

Introduction – How far along are you?

'Well then,' said the Zaddik [the righteous one], 'in every era, God calls to every man: "Where are you in the world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?" God says something like this: "You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?" (Buber 1948, 1994) p4

This thesis is a report of a journey; a report to the world, to you the reader (and even to God), in answer to the question that Martin Buber has the 'Zaddik' pose above: *how far along am I?* Coming across this passage was timely. I am about to enter my forty sixth year when you are likely to be reading this. Such synchronicity is significant in this type of work.

My work in this thesis comes from the broad school of 'action research'. The 'action' here is in the context of everyday lived life, 'living life as inquiry', as Judi Marshall says (Marshall 1999). The quality of this type of 'research' is measured in terms of the 'quality of our acting', as Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury propose (Reason and Bradbury 2001). In textual terms, we are concerned with how this thesis shows the developing knowledge associated with living, acting and reflecting with respect to a set of challenging questions.

These questions are about how to be a man, a *good* man, in my work and life, measured in action. It explores these themes through the lens of a post-modern world, a world that is critical of simplistic notions of goodness and progress. Goodness, in this sense, may seem naïve or ironic. Yet the impetus to consider change in/of myself in order to change 'men' and to 'be that change I want to see', has obstinately persisted.

So I aim to be sensitive to both the postmodern/poststructuralist attention to language, text and subjectivity, as well as the incitement to action towards generative ends that is the hallmark of the 'action research' school, and in particular the inquiring approach of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath, UK, where I have been studying since 2004.

Importantly, and especially in the story that I interweave in the text (see especially Chapter Four), this thesis addresses my own children, to whom, in my view, I am ultimately answerable. I am walking a challenging line here: along the edge of the post-modern Patriarch. I am a father, and as such inherit habits of patriarchy, yet as I search for practices that explore and disestablish some of its degenerative power relationships, I want to enhance (not undermine) these vital, loving relationships.

For this reason, I adopt the strategy of narrative: 'inventing' (or living in?) a parallel, 'storied' world, wherein I can play between the 'warts and all' account and the hero narratives that are the hallmark of patriarchy. This allows me to dance between the pressures of habit and the possibilities of new performances. Action Research encourages us to be alive to missions of change, and the knowledge associated with them, but also realistic in the face of dangers, shadows, paradoxes and mysteries thrown up by post-modern and critical spotlights.

I come from a Jewish background and this provides a context for this inquiry. In Yiddish, the language of my Eastern European ancestors, the word 'mentsh' was used, literally to mean 'person', but it also meant more; variously, a 'big person', a 'good man', or even a 'person who is always working at being a person'. So this is about how to be a mentsh, to live in 'mentshlichkeit' ('the art of the mentsh') in a heartfelt, and embodied way; with a critical consciousness, a sense of irony and with

sensitivity to the challenge of both feminism and the times and places in which I find myself.

This is an inquiry, with reference to CARPP's outlook on the world. In such an inquiry, I am sensitive to questions of validity, such as:

- What is the significance of this work?
- What enduring consequences can emerge as a result?
- How can it be expressed through practices?
- Which key relationships and subjectivities need to be honoured as a generative source of knowledge?

(derived from (Reason and Bradbury 2001) p12)

In that sense, this is primarily a 'First-person inquiry'. (Torbert 2001). What I take this to mean is that this research process, unlike those in the more traditional social sciences, start by tackling the 'problem' of participation of the researcher in what is being researched head on. Traditional research methodologies, under strain from the challenge of post-modernism, usually find a mechanism to side-step their discomfort with the separation of knower from what can be known:

The more usual, or at least currently fashionable, practice is to devote at least a chapter of your book or PhD thesis to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical and methodological difficulties of participant observation. (Fox 2004) p4

But in this research project, the torture and self-flagellation are transformed into signs of disturbance (or discomfort) that, in themselves, represent something interesting; 'data' or, if this word is too atomising, then at least 'information'. We can foreground this experience, not as something problematic, to be swept aside, but as inherent to an account of action, one that can inspire action in others.

Such data is also relevant to the mission of a feminist epistemology: feelings and emotions are signs commonly ignored by the (male) dominant discourse, especially in 'the Academy', the collective term for the global University-based community. In moving towards them, and by considering the impact of this discomfort on action, I am addressing what is commonly elided as useful knowledge. And at another level, quite simply, perhaps if we men own this discomfort that may be a shadow of our privilege, and carefully consider our action in this light, then the normally disappeared 'others' (women, children, black people, etc.) don't have to carry it for us.

Adopting this position, we can expect to hear, perhaps in the disembodied, dominant (male) voice that predominates, the accusation that this is in some way solipsistic and self-interested. But my response to that would be, isn't all research, ultimately? My sister is an Assistant Professor of Medical Genetics. She has reached a high level in Science and this bucks the trend for women. I am proud of her achievement. She began her career by participating in research investigating the blood disorders of Ashkenazi Jewish families, like our own. Who can honestly claim these days that any science is disinterested? In many ways, her work and mine are alike.

In the words of Philip Corrigan, '*We (men) need to re-member our bodies.*' (Corrigan 1988) p377. This is a (somewhat ironic) attempt to re-member mine, in the course of serving generative (feminist) ends. So this is a journey into self, but with a liberatory (rather than solipsistic) purpose. It is about the detail of my intentional action and choices around a set of questions, towards generative masculinities, work, fatherhood and ultimately the meaning of being a good man.

This work is located and relational. It stands for new knowledge found between myself and others - between myself and my children, with my work colleagues, and between me and you the reader. The text is located between people, and also in a physical and temporal space, in the significance of the now, and the choices I am making as I write, telling you a story which had choices in it. I accept that the timeliness of this text may be lost in the editing process, and 'now' becomes part of a tangled 'then', but right now, I am located upstairs in my house, in my attic-office. It is a foggy February morning. The sun is beginning to shine through the haze and burn it away. For a while, you could look through the mist directly at the sun and see its outline. Right now, the sun is too bright to do so, but for a while you could stare at the sun without harm. To be able to admire the sun like this is a rare thing. The mist has to be just the right density to do so.

I am struck by the timeliness of this vision. The world reaches out to me, helping me to articulate something. Through my voice here, my hope is a larger-than-my-voice will speak to you, with enough transparency to reveal new things, like the roundness of the sun. My emancipatory intention is to be present in this text in a way that challenges the general absence of ambivalent, trembling, questioning male selves in academic and business texts, and the world of work generally, which is the world I want to explore. There are plenty of heroes, who present themselves fully-formed and 'self-made' to the world in their story, but far fewer reflexive male voices. Who asks: 'What sort of a man am I, in this work, in this text, in this role, in this world? What man-words do I speak? What sort of man-space do I occupy? What sort of man-time do I spend?' In the words of Stephen Toulmin:

The "modern" focus on the written, the universal, the general, and the timeless – which monopolized the work of most philosophers after 1630 [and Descartes] - is being broadened to include once again the oral, the particular, the local and the timely. (Toulmin 1990) p186

Why do we use the voices of 'others' in our texts like this? Because they represent the authority we draw on, in order to take our place alongside them as our own authority in this pantheon. My own voice of authority voice is being tested here. And in itself, this represents a particular and arch challenge for me; a challenge central to this inquiry. In gaining the qualifications and status of a doctoral degree, do I risk losing the freshness, the timely, relational, baked-afresh self, by 'becoming' someone, a 'Dr.', part of the expert dominance that is one type of (masculine) hegemony? Is there a particular seduction to the academic, male voice and role to which I am succumbing? I explore this particular edge here – through my inquiry practices and the stories I tell. This is an ironic, highly reflexive question – I feel uneasy about it, and I aim to foreground it through this inquiry and its examination.

Let me say a little more now about this inquiry space I occupy, so you can locate it alongside your own world and test its claims alongside your own experience. I undertake this inquiry in the early 21st Century, during a time of immense global challenges and forces at play.

I have mentioned irony because these are ironic times. Social, economic and ecologic fault-lines impinge on my life and the life of this inquiry. Progress as an idea is deeply problematic. At the time of writing, I live in the southern United Kingdom, in Surrey, with my wife Gillie and my children Max (10) and Jess (8). Explaining masculinity to Max, as the older one, and the boy, was a stimulus for this work. In a timely way, when this started to come together in 2008, he was the proverbial 'intelligent 10 year old' who grounded me and inspired me to express myself in a more straightforward language, particularly in the storytelling sections. I want him to be able to read these

stories (at some future point) and find them useful in his own life, in his own questions of 'mentshlichkeit'. (Again, ironically, in this choice, am I 'disappearing' my own daughter? I notice my discomfort).

Christopher Poulos talks about such a relational ethic in narrative research:

In the writing of autoethnographic research, the relationship between the researcher and his or her significant others becomes a primary locus of ethical action. (Poulos 2008) p46

In such a way, my 'narrative conscience', as Poulos describes it, holds me to account in a way that may be argued is far more poignant and effective than some abstract ethical principle. In the end, my reader, our meeting may be fleeting, but in the years to come, I have to be able to look my children in the eye. Ultimately, won't they be the most fitting judges of whether I lived up to my intention of being a mentsh, a good man? As such this whole work is a living dedication to them, and not just as some throwaway line in the Acknowledgements.

*And the feel of your tiny hands
wrapped around one of my fingers
has made more of a man of me
than I could ever make of myself*

*Abraham Gibson, From Mookie, Boogaloo, Shalamar (My children)
(Gibson 2002) p70*

I am a 'Surrey Jew', itself an ironic identity, spatially defined at my house, where the 'leafiest County in Britain' meets *Fiddler on the Roof*. I offer this as context; it gives you a mood, a frame in which to locate my worldview or paradigm, 'as Ogilvy (1986) pointed out, [paradigms] are about "models, myths, moods and metaphors."' (Heron and Reason 1997) p274.

Most of my work is in and around the conurbation of London. Since 2006, I have been working as a 'Senior Consultant' (I notice a discomfort with the status of my role and its seductive, 'expert' masculinity) at Roffey Park Institute, a business school based in rural West Sussex. Much of this inquiry is located in the practice of this role, or in a parallel world based largely on it. Roffey Park has an academic and business teaching stream and I am involved in both. Prior to this, I worked as the developer of 'Navigator', <http://www.springboardconsultancy.com/navigator.html>, a business-oriented, 'men's development programme'. In many ways it was my frustration with this role that prompted both the move to Roffey Park and provided the impetus for this inquiry, as I explain in Chapter One.

Methodologically, this work is personalised and narrative-based. It is telling a story of a journey of becoming, and in the telling, there is also an uncovering of knowledge; what Laurel Richardson calls 'writing as inquiry' (Richardson 2005). But I hope it is more than just writing about a personal journey. My hope is that it will encourage (or even incite) you. In many ways, this will be a good test of its quality. It is also about action, and how in this complex area of gendered dynamics, we can encounter a difficult and even oppositional relationship between intention and action. I offer an intense, reflexive exploration of what Judi Marshall calls these 'gender interference patterns'. (Marshall 1999)

A word of warning on masculinity - men don't often 'go there', so we can find it a bit odd when they do. Florence Geis argues that when we see women in leadership, they

just don't fit our mental model, so we may dismiss them more readily than we dismiss our prejudice. (Geis 1996). Similarly, I'd like to encourage you to have some compassion for a man engaging in this level of reflexivity about his masculinity. It can make people feel uncomfortable, and they can be hostile, as I shall show. I have worked in this area for many years and I know how 'queer' it may seem. I use 'queer' in the same way that 'queer theory' uses it – with deliberately political and layered meanings: 'strange', 'unusual', and also 'disruptive', especially of unquestioned assumptions around gender, bodies and sexuality.

And yet I hope this text isn't too densely self-reflective that it becomes what it tries to avoid; that is it turns into a hero-narrative, a triumphant declaration of progress according to self-serving measures, like the biographies you find in an airport bookshop. I aim to make choices in my writing that are reflective of important dilemmas. These choices are not fully formed and easy, but they are not all tortured and difficult either. Like the mist outside my window, to reflect this experience, the text needs to be dense, but not too dense, light enough but not too light, self-aware, but not self-obsessed. These are complex choices, in a somewhat ordinary man's life.

There often seems to be a pre-occupation with the desire to be designated a male feminist, rather than the feminist methodological concern with producing less partial representations of the social world and women and men's cultural habitation of it. Feminist methodologies have made explicit the social processes involved in the production of research. (Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2003) p111

I am not that interested in being called a male feminist, but I do intend to engage with feminism and I am sympathetic to the feminist critique of male power, without being too apologetic of my masculinity (which my feminist friends tell me isn't useful to them anyway). Most importantly though, I am indeed working here with the challenge that feminist *methodologies* and *epistemologies* make to a research agenda. In developing alternatives to what Connell calls the dominant 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1995), I assert that what the feminist cause needs at this time is for more men to consider *how* they think, rather than just *what* they think, and act in this awareness. This is after all *action* research.

In the theoretical grounding of this work, I draw on a wide range of textual sources, around masculinity, gender, feminist, Jewish and queer theory, social construction, post-modernism, organisational theory, action research and narrative inquiry. I have also been influenced by fictional sources, including feminist science-fiction, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (LeGuin 1969, 1997), and Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex* (Eugenides 2002).

So let's be more specific about what you will find in this thesis:

I begin with a short statement which explains why I think this work matters.

Then you will find the first of a series of interspersed narrative interludes, tracing a parallel, future world. This narrative takes over and becomes the dominant voice in Chapter Four. This developing story offers a number of advantages. Firstly, as a story, it allows me to 'show' you the kind of dilemmas inherent in this kind of study, rather than just me 'telling' you about them. Secondly, it introduces other voices and perspectives as part of a developing critical subjectivity embedded in this research journey (Heron and Reason 1997). The quality of this critical subjectivity is essential to the validity of this kind of (narrative-based) research process. Thirdly, it introduces a practice of development, based on a fragmented, layered self, that I argue (in Chapter

Two) is the key to a feminist epistemology, challenging the dominant ('whole, self-made') masculinity that prevails in 'the Academy' and beyond. These voices (of women, children, 'others'...) are partly mine and partly beyond me, as is the nature of my-self in a post-dominant framing. I don't offer this as a 'truth'; rather it is a *practice* of challenge to the myth of the (whole, male) self.

The First Chapter then explains further how stories operate in the context of action research. I also interweave with this the context for masculinity in this work. I explain the relevance of developing a 'form' of narrative-based work relevant to the 'content' of gender and masculinity, and consider what constitutes quality in this type of work. I explain how in considering the 'art of being a good man', in the transition of my work from the 'Navigator Men's Development Programme' to my role as a training and development consultant at Roffey Park Institute, I was drawn towards considering what gender/queer theorist Judith Butler calls 'performativity', the fine-grained, everyday performances of gender, rather than taking a 'position' around gender.

The Second Chapter is about how this inquiry work became important to me; about what is inquiry and what might constitute quality *practices* that take me into it. How can I explore my claim to be a good man? I also suggest that an 'inquiry of discomfort' (Wolgemuth and Donohue 2006) as both an idea, and an experience, is another measure of the quality and validity of this work. I consider some of the vital literature around masculinities, particularly focussing on the critique of Bob Connell's notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1995). This leads me towards what I call an 'inquiring masculinity', one that is conscious of the critical perspectives and challenges of feminism but sympathetic to the specific, living bodies and selves of men, as they are experienced subjectively. Informed by my own Jewish subjectivity, I then consider how goodness might operate beyond the limitations of western 'reason', and we can start to see the project here as an escape from a haunting, a possession by a particular (maybe even demonic?) spectre of dominant masculinity. How can I develop practices, even rituals, which immunise or resist, in the same way as the acts of observance in Judaism are designed to do?

The third chapter explores an uncomfortable, tentative foregrounding of my (Jewish) body. Again, I am offering this as a story, not *the* story. It provides an insight into my own journey as a model for others. I place this in the context of an exploration of what Gloria Gordon calls 'bi-cultural competence' (Gordon 2007), the understanding of the relationship between our local identity (and in my case, Jewish masculinity), and the mainstream, (for me, in the context of dominant masculinity). I consider this bi-cultural competence, the ability to shift between private and public worlds, as both a blessing and a curse: an advantage, and an example of the shifty, protean nature of a Jewish masculinity that holds itself inferior to the mainstream. It also re-introduces the theme of my own role as a father as an important facet of this located, inquiring masculinity. I conclude with a story that explores the possibility of an embodied reading of text, congruent with the embodied spirit of this inquiry – inspired by Philip Corrigan's incitement to consider 'the intellectual's body'. (Corrigan 1988)

The fourth chapter is a change of register, a new voice entirely. It comes from, and is aimed at, the heart. It is a story called *Gender Future*. It is a fiction, based on my own experience. It opens up a parallel world, not unlike (but not entirely like) my own. My intention is to explore imaginative questions of gender, using a process Laurel Richardson calls 'writing as inquiry' (Richardson 2005). I would encourage you to read it (as I have encouraged others) as a story, as if you were given it in a book club. Why? Because it might be more fruitful to engage in an act of collective imagination. This will require some creative room and a bit of heart. Afterwards, we can return to critique. But to engage with a story from the starting point of a critiquing mind is to akin

to arguing that in all likelihood Goldilocks could never have met those three bears and eaten their porridge.

In the fifth chapter – I show how I used the Gender Future story as an inquiry tool, to engage others in this wider process, principally at Roffey Park. At this stage, I reach towards ‘second person inquiry’, where others are invited to participate by reading this story and take some ownership of these questions with me (Reason and Bradbury 2008). In a sense, as I discuss, this is about how this type of inquiry finds its ‘legs’.

I hope that it is possible to see how I trace a body through this text: I start with head (grounded in thinking territory), move to heart (engagement with a story) and then finally to legs and hands: what do I *do* in this? What are the action choices and dilemmas that persist in these questions? A head and heart with no legs/ hands finds it hard to move. Similarly action without mind (head and heart) lacks reason. Head, heart, legs and hands: a body, re-membered.

Perhaps what’s more veiled here, is sex. I am uncomfortable with this. It is true that, apart from some references in narrative, I have avoided this discourse. I wish I had been bolder, but it was too much of a risk. Like the sun as it grows in intensity outside my window, the lights of this experience are too blinding. This is an example of making choices about what I foreground. We have a right and a responsibility to signal what is in and beyond the bounds of our inquiry.

Early on, my wife Gillie asked not to be included and her absence is out of respect for that request. I would only add that I love her more than I can express in these few words, and her support in this process has been immense, incalculable and appreciated.

In the sixth chapter the legs and hands are engaged, in the form of two detailed accounts of applying these questions of inquiring masculinity, and being a good man, (mentshlichkeit), in my work as a consultant/facilitator. I haven’t said much about the definition of this role, preferring to tell stories that show it, and the action choices and dilemmas in the role that are relevant to my inquiry. My hope is that this is more economic and vivid.

My writing is sometimes deliberately tentative...or accidentally **strident** and this may have an impact on you. I also play a little with changing fonts (and devices like parenthesis). Also:

- In the story-telling sections, I use dialogue quite a bit, but choose to format it as bullet points
- Why do you do that?

Because I am attempting to *appear* in the text. I am attempting to say something about bodies and performance, ironically, by writing about them. I write as I’d like to speak (or at least a toned down version of it); referencing Stephen Toulmin, (and my own Jewish subjectivity), I invoke the oral as well as the written (Toulmin 1990). The oral tradition, as a presentation of knowledge, is one I grew up with. Hebrew, the Semitic language of the Jewish religion (as opposed to Yiddish, the Germanic everyday language of Ashkenazi - literally ‘German’- Jewish communities), has signifiers of meaning in voice and sound that land differently to text. It is significant that the most important Jewish prayer begins with the words ‘*Hear, O, Israel.*’ Notice it does not say, ‘*Read, O, Israel.*’ So I hope at some level there is a play here going on, a ‘hidden transcript’ (something I will say more about) around the oral, the embodied, the *performance* of gender and masculinity (and Jewishness); one that challenges the ‘dominant discourse’ of text. Hence the conversations.

- And why are the dialogues presented as bullet points?

- Sorry. Nearly forgot. Yes. When I write the dialogue, I see it like a film, and therefore I see this as more of a screenplay than a novel. So these dialogues are a script. I wish I'd had the wit (or time) to film the spoken scenes. Perhaps one day I will. Or maybe you will *with* me, in your reading of them. I would invite you to 'see' them, this way. Then this script stands between us, as something we make sense of together. So the text is unfinished at some level, and we can take it further, by talking about it, together. This puts this thesis, and the knowledge I am seeking here, in the participatory tradition of 'action research'.

I won't offer you easy answers, but I do accept that I am *answerable*; that as a man and as a father there is something I need to take responsibility for and to try and change, and hence the impetus for this research project. I don't take all the responsibility for the way the world is, but I do interrogate my part in it, even though paradoxically my part is almost impossible to disentangle from that of others.

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

It is uncomfortable to admit what I do not know; to admit it to myself and to my children that any mess we're in has no easy solutions, but it does reflect the truth of my life. I regularly wonder how on earth I got here, rather than pretending I can construct a seamless story about my progress, post hoc. It may not be as pretty but it may be more truthful, and perhaps offering a different kind of hope for all of that.

I also offer at the end some supporting appendices, specifically:

- Two examples of an inquiry practice I developed, using letter-writing to my children
- A Story of my journey to Washington DC in January 2009, for the inauguration of Barack Obama, called *Praise Song for the Day*.

I offer this latter piece as an example of my developing skill in story-telling, a timely study of a 'good man' (ironically put), and also because it has particular significance in the Conclusion.

For now, I offer you some thoughts about how you can engage with this text and measure its quality. You may have your own criteria of course, but I offer you some questions which I hope make sense for you as a way of considering this as action research, a human scale inquiry that enables us to meet and develop knowledge together:

- How does it move you?
- Where does it meet your own experience?
- How does it help you by informing you about your own action?
- What paradoxes and dilemmas does it support you to act in the face of?
- How does it make you usefully uncomfortable?

Ultimately a text on a human scale should inspire good conversations. I really look forward to hearing what you would like to talk about.