

Appendices

Appendix One: Reflective Letter-writing

I offer two examples of the writing-to-my-children letter-writing inquiry practice I developed, which lead to the *Gender Future Story* (see Chapter Four).

1) Show and Tell – Where Story and Ideas Merge

From (Adams 2006)

Frank (1995) encourages us to live with stories, to engage with them emotionally and viscerally rather than to just think about them. This idea guides my project. However, in the spirit of Krippendorff (1995), I wish to re-language Frank's notion. I seek to find what the opposite side of the coin looks and feels like: living with theory. I argue that such a move may further collapse the theory-story binary that haunts the halls of many university settings.

For example, my life feels like a tension between showing and telling: I live through the moments of my past that appear without emotional engagement and dialogue; I also live with moments loaded with feeling and conversation. Furthermore I experience my connection to my dad via a relational paradigm. (Bochner 2004, Yerby 1995).

My response: 2/3/08: Show & Tell:

Show (1)

My son Max, (9), asks to speak with us, after his sister has gone to bed.

"I want to tell you how I feel," he says. "I don't know why but I just feel sad. Or a bit guilty, and there is no reason for it, but I feel these things and don't think I deserve to be happy."

The next day, we are riding bikes together, on the way to Kingston, along the river. We are on the way to the shop that sells his latest obsession, which is 'Warhammer' toys.

"How is that feeling of yours now?" I ask

"Well it's like a black piece of paper that has nearly been completely covered up by lots of white pieces of paper that are the good things. The black piece of paper has almost completely disappeared."

"But is it still there, underneath?" I ask

"Yes," he says, "It still is."

Tell (2)

"Perhaps this is just about growing up" I tell him "You know, life seems so straightforward and simple as a child. But when you grow up, you start to realise how complicated everything is."

"Yes", he says, "It is".

Show (3)

It must be 1974 or thereabouts. I am 9 or 10 years old. I am riding in the car with my mother and father. Dad is driving. We are on the North Circular Road,

a regular route of my childhood, driving past Neasden, where I was born, on our way back to Ealing, where we now lived.

I want to tell my father and mother something. Something of how I was feeling. "It is like I am leaving something behind, and I feel bad about that. Like I am a bad person for leaving behind being a child. It is hard to explain, but I feel like I shouldn't stop being a child anymore, like I am betraying my childhood". "Oh don't be silly", says my mother. "Everyone needs to grow up. "It's fine, don't worry." "I don't really understand that at all." Says my father. "You're fine."

Tell (4)

I feel awkward remembering this story like this, and have tried to re-remember it, as if it was different, but all I can really recall is a sense of reaching out to get my mother and father to understand and feeling like they didn't, that they were quite dismissive. I don't think they meant to be cruel or harsh, but maybe it was something they just couldn't relate to, and maybe they were just keen to reassure me, and shoo away the ghosts, by saying 'this isn't anything.' There is a danger here that I propose my response to Max's approach to my wife and I is somehow 'better' and that may be disrespectful of my parents in this story. I believe they thought and intended to do their best for us. And maybe Max also feels, in the haste for me to make sense of his experiences (see tell (2)) that I don't quite 'get it'. Intergenerational understanding will always be challenging. What strikes me here is the similarity of the two stories, the universality of the boy wanting to express something of this cusp between childhood and adolescence. And that metaphor of the black piece of paper, the metaphor of doubt. It is such a powerful metaphor for me, especially as 'paper', and 'text' are so intertwined – the marks on paper (electronic or otherwise) that are some kind of articulation of a way out of the complexities of the world, created though power, authority, control, materialism, gender, race, culture, and all set against the inevitability of growing, ageing and death.

So my son is telling me, showing me something here, a liminal moment, so well timed, like a distant bleep from a far off star captured by chance on a radio-telescope. It is a signal I can't quite pretend to read yet but it feels vital and relevant to this inquiry. I am so grateful and proud of his ability to articulate this. And I wish I was better equipped to make sense of this message. Being, becoming a man, finding out what sort of man I am, and playing this tape backwards, to check that I have not become the very kind of man I said I would not be, and then realising that being or at least symbolising and embodying a dominant masculinity is to a degree an inevitable process, because I have this big white body, embedded in a big middle class white lifestyle is all a painful realisation, one of my own black pieces of paper, I've been trying to dig down into my accumulated mound of scrunpled heaps of paper and find. And being that man to some degree, accepting it, and then taking steps, in the moment, to remember I am not him too, through such glimpses and then acting as if I'm not, again liminally, by biking somewhere with my son, and trying desperately to understand and not dismiss his feelings, these are good things that somewhat ameliorate the impact of being 'the man'. And I recognise I can never understand, not really, because I am 'the man' as well as a disruption of him. But it is never 'either/or'. I have to accept that I am both, and have been both, the big white bully who 'tells', and the open softer, reddier, bloodier, naked-alongside-him one who 'shows' something slightly different.

So the black piece of paper (and there are pieces now, many of them gathered over the years), still lurk, and I wouldn't say I gather them up and embrace them. But I can just about live with their enduring presence.

And as for you, my boy: I wish I could take away the piece of paper so you could live your spotless life a little longer, as perhaps my one parents wishes, in their shooing the dark away. And I don't. I celebrate, I exalt in your finding this depth, this darkness within, this shadow. I am delighted you find in your depths the darkness as well as the light. And doubly so, I am overjoyed in you ability to articulate this, and I know that you will choose one day not to do so, to me, and that will be painful –another spot of black ink on my own pristine sheets.

So perhaps this is the cruellest turn of all: Far from wanting to protect you from this pain, part of me yearns for it in you, as fathers have done over the years and centuries when they have set their boys loose and alone on the mountainside. No change there then.

2) Inquiry of Discomfort – and a Narrative Conscience: Towards a quality of nakedness in my writing

Herein, we argue for conducting emancipatory narrative research with the explicit intent of transforming participants' lives by opening up new subjective possibilities. The argument is situated within the theoretical traditions of postmodernism/poststructuralism and feminist and queer theories. Drawing from Megan Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort and Gubrium and Holstein's (2003) active interviewing, we propose a narrative research method called an inquiry of discomfort. This mode of inquiry challenges conventional understandings of qualitative research that posit the researcher as passive recorder of an individual's experience. Instead an inquiry of discomfort emphasizes the proactive and transformative potential of research projects for both researcher and participant. This approach to research inquiry fosters a specific kind of transformation: the creation of ambiguous and flexible subjects as touted by a pedagogy of discomfort. The aim of an inquiry of discomfort is to identify and promote an intentional and conscious shift from dualistic, categorical and entrenched positionality to a more ambiguous engagement with social reality. (Wolgemuth and Donohue 2006) p1024

and:

In the writing of autoethnographic research, the relationship between the researcher and his or her significant others becomes a primary locus of ethical action. Relational research ethics, informed by a narrative conscience, calls the researcher to embrace new layers of complexity in the search for the right story, written with care, while offering narrative and dialogic methodologies for dealing with the dilemmas that come with the territory. (Poulos 2008) p46

My response: 3/2/08:

So in standing for some kind of difference between then (father) and now (father)...how do I really know? I can suggest all sorts of anecdotes to suggest "improvement"...(Today we lay in bed cuddling and telling jokes, on a Monday morning I waited to go in late to work in order to see you walk down the street

to school. I waited on the street corner to see you walk through the gates. Fearful that something might happen to you, I turned back one last time to check that you had gone in safely.) No doubt my father would not /did not do that for me, but many fathers did and do. I am not that special. How could this become more of an 'inquiry of discomfort' (Wolgemuth & Donahue 2006), a shift from 'dualistic, categorical and entrenched subjective positionality to a more ambiguous engagement with social reality'? In other words, (and boy, does it need those other words if I am going to help you understand!), it would be so easy to demonise my own father and hold myself up as some kind of paragon, something so special, but perhaps engaging in a project towards gender change is messier, and I might have less to prove and more to simply hold myself up, as a kind of model and better to show you that I am no 'better' than your 'Grumps', your grandfather., and that to 'kill him off' in this way would be part of a very old tradition indeed. You, or at least the grown up you, might be more helped by a partial, difficult, honest, uncomfortable me, who doesn't know, but moves towards that disturbance, both within and without, of not knowing?

Perhaps it isn't up to me to show you how 'good' I am but rather to show you how I am, to hold this disturbance and nakedness up to you as the best I can offer? Maybe that in itself would be more helpful and 'emancipatory' for you?

So I am sitting here, enjoying the warmth of the radiator by my knee, writing to you, imagining you at my age, wondering with a huge surge of joy in my heart what you will make of this man, your father, who calls himself a 'Consultant', and yet who spends a fair bit of his time feeling alone, afraid, anxious, staying on the edge of this disturbance, when all this is what he has to offer; a space of not knowing for sure, in hope, and nakedness.

I offer these two pieces as evidence of the developing edge of inquiry I was learning to walk along; and to use an alternative metaphor, as musical scales that informed the quality of the story as it emerged, in choices I made around form, methodology and content.

This was a very practical as well as a very 'deep' process; for example, what was interesting about my own responses was that I chose to write them in my own hand at first, as this seemed to enable a more direct emotional connection with the themes I was exploring. This practice continued into the writing of the story, whereby I would write a section of dialogue in longhand as a first draft, and then re-write (often with considerable evolutions in the themes and content) onto keyboard.