

## Interlude – ‘So, what difference does it make?’ asked Dr. Sarah Jones?

Sarah placed the manuscript down on her desk, with a thud.

- That’s a lot to read - she murmured to herself. Reading students’ theses was daunting. She felt terribly obligated by it. It hadn’t been long since she had been in that position herself. But part of her felt insecure – what was a good job here? How did she know what would constitute quality? How was she an ‘expert’ in this? She began to read, and whilst there were details that caught her attention, as she scribbled notes in the margin, there was something here that shook her. She momentarily closed the cover to look at the title page. No, it was the student’s name she found. Yet it echoed so many of the themes from...someone else. There wasn’t a hint of plagiarism. It was very unique. But it was also so...familiar. She read on, intrigued.

A week later and there is a knock on the door. The student pops his head round the door.

- Ah. Dr. Jones. You’re in. Is now a good time?

- It is the time we suggested.

- Yes. Absolutely.

The student comes in and sits. She studies him. Similar build perhaps. Not quite as tall. Slightly wider...perhaps younger? Sarah continues.

- So you must be keen to have a chat about your writing?

She is conscious she has skipped the niceties. This is a habit of hers and her voice trails off slightly. People say she can come across a bit brusque, too business-like, too ‘transactional’. She doesn’t think she is. She thinks people notice it more, because she’s a woman. Anyhow, the student seems encouraged:

- Yes, please go ahead

- I really liked it. I don’t know you very well, but I got a real sense of you from your writing. I felt really *held*, and engaged. You’ve done a lot of work. Well done. There are some things to discuss of course.

- Yes please, go ahead. I’m keen to finish.

- Oh yes, I can remember that feeling!

A small ripple of laughter softens the space between them.

- Ok. I’ll cut to the chase. That’s very ‘me’, anyway. I’d like to start with Chapter Five.

Suddenly the window bangs shut. A lash of rain batters the glass. She starts:

- This weather!! Another month of it. Did you get here OK?

He sighs:

- It was a bit of a struggle. There were convoys on the roads, moving away from the coast. I don’t live that far but it took most of yesterday. But people were friendly enough. It is easy to hitch a lift these days.

- People do seem to be pulling together. ‘Blitz Spirit’ and all that.

She momentarily thinks of her baby son, and of her husband, not far away, safe, but nevertheless...

In the same moment, the student speaks:

- It does make me wonder of course.

- What does?

- All of this. You know. Whether it is worth it.

She finds her voice. A resolve tightens inside her:

- On the contrary. I think this work, what we do here, is somehow more important than ever. Let’s get back to it, shall we?

- Yes. Of course. You were saying. Chapter Five?

- Yes. Particularly the conversation with your colleagues

- Steve and Helena.

- Yes that’s right. I had two main questions really. One is a detail, and the other a more general point. But perhaps they are linked. [Then, remembering herself:] I mean, I liked the Chapter. I liked the interweaving of dialogues [she thought to herself...shall I

mention...? But no, not yet]. How the characters come alive; the interplay between form and content. But the first question I had was about the letter.

- The letter.

- Yes, from Steve. You chose to reprint it in full. Without in some way 'working it', as data. I wondered, why? Wait! Before you answer, are you recording this?

- No – good point. I'll switch my machine on. There.

- Good because you might want to capture this.

- Yes. So. The letter. To be honest, when I received it, I was blown away by it. What I haven't said is how unusual it was, out of the blue. I realize now that is in the background, which of course I haven't shown. So I can explain now: Steve was, is, a very private person. Behind the letter was a silence that I haven't mentioned; the silence of the lack of an emotional voice *before* he sent that letter. Part of his shtick, his persona was to be very closed about himself. As a leader, this seemed like a real strategy, his mystique. So to get this letter from him, it was like a real flood, (Oh, perhaps not a very sensitive metaphor in current circumstances), but it *was*, like, a wave of emotion, a real hidden transcript made public. It was as if the story made it possible to open up in a way that was really surprising. It was so *charged* with emotion. What I wanted to show was that charge, in full. Interesting that it didn't quite work, for you.

- I saw the emotion, but there are things in it, things he says, which could do with exploration.

- Like – what do you notice?

- The question, he asks for instance about how will you feel when your children read it?

- That's a real challenge. To be honest, it feels like...unfinished business. I'm Ok with that; quite excited by the prospect of it in fact. One day they will read this, perhaps, I *hope* they do, and then the story might have another turn. I can't imagine what that is now, but it feels like a mark of quality that the story will continue, long after this process is over. They may worry about what I might do next. Sometimes I think about that. Am I going to do a 'Jim' and disappear? But actually, I think, this thesis was my disappearing. I've spent so much time away from them, working on this. I look forward to it being over, and then I can be with them some more.

- And his challenge about who's 'missing'?

- I am not quite sure who he means. Clearly, many people have mentioned to me about my wife's absence. But I have always been clear: I have respected the boundary she laid down at the beginning of this. That's all I can say. It feels very relevant to *mentshlichkeit*, being a good man, to respect that boundary. As to anyone else who is 'missing', I am not sure who he might mean?

- No, yes, I thought he meant your wife too.

- But I am OK with that boundary. I think it might say more about Steve, and where he was going, in his relationship.

- So it was about showing the 'emotional charge' as you say, which in some way 'deals' with the power dynamic, by opening a hidden transcript, an emotional register?

- Yes that's right, although of course, the story caught Steve just as the power relationships were changing and he had chosen to leave Roffey. That's why the counterpoint between him and Helena is so intriguing. My hope is that the story inquiry process enabled some kind of transition between them, almost at a transpersonal level, it may have helped, some kind of healing. But that might be too big a claim.

- It would be hard to evidence.

- Well, it *feels* right. And Helena did say, when I showed her the draft, that reading it had made her more 'forgiving' of Steve, in all the chaos of their handover, with the redundancies and all. I'd love to believe that I am showing here how *mentshlichkeit*, being a 'good man', within the surfaces of power and its transitions is about supporting some healing; that the process that I introduced here helped Roffey in some way. It

would have been an unintended consequence, and big claim, but even if it did a little bit, that would make me very happy. Dealing with power as facilitating and healing...

- That brings me onto my second question. I wondered, you know, at the end of it all, what difference did it make? Did it change anyone, their behaviour? This is *action* research after all. I'm sorry. I have a bit of track record with this question.

The student's face was blank.

- Never mind. I am interested though. How else do you think it made a difference?

- Turning to Helena for a moment, again there's a definite hidden transcript surfacing. Clearly there is a hinting, a flirting with sexuality which is usually so taboo in organisations. I felt I had to be really respectful about that, but the metaphor of the water flowing between us (again, not surprising in the circumstances) felt like a vernacular that enabled us to shed some light on that surface.

- But what about the difference? Is there anything more?

- What was interesting was what happened when I showed Helena the draft of the chapter.

- Yes.

- She told me that, in the course of reading it, she was also multi-tasking, you know, sending out emails and so on. And there was this one email, which I was a recipient of, amongst others, which was quite strident, and it was quickly followed by another, which apologized for the tone of the first and said the same things, but in more... conciliatory style. It was later that day that we met to discuss the chapter and she said the second email was a direct response to her reading the Chapter. It's not a big thing, but it felt, somehow, significant, as if there was a small element of 'speaking the truth to power', in a way that she could hear it.

- It interesting though, isn't it, that for a woman leader, the message is, 'tone it down', be softer. This is close to my heart. Would a man have to tone it down that way?

- That's a good challenge. I don't know. This does suggest a different kind of pressure on women leaders. But she seemed to think that it had helped her. And of course, she was feeling the pressure of carrying the organisation through a difficult time, having to make people redundant. Steve had left before that. I felt for her. And around this time, I am sure now she was thinking of leaving. Because that is what she has done.

- Gosh! Really? She has left too! Oh that's interesting.

- Yes. Again I wouldn't claim that she left as a direct result of this inquiry process of course. But it was like, you know, when her face darkened and I fed that back to her? There was definitely a moment there, a kind of connection being made; maybe even slightly enlightening. I can't confidently claim an impact like that, but in this kind of work, it is that kind of synchronicity that says something. It isn't about direct causality. It may be just about being part of a stream.

- Was that when she mentioned about being uncomfortable about using the word 'thick'?

- Yes that was the same conversation.

- That's really interesting. You mention that in the chapter. It seems significant, but I'm not sure why?

- It just occurred to me that there was a bit of a policing going on. I caught it in my own fear about what people would think when they read the story; that I was stupid. That was my worst fear. And I did wonder if that was one of those mechanisms of punishment that Foucault discusses, you know, that we internalize? In a place like Roffey Park, being seen as 'stupid' is somehow really unacceptable. I have talked with a good friend at Roffey, about how she often feels like she can't live up to expectation of expert in the place. That she feels she isn't 'clever' enough. It relates to the political economy of the place; we need to show how 'clever' we are in order to make sure that we are a worthwhile for companies to spend their money with us. By and large, people's view about knowledge is that it is fixed and propositional. It is about details and 'facts', tools and techniques, rather than practices. It's what Bateson said about 'substance' rather than 'form', as I said in Chapter Two. Our 'knowledge' is in what

substance we can dissect. And then Helena mentions it when we talk about the story, and then again, as a subtext, as the only thing she was uncomfortable about in the Chapter. Not the sexual stuff, but *that*.

- Yes that does suggest something going on there.

- But then, how does this sit alongside the 'expert masculinity' that I talk about? The idea of staying with the edge of *not* knowing? And it cuts to the heart of my quandary in this PhD. What am I becoming an expert *in*? How will I cope with the expert masculinity of a PhD? Will it somehow re-create the position of expert, moving me away from the creative 'edge'? These are real fears I have. That leads me to Chapter Six.

The time had come for the student to leave. Sarah felt like she couldn't hold the tension any longer, and decided to ask:

- Listen, I know it sounds odd. But, the name Dr. Jim Porter: does it mean anything to you. I mean, beyond your own inquiry?

The student was puzzled.

- No. Er. No, I don't think so. Why?

Sarah waved away the moment.

- Oh it's nothing, really. It is just that I knew a Dr. Jim Porter. A real one. And he was also interested in gender and masculinity. And he was Jewish.

- Really!?! Your kidding! That's such a coincidence! I must get in touch with him. Have you got a number for him? Where does he work? Where is he now?

The student's fumbling for a pen and paper was halted by Sarah's answer.

- That's just it. No-one knows where he is.