

## Why does this Work Matter?

*The group sits in a circle, a circle of strangers, in that awkward, polite, pregnant space at the beginning of a four-day course. There are at least 20 of us there – a big group! My anxiety is enhanced. Each of us is asked to make some kind of statement, a statement of commitment. But this has an unusual phrasing: it is not ‘I am committed to...’ but rather ‘I am a commitment to...’ This is the crux of the course on ‘Embodied Leadership’. It’s altogether more personal and...embodied. The introductions creep like a rash towards my position in the circle. I should be listening earnestly to everyone else’s statement, but all I can do is swirl in my own self-absorbed stew:*

*‘Oh God, What am I a commitment to? What am I a commitment to? I’ve got to say something deep, something profound. Something about ...gender...identity... Oh yes! I am a commitment to better gender identity ...Yeuch! I am a commitment to....being a great consultant...no...to being the best...no...to a disruption of disembodied masculinities ...God! No! ...to post-patriarchal....post-patriarchal... post-something! Oh for God’s Sake! To saving the world, and loving kittens? I DON’T KNOW! I don’t know what to say. The rash is upon me. It’s too late. I must speak now. I stop, breathe, centre myself. From somewhere within, after years of this work, comes a voice from behind the whirl. It seems to know exactly what to say: “I am a commitment to being a **Good Man.**”*

I offer you this story for a number of reasons. Firstly, it tells the story of how I crystallised my thoughts around the title of this thesis. It also shows you a (real and messy) reflexive, inquiring process, rather than me just telling you about it. Of course, a critique might be that there could be many other ways to tell this story, and how do we know if this is a ‘true’ account? The short answer is that the claim we make with stories is not whether they are true or not, but in what can we do with them once they are told. But we’ll come to that. At least for now I hope you can appreciate what it shows you, including the things I haven’t mentioned, and encourages your participation.

But I also offer it because I hope it shows the world I work in, so I can open with a brief but important discussion about how might my work here have some significance; in short – why does my work, and my inquiry, *matter*?

This story describes the arena of a learning programme in a modern organisational setting. In this case it is located in a bright, large training room, at the front of which is a picture window overlooking St Leonard’s Forest, in Sussex, England, the setting of Roffey Park Institute, where I work as a Consultant. In this case I was a participant rather than facilitator, but in my work I can regularly find myself in either role. So what does being a Consultant mean in this case? It means being at home in the kind of scene above; a deep, narrow, peripatetic learning group, usually not more than five consecutive days long, where thoughtful, (sometimes) vital questions of self, in relation to the places we work, and occasionally the wider communities in which we live, are repeatedly worked through. In the context of the scene above, a group of managers and consultants are considering the relationship between who they are and the work they do, and how they embody this relationship.

A colleague of mine at Roffey Park says, “What we do is hard sometimes, but it isn’t coal-mining.” What does he mean by this? I think he is recognising that what we do is emotionally absorbing work (I can come home on a Friday evening feeling like a hollow husk) but there is a level of abstraction in it, which can look a little self-absorbed. It is far easier to see the ‘work’ in something materially productive, like coal-

mining. And yet, in our society's work culture, it is at this level of mental and emotional abstraction that much of the 'work' gets done. This work is in the relationships between managers of a company, or in the decision-making processes of an executive board. These fields of interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics are the stuff of our back-breaking, (or should that be, mind bending, heart-wrenching?) labour.

In the words of Seamus Heaney, observing his father's work in the peat bogs of Ireland:

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.*

- Seamus Heaney – 'Digging'

So if I, like Heaney, compare my life to my father's and his father before him, there is a progressive internalisation of the framing of our work. My grandfather was a tailor. He cut cloth with his hands, a woodbine cigarette eternally at his lip. He was quiet and unassuming to the point of inexpressive by all accounts and he 'died before his time', of a heart attack, when I was just six months old. My father was a 'company director', an operations man, who organised the making of clothes at factories spread around the UK. His work was more 'relational', although that tended to evidence itself in a Friday night spill-out of all the interpersonal politics, rivalries, jealousies and power-plays between him and his colleagues. In his story, all of this was 'unhelpful noise' that 'got in the way of getting the real work done'.

I notice here, as I write this, the Friday night family ritual, on the eve of the Sabbath, echoing through the generations. It is not surprising, because in a Jewish family, what happens on a Friday night always has great moment as a marker of change and permanence. It is a significant stage for our performances. This stage will return.

Our work at Roffey Park is to help people manage their relationships at work better. We teach (or facilitate learning about) these interpersonal relationships, how to manage the interpersonal power, politics and so on. So my work at Roffey is *about* that noise, much to my father's bemusement. So the world of work has evolved, as expressed by the patriarchal models in my own life; things haven't got more personal but they have become more *about* the personal, as the stuff with which we work; as the matter at hand. What we talk about (or 'construct') as labour, if Roffey Park's work is anything to go by, makes the nature of the work more confluent with the nature of the self. This isn't the only analysis, but it is one that applies to many of us. So ourselves and their dynamics bring us into the arena for the 'action turn', as Peter Reason calls it:

*an 'action turn' in research practice which builds on and takes us beyond the 'language turn' of recent years: the language turn drew our attention to the way knowledge is a social construction; the action turn accepts this, and asks us to consider how we can act in intelligent and informed ways in a socially constructed world. (Reason and Bradbury 2008) p5*

It suggests then, that to take the action turn, following on from the language turn (of postmodernism), we need to consider who we are, what we talk about and what we do as a result. This isn't a justification of what may seem an archly self-referential

research project like this one (although such a justification may be required). It is also to point out that when we are looking for what is good, what is worthwhile, what has *quality* in this type of work, it may be hard to distinguish between what makes a quality research process and what makes for a quality life, doing quality work, lived by a quality person, or in Yiddish terms (as I shall explain) a '*mentsh*'.

If we add to this mix the lens of gender, which, for all sorts of reasons, has become an important one in my life, then this stuff of self must be the stuff of masculinity, and living a good life means being a *good man*, hence the voice which spoke in the scene I describe above.

For years I tried to couch it in more 'high falutin' terms: my research title for a while was: '*An inquiry into the expression and generation of post-dominant masculinities and fatherhood as archetypes of leadership*'. For heavens sake! How about saying this is just about being a good man? Having said that, there was much work to be done to go from that A to this B. Giving up the safety of over-intellectualised language, to come out from the academic closet and be exposed in this way took work; inquiring work. Showing this work in a quality way is the nature of my purpose here. Being a good man isn't a trite thing; it is a vital thing, simple to say but complex to consider. How to show it, in an era that still fails to meet the basic challenges of feminism? Only recently, The Cranfield School of Management quoted Harriet Harman, the UK Minister for Women and Equality:

*The proportion of female directors of our top companies has increased from 6.9% in 1999 to 11.7% [in 2008] (Harman 2008)*

It is discomfoting that in 2008, this is trumpeted as progress. Of course there may be many issues facing us here, not in the least whether women *want* to become directors of top companies (see in particular (*Marshall 1995*)), but the question remains – what is a good man's response to this phenomenon? Men are wont to ignore it, or hang their heads about this, or back away from facing their role in it. This is not surprising; it is a complex, tricky thing to get to the bottom of, easy to be defensive of or in denial about. I don't suggest that what I show here is every man's possible course of action, but what I do hope to show is how a man can move *towards* the discomfort of these thorny questions, not as an abstract challenge, but as a very personal, moment-to-moment one, and that this may offer us some benefit.

Of course I could be doing more seemingly 'important' things than this type of personal work, in developing countries for example, where 'gender issues' are sometimes about whether women and children live or die. But firstly, this isn't where I am located in the system, and secondly, can an argument be constructed to show that being a good man *where I am now* may have just as much moment, in terms of the world we are co-creating? I argue that it can. We are all part of the global system, after all, and it may be falling prey to a very old-fashioned (even macho) ethos to suggest that people who work in arenas that are romanticised as more 'important' do more vital work to the ends of 'goodness'.

I have faced this question about whether this type of work is vital for change or just self-absorbed male hand-wringing for some time. Between 1996 and 2006, I ran a training programme called '*Navigator*', that offered what I described as 'ordinary blokes', (broadly, those men who wouldn't normally choose to join a men's group) a chance to consider the meaning of their lives in relation to their work and masculinity. I talk a little more about this in Chapter One. This programme provoked both resistance and support. For example, when *Navigator* was launched in 1998, Bel Mooney argued in the *Daily Mail*:

*I'm all in favour of pushing out the boundaries of sympathy – but when I hear that men, 'challenged' at work, are being offered self-help groups to enable them to come to terms with the fact that there are women there, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Women carry the main burden of life, while these 'threatened' men seek consolation in each other – to whinge. Oh, please!* (Mooney 1999)

Yet Peter Baker (now head of the UK government-backed 'Men's Health Forum') suggested in response, in the *Independent*:

*The end of the job for life, the replacement of manufacturing with service industries, the flattening of traditional hierarchies, the increasingly important role of women and the demand for new "feminine" skills, such as communication, teamwork and flexibility, are fundamentally altering men's relationships with work, profoundly affecting their sense of identity and self-esteem. Navigator aims to help men deal better with these issues. (Baker 1998)*

These positions show the stretch of the rope around whether this kind of inquiry mounts a serious response to feminism or not; we all need to decide what looks like 'important work' in this arena. The view I hold here is that there is no more important arena for the progress of complex gender questions in action than in my own life, as an example of what is possible to shift in the moment.

This suggests that the arena for change and transformation I inhabit in this thesis is small scale, about 'micro-practice', local and mostly (at least at a first glance) intra- and inter-personal. Some may suggest that impact of this type of inquiry might therefore be quite limited. In the context of Action Research, Gustavsen for example, says:

*Ultimately the success of the kind of action research described here is linked to our ability to help initiate and support processes that become long-term, self-sustaining and include a continuously growing number of actors and constellations of actors. (Gustavsen 2001) p23*

I am not advocating that inquiry into this kind of micro-practice as the *only* way, just *my* way and *here*. It is the scale of action I choose to focus on, congruent with the mission of *mentshlichkeit*, being a good man. As the Ghandian saying goes, it is about *being* the change I want to see in the world. I hope to encourage such questioning because, I claim, if more men did so, the world would be a different, better place. In Chapter One, I describe a shift I made in my own work that coincided with this inquiry, away from my role with the Navigator Men's Development Programme. Meanwhile, Navigator itself persists, and is still drawing in a 'growing number of actors'. I also hope that what I discuss here has the capacity to draw people in, and one of the challenges I focus on is how I encouraged participation in my inquiry.

But it feels like part of a seductive play, the glamorous haunting of an egotistical masculinity, as I shall discuss, to consider big scale projects as the best way that change happens. Perhaps worthwhile change also happens in the loving relationships we develop, as well? Perhaps this is the most important, most sustainable change? Size isn't everything...

And more simply put; it is my contention that men need to do this personal, challenging, inquiring work, coming down from the rarefied atmosphere of the

mountaintop, letting go of the universality of their voice and becoming the quavering, uncertain individual, and with a more faltering voice, engage themselves in *not* knowing and 'showing up'. We need to show what this work looks like when it is being done, in all its doubled-ness and difficulty, in those complex boundaries between experience, presentation, knowledge and relationship, in the here-and-now.