't happen!

- Exactly! People may judge me, as a man. But *this is my territory*. I have earned a right to it. The judgement is internal and I have let go of it somewhat. I wonder if that's true for other men? That they carry a sense that the standards of awareness and action around gender questions are 'out there' – as if women intrinsically hold that standard and men don't? I feel more confident in my own standard. It's like the idea of emotional labour, or like Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift*. If women do most of the work in their territory, it means men don't have to. It's the same with this. If women hold the standard, then men don't have to. If we are defensive about it, that's not helpful either. We need to *own* this work. Your story helped me own this work.

- So that's the awareness piece, but how does it help in the action? What does this mean you do differently?

- It's like I wrote in my journal recently. I feel less 'judged'; so for example, when a woman at work recently said 'Oh, typical men!' and she was lumping me in with that judgement; I didn't feel drawn to respond, to defend myself. In the past I might have said something like 'Not all men are like that, you know!' But I didn't because in that moment I felt calmer and I thought, 'I'm not answerable to her about this!'

- So what did you do?

- I just smiled. I just smiled, and shrugged.

- That's progress? After how many years in this work?!

- It might not seem like much. It's a trivial example I suppose.

- And she could have read that gesture in lots of different ways

- That's just it. I knew that it didn't matter, really, how she read it 'as a woman'. I didn't need to defend myself. She's a friend, and that matters. But in not holding me responsible for all men, I am not holding her responsible for the standard as a woman. That is up to me now. I need to have an active sense of whether my behaviour is sexist or not, typical or not, for my own good. This is

mentshlichkeit, staying with the edge, the struggle, owning it. How would the world be if men owned it more?

- Quite different I suppose.

- I have realised through your story, and talking to you the possibilities of owning up to male power as a good thing, it can be a good thing, an opportunity for a man with a feminist subjectivity.

- Now you sound like an unreformed academic

- Touché!

I notice again an endearing gleam in Jim's eye.

- I am glad. Actually I'm inspired. It gives me some hope. How a younger man can be unashamedly male and still face the challenge of a critical view towards male power. That is an inspirational idea.

- I didn't have that clarity about it until now, talking here with you. So I owe you again.

- You can pay for the coffee.

Later, we are standing outside the café, at the foot of the bridge, with the river glinting below. He is about to walk across it. We are about to say goodbye.

- Thank you for the coffee, says Jim

- Thank you for allowing me to 'invoke you into existence again'

- Ha! I am pompous, you are right!

- No really, I appreciate it. It has been really enlightening. I have enjoyed it. I hope we can meet again.

- So do I. You are a deep thinker. You have more to say.

- Yes, but what?

- You have more to say about the 'action turn' as you called it. How it changes what you do? And also, how have others reacted to your story: what has it done for them? Give it some legs.

- That might be hard to say. It is all so inter-connected. How do you know for sure if something has an impact and if so what?

- Yes it is hard. We know that. But it's still worth a try. You might want to just say a bit more about what others have made of it. Weave their stories in a bit more.

- Yes that's a good idea. I have thought about that. I'd really like to continue by telling their stories, continue the narrative, widening it. Maybe that's how I can show the action impact in some way. I'm not sure.

- That's what you've got to do. Don't try and be sure when you haven't done it yet. Just give it a go. Continue fearwards.

- Yes. Thank you. Again. That's really useful

- No problem. I hope we meet again.

- Goodbye.

- Goodbye.

We shake gloved hands and he turns and walks over the bridge, heading 'somewhere north', in the low winter sunshine.

Giving Legs to the Story

How good does a story have to be to work well enough to draw others into the questions it seeks to explore? And when does it become such a compelling story that it ceases to be an inquiry piece and starts becoming a work of 'fiction' that we can equally hold at an objective (and thus impersonal) distance? What do people see when they read a story? What control do you have, even as the author to dictate the direction of their imagination will take?

Following Jim' Porter's advice, I want to start to explore the responses my story received as I handed it out, and how this did the work, or not, of moving towards '2nd person inquiry', inviting people to participate in the conversation around gender and masculinity. I felt I had explored the thinking behind my inquiry, the 'head' of my work, and the story had given it a 'heart' but now I'm interested in giving it some *legs*. This is after all, 'action research'. So like sending my children off to school, it was time to send my story out into the world, and let evolution unfold.

I had a deliberate intention in handing out the story 'Gender Futures' to work colleagues, friends and family members. It was to take the next step on my journey towards a more 'inquiring masculinity'. I wanted to co-inquire, to explore the fertile territory between the public and private narratives of self that is the site of the policing of gender and masculinity boundaries. How can we disrupt the commonly held narrative and so open up evolutionary possibilities? This is where the border police stand, either our own internal ones or those that control the social practices of story-making around the self, not just in literature or fictional accounts, but in everyday conversations and encounters. As Mary Gergen points out:

"Although androcentric control over literary forms is a serious matter, how much graver is the accusation that the forms of our personal narratives are also under such control?" (Gergen 1992) p130

As I have discussed, using a story is potentially generative in this process of disruption, but it also has its dangers as a 'heuristic'. If we go back to the roots of that word, it comes from the Greek meaning 'to reveal' or 'to discover'. So to suggest that the story I present people is a fully formed thing, in which they simply discover meanings that are inherently 'there', would be in this research method, misleading. The process of discovery around a story is more relational. The story becomes a mirror if you like, for peoples' own questions. So whilst wanting to hold people to inquire with me into questions of gender and masculinity, I must accept that their participation could take us anywhere they wanted it to, with respect to the democratic tradition of action research. (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Who am I to say what it is they must see in it? And yet I am a partner, a co-inquirer, so my perspective is valid too. This is the tension inherent in this kind of approach. It isn't bad thing – indeed it can be uplifting, educational, risky, even fun, to walk along this edge with people.

During this phase of the research I found myself being challenged to see things, themes, directions, perspectives and ideas in the story that I had never even thought of. And even I myself was surprised by what I found in the story long after I had written it. To me there is beauty in this, in opening up to the wonder of this evolutionary process. A mark of quality in this type of research, moving towards 'cooperative inquiry', is how well we hold this tension of 'convergence and divergence' (Heron and Reason 1997). This is more of an art than a science; or maybe it is better still to see it is a kind of craft, as Peter Reason does. (Reason 2001). If the story is good enough, with enough narrative potency in it, things will emerge, even if you can't predict what direction these things will take.

Working with Power - Who did I give the story to and why?

Stephen Toulmin, in his book *Cosmopolis*, talks about the timely and the local nature of knowledge that we have had to become more used to, in the wake of the post-modern challenge to the Academy's foundationalist thirst for universal, permanent knowledge (Toulmin 1990).

The implications of this for the action researcher are profound. It means that we have the task (or the possibility) of locating our own ideas, and research methods within an ever-changing and evolving territory of action in the world. And in 2006, aged 41, when I joined Roffey Park Institute, I was given the opportunity in a timely way to bring my research into that community. Finding a way to do this in a way which responded to the issues that my colleagues raised in the 'mind-map' at the beginning of this chapter led to the development of my story telling skills, hence the use of the 'Gender Futures' device to draw people into the conversation. This type of knowledge development is contingent and opportunistic; taking these opportunities is the inherent skill of the craft that Reason discusses (Reason 2001).

I was prompted in this next phase of inquiry by the question in the mind map: how can I 'deal with the power relationships at Roffey Park'? This is a question crucial towards *mentshlichkeit*, being a 'good man'. Power relationships don't go just away because we have an intention to face them. They need engagement, making difficult choices between intention, action and reflection. This is a good test of *mentshlichkeit*. I am not sure what the practice group meant exactly by 'deal' with the power relationships; I took it to mean, engage, incite, disrupt, challenge, but equally, they could also have meant: be sensitive to them, finessing them, finding ways to *heal* them, helping things move on...?

Using the story as a tool of such engagement, I was aiming to practice a Foucauldian perspective on power:

Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which the individuals are caught up.
(Foucault 1975) p202

In this sense, the power dynamics of a place like Roffey Park, are explored, moved, disrupted in action on those surfaces, lights, gazes and internal mechanisms, between people and in their interactions. My intention with the story was to have some impact, to stir the pot, and in so doing, hold up a bit of a mirror to these surfaces. I was very conscious that I act *within* these surfaces myself, and I wanted to craft an engagement with them, rather than plunge in creating too much of a 'splash'. What were the risks?

I was fully aware of the intensely political dimension to this. Adopting a Foucauldian mode, the 'Institute' in the story, on which Roffey Park was based is a model, as every organisation is, for a prison, expecting certain behaviours and delineating transgressions through structures, 'internal mechanisms', habits, practices and punishments. The story potentially held a mirror up to these and in doing so I was aware of my potential transgression, and possible 'punishment'. Indeed, I *hoped* for a transgression, especially around gender, even if I couldn't predict what it might be. But I was anxious as well.

As Foucault says: '*Prisons put the cop inside your head*' (Foucault 1975). In bringing what I hoped would be a transgressive story into this system, reflecting a different light on its surfaces, I felt the presence of that internal cop. There were elements in the story that, when I thought of them, brought me out in a bit of a cold sweat when I considered how they might be received. Would people think I'd 'gone a bit mad'; that I was some kind of 'pervert', or surfacing my subconscious homo-erotic gender confusion? Roffey Park was, after all, mostly a community of psychologists. God save me.

At first, returning from the Italian holiday break where I finished the story, in the late summer of 2008, I was very tentative and nervous about the story's distribution. The key was whether it *worked*; did it hang together as a work of fiction? I think my worst fear, beyond all the others above, was that people would simply think I was a bit stupid. If the story *worked* for people, and had in it for them the subtle and sophisticated levels and readings I aimed for, then I think I could face most other judgements and accusations. But to think people would see me as in some way a little stupid, a bit *gauche* and naive...? This fear haunted me the most. Was this internal judgement a signal that a place like Roffey Park uses as a mechanism of control? Or is this about the wider control mechanisms of the 'expert masculinity' that I am aiming to deconstruct? Is this why men, haunted by the spectre of an academic 'expert' masculinity, may avoid showing their 'ignorance', or (in a different 'light') avoid facing that (potentially fertile) place of 'not knowing'?

So when people started coming back to me with their views that by and large, they thought the story 'worked' (although with one exception, of which I will say more in the Conclusion) I was most relieved and was then able to be a bit more loose in the story's distribution. In fact, I would say (in a form following my content) that I started off quite demur and by the end became a bit of a tart about it, distributing it quite freely. From wondering if I was being too risky, I went to reflecting on whether I had been risky enough.

I decided that I would print off a bundle of them (about 50 copies) and give them to people by hand. I deliberately avoided emailing people, as I thought this would be judged as asking them to do more of a chore for me, whereas handing people a manuscript had the advantage of my giving it them 'as a gift', and this sense could be attached to the conversation that went on around handing it over. I was usually quite specific about what I said in this handover, along the lines of:

'This is what I mentioned to you. It is a story. I'd like to invite you to join in with my research, by reading it. I hope you enjoy it. What sort of feedback would I like? I would prefer that you just read it as a story, like one you got for a book group or book club. So I am not looking for an academic 'critique', rather a discussion of any of the themes and ideas that grabbed you as you read it. I'd really like a coffee and a chat when you are ready, if you'd like to.'

This script, and the choice not email the text, were part of a deliberate attempt to work with the power 'surfaces' of Roffey Park, encouraging an engagement at an emotional and experiential level, rather than just an 'intellectual' one. This was an experiment. How would people engage? I chose to manage it in this way. It was a difficult choice. Should I say nothing as I handed it over (and risk being seen as unenthusiastic, aloof, even arrogant..)? Should I say 'it's for my PhD' (and risk people feeling drawn into some intellectual 'critique'), or should I use this as a chance to practice a softer, relational invitation, to *inquire*? I intended the latter. It isn't the 'right' choice necessarily, but an example of deliberately working with the surfaces and gazes of which Foucault speaks, as part of an experiment with *mentshlichkeit*.

As a rough estimate, about 30% of people actually came back to me with a genuine urge to have to a further conversation: that's about 15 people. The interlude at the beginning of this chapter captures the spirit of these conversations. This is a claim of course, and it begs the question; did I choose the excerpts that would show the 'best' of these? I would suggest that I have no reason to hide any dissenting voices.

I had quite a number who simply responded by 'I liked your story'; or 'I really enjoyed it', and of course I would say probably a third so far I haven't heard of from again.

There is the possibility that there are a number of people out there who do indeed think I am a bit queer (meant pejoratively) or mad, but interestingly I haven't picked that up. In fact for a while, I was getting so many 'I really liked it' responses, with real *warmth* from people, that I became worried that I had erred on the side of being 'too safe'; could I have been edgier and more controversial in the story's registers, to provoke a bigger response, even some outcry?

There are a number of possibilities here, one being that they haven't read it yet of course. I was conscious when I handed it over of a sense of the length/weight of it: Double-sided printing meant that the story's 50 or so pages came out in my view 'not too thick' (about 4-5mm or so on A4 paper) but for those for whom reading didn't come naturally this may still have been too daunting.

But I recognise I was being deliberately political in my approach here. Roffey Park isn't a place where outcry sits very comfortably. My experience of 'outcry' very much informed the early dialogues of the story in Chapter Four, particularly the conversation between Jim and Daniel (see Part One, no.3). So I think I got it about right to provoke enough of a response to engage a wider dialogue and not too much that it would shut this down and just make it 'about me' and therefore marginalise it. There were some strategies in my timing and selection of people to play this deliberate game: By this I mean:

- Trying to make sure that a number of 'important' people read it, those who have influence at Roffey or beyond, in that they may be able to support a further extension to the conversation around gender. Below I focus on the responses of two people, Steve and Helena, who best fit this category
- Making sure that I gave it to people whose opinion I respected around these issues
- From an ethical point of view, making sure than anyone who had a particular investment in it, in that they had been involved in any of the conversations that had formed the basis of the story's content, had a chance to read it early on (in effect giving them a chance to 'veto' it)
- Beyond this, offering it to whoever showed an interest or might seem to benefit from it

Of course this may suggest that I deliberately avoided or skewed the readership to support a particular kind of advocacy around the questions I wanted to explore. This is a fair challenge. But in response I would argue that in terms of my research intention, which is to engage the community in which I reside in a wider conversation about issues that aren't usually foregrounded, such a political sensitivity isn't just appropriate, with a skill and grace worthy of *mentshlichkeit*, it is necessary. As Patti Lather says:

I position validity as an "incitement to discourse", much like how Foucault saw sexuality in the attention it receives within the human sciences... a fertile obsession given its intractability. (Lather 1993) p647

And that in this sense, in terms of the validity of my approach as a researcher, I am tracing here:

A methodology that "comes clean" about how power shapes an inquiry, how I use disruptive devices in the text to unsettle conventional notions of the real...(Lather 1993) p685

I would also say in my own defence, there was no deliberate attempt to deny anyone access to this story. It is pretty widely known within Roffey Park that I have written it

and that it formed a major part of my research process to invite people to read it. Indeed, it was part of the political expedient to give of a sense of warmth and invitation around it, in order to serve the wider aims of advocacy that I have already discussed are sometimes necessary in order to get elided issues onto the agenda.

I'd also say that there most potent 'risk' was in my engagement with specific key players in the Roffey game and beyond. These were people who act at the higher echelons of formal and informal political and economic power within that community, who I deliberately went 'fearwards' with, and engaged them in the story-inquiry process.

Again, harking back to Toulmin's 'local and timely' nature of knowledge formation, it is relevant that as I was proceeding with my inquiry into Roffey, during the autumn of 2008 and winter of 2008-9, the clouds of credit crunch and global recession were gathering and then breaking, a storm that had a dramatic impact within Roffey Park. Five fellow members of my 'consultant team' of 22 have been made redundant during this time. This added a further piquancy to the inquiry and also made it harder to hold in the picture. It is a reasonable (but not a comfortable assertion) that questions that are hard enough to keep on the agenda in good times are likely to be even more foreshadowed when times are bad. Having said that, there are always opportunities to be grabbed, whatever the weather. Engaging with Steve was an example.

Choices, Appreciation and Challenge – An Edge to Explore

James

It's 5.45 on a damp steel-grey Sunday afternoon. I'm sitting in a cottage in Cornwall bereft of telephone, mobile signal, internet access and all other interruptions (and connections) to the rest of the world. Not sure when I will next be online or in touch but I wanted to write this now, a few minutes after putting down Gender Future. I say 'this' without yet really knowing what it is I want to write, but with a strong feeling that I want to respond, to connect, to acknowledge something in what I've just read.

In part I want to acknowledge and honour your openness in sharing something of yourself – something important. In part I want to say – 'OK; I get it now'. Somehow my understanding of what you are doing, saying, embodying, researching ... well I've always kind of understood, but now it feels so much clearer.

And then there's part of me that having read your story desperately wants to tell my story – the story that no-one has heard, the bits that I struggle to understand myself, to just be able to put it out there in all its messiness – a part that just wants to connect and admires (and is slightly envious) of what you have done.

I wonder, was it cathartic to write it down; was it scary to hand it out; have you edited it knowing that your children might read it one day? And there are many things that I'm curious about – in particular about what (and who) is missing from the narrative. But that's my stuff !!!!

And there's a question that nags away at me (although again, I'm pretty sure this is my stuff). Is this really about gender? Is it really about masculinity? Or is it about identity and our struggle to allow the true essence of who we are to walk free in the world. All of us live our lives trapped within a complex web of

expectations, our own and others. There are many strands to this web and it seems that gender is one of these, albeit one of particular significance and one with many threads that spread out from it. But at the centre of the web is the essence of who we are, 'spirit' perhaps. And it seems strange that so much of how we organise ourselves and our societies and our lives mitigate [sic] against allowing our true spirit to roam free – and yet again, maybe that's just my stuff and my story.

Anyway, before I start to ramble incoherently, I want to say 'thank you' for letting me read this. I'm sure that some of our colleagues will respond more cogently than me, and engage in deep well-thought through intellectualised debate; will analyse, hypothesise and critique. I hope they do. It's a serious and important piece of work and another way of keeping the conversation alive. But I want you to know that what you've written has touched me deeply, has found its way through my personal web, and resonated with something that has become the central struggle in my life at my moment. How can I be me in the world? How do I know who 'me' really is? And what if that 'me' doesn't fit with the wants, needs and expectations of the people, the institutions and the life I have co-created around me?

Enough for now. Keep the conversation going.

Steve x

In analysis of data in all research processes, selection, particularly with what is foregrounded or not, is inevitable. Here I choose to show the 'data', in Steve's letter, in full (I deconstruct it further on, as you will see). What matters is how explicit this is, and with what validity these choices are made. My criteria for making these choices are mostly to do with being sensitive to the people who have participated here, honouring their generosity in staying in inquiry with me. This seems like 'dealing' with power relationships, in a way that is sensitive to 'being a good man'. So I have mostly made choices that are intended to protect their (and my own) vulnerability. In that sense I would say that the qualities I bring to this analysis are *appreciative*, without losing the edge of *challenge*. I also aim to foreground what further enables the themes so far to unfold.

Steve had a powerful role at Roffey Park when I first mooted the story inquiry with him. Officially our Director of Bespoke Services, this made him both my line-manager and key to the operational and strategic life of the Institute. He had hired me knowing my interest in gender and I knew this was a cause with which he had notional sympathy. In fact it was with Steve's backing that I was enabled to offer and run a weekend-long 'men's retreat' at Roffey Park in my first year there. Steve not only backed it, but attended himself, and that clearly had an impact that facilitated 12 out of the 13 male consultant staff team also taking part.

I like Steve, and generally got on well with him. With affection I would describe him as a clever operator within a complex political organisation, the type of organisation I trace in the 'Gender Future' story. As such, he wasn't always popular with everyone, being seen by a number of people as a bit of a game-player. Was this evident when I first suggested to Steve that he read my story? Indeed, he was slightly reluctant:

"You know," he said, "I'd really like you to read it to me, because I find that more accessible than reading it myself".

I made sense of this as an attempt to avoid adding extra work to his pile, whilst continue to signal his support. This may be my unfair impression but it is within the bounds of his reputation. However, events then conspired to enable him to engage with it, as he was already in the process of deciding to leave Roffey Park, which he did in early December 2008, after over ten years of employment there.

So the story then 'caught' Steve at a very interesting time, one of major transition in his life, a time of re-construction of himself, hence his email to me above. It was also a time when, even as we talked, I was conscious of a shifting power dynamic, an equalising, with someone who wasn't my 'boss' anymore, and the opportunity this opened up between us for a conversation, which in its openness, depth and richness may have been different whilst that power dynamic persisted.

I am conscious that I am talking *about* Steve, and this brings up uncomfortable feelings, of disloyalty for example. I wouldn't want to be disloyal because actually Steve is someone who I found to be very loyal to me, and indeed has been very supportive of me in this process. For example, he granted the funding for my PhD from Roffey. So as the ferryman, I owe him in this journey. How can we explain the effectiveness of inquiry into a community without framing the political economy and setting of this local and timely work? This is another one of those 'edges' that we have to signal and negotiate. Respect vies with honesty in the sense-making as well as the story-making process.

At this point then, the classic researcher choice would be to anonymise the subjects in the story. But this misses the point in my case. I would rather continue to write 'fearwards' (Turner-Vesselago nd), working along the edge that is presented here, making respectful and honest choices about what and how to present as I go. This is a harder but perhaps more appropriate choice. So Steve, if you are reading this, you can notice how you are here, and not here. I would make no claim to say that the Steve I portray here is the 'real Steve'. It is the same for all the 'voices' that come onto the stage. As such he may only exist as another character in an ongoing play. Whatever name he is given is arbitrary, so it might as well be, paradoxically, and perhaps more honestly, his 'real' one.

Looking at the Story with Steve

My initial intention with all of these conversations was to use their perspective to look back on the story together, holding it up against my own changing, distancing view. As I did so with Steve, the conversation builds and takes on its own life, and of course this takes us off in other places. Intention and intervention rarely coincide. So I offer an abbreviated transcription with a meta-commentary, to show how these conversations in themselves were an opportunity for inquiry to continue. I am aware that I have very specific choices about what to foreground (although I haven't left much out) from my conversation with Steve.

Steve: "Reading it in one sitting, it had a huge impact on me at the time. I was projecting a lot of what was going for me into my interpretation."

So it caught him at just the right time, in his own transition, in his own shape shifting and questioning in a parallel way to what Jim Porter was going through. The timely nature of knowledge strikes me. How I couldn't have predicted this but how opportune it was – the practice of story-telling and how it can catch people and this can be difference that makes a difference.

Steve: *"For me the paper was less about gender and more about the struggle to be just to be how we are. For me the gender narrative wasn't the dominant one – the piece was about how we find ourselves trapped in the web of our expectations, other people's expectations and how we lose the ability to stand back and think 'who am I' and just get on and be who new are. It is a more fundamental struggle than that. And I can see how that's been my struggle of the last 24 months."*

Looking at the story through Steve's eyes I can see that it may have been Jim's move to run away, or go away, that speaks to him. I have often wondered since writing this if the story is a kind of prophecy for me - how the pressure would build for me to go off and 'find myself' like Jim did (although I don't feel like doing that now). But Steve was one of the role models for me as I came to Roffey Park – was he laying down some kind of template for myself, and how far is this just some kind of 'mid-life crisis'. In some ways, Jim (and Steve's) move to do this could be an expression of quite a traditional masculinity – that of the 'successful' man that yearns 'meaning' questions; a luxury that a feminist might argue is less accessible to women. So once again, I find this loops me back into questioning how an attempt to frame a disruptive, radical inquiring masculinity can get pulled back into the patterns, habits, practices, gender 'performances' that are as old as the hills.

Steve: *"Things happen that raise in me the awareness of how much I am being, how programmed myself, how the self image I have created, or colluded in the creation of, sets up expectations of who I am, a kind of a web, it becomes so ingrained in how I think and feels and reacts, that it is a huge wrench to stand back and say – is that really me? What is the real me, how can I be true to myself? It is easy to deny yourself choice, so we fit within the pattern of expectations, and it becomes easy to lose true choice. There is a need in me at some point in the cycle to Hoover that all out and look at the choices."*

So when I look again at this story as if for Steve, notwithstanding the issue of 'mid-life crisis' above, I see him yearning for a change, a shift away from the person he is 'made to be' within the system in which he finds himself. As he suggests, men can collude with the expectations of how people expect them (us) to be and when that happens. Are these expectations part of the 'haunting' process of the hegemonic masculinity spectre I have described?

In this we can lose a sense of freshness, of in-the-moment choices, and become that (dominant) *Man*. So this sets up a pressure that leads to a kind of flight, and so whilst it can be seen as a luxury for (privileged) men to 'go off on one', it is also a genuinely felt yearning to break away from the same systemic (gendered) patterns that entrap both men and women. Was Steve finding his own practices of escape from the hegemonic haunting?

This is a huge paradox, one I have also often felt: that in my yearning to move beyond the way I am seduced to behave and be as a man, I am also potentially expressing one of my privileges; a double-bind. I hadn't fully spotted this before, but through Steve's eyes I can see the double-bind that the story points towards for men.

Steve: *"I move into a blank space – it is terrifying, scary but in some way better than re-creating myself where I am. "*

So is this brave. Or was Jim (and Steve) just running away? Both of them argue that they are moving *towards* the fear.

Steve: *“Every so often I reach a point where I have colluded in the creation of a lot of things that have restrained me, held me, denying me access to many things of what I want to be in the world, and I break out of them. But how much do I really learn if I just repeat this cycle.”*

The story raises a question for him: whether we really learning or just repeating habits? This is a big question for him and I am moved by the way in which, whether about gender or not, the story enabled him to consider these questions.

Steve: *“And to cycle back to where we started, there was a way in which the story was about the problem of the skin, seeing the web that holds and then breaking it, and that touched me, very deeply. And it left me with a challenge to you – is that just about gender or is this just the human condition?”*

So how did I respond to this challenge? It is one that really matters because part of me fears that the story does let people off the hook – that they can avoid looking at the gender questions it seeks to raise by moving towards the aspects of it that they want to see, and avoiding the gender challenge it presents. And yet, Steve brings the challenge back to me. And this gives me my chance for advocacy:

James: *“That’s a good question. I don’t have an easy answer for that. My whole inquiry has led me to realise how complex and rooted gender is as a system. It is an intrinsic part, a bit like saying which part of the tree is the most important part? And paradoxically I feel the need to raise awareness of the parts of the tree that are neglected. It’s like saying ‘notice the bark – it’s actually really important. I know it isn’t the whole tree but it’s a really important part that we don’t always look at.’ There has been a deliberate need in me to highlight it. But paradoxically I have learnt myself that it is just one part.”*

Steve: *“That helps, and if it is really that complex and that rooted, what do you seek to do anything about it? Is this about changing gender or is it just raising awareness about it?”*

I see this coming, and here’s the rub. And when Steve asks me this, I am really struck by a need to justify; to prove that as ‘action’ research this all makes a huge difference to the world. It is as if I feel in some way challenged, not just by Steve so much as by the world around me that constantly seeks Newtonian, causal links, and if I fail to provide them, I have failed *per se*. But I catch this defensiveness in the moment, which if I act as I have done before, would become an incitement to defensive qualification. This would throw me ‘into my head’, and prompt me to give an intellectual, wordy, ‘academic’ response. Instead, I try and move somewhere different with it:

James: *“I can go into lots of academic speak about, I suppose social construction and how languaging something is making something change and etc. etc...but...I suppose what I would say I spend most of my time in a paradoxical place – feeling much less bothered about wanting to change something, less bothered with ‘agency’ and much more willingness just to hold a place of questioning, without an agenda that it has to be ‘like this’. I think also that’s a healthier place for a man to be about this. I think men are often forced into a place of denial or defensiveness. I just have found a place where these gender questions are my questions. I am not answerable to feminism, to women or anyone. I’m only answerable to me in them. That’s a freeing experience, and if more men felt like that, maybe the world would be better for*

women too. We'd be more questioning in an ongoing way about who we are in the world. It's paradoxical, but this is mine.

Perhaps I didn't avoid the hook of defensiveness completely. But this opened up a new arena and further enabled an advocacy of what this story-telling inquiry process has really done for me – made me more owning of these questions, and less defensive of them. This practice is skilful, as it has more chance to draw people in:

Steve: There's something very appealing in what you are saying, it resonates with a thought I have been having about the importance of acceptance. Can't we get to a point of saying – that's just who I am? People could just accept and sit with it; then it's as if the world changes around them. Change happens but not by the actor forcing it. Which is quite a macho thing. But far more powerful is acceptance. Quiet, passive acceptance of what is. Something magical seems to happen.

And once again, the conversation around gender, held in a bubbling, building, inquiring register, between two men (a relatively rare thing) opens a doorway to deeper, even transpersonal questions. But have we let ourselves off the hook? Is the flight into transpersonal questions a luxury of the (successful, hegemonic) man, or a legitimate practice of escape from the spectre of dominant masculinity? This seems to me to be another one of those 'gender interference patterns' that Judi Marshall describes (Marshall 1999). Struggling with them is part of the practice of *mentshlichkeit*, without expecting simple answers. But at least Steve and I are naming it, and this is what men don't tend to do together; and in doing so, the conversation is opening up a hidden transcript.

I note that, when I showed this chapter to Steve a few months later, in order to check he was happy with its portrayal of him, he said this, in an email:

Yes - I am happy with this...And I can also see now how the chains that have been most difficult to shake off are absolutely and clearly grounded in gender - in the expectations and manifestations of 'maleness'.

I wonder how much this shift in Steve (and what in his acknowledgement of the 'maleness as the most difficult chains to shake off') is due to a subtle, longer term impact of this inquiry?

Through Helena's Eyes

If there was one person who, before this all began, I would have said it would have been great to hold up against Steve's view of the story, it would have been Helena's. Helena was someone who I wondered hard and long whether I would offer her the story. I worried about what she would make of it, and of me as its author. She is someone whose stock was rising at Roffey Park, and in the time I have been at Roffey Park, she has had several promotions to more senior positions. At the time of my conversation with her, she held the role of 'Director of Business Development'. It would be fair to say that she is filling the power vacuum left behind by Steve's departure.

I notice the surfaces of power that are on the move here, between Helena and Steve and how the story-inquiry I was offering reflected onto these surfaces. Was this 'dealing' with the power relationships here', in the way my colleagues had suggested?

I see Helena having two distinct sides. I have had very good, open, honest and interesting conversations with her. We see eye to eye on many things, and also I have seen another side of her, which I would describe as darker, more controlling, sometimes exhibited in emails which often sound quite directive and brusque. I have given her the feedback about this and I would say that I found her open to listening. In turn, her feedback to me is that I can come across a bit wordy and academic sometimes, which fits completely with what I have been exploring here. But fundamentally, although I am bit scared of her darker side, and probably consciously or otherwise do much to stay on her lighter side, I have real sympathy for her. I see her as one of those women leaders for whom the words of Florence Geis may resonate:

The differential expectations, perceptions, roles, and consequent behavior are consensual in society, defining them as the truth and further endowing them with value. One result is that women and men strive to display the “desirable” attributes. Another is that those who violate the stereotypes are disliked, producing a “damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t” dilemma for professional and managerial women. (Geis 1993) p38

I see Helena as a highly proficient leader, who people (myself included) may judge harshly at times, when she adopts leadership registers normally associated with men. My guess is that she has some awareness of this and it may bother her. This was certainly the case when we discussed the story.

It was with a little trepidation that I gave her the story and again I had the conversation with her about reading it ‘as if it were for a book group’. I am conscious that I offer this story with the accompanying script quite lightly, almost playfully, and I intend by this a kind of ploy, to undermine (or is it inadvertently to underline?) my anxiety – to charm people into seeing this story as a ‘harmless’ gift, almost as if I don’t pretend very much by it. If so, this is a pretence, because I do mean a huge amount by it, but I notice this strategy as part of the living inquiry of this messy process, the ‘incitement to discourse’ as Lather calls it, (Lather 2001), and this is heightened when encountering power dynamics, like with someone in Helena’s position. It isn’t good or bad, unintended or intended; just a view of ‘coming clean’, in the half-light where intention, action and reflection meld and play like the flickering shadows of flames on a cave wall.

But I was buoyed by Helena’s initial response, in a snatched corridor conversation, which I recorded in my journal:

*“I am enjoying your story. I am being drawn into it, irrespective of the themes. I read lots of contemporary fiction and as a work of writing I found it a quality, engaging read. Let’s have a coffee and chat about it”
“Bingo!” I think to myself. “Just what I was after”.*

I was very pleased when she said this, and only later did I reflect on the comment that perhaps, in being stroked, my ego led me to overlook: what did she mean by ‘irrespective of the themes’?

After a number of false starts, Helena and I did manage to catch up for a coffee, and this was against a backdrop of the organisation going through some tumultuous and controversial changes, in which she was a key player. To that extent, I was surprised that she chose to find the time to have a chat with me about the story I had written.

Helena: Yes I did enjoy it. In fact I was very surprised. I don’t know what I was expecting but, you know I read a lot of contemporary fiction, really modern stuff

*and this had a strength of narrative, a force that really grabbed me. I couldn't put it down. But it left me wondering - what is it?
I think to myself: 'And here maybe we get to the nub of the issue about the 'irrespective of the themes' comment from before.'*

And we continue to pursue this thread and I am struck by a mental image of us walking slowly, side by side into a kind of pool or body of water together. I hold this picture in my head as we 'walk on'. I wonder what this pool is made of? The cold water of deeper, lurking questions? Was there was a frisson of sexuality in it? Or is it just entering another territory, another kind of world, a more private, submarine environment? I am not sure, but the image stays with me as we talk.

J: How do you mean, 'what is it'?

H: I was impressed with the writing, so impressed but there was one thing that occurred to me. I wonder if it is possible for the story to be too good?

J: Too good?

H: Yes as if you are trying to draw people into particular themes and ideas, I mean I understand what you are getting at, about gender and so on, but there were parts of the story that really grabbed me, and I wonder if that means you actually lose the power of the gender themes because there were other parts of the story that worked so well and took one off in that direction. Does it detract by being a good story? I like fiction and yet I wondered – how do I engage with this? I mean, I will abandon a book pretty quickly if I think the author is thick, or the dialogue isn't believable or it just doesn't hang together. But here the content, the characters all worked, and so I didn't have to think about gender as a separate thing and I wonder – does that make it weaker or stronger?

I take Helena to be complementing me on my writing, and I am chuffed by this. Her challenge about the story being 'too good' is a good one, and it concerns me. Have I 'dealt' with the power surfaces at Roffey by finessing them, and in my intention not to disturb it too much, have I felt the pool unstirred?

I also notice how this lands with me as 'important': here is a key player in my current political landscape complimenting me, giving me a real tick for talent. But is there (in the fact that Helena mentions specifically about the author being 'thick') a surfacing here of that mechanism of control around being seen as 'stupid'? Was I right therefore to fear this mechanism of control and 'punishment'? And what would the punishment have been? Would it have been simply that she wouldn't have engaged? Am I playing with this power dynamic, or *along* with it? Is this *dealing* with it?

There is no getting away from the sense of power between us. It is a noticeable in its ascent as was its waning with Steve. Yet that water, palpable and viscous, seemed to flow between us, as though describing the public/private boundaries we were on the edge of transgressing. I felt the danger of this territory and I meant then and mean now the utmost respect for Helena (and myself) in reporting it this way. This feels like an important quality of *mentshlichkeit*.

Helena continues:

And so it introduced so many themes, so many ways of looking – I mean was it about gender or about sexuality? So it asked me for my views – like about sexuality and I think 'yeah – has it always been a binary for me?' and I found myself questioning about gender and how we are socialised into it. I really liked 'Part 3' and the blurring of gender boundaries and I found it difficult not to put them into categories. And I liked Part 1 and the young white girl versus the

older male professorial type. In the last scene I saw it like in a film, with just a screen, like a hologram and these very vague forms, almost without bodies. Is that what you meant to show?

J: No actually I saw them as a group of people and I saw the main character as like me, only feminine and the other character as her boss was a man - it is funny I tried so hard to make them androgynous but I still saw the more powerful characters as men and the nurturing, hard-working ones as female. I just couldn't really escape from my socialisation in my head, even if I did on paper

I find the way in which people make a story their own a very moving and inspiring thing. But beyond this is the further possibility it opens up for me. Even I hadn't caught this until now; how in all my efforts, going through that Part 3 with a fine-toothed comb, trying to iron out all the gender wrinkles, in my head I still imagined all the more powerful characters as men and the less powerful (and more hard working!) ones as women. And the central character, Trem, I had seen as both myself *and* feminine. And here I was, talking this through with a woman in a position of power and we seemed to swirl in with the story in a transpersonal dance with it.

H: That's funny isn't it because I had done so much with it that you haven't really intended! In my head I saw them like a loose form, sort of entities and at the head is this benign controlling power. I liked how gender has been ironed out, but yet there isn't equality necessarily.

At this point there is a big pause, long and viscous, and I notice Helena's face perceptibly darken and colour. I tell her this, and she sighs:

*H: It's huge isn't it? So tentacled, the capillaried nature of it all. It is so hard to sort it, to do anything to make things better. Isn't it easier with, say, race – there's more public consciousness and discourse about it – I mean it's obvious – the sex organs are hidden and yet race is more visible. So how does the story help? Where do you start – it's so fucking big – why do I bother? Do I bother? How do you do your work with an organisation? It's too much, too big.
J: I don't know. I don't know how it does. But I suppose I would ask – did I learn anything writing it? And I would say yes I did. I learnt just that: that things are this big and rooted and that therefore I feel less...compelled to sort it all out, and yet things change. Things are changing and I think it is that social constructionist thing: if we talk about it, 'language' it, then things do change, move on, we become part of a conversation. That is doing the work, rather than any great 'action plan', which is an idea that is the product of an older system, more rooted in patriarchy anyway.*

Oh no! Too many words! I notice my big, fat piece of interpretation. Did I even come across as patronising? I have a sense that I am rescuing her from the depths. Some hero! And why should I do that? Does she need my consolation in this way? Why not stay with the sense of...loss? Yet she seemed almost hopeless, and...vulnerable...and I felt drawn to put my proverbial arm around her; a big transgression, but *what the hell?* That's what I did. Did it help? What does help mean here? But something flowed as a result. Something was loosened, like a bolder at the bottom of a stream:

H: Yes it's like the Obama thing – I read recently that whichever way we look at it, we are all becoming 'light brown' – that's why Obama is so inspiring. And these ideas do kind of take hold. In my book group, I suggested to someone in the group that they read this story, by this woman Norah...something...called

'Self Made Man', about a woman who spends a year as a man, and I suggested to this guy called Phil in the group and he read it and recommended it to someone else, and it ended up sort of doing the rounds, unofficially, without any promotion. All these themes about sexuality, gender, provocative stuff and it seeps in – it finds its ways in. It is interesting how stories can do that: create this undercurrent about things that have a life. Like Melissa [another colleague at Roffey], she read your story and she talked to me about it, about how it made her think about these things, and she said, it 'made me think about James'.

J: So there's this vibrant, private undercurrent and maybe that's how really edgy challenging stuff gets shifted, not in the public domain. It's like cabaret, playing out the underworld.

H: You know I've always wanted to do that here, cabaret, like a 'revue', where we could do these skits. Useful self-mockery, even some cross-dressing! It's like with the women's weekend here. I've always wanted to take it a bit further but I sense reluctance from others. I wanted to ask 'what does it really mean to be a woman'? I'd love to play with that a bit

J: What would you do?

H: I think I would dress differently...that would be start

We talked some more about a plan which we haven't realised yet, to do a cross-dressing party at Roffey and there was a lightness and fun, flirtatious even (gulp!) to the end of our conversation and I felt the water flow around and way and the conversation ended there. I found the book she mentioned on 'Amazon.com', by Norah Vincent, called *Self Made Man*, although I haven't read it yet. Even now, and in the context of the roles we revert to in this challenging time within the organisation, the conversation has a sort of dream-like quality that makes me wonder – did it happen like this? I know I haven't captured a verbatim account of what we said (I wrote notes as we talked, but didn't make a recording, whereas I did with Steve). But I don't think it was very far from what was really said. I showed a draft of this chapter to Helena, and she agreed that it was fair account of the conversation. Interestingly, again, she specifically mentioned that the only thing she was a bit uncomfortable with was that she had used the word 'thick' (as in stupid).

It was an underwater, (underground) conversation, which in its registers, the flickering of light and dark, had a kind of healing quality to it, which perhaps is the role of transgressions like revues and cabarets, underscoring and undermining the certainties of public power plays just like Isherwood's novels did for 1930s Berlin (Isherwood 1993). I hope Helena found it useful in the same way. But how was this 'dealing with power issues at Roffey Park'?

So words did begin to make worlds here, even if there were other blaring discourses going on (like about credit crunch, global economic downturn, and redundancies), I feel hopeful that these loud voices haven't drowned out the possibilities of gender inquiry completely. Maybe for Helena it even provided a private, transgressive respite? Another question on the mind-map above was 'where's the financial benefit' and now, more than ever Roffey Park is driven by the need to make money, to survive. In the next Chapter I explore how such an inquiry into *mentshlichkeit* translates into the skill of practice for which I get paid.

I would reiterate the respect and gratefulness I felt towards Steve and Helena in having these liminal, transgressive conversations. And there is something to be said about Roffey Park, the place that pays for this inquiry, too. As my supervisor, Gill Coleman pointed out, when she read the draft of the story, there is something quite striking about a place where such conversations are possible. The conversations with

Steve and Helena weren't the only ones I had. There were a number of others with such depth and richness, as the excerpts at the beginning of this Chapter show. However, these felt like ones that, due to the power relations involved, offered good examples of the incitement to discourse I intended by writing the story.

But now there is more to be said about my practice, as a 'consultant' and how this is given 'legs' by my inquiry into such 'mentslichkeit', the supposed art of being a good man.