

## Conclusion – Where next?

*'All real living is meeting' – Martin Buber, I and Thou  
(Buber 1958)*

*Lisa: Congratulations Dad! Admitting your ignorance is the first step to  
overcoming it.*

*Homer: So do I have to take the next step?*

*Lisa: Yes Dad.*

*Homer: Doh!*

*(The Simpsons, 2009)*

## The Difference That Makes a Difference?

I return to the question that Sarah Jones has persistently asked me through this thesis. What difference does this make? What impact has this research process had, and how do I assess this quality? This is *action* research, after all.

In the introduction I invited a judgement of validity in this research process in describing action research as about the 'quality of our acting' (Reason and Bradbury 2001). I would point to the richness of the story, and quality of the conversations it provoked, as a demonstration of this validity. I also invited you to consider some questions for yourself, and would invite you to consider how participating in this process has landed with you in relation to these:

- How has it moved you?
- Where has it met your own experience?
- How has it helped you by informing you about your own action?
- What paradoxes and dilemmas has it supported you to act in the face of?
- How has it made you 'usefully uncomfortable'?

Another mark of quality I would celebrate in the course of this inquiry has been the development and honing of critical subjectivity, particularly in dialogue. Again, I would admit that this is a knowledge practice I have stumbled upon, rather than designed, and for which I am profoundly grateful. The characters in this story have been as much of a gift as the relationships in my life that have inspired them.

I am confident that there have been *differences* in the course of doing this research. I would challenge the idea that they are a direct effect of this cause. I could start to make that link, but then we would be back in the territory of a post-modern critique of an account that starts to tell its heroic story, post hoc. To side step this, I would suggest that there have been changes, subtle, nuanced shifts and *differences* that have been working their way through, contemporaneously with this research. Whether they are the 'difference that makes a difference', to quote Gregory Bateson, I think it is too early to say (Bateson 1972). But I would track these differences at two levels.

At one level, I see these differences working on a very local, personal scale, in my own practice and relationships, for example, at work. I notice I have *more* of the inquiring conversations and dialogues, the type of which you have seen throughout this thesis. And counter to that, I think I am having *fewer* conversations like the one Dr. Porter has with his student, Sarah Jones at the beginning of Chapter Four. Or at least, where they are happening, I think I spot them and am more likely to bring them back to a place of 'growth in connection', as Joyce Fletcher calls it (Fletcher 1998). I am not claiming this as an absolute, but as a trend. I aim to continue to be vigilant to it. The work of *mentshlichkeit* is to be wary of when the *sheydim*, the ghosts of a dominant

masculinity creep in and start to assert that they are the finished article. Such work is always unfinished, and about maintaining the practices I have described here, and developing them further. I would suggest that the quality of this assessment comes through the evidence of the conversations I have shown you.

I am also noticing, at the level of my practice as a facilitator and teacher, more of a confidence to push towards the *not knowing* rather than the knowing 'expert' position. Like in the dialogue I started to develop as a practice in Chapter Two (see Practice 3), I am working at being more negotiable in my knowing, recognising the challenges I get from students and colleagues as an opportunity to inquire, rather than as a time to assert my passionate position. Again, I would suggest this as a tentative trend. But I am consistently inspired by David Abram's proposition that we are all, in the (human and beyond-human) world, made of the 'same flesh' (Abram 1996). So I am starting to see my voice as *more* than my voice, and the voices of others', conversely, as mine, at least more often. This has enabled me to be more participatory in the exploration of what there is to know, in the course of doing my work. The quality of this can be assessed in this text only partially, through the sense you get of me in the stories I tell, and in the way I have caught myself 'in the act' as 'expert', and brought myself back to the edge of not knowing.

I do hope that my story had some sort of an impact on the community at Roffey Park. I know that it has had some, for individuals, because I had many good conversations as a result. I have shown some of them here. I also suggest, tentatively, that a few of the decisions people such as Helena and Steve have made were influenced, or at least supported by, their participation in the story, even partially. But I would also own up to a disappointment that the storytelling process didn't have *more* of an impact at Roffey Park. Perhaps, in my anxiety, of 'how I would be seen', I erred on the side of caution? Perhaps I could have been bolder with my challenges; in aiming for a subtle, 'tempered radicalism', I ended up making little impact at all (Meyerson and Scully 1995). On the other hand, I decided to drop this story into the pond that is Roffey Park, to see what ripples it may make, at a time when that pond was stirred up, drained, re-filled and dredged by a number of major events, such as the global financial meltdown. In that light, maybe I didn't quite find enough of the difference that will make a difference here.

This does suggest to me that when you want to keep issues like gender on the agenda in such times, you may have to shout louder than I have been prepared to do, at this time. I return to the conversation I had with Sarah in Chapter Six. Maybe there are still times when the only thing that will shift entrenched positions is the quality of protest. I haven't let go of that entirely.

There is however another level at which we can consider impact of this type of inquiry. Contrastingly, this is not at the personal, but rather has a much larger stage, and is highly systemic and global in nature. I do not claim to have agentically 'caused' any difference at this level, but I would suggest that the research outcomes of this inquiry, particularly in the cyber-gender themes that emerged in the storytelling, tap into large-scale, global trends. As I said at the beginning of Chapter Five, I am not predicting *what* shall happen in the course of gender evolution. I can't possibly predict that. But I am suggesting that things *shall* happen in this arena, at a societal level. Evolution will do its thing, culturally and techno-biologically. Indeed, where these two meet, there will be surprising outcomes, that will challenge the fixed, bi-polar positionalities of gender. In fact, this is already happening. As I write, in the summer of 2009, the newspapers are full of commentary about the young South African athlete, Caster Semanya, who had her gender (I say 'her', because that is apparently what she wants to be called) cast into doubt by her victory in the 'Women's' 800m race at the World Athletics

Championships. I will not go into the debate here at length. Suffice to say there *is* a debate, and it is throwing the whole of the ‘intersex’ conversation into the foreground, ‘storming the stage’, as James Scott suggests these hidden transcripts do, from time to time (Scott 1990). Of course, this storm may rage and then disappear, (and for the sake of poor Caster, I hope it does), but it suggests that there may be an underlying, perhaps accelerating discourse about the nature of gender, which may disestablish received gendered roles further. And this may well be accentuated by bio-technological innovations which are emerging. As a sign of this, even conservative commentators, like Dominic Lawson, are making some surprising pronouncements:

*In the spirit of diplomacy and fair play, let this column offer a solution to these embarrassing difficulties which continue to vex the Olympic movement...an action which will cut the Gordian knot of ambiguous sexual identity. Let there be no male or female athletics championships, divided with the rigidity of South Africa's former apartheid laws. (Lawson 2009) p14*

I recognise that this may be somewhat ‘tongue in cheek’. Nevertheless, I notice the serious subtext of the gender ‘divide’ starting to take on the same quality of ‘criteriology’, as Andrew Sparkes calls it, (that is, an arbitrary distinction made for the sake of socially-constructed differences) as the enforced race rules of a former fascist state (Sparkes 2006). Such parallels with cyber-feminist fiction are too compelling to ignore. And of course, I might never have predicted that Sport would be one of the cultural arenas that would force the issue, but with hindsight, it seems obvious that it would, considering the spotlight it throws on bodies.

I cannot claim that such change is as a *result* of my story here. That would be ludicrous of course. But there is a noticeable symmetry, or at least a synchronicity, convincing me that, from a research point of view, what I have been discussing here is at least timely, and a predictor of things to come.

Finally, as a father, has this made a difference? I hope so. I wondered about this one long and hard. In this research, have caught myself consistently measuring myself against my own father and finding that, contrary to what I might claim, we may not be very different after all. But I don’t have a problem with that now, because in the course of this work, I think I have learned that my father is a good man.

So this returns me to the question: how does this relate to the practice of being a good man? What about the practices of escape from the haunting of the hegemonic masculinity? For that, I would like to tell another story.

### **How it Usually Plays Out**

Heron and Reason (1997) talk about the use of ‘critical subjectivity’ to enable the inquirer to keep his or her feet on the ground with the relational knowledge they are developing:

*“Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing.” (Heron and Reason 1997) p282*

One of the ways I have done this is to regularly pass my work through the filter of a friend and colleague removed from my world either of Roffey Park or Bath University. This has been Denis Postle’s role for me. Denis has an interesting position in this work; he is an independent figure on the edge of the academic/therapeutic life-worlds. I first met Denis because he was a tutor on the Post Graduate Diploma in Humanistic

Psychology I completed, 1991-1993. He is known for editing an online journal called 'ipnosis', <http://ipnosis.postle.net/>.

As it proclaims, 'e-Ipnosis continues to be an independent source for information about the imposition of a tickbox culture of state regulation on the psychological therapies'. Denis claims an orientation of a radical who has understanding of the established orthodoxies of The Academy, society and government. He claims he is motivated by the will to uncover abuses and hierarchies of orthodoxy. I chose to work with him because I hoped he might hold me to account around the development of my inquiry. He might 'hold my feet to the fire' if I was becoming too 'academic' in my approach. Ultimately his interest and orientation is around a challenge to dominance of 'expert' knowledge, in particular around what he calls 'psycho-practice'. He also knows some of the people involved in the faculty at the University of Bath, including Professor Peter Reason, and John Heron, the Godfather of cooperative inquiry, with whom he has worked since the 1970s.

I have regularly visited Denis since 2004, for alternative 'supervision'. Denis lives 'offshore', literally, on an old sailing barge, on the River Thames in Chiswick, London. My visits have often felt like an interlude in another world, one well-placed to look askance at the one in which I normally reside.

I sent Denis the 'Gender Future' story and looked forward to as rich and poignant a conversation about it as ever. Buoyed as I was by a positive reception in mostly everywhere else I had sent the story, I had no reason to fear Denis' reaction.

I was somewhat taken aback, however to receive this response:

*I don't know how to handle the relation between writing dialog based story telling and the demands of a PhD. I.e. How much knowhow do you have to demonstrate. The latter seems to be in the driving seat to an extent that for this reader undermines the reading experience. Most of the time you seem to be on some cusp between an academic article and a perfectly viable story.*

*And not until this reading have I seen what might be supporting this and how you might move towards some sort of composting.*

*Two points ways of describing the same thing:*

*That it is perhaps a quite strongly masculine piece of writing – that defies I imagine, your conscious intention. How so? (and does it matter?)*

*Well from this fiction writer's perspective, with the exception perhaps of the opening scene, it seems (ref Deborah Tannen) very much, **report** talk i.e. one way giving out. And there is perhaps too little of what amounts to **rapport** talk i.e. talk that is to do with sustaining relationship. I understand you may reject this as making me part of the problem! But I thought I offer you it anyway.*

*Of course you may intend the father's very long letter sections to be simply informative but once you start on dialog as you do with this story I would argue that there needs to be a significant dramatic event that switches us into 'reader of letter mode'. Perhaps through their existence being flagged up several times earlier i.e. threaded through in a minimal but eloquent way so that when we get to them we are keen to find out what they contain.*

*And for this reader (I bear in mind the caveat above) they are way to [sic] long.*

*I hope this proves useful  
Greetings Denis*

I was shocked by Denis' response. It felt overly critical and I was hurt by what felt like a lack of any kind of regard or warmth. In short I concluded that he hated it. I stewed for a while. Could I just put it down to 'his loss'? Was he just too challenged by the gender themes in the story? Did they affront his sexuality or identity in some way? That would enable me to dismiss his challenge as in some way 'his problem'. Gradually however I came round to a more inquiring view. There was clearly something here worth inquiring into: particularly the (what felt like) accusation that I had written '*a quite strongly masculine piece of writing – that defies I imagine, your conscious intention.*' Ouch. Too much truth there – a real resonance with a recurring theme in my inquiry so far: finding myself back in the gendered patterns I might claim I was in some way 'above'.

So I was compelled to meet with Denis and talk about this. Back on his boat, floating on the tide, we had a long discussion. He had misunderstood my need for feedback, thinking that the story was still a work in progress rather than 'an action in itself', and as such a fixed thing. He also acknowledged that he had been overly critical in his comments and that sometimes, as he said himself: '*I underdo positive regard*'. I checked out with him whether he was simply threatened by the gender/blurring in the story and we tossed this around enough that I believed him when he said he was not. We left on good terms, but I still had a sense there was more work to be done, both ways. Later that week, he sent me this email:

*Hello James,*

*I was saddened by what feels like a dislocation of our long-standing relationship and I wonder how it might have come about.*

*Reading your American piece [see Appendix Two] perhaps takes our story on a little. It was interesting and in a counter-transferential way revealing of how I might well miss some of what you've been saying in the story.*

*I found the Obama account very lovingly done and echoing the texture of opinion and freezing cold (the BBC people had blankets over their knees while doing interviews) that emerged from TV coverage I'd seen. The ground level account from inside the crowd and the scale of it was welcome.*

*I had another, perhaps more pertinent, reaction to the Washington text. As I got to the bottom of the first page I tripped over a sentence in which you appeared to have written 'I should know that, doing a PhD **is** the embodiment of masculinity'.*

*'Hold on', I thought. And read it again. It was my sentence not yours. I'd somehow transposed 'in' to 'is'. What this might mean could take us on another journey.*

*My first thought is that it is part of my story to tend to see 'PhD' as a badge of status, i.e. a step on a ladder of 'expert' dominance. Not because it is inevitably so but because this is usually how it plays out.*

This is usually how it plays out.

Denis' words are particularly poignant. My intention with this research process, and this thesis, has been to find out the practices of inquiry and of living that can resist the spectre of a type of hegemonic, or expert masculinity from taking over, from haunting me. Yet how does this usually play out? How *will* this play out in my life? Ultimately, in terms of quality, isn't the way this plays out in my life the main test of the validity of this research process?

I went for a long walk. Everything was buzzing round in my head; the texts I had read, my supervisor's notes, Denis' challenge, my own discomfort with what felt like an increasingly self-absorbed stew. Walking has been one of the practices that helped me get back into connection through my body and with the World, to which I hoped all of this would be of some service. Whilst walking I considered that key question of quality: *How will it all play out?*

As I walked along the river, in the evening sunshine, I wondered what on earth this had to do with everything I was seeing: the sparkling river, people lounging on boats by the lock, a cricket match finishing, a father hooks a small fish out of the river and his small children gather round to poke it. How does what I am doing here relate to all of that?

Then it came to me, and suddenly things seemed to link together: the story in Chapter Four, something that Jim had said in the Café, my intention to respect Steve and Helena in their discussions with me in Chapter Five; Sarah and her thoughts turning to her husband and baby in the storm. It was right there, in what Trem had seen in Trem's baby's eyes; to 'be made by one's child'. And why had people at Roffey Park generally responded so warmly to my story? There was something here I had only just spotted. And it was even in the way Denis had voiced his thoughts. How could I have missed it? It seemed so clear now. It was what I bring, I hope, to the one role in my life that really 'makes' me, that is being a father. It was love.

As I walked along the river, with this sense welling up in me, I passed a young boy, about my son's age, walking in the other direction. I noticed that he was silently crying to himself. He wiped his eyes and sniffed back his tears as he marched along.

- Are you OK? I asked him

But he carried on walking, and threw a stone he had been holding at some nearby geese, which thankfully missed and plopped into the river.

I don't know why he was crying. It could have been something very trivial, or something really painful. I don't know. But I am crying now as I write this. It seems to have such synchronicity; it is timely, as if the 'Practice of Reflection with the World' has yielded a clear message. I wanted to help him, to put my arm around him, wipe his tears and find out what was up. But I didn't, and besides, there are some restraints on 45 year-old-men putting their arms around children they don't know. I just watched him for a while, as he walked away.

I don't know why he was crying, but it just seemed to speak to me of the need for love. What else can I do? What else do I *want* to do, in my work or my life? What else really makes for *mentshlichkeit* anyway, being a good man? It feels scary, egdy, saying this right now. I notice the cop in the head, and wonder what judgements you will make of me? But actually, that doesn't matter. This is what I *want* to do. This is the turn I realise I have made in this work; the turn towards love.

*This is usually how it plays out.* I take Denis's warning very seriously. I offer the practices below as a list, a marker of what I feel, in straightforward terms, I would say, right now, give me a space of resistance to the way it usually plays out. These are the

things I do, or have done herein that I think give me a chance to play it out differently. These are my current practices of *mentshlichkeit*. These are all practices that can be judged in terms of the quality of inquiry I have been applying here:

- The practice of persistence with a set of questions
- The practice of owning gender concerns - this territory is mine
- The practice of being consistently moved by the hidden stories, made more public
- The practice of allowing some disruption in the even flow of my (male) voice
- The practice of making characters real/making real characters, who speak different voices
- The practice of bicultural awareness
- The practice of discomfort as a sign that there is some new learning to uncover
- The practice of letting the stories tell themselves – creating a fertile space for a storied consciousness
- The practice of love

And if there was one, above all the others, that I thought had the power to really resist the way it usually plays it out, it would be the last one.

\* \* \*

- So the love-turn eh? People may not love you for that!
- No that's a risk isn't it? To love without expecting love in return. Can I live up to that, especially in my work? And not expecting it in return feels like a good challenge to the 'glamorous' male academic, who needs the love of the group to feed his ego.
- Does that mean you have to look at the definitions of love, the texts, the sonnets...?
- Oh God no! I am wondering about the *experience* of it. What about a loving critique?
- Feels risky.
- Then that must be a good thing, don't you think?
- We'll see...

\* \* \*

Sarah turned to the pile of letters sat on her desk, with a note:

*You'll know what to do with these.*

*Best*

Jim

The rain lashed against the window.

She placed the letters in the archival boxfile. For a while she considered what to write on the lid.

- Less is more. Let them speak for themselves.

She wrote: 'letters - early 21st century', and placed the box of letters on the pile of crates that were earmarked for the basement.

Then she found her coat, turned off the light and went home.

\* \* \*

They sit on Hampton Court Bridge. The river glints below. The world is on holiday around them: kids with ice-creams; people messing around, not just in boats on the river below, but also on bikes, in cars, by train, on foot, every which way. The two men sit side by side on the parapet overlooking the Palace; the still, small centre of the world. One of them, the younger of the two, is smoking a cigarette. The older one is taller, silver-haired, and has a straight back and an almost aristocratic bearing. He is speaking.

- I am proud of you, of what you have done. You certainly gave it some legs. At least you tried, and found there aren't easy answers, but it is all about action, in the end, in the face of the dilemmas, difficulties and paradoxes

- Thank you.

The smoker draws deeply on the cigarette and flicks the ash towards the river. The older man turns his head towards the smoker.

- So?
- Yes indeed: so?

The smoker turns his head away and squints towards the sun

- SO? Says the older man again, more pointedly

The smoker sighs, and speaks as if admitting defeat. He continues:

- Oh, I don't know... So many words. Too many words. The rest is about doing.
- Yes. It is done, and now there is more to do.

They continue to sit in silence, a silence that is as deafening as the rush and roar of the humanity around them.

\* \* \*

I have lived this inquiry in this shape for six years. What I have shown here is a glimpse of all of that life and the possibilities of persistence towards a set of questions. Now this persistence will take on another shape.

My purpose was to 'show up', to respond to (and later to own) the challenges of feminism, to move towards and stay with this and other discomforts, and to build a relational practice of knowledge whilst working along the edge of disturbance this discomfort creates. Ultimately it was to explore the possibilities of the action turn in the midst of the paradoxes that this discomfort dislodges. In all of this, I have held the possibility of defining being a 'good man', of *mentshlichkeit*, in this light.

But it leaves me with a threshold still to cross. This is the threshold to the rest of my life, with an intention to live with as much freshness, and in-the-moment *inquiry* as I have done in the past six years, yet with the growing burden (an interesting word to use) of a formalised title, an academic masculinity, having climbed up another ladder of expertise (or expert dominance, as Denis would challenge). Will I be seduced into *knowing about* and lose sight of knowing *within*, or even *not knowing*? How will this play out?

This is a challenge I take very seriously. It has bothered me, discomforted me ever since I completed the *Gender Future* story in the autumn of 2008. I don't think there is much more to say about it. It is up to me now, in the words of my 'mentor', Jim Porter, above, to see that it is done, and then just get on with what more there is to do.

But there is a hope for me; all is not lost - indeed far from it (of course). As a Jew, and as a man, I accept that I am not 'self-made'. I have my wife, my family, my friends and community at Roffey Park and beyond, and above all, my children, Max and Jess, to thank for helping me realise that there will always be more *doing*, in the work of *mentshlichkeit*.

I am so much more grateful for that, and for them, than I can ever say.

*Thus the constructive process is inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections, seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings. In the end, the story simply asks for your consideration. (Sparkes 2006) p4*