

## Chapter Three

### Postcards from the Edge

Karen, I'm with you because I choose to be with you. I don't want to live someone else's idea of how to live. Don't ask me to do that. I don't want to find out one day that I'm at the end of someone else's life. I'm willing to pay for mine... to be lonely sometimes... to die alone if I have to... I think that's fair<sup>1</sup>

I'm debating where to begin this chapter since, in a sense, the whole of my life has been a struggle to find happiness in loving relationships. I had not thought of this struggle as inquiry until I joined the CARPP programme at Bath in February 1997. Alison and I had been having an illicit affair for six months and my twenty-four year marriage to Sara was in tatters. At the first supervision meeting with Jack Whitehead, we spoke about our intended inquiries and I said that I wanted to explore the possibility of relating with integrity and authenticity in the workplace. This seemed to be a worthy endeavour and, at the next meeting in March, I duly replayed a tape recording I had made of a conversation on this subject with Roger, a work colleague. Interesting and worthwhile, but somehow missing the point entirely.

On the way back I realised, "How on earth can you go on talking about integrity and authenticity at work when your whole life is founded on a lie?" I felt extreme discomfort at the dissonance between these two positions. My powers of concentration were very low at that time and I could scarcely read or write, so at the next supervision session, which happened to be with Judi Marshall, I declared "I'm afraid I have not really done any research. All my energy is taken up trying to get through this situation." To which Judi responded "I think you are right in the middle of your inquiry. Perhaps this is your work now". With that encouragement I relinquished my fantasy that inquiry has to be "out there" (a formal, rational process disconnected from lived experience) and realised that it can also be "in here" (a holistic and subjective process giving direction and meaning to life).

By July, we formed our semi-permanent supervision groups and I felt safe enough to begin writing about myself. Over the next six months *Out of the Frying Pan* emerged,

partly out of my need to make sense out of what was happening, and partly out of the desire to tell my story. To find a voice, through which I could re-establish my identity as a separated, then divorced, single man.

I wrote mostly for myself but increasingly with a sense of audience too. As I got to know Jack Whitehead and the other members of the supervision group, I wanted that voice to be heard, to share what was going on in my life – just as I became interested in hearing about their lives. When *Out of the Frying Pan* was finished (it became the focus of my Diploma/MPhil transfer paper) I continued to write occasionally about these aspects of my life. Sometimes I found it helpful to reflect on a particular issue or process. At other times, the act of writing was a search for meaning, a form of inquiry in itself.

As a writer, I am fascinated by the intimate connection (and tension) between living and telling. Referring to Sartre's injunction in *Nausea* (Sartre 1964) "But you have to choose: live or tell", Erving Polster, a canny old Gestalt therapist writes:

Although it is of course difficult to live something out and tell about it at the same time, this exclusivity is softened by our remarkable integrative skill... This deftness is... available for the co-ordination of living and telling, a feat which, in contradiction of Sartre's protagonist, we all accomplish everyday (Polster 1987)

In this chapter, I seek to "deftly integrate" living and telling by careful selection and commentary on some of the pieces I have written about loving relationships over the past few years. Of course, separating my living inquiries into discrete chapters is an artifice. Whether I wish to argue for a single self or a multiplicity of selves (or both), it can hardly be denied that I am living one life. What I learn in one area inevitably feeds the whole - though I may be reluctant to apply such lessons uniformly! For example, I expect that writing about loving relationships will open up issues about healing that I intend to spotlight in a later chapter. Links with *The Mens Room* will also become apparent. Indeed, the letter to Chris, which closed that chapter, is profoundly concerned with what it means to be in loving relationship with another; in this case, another man.

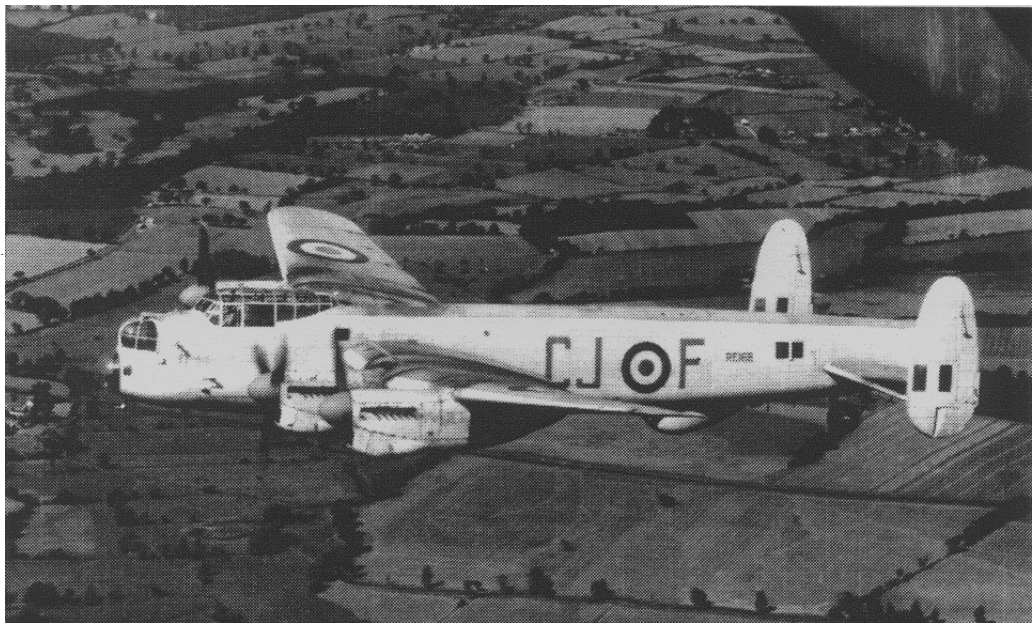
### **The Dragon Rider's Son**

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<sup>1</sup> Denys Finch-Hatton to his lover Karen Blixen, from the film *Out of Africa*.

This picture, one of my most prized possessions, is an air-to-air shot of my father flying a post-war Lancaster bomber somewhere over East Anglia. It is just possible to make out his figure in the pilot's seat. A framed enlargement hangs in my living room – the Dragon Rider in his element.

I debate with myself; should I include this picture or not? What purpose does it serve? Is it just maudlin self-indulgence? I decide that it is important – this is how I picture him. This image of a sky-borne hero is how I have thought of him most of my life. It is etched deeply into my soul and still inspires me to follow my dreams. I am grateful for his life and wonder what it would have been like to have known him.



About this time he fell in love with a bright-eyed maid. She was still smarting from the loss of her first husband – a cruel and selfish man who had deserted her for another. His love healed her bitterness and they were very happy together. The years passed and brought first a son and then a daughter. His first-born son was the apple of his eye and he loved to dandle the young child on his knee, hold him in his arms and play with him by the edge of the sea.

One day the Dragon was faster than those he wished. The Dragon's speed and manoeuvring, to find the perhaps a brittle w



l of dragon – smaller and open to ride one if he w speed each day. Its rder, swooping and something snapped – o late. Whatever

happened, and we may never know, they cartwheeled to the ground, smashed upon the rocks below and were consumed by the dragon's fire.

The Dragon Rider's widow was heart-broken and said to herself; "I must be strong and I must protect the little ones from this great pain." The Dragon Rider's son wept and had terrible nightmares. He could not understand why his father did not return. His uncles and aunts and his grandparents said to him; "You are the man of the house now. You must be strong too." The boy thought he could not be strong if he remembered his father and the pain of his going so he reached deep inside himself and shut the door to his past but in doing so he also closed the door to his heart and his true feelings. He said to himself; "I will endure. My task is to survive. Who will look after my mother and sister if I die?"

For two years the Dragon Rider's son lived at home. He had little joy because he was burdened by his sense of responsibility and because, deep down, he knew that he was too small and too weak to take care of his mother and sister. Still, he tried. At seven years of age his mother said to him; "You must go away from home now. You father chose a school for you before he died. You can better yourself there, rise above our station. Maybe you could become a lord or even a king." So the boy went, saddened and shocked at being sent away. Bullied and bewildered he begged to return home. "No," his mother said. "This will teach you how to become a man."

When the boy eventually returned, there was a new man at home. "This is my husband-to-be. He is a good man." "Is he a dragon rider too?" asked the boy. "No," said his mother. "He tends them on the ground." The boy said no more on the subject. The years passed and the boy grew up looking more and more like his father, but empty inside like a terracotta warrior – stiff and brittle. As he approached manhood, a courtesan (a mature woman), liking his appearance, fell in love with him. She bewitched him with her body and ensnared him in her home for a year and a day. He surrendered willingly – the more so because it was against the wishes of his mother and step-father.

One day the courtesan said; "This is not the place for you. Go now. You must find a wife and work of your own." He left, once more sealing the heart, which she had opened. He decided to marry the first woman he saw and that he would become a Guardian. Surely, in this way, he would become a man amongst men. The first woman he met came from a good family and she agreed to marry him. They set the date of the wedding once year thence and the Dragon Rider's son joined the Guardians. He watched the older men and being quick-witted and clever he learned how to copy them and even to anticipate their commands. "Carry on like this and you could become a Chief Guardian," they told him. He believed them and tried even harder.

After they were married in the presence of family and friends, his wife said to him; "We must have children of our own." And the Dragon Rider's son said; "As you wish." In the years that

followed they had four children. The fourth was a sickly child, though much loved. So they lived together for twelve years until, one day, the Dragon Rider's son woke up and realised that he no longer knew what he was guarding, nor did he care. He no longer knew his wife, nor did he care.

At this time, a faerie woman came to the House of the Guardians. She looked into the eyes of the Dragon Rider's son and said; "I know you. I know your pain. I see your beauty. I will make you whole." Then and there, for the first time in his life, the Dragon Rider's son fell in love. For two years they met in secret places, stealing moments, living in an enchanted world. The Dragon Rider's son learned to cry, learned to laugh, learned to love and his heart opened once more. He learned to take pleasure in his body and hers. He learned that there was more to life and he learned that he had much to learn. Despite his happiness he felt torn in two and he knew that somehow he had to reconcile his faerie life with his human existence. So he said goodbye to his lover and left her grieving. They mourned each other for seven years.

Slowly, the Dragon Rider's son began to open his heart to his wife, his children, and his friends and to himself. He found many new ways to express himself – in words, in art, in music, in dance. He found much anger, much beauty, much sorrow and much joy in the world.

Still, he asked himself: "I am the Dragon Rider's son – but what is my name?"

How powerful such stories are, both to give coherence to experience and to convey meaning. I am astonished at how much it has to teach me. Of course, I already knew the elements of my own autobiography. The familiar sequence of events; my father's death in a plane crash, the misery of boarding school, a brief but glorious career as a toy-boy, marriage on the rebound, joining the police force, the almost automatic assumption of fatherhood, an operatically doomed love affair, a fragile reconciliation and simmering resentment. But, reading the story to the other men in the *Making Tracks* group, I came to see how much I still defined myself as my father's son. That final question, "But what is my name?" came completely unbidden and, at forty-five, provoked the stark realisation that the basic beliefs shaping my attitude towards loving relationships ("You can't have what you love and you can't love what you have") stemmed from the way I had tried to cope with the emotional trauma of losing my beloved father when I was four.

Then too, I could see how much power I had given to women in my life; my mother who "sent me away", the older woman who "enchanted" me, the "faerie woman" who cast a spell on me, my wife who "decided we should have children". How passive I had been, how helpless, and how resentful I had become. Since my father's death I had carried a

sense of responsibility for others – a deeply ingrained sense of duty that had become a burden, that stopped me from asking the question “What do I really want?” and drove me to shape my life in response to others’ needs.

Five years of Gestalt therapy<sup>2</sup>, excellent though it was, had not freed me from these chains. The story showed me that I had to lay my father’s ghost to rest, to come to a new relationship with him, in order that I might redefine myself from “the little boy whose father was killed when he was four” to a person in my own right, a product but not a prisoner of my past.

### **Father’s Day**

Three months later, on 18th June 1995, at a subsequent meeting of the *Making Tracks* group I was able to do this in a totally unexpected way. Shortly afterwards, sitting up late into the night, writing through my tears, I found expression for these events in the narrative poem *Father’s Day*. Later still, at my instigation, my mother, my sister and I got together with my father’s surviving brother to erect a headstone on dad’s unmarked grave – a long overdue act of remembrance and family reconciliation.

#### **I**

Lying at the centre of the bridge, suspended  
Over a torrent, blood-red and swollen by rain,  
I sing to the river in hoarse, high-pitched tones  
My song snatched away by the rushing water.

Scintillating light hypnotises and pulls me down,  
Down and along – tumbling and flashing in the sun.  
The tyranny of my conscious mind relaxes and  
I surrender my tired ego to the joy of pure being.  
Ancient magic has power still in Roeburndale.  
All things are possible in this timeless place  
When men gather in hope and love of truth.  
The valley invites me to receive its blessing.

#### **II**

I see my father’s body, hacked and charred,

Caught on a rock, swaying in the current.

*Dear God its him – Don't leave me now*

*I've been waiting for you all my life.*

I stumble down the bank and into the water,

Wrap my arms around and drag him ashore.

On land he takes the shape of an old tree stump

Cut down near the root – limbs blackened by fire.

I too am stuck in the river and see myself,

A pale stone, lying motionless in shallow water.

His kindly voice instructs me to lift the stone

And place it in the crook of his wooden arms.

Together we sit, perched high on a boulder,

Tree-hearted man and stone-hearted boy

Looking over the valley to the hills beyond

Crying, laughing, hugging – lost in wonder.

### III

Later, on the edge of sleep, I realise

That he has come for me to say goodbye,

Return him to the friendly earth and mourn

And, by releasing him, free myself.

I wake next morning knowing what I have to do.

It is Fathers Day and we men, encircling the ashes

Of last night's fire, each have stories that must be told,

Stories of fathers and sons, full of anger, pain and love.

We listen with open hearts and speak when moved,

Journeying together at our own speed - in ritual time.

My stomach knots and twists when my turn comes.

From the hillside, my father cries out to be buried

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<sup>2</sup> 1989-93

IV

The circle opens and, barefoot, I lead the way uphill  
Through long wet grass, to my father's rocky shrine.  
As we approach, a solitary jet passes high overhead.  
It is his signal and I feel him come into the valley.

I reach out to the tree stump and it becomes him  
The stone child he holds is me – I scream in anguish.  
But this time I am not alone. I am held by strong,  
Loving men who will not let me fall. I am four again.

*Where are you daddy? Why don't you come home?  
What am I going to do? How could you do this?  
I am totally alone in a dark place. I need you.  
YOU'RE NO FUCKING USE TO ME DEAD!!!!*

Grief is messy. It all has to come out – the terror,  
The incomprehension, the anger, the pain of loss  
Before it is possible to forgive him for dying and  
Love him again for who he was and who he is.

After what seems hours my sobbing ebbs away.  
Looking up, I am surrounded by men's faces  
Many tracked with their own tears, and mine  
Flow once more but freely and without effort.

V

For a long time, I sit on the boulder, rocking gently  
In the arms of another man whilst stroking my father,  
Taking joy and strength from their presence,  
Explaining what it is to be the Dragon Rider's son.

The story, like all good stories, changes in the telling.  
I see for the first time that my father grieved for me  
As I did for him, and that the courage and determination  
Which killed him, nourished him too and could sustain me.

Our companions have gone ahead to dig the grave.



When they return in solemn procession, find us  
Light-hearted and cheerful. I am ready and follow them  
To a small, wild garden in sight of the bridge.

VI

There I place my father's image in the ground and,  
Laying aside the stone, barehanded, cover him with soil.  
Others share the task, placing sods for all our dead.  
When all is done I am asked if I have anything to say.

*My father could fly – and it cost him his life.  
He was a strong man, a loving man, and fearless.  
If he had been different, he might have survived, but  
He died doing what he loved best and I am proud of him.*

*Man and boy, for forty years I have missed him.  
Now he has come back to put fire in my belly,  
To bequeath me some of his strength and courage,  
To melt my stone heart and teach me to live.*

*His name was Raymond Geoffrey Mead.  
He died in 1953, aged twenty-eight years.  
Thank you for helping me bury him today.  
Goodbye Dad – I love you – rest in peace.*

VII

It is not quite finished. One more task remains  
To free us both from this ancient tragedy.  
Gathering up the stone child from the graveside  
I return to the centre of the bridge where this began.

With a loud cry, echoed from the bank, I raise  
The stone high above my head and cast it  
Down where the current flows swift and deep.  
At last, I am ready to live in the mainstream.

A great rush of energy surges through my body.  
Hot tears well in my eyes as I feel the power

Of the moment and I am welcomed back to shore  
By cheering, hugging, joyful, blessed fellow men.

The poem is both a record of events and a story of living inquiry. Telling and re-telling the story reinforces my sense of self. Turning to Erving Polster (Polster 1987) once more:

People often summarise the events of their lives in a word or two [in my case the Dragon Rider's son] and then forget what it is they have summarised. At first, the special titles they give themselves are convenient symbols or guides in an otherwise incomprehensible existence. But the details, the substance of life, may be lost. When the story is told again and substance and title reconnected, congruence is restored and a sense of wholeness regained. (p71)

The poem also shows my willingness to trust my own process, to follow the winding path of the psyche and allow the possibility of connection with the “more than human world.” (Abram 1997) Singing to the river in the conviction that I would be heard opened me to its reply. The valley brought me what I needed because I was ready to receive it. Some will dismiss this as fanciful nonsense, yet surely it is a natural concomitant of the participatory worldview described by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury in their introduction to *The Handbook of Action Research*: (Reason and Bradbury 2000)

Human persons do not stand separate from the cosmos, we evolved with it and are an expression of its intelligent and creative force. As Thomas Berry (Berry 1992) puts it:

The universe carries within it a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension... the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness

That day in Roeburndale, as during the burial ritual at Gaunt's House <sup>3</sup>, I experienced myself participating directly in the psychic-spiritual and physical-material dimensions of the “more than human world”.

### **Out of the Frying Pan**

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<sup>3</sup> See – *In Search of Spirit in The Men's Room*

When I began this chapter, I had not expected to spend so long writing about my father but I can see now that coming to terms with his death fundamentally changed my attitude to being in loving relationships. The ethic of care and responsibility towards others that I had, untypically, learned as a boy and which had become distorted in adulthood into passive, dependent and sometimes manipulative behaviour towards women, was challenged by a growing sense of my own identity and of the right to choose for myself. I found myself in mid-life beginning to move more closely along the typical male trajectory described by Carole Gilligan (Gilligan 1993):

Male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and expresses the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community (p156)... These different perspectives are reflected in two different moral ideologies, since separation is justified by an ethic of rights while attachment is supported by an ethic of care (p164)

It was not a simple shift from one perspective to the other. I experienced enormous tension as my inner desire for freedom and self-expression outstripped my ability to negotiate change in what increasingly felt like the confines of my marriage.

In the opening section I described how, with Judi Marshall's and Jack Whitehead's encouragement, I wrote *Out of the Frying Pan* as a form of inquiry into these aspects of my lived experience. I want to include some extracts from it here – not in any sense as self-justification, nor as an apologia (I seek neither your approval nor your condemnation of my actions). Rather, I invite you to join me as I revisit the text to see what it has to say about some of the forms and practices of “living inquiry”.

The original, rather rambling text was some 14,000 words long. To have included it verbatim would have been self-indulgent (and, perhaps, have presumed too much upon your patience). So I have edited it pretty ruthlessly to a more reasonable 3,000 words, focusing on the events themselves and some of the immediate “reflections-in-action” (Schon 1983) that helped to shape them, whilst seeking to retain the substance and vitality of the original language. I have also been very conscious of Judi Marshall's “edge” (Marshall 1999) around personal stories and have chosen to exclude, from this more public document, some intimate material not central to the story that might have caused distress to my children and ex-wife.

**Out of the Frying Pan**

I arrived at Hawkwood in September 1996 - for the Collaborative Inquiry Conference - more open than ever before to the possibility of change. During the first afternoon, Peter Reason explained John Heron's hierarchy of learning and inquiry - moving from experiencing (being in the world) through representation and proposition to practical action. As the model unfolded, I placed myself in the lower bands of the pyramid - experiencing much, occasionally representing my experience through pictures, poetry, dance and writing, even coming to make propositions about right living - yet failing (I saw it as a deep personal failure) to change my life, to change my practice as a man, as a human being. I began to see that if I was serious about joining CARPP and pursuing a PhD then I would have to confront this barrier - certainly in my professional life and (I began to suspect) in my personal life too - in my relationships with myself and with others.

By the end of the first afternoon, I was bubbling in a state of intellectual fermentation, preparing to let go of some of my compulsion to control the world - which I had largely maintained by saying "No", by denying myself the experiences that might really change me. So it was in that state that the second significant event, or series of events, began. Early that evening I became reacquainted with Alison who I had met for the first time at an Open Space conference the previous week. Then, we had danced together - she inviting me to a local dance group and me asking her to help me put on a short dance workshop for conference participants.

As the evening wore on, numbers dwindled until, eventually, Alison and I were alone together. Gradually our chatter subsided and she said, "What are we doing here together... and what do you want to do about it?" It was a fateful moment. I knew that I stood at a crossroads. I could deny my attraction and say "No" to life again or I could risk saying, "Yes". I chose to say "Yes". I shook with fear as I told her that I was not sure what we were doing together and that I wanted to spend the night holding her in my arms.

When the conference came to an end I felt the world closing in on me. Soon she would be gone. Was that it? What should I do? What did I want to do? I asked Alison to come with me for a short walk to find some privacy. We leaned on a pasture gate, the air smelling vaguely of cows, and I broke down and wept. I told her how frightened I felt, that something was about to snap and I did not know where I would end up. She comforted me, accepting my tears without pity or fear and asked me if I wanted to keep in touch. I said that I did not know what I wanted and asked her not to write to me - she agreed - I was due to go to Toronto within a week and would have time to sort myself out and decide what to do.

Returning to Hertfordshire, I entered my house. It no longer felt like home. Within a few hours I was in the bedroom, sobbing and trying to explain that I had been profoundly disturbed by the conference. I was desperately frightened by the prospect of living my life as inquiry - yet I knew that I had accepted the challenge. I felt as though I would die if I did not. I was facing a deep spiritual and existential crisis. I did not tell Sara about my meeting with Alison. I did not know whether I would ever see her again and did not want to cause either of us unnecessary suffering.

I struggled with my conscience for the next few days before flying to Toronto with our eldest son to visit my mother and stepfather. There I had a lot of time to think about my predicament. I sank into despair and a deep depression, which only lifted walking alone one day in the rain. As I hit bottom I was confronted by the choice between living the life my soul demanded or giving up. Put that starkly, there was only one conclusion. "I choose life," I said to myself, then out loud, then shouting - then breaking into a run as I felt the power and joy of this statement. I had made the crucial decision, passed the turning point, I knew that I would allow my life to change direction, that I was prepared to risk everything I had built over 25 years of work and marriage.

It was after that experience that I wrote to Alison - a long letter 20-30 pages perhaps, pouring out of me - streams of longing and desire - I want to see her again when I get back to England. I posted the letter from Niagara Falls the next day. It was done, the die was cast. I phoned Alison a few days after landing back in England and found that she had been very moved by my letter and that she wanted to see me again. I kept all this from Sara but could not hide my increasingly disturbed behaviour. My emotional mood swings became erratic, my libido crashed and my grasp of reality became pretty tenuous. I retreated into myself for long periods, locking myself into our bedroom, going for solitary walks and drinking heavily.

Sara was scared and angry with me. Our children generally kept out of the way - I had little time or energy for them, so self-absorbed was I. My journal contains page after page of melancholic, agonised self-reflection. I withheld the truth from everyone - Sara, children, even myself. Somehow, I figured, there was a way out of this. If only I could find the right words, the right formula, I could make it all right for everyone.

I invented reasons to be away from home - conferences, meetings, dance classes - anything I could think of to be with Alison. I was obsessed with her, thinking about her in every waking moment, dreaming about her, writing to her, phoning, meeting clandestinely. Sara must surely have guessed? I held her, and the children, at arm's length, knowing that if I let them get too close I would not be able to hold it all together. I dare not let the cat out of the bag.

I did not want to hurt others and, despite the evidence of my eyes, pretended to myself that everything would somehow work out. I was constantly exhausted, stressed beyond measure, frequently had chest pains and shortness of breath. I could only concentrate enough for a few hours productive work each week. Sara was deathly pale and sick. The kids were fractious and edgy. My whole, carefully constructed, world was falling apart, going down the tubes and, perversely, I was willing it to happen. So often in the past I had pulled back, had avoided the possibility of real change - now I was determined to continue, to see it through.

Moving through, entering the void was all I could do. For months I lacked the ability to judge what was good or right. My rational mind deserted me, knowing perhaps that it could not serve me well. It was my heart, rather than my head, I most needed. It was as though when I sent Alison my letter from Niagara, I had cast myself over the waterfall in a barrel. For a time I ceased to have any sense of control over myself, or my life. What pained me most was the hurt, anger and fear I could see in Sara and in the children - them most of all.

After that, it was my body's reaction to events that most troubled me. Along with the stress symptoms I became sexually impotent for several months. Even now my sexual energy is low and it seems that I may have sacrificed a large part of it to the struggle. I nearly let myself off the hook then, glossing over the shame and humiliation of this experience. In some ways it has caused me to reassess my identity as a man. Like so many, I learned that to be a man means to be constantly ready for sex. If I am not and cannot, then how (else) can I be a man. Working this out has been, indeed continues to be, one of the most challenging aspects of my relationship with Alison.

For a time these pressures threatened to overwhelm me. I could feel the over-stretched membrane between my fragile sanity and the madness that lay in wait, prowling in the darkness beyond. I also knew that, paradoxically, I had to ease the grip of my rational mind in order to survive. I recalled what I had learned about the power of surrender and of the universe to support us when most in need and turned to the *I Ching* for guidance.

At the turn of the year I retreated into a locked room to meditate and to determine how I would move into 1997. I stripped naked and sat cross-legged on the floor. In front of me I lit three candles for "life, love and happiness" and began to count my breath ... out... 1 ... in ...out... 2 ... in ... out ...3 ... in ... out, emptying my mind and letting my body take me to an altered state of consciousness. After some time, fifteen minutes or so, I brought my attention back to the room and carefully cast three coins six times to give the pattern of a hexagram - then consulted the *I Ching*. Before opening the book I decided to commit myself to act in accordance with whatever it said. I cast T'UNG JEN (Heaven over Fire) - the hexagram that, above all others, is concerned with personal relationships. I read:

Proper relationships, whether in love, work, family or friendship, must be founded on and conducted under proper principles in order to succeed ... kindness, humility, equanimity and openness ... The fundamental rule of the I Ching for the conduct of relationships is that they take place in the open. This means that every facet of a relationship should be seen as fair and correct by *everyone* concerned, not just yourself.

I squirmed - my relationships seemed to meet none of these criteria! I felt a wave of dread and excitement sweep over me. I did not know how or when, but I seemed destined to break out of the pattern of deceit that I had created into some new place. Somehow I had to decide what to and act upon it.

Within three weeks I had spoken to old friends at the Police Staff College at Bramshill and arranged a six-month attachment to work as an internal consultant. My boss, Peter Sharpe (Chief Constable of Hertfordshire) agreed to this. I had been frank with him and he, in turn, was tremendously sympathetic and helpful. I arranged to go in April once I had finished my current projects in Hertfordshire.

In the meantime I was thrashing around desperately, whole weekends spent in drunken depression and blazing rows. The children and I avoided each other. God knows what was going on for them. I know that they were very hurt by my behaviour which must have seemed like a personal rejection. If anything, the prospect of freedom exacerbated my feeling of being trapped. I thought of some lines of Rilke and knew that I had to go on:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.  
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.

And another man, who remains inside his own house,  
dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,  
so that his children have to go far out into the world  
toward that same church which he forgot.

By March, my departure from the family home was fast approaching though still, ostensibly, temporary. Actually, I did need space for myself - the chance to be on my own, away from Sara, children and Alison. I needed to take stock, to check out what I was doing and for whom. I took myself to Spain for a week at Cortijo Romero, an "alternative" holiday centre in the Sierra Nevada mountains. There I meditated, slept, danced, walked in the hills, enjoyed Shiatsu massages, painted, ate and swam. It was a glorious week in which I reaffirmed my commitment to myself, to leading my own life, to being who I am. As so often, I was moved by the beauty and power of

poetic language. A friend read Rilke to me in the original German and I composed a short poem in return.

How commonplace is this divinity  
Delighting itself in infinite variety of form.  
I, too, wantonly breathed into existence  
For no other reason than to be what I am.

On the penultimate day our small group went on a pilgrimage to Osel Ling, a Tibetan Buddhist retreat centre high in the mountains. We had a steep climb on foot and as we went up I inwardly recited the following affirmation “I love myself as I move towards joy - and others are hurting.” Sometimes the words triggered sobbing, sometimes they eased my heart and quickened my footsteps. On arrival we were given a glass of cold spring water and wandered around looking out at snow-capped peaks and eagles wheeling in the clear air below. The very earth on which I stood seemed to tremble with a benign energy as I made my way over to the Stupa (prayer circle). Walking clockwise round the altar I made three prayers; the first (for Sara and me) - “Let us separate with love and compassion”, the second (for myself) - “Let me love with an open heart”, the third (for us all) - “Bring joy to all our lives”. Then it was time to go back.

For several weeks I returned to the family house in Harpenden each weekend, almost as though nothing had happened. Then, in the first week of May, I went to mid-Wales to speak at a conference on men’s development organised by the NHS Wales Equalities Unit. Once more I found myself espousing the values of honesty and courage to an audience, and heard the hollow ring in my voice. Driving back to Newport to catch the train, I talked to a colleague about my dilemma. He, in turn, told me how he had come out as a gay man, the fear he felt, the problems he imagined, and the place he was in now - living his own life without apology or deception. I found him inspiring. Surely what I had to do could not be more difficult?

That weekend, on Sunday 4th May, I asked Sara if she would go away with me for a day to talk. She said that she could not manage a whole day, nor could she wait, it had to be that afternoon. I agreed, but first I went out for a long walk to gather myself together and to find my resolve. All that came to mind was the fourfold way - show up - tell the truth - listen - be open to outcome. That was it, all I could hold on to. I returned to our house, collected Sara and drove to Ashridge forest. We sat on a fallen tree and I said, “You asked me before if I had another relationship. I lied to you. I do.”

There was a momentary pause then she exploded with rage, punching and kicking me. All I can do is brace myself against the blows and beg her to stop. Eventually the tirade subsides and the



questions come, “Who is she? What is her name? How old is she? Does she have children? Have you had sex? Do you love her?” I answer as truthfully as I can. We are both sobbing. “It’s not about her” I say, “It’s about me. I have to live my own life. She is not the answer.” When it comes down to it I am still not willing, of my own volition, to leave Sara. I don’t know why I can’t just say, “It’s over.” But I can’t. It has taken all my reserves of courage just to tell her that Alison exists. I feel as though I have nothing left inside.

We got through the weekend somehow and I went back to Bramshill. Work was a haze and sleep impossible without whisky (I don’t believe in pills). I went back to Harpenden at the weekends. We would talk for hours, going round in circles. I could not imagine life without Sara nor would I give Alison up. “What do you want?” Sara would ask. “I don’t know” I would reply. We were stuck, cycling round the same issue time after time.

In late May, Sara and I talked once more. She is clear that she does not want to share me with anyone and I am adamant that I will not give Alison up. We both decide that it would be better for me to stay away “for a couple of months”. I tell the children that I will be staying at Bramshill and that they can visit me there if they would like to. They hear my words with a dumb animal pain that they cannot express and I leave.

A few weeks later, I telephone Sara having spent the weekend alone in my flat trying to write a letter explaining everything and failing to find the words. In the end I phone her and all I can do is to speak my truth, as I know it:

I am scared and unhappy. I am desperately sorry for the pain I am causing you. I will not go back to the past. I still feel a deep friendship and affection for you. I love our children and want to see them. Our relationship just does not work - the fit is bad and I doubt if we now have the capacity to change it. I regret my cowardice and deceit - for a long time I did not want to face the consequences of my actions, now I understand that the only hope is to face the truth whatever it is. I will not give Alison up. I do not know how to reconcile these truths and I have given up trying to do so.

Sara hears me out. She is, understandably, bitter and angry and it is she who makes the final decisive move. “I have thought about this very carefully. I never want to see you again.” For all my “inquiry” and self-development it was she, not me, who had the courage to cut the Gordian knot. I suppose that I brought it about, manoeuvred her into it. I am sorry that I did not find it in me to be more direct. I did the best I could.

Perhaps the first thing to say about this text is that, despite my editing, it is still quite long. I wonder if this needs further justification? I think it is very important to share

with you enough of the material upon which I am relying when I theorise or make claims to knowledge for you to make your own judgements. Like John Heron (Heron 1992) I dislike and distrust over-elaborate intellectual superstructures. Speaking of theories of the person he says:

Its terms need to be thoroughly grounded, with a good bedrock quality, in deeply contemplated experience... Too much theory constructed on top of the phenomenal base is suspect (pp4/5)

It seems to me fitting, in any branch of human inquiry, and particularly when mining one's own experience, to theorise sparingly and make modest claims to knowledge, and then only on the basis of a substantial process of inquiry.

Second, I must acknowledge that as well as the personal, *Out of the Frying Pan* lies deep in emotional and psychological territory. Perhaps it is safe to assume that, unlike Donald Schon in his introduction to Bill Torbert's *The Power of Balance* (Torbert 1991), you are not disturbed by my refusal to respect conventional boundaries between personal and professional life. If I am wrong, you probably stopped reading long ago! However, I want to go further than this by joining Ruth Leitch and Christopher Day in explicitly promoting the contribution of emotional and psychological insight to reflective practice in action research. Yet even they, in an otherwise excellent article (Leitch and Day 2000), shy away from the practical implications of what they recommend. Thus, I thoroughly endorse the sentiment behind this statement:

To avoid a well-rehearsed, but limited approach to reflection on feelings... the approaches derived from the worlds of psychology or psychotherapy are those which bypass the rational in the first instance, and find access to the emotional and imaginary substrates of the teacher [or other researcher?] (p188)

But, oh how revealing the final sentence of their penultimate paragraph:

Finally, there must also be a "fitness for purpose" to ensure that identified goals are not being lost in any *mindless self-exploration*. (p189 emphasis mine)

Who decides, I wonder, when such self-exploration is mindless? And, if admissible, what forms are considered appropriate to represent it? I argue that "living inquiry" must

concern itself with both inner and outer dimensions – with self-exploration and our influence for good and ill in the world. Such concerns require far more than “a conceptual understanding of the nature of emotional understanding” (Ibid. p188). They demand that we commit ourselves to a deep experiential examination of our personal and professional lives – feeling as well as understanding our emotions, and using “artistically rendered forms” (Eisner 1993) to give expression to our creative imagination.

Having made these general points about the text, it is time to interrogate it for some specific examples of the forms and practices of my “living inquiries”. Bill Torbert and Judi Marshall have both written about their different attentional disciplines. Whilst Bill prescribes his as the basis of a new social science, I prefer Judi’s more inclusive and permissive view:

Each person’s inquiry approach will be distinctive, disciplines cannot be cloned or copied. Rather, each person must identify and craft their own qualities and practices. The questioning then becomes how to do them well, how to conduct them with quality and rigour appropriate to their forms and how to articulate the inquiry processes and sense-making richly and non-defensively. (Marshall 2000)

### ***First Person Inquiry***

What leaps off the page at me is my obvious propensity for “first person inquiry” even in circumstances where collaborative “second person inquiry” would be more appropriate. I held on for eight months, trying to work things out myself, withholding the truth (even lying) rather than engage Sara in open dialogue. I might seek to justify this by citing the failure of our previous efforts at collaborative inquiry through marriage guidance counselling and couples therapy to achieve anything more than temporary respite. But I might equally acknowledge that I selfishly wanted to have my cake and eat it (both marriage and affair).

### ***The Fourfold Way***

Whatever the motive for delay, when I told the truth it became possible for us both to work towards some sort of resolution. In May and June, despite (or perhaps because of) our pain and Sara’s anger, we communicated with ferocious honesty. At that stage in the

text I refer to “the fourfold way”. I borrow this phrase from Angeles Arrien’s book of the same name (Arrien 1992) which I came across shortly after publication. A cultural anthropologist, Arrien draws on the wisdom traditions of native Americans and other indigenous peoples to offer a traditional form for “right living” based on archetypal energies and symbols associated with the four cardinal directions arrayed as a circle or medicine wheel.

I recognise the potential for cultural imperialism, however I believe it is possible to use the form respectfully and non-invasively. Impressed by its accessibility and “profound simplicity”, I have found attempting to behave in accordance with its strictures extremely demanding. The form enables us to access the human resources of power, vision, love and wisdom through right action, right placement, right speech and right timing. Arrien encapsulates these as: “Show up. Tell the truth. Pay attention. Be open to outcome”. And it seems to me that these few words capture the essence of effective human inquiry.

She also recommends four corresponding meditational attitudes to develop and strengthen our capability for right living; standing (as in Qi Gong and Tai Chi), walking (or jogging), lying (as in relaxation and yoga), and sitting (as in zazen meditation). I have practised all of these exercises (though irregularly and in varying degrees) over the past fifteen years. Interestingly, Bill Torbert recently wrote (Torbert 2000) about the need for such exercises in developing the qualities of attention required by first person Action Inquiry:

I cannot emphasize strongly enough how unknown such exercise is generally, nor how reliant we must therefore be on personal guidance by longtime practitioners of attention exercise in ongoing traditions of attentional inquiry. Reading about it does not generate the capacity for doing it. Reading about it does not necessarily generate a very reliable wish to generate the capacity for doing it.

### *Entering the abyss*

Paradoxically (in the light of my persistent reluctance to embrace the loss of control inherent in second person inquiry with Sara) the text also reveals my willingness to enter the abyss of incoherence and unknowing. This is probably most apparent in the moment I

told Sara the truth about my affair and in the metaphor of casting myself over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

Reflecting on teacher's stories of becoming action researchers, Maggie MacLure (MacLure 1996) considers the common assumptions that appear to underlie the narratives:

...that a life story will be linear, directional, cumulative, coherent and developmental; that the past will help to explain the present (and not vice versa); that transitions are resolutions of boundary problems, and contradictions can be transcended; that the self is singular, discoverable through reflection, sits at the centre of our story... persists over time and thus itself provides coherence to the narrative...

and then asks whether we should abort the mission to explain our lives and put ourselves into the abyss of *différance*. But surely neither of these positions is absolute? There are times when our lives more or less hang together and we can make a kind of sense of them (the drive to do so is very strong). There are other times when "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold"<sup>4</sup> and the relationships, structures that hold our lives together, even our sense of identity, collapse or dissolve.

In Gestalt psychology<sup>5</sup>, healthy organismic functioning requires that we learn to move fully and freely round the cycle of experience; through sensation, awareness, mobilisation of energy, action, full contact, satisfaction and withdrawal into the fertile void. Until we let go of our existing patterns of understanding and enter liminal space we cannot fully embrace emerging new possibilities. Without death there can be no rebirth: without winter, no spring: without Persephone, no Demeter. So, I am claiming that these examples (telling Sara the truth, going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, even consulting the *I Ching*) represent important aspects of my practice of living inquiry. They are Eleusinian moments of letting go, of surrender, of conscious unknowing.

### ***Tortoise Mind***

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<sup>4</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*

<sup>5</sup> Which I studied from 1991 to 1995 for a postgraduate Diploma in Organisational Consultancy

The text also describes an occasion when I deliberately took “time out” from my immediate circumstances by going to my favourite Spanish mountain retreat, Cortijo Romero. This has become an annual event – a week of recuperation and renewal. I

“defocus” my attention, stop striving to understand and allow new ideas, images and insights to emerge. There, away from the hurly burly, I can recognise these green shoots more easily and nurture them through meditation, creative writing, painting, prayer and ritual.

There is something important here about building psychological spaces into the inquiry process for the “tortoise mind” to gestate. Guy Claxton (Claxton 1997) warns against the danger of premature articulation or “how thinking gets in the way of learning” (p28). Drawing on a wealth of clinical research, he demonstrates how noticing, pondering and mulling without forcing a conclusion help our unconscious mind process the complexities of difficult problems. Imagination cannot be rushed – the muse demands to be entertained. I contrast this fostering of unconscious mind with Torbert’s call for “consciousness in the midst of action”(Torbert 1991). Of course, both are necessary and both, I assert, are evident in *Out of the Frying Pan*. As Claxton says (Claxton 1997):

If the passive acceptance of not-knowing overwhelms the active search for meaning and control, than one may fall into fatalism and dependency. While if the need for certainty becomes intemperate, undermining the ability to tolerate confusion, then one may develop a vulnerability to demagoguery and dogma, liable to cling to opinions and beliefs that may not fit the bill, but which do assuage the anxiety. (p6)

### ***Sacred Mirrors***

In my use of the *I Ching* to help me decide how to act in relation to my marriage I was, as I subsequently discovered, following in Bill Torbert’s footsteps (Torbert 1991). Reading how he too consulted the *I Ching* in similar circumstances enables a useful comparison to be made. Bill found, despite his “extreme scepticism” that the ambiguity of the commentary on his chosen hexagram crystallised into clear guidance when read to him by another. Not having another to read to me I had to open myself, through careful preparation, to receive the message. For me this is a sacred process and I choose to believe in the possibility of accessing universal wisdom in such ways. As Peter Reason says in his essay *Reflections on Sacred Experience and Sacred Science* (Reason 1993):

We *can* choose the mirror we hold, the aspects of the cosmic dance to which we wish to make ourselves available (p277)

I have found that when I ask the oracle for guidance with acceptance and humility, a response is always forthcoming – sometimes clear and unambiguous, sometimes confusing. I think of this as the universe dropping a grain of sand into the super-saturated solution of my unconscious mind, precipitating the formation of a crystalline structure. I have a sense of allowing this to happen rather than making it happen – of getting out of my own way so I can hear the voice of my soul. These things should never be done lightly: they are demeaned by such treatment and withhold their magic. Do not consult the oracle unless you are willing, without reservation, to hear its answer.

Occasionally my living inquiries focus directly on the spiritual (as, for example, in the events described by *In Search of Spirit*<sup>6</sup>). More often, spiritual and sacred exercises form part of inquiries into other aspects of my life. The use of ritual and ceremony to create transformational spaces is an important aspect of my inquiry practice.

### *Imaginary friends*

I am also struck by the significance accorded to metaphor and imagery in my inquiry process. In *Out of the Frying Pan* this is probably most apparent in the inclusion of Rilke's poem *Sometimes a Man Stands Up*. When I say "I thought of some lines of Rilke and knew that I had to go on," it is a literal statement not a fanciful embellishment. I was (and remain) profoundly affected by the images in the poem – especially the "church that stands somewhere in the East." Reading it for the first time in James Hillman's *The Soul's Code* (Hillman 1996) starkly illuminated my predicament and provided a positive framing for what I had been thinking of as the selfish abandonment of my family merely to be with another woman. I too was being called to follow a destiny I could not articulate. I felt as though my physical life was at stake. My soul was sickening and I knew that I must either follow the call or become increasingly trapped (like Hillman's stereotypical modern father):

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Mens Room*



... in a cage of... delusions that crush the angel's wings. Without inspiration, what's left is bare, aimless ferocity. Without desire for an ideal, what's left is lustful fantasy and the seduction of free-floating images that find no anchor in actual projects. Present in body and absent in spirit, he lies back on the couch, shamed by his own daimon for the potentials in his soul that will not be subdued. (Ibid. p81)

I have been much influenced by the primacy Hillman attributes to the imagination and the poetic basis of mind (Hillman 1983) and to the power of metaphor to generate new understanding and change our view of reality. I seek to cultivate my imaginal and metaphorical capacities through photography, painting, creative writing, poetry and other expressive arts. I do so not to claim the status of a dilettante artist but to honour my creative self and the world I inhabit. Often, what comes out of this work challenges (though sometimes supports) my worldview. The short poem *How common is this divinity* in my narrative both affirms my "right" to be who I am and deflates my ego by recognising the presence of the divine in all forms of existence.

Occasionally, what comes out challenges and supports other people's understanding in helpful ways. For example, Paul Roberts<sup>7</sup> wrote to me about this in March this year (2000).

**Paul's thoughts on my use of metaphor**

As I said on the film weekend I think you have a real talent for metaphor. There are two occasions when you have used metaphor which have had a profound effect on me and stayed with me as images which have reoriented the way I have thought about situations and people.

The first was the occasion in the supervision group when I expressed anger with Jack for what I felt was his way of invalidating the exploration of my depression and his view that this was not relevant to his educational practice. You were quiet initially whilst we both spoke and then, at an appropriate time, you offered the story of your experience as a young policeman and the image of an unexploded bomb and the issue of where to draw the cordon around it. You also commented that you thought we did not as a supervision group need to draw the cordon at such a distance. I thought this was a powerful way of using an image to contain and recognise both Jack and mine points of view. This seemed to me to allow a creative appreciation and holding of the issues we

were exploring. As I write this I also realise I am developing my own thinking. There is something interesting here about the way that an image or metaphor can be used as a crucible to contain a situation in which there is conflict and strong feelings.

The other occasion was the image you offered in an email of your experience of supervision with Jack in which you described him as an anvil which suggested to me that the process of supervision could allow us to forge our own views against the substance and solidity of his views and also affirmed the importance of heat in this process. This image really shifted my view of Jack away from rigidity and oppression to something that I could come up against which would be a creative, enabling and shaping process. As I write this, I think further there is an important dimension here about men at their best which the image of an anvil beautifully captures - how can we strongly challenge and come up against one another, especially against men in authority without the consequences of that being retaliation, disengagement or covert undermining?

I remember both occasions well. Each time, the central image (the cord around the unexploded bomb, and the anvil) arose spontaneously, clear and sharp. Simply offering them as metaphors for the situations Paul describes was enough.

Fascinated by the power and effect of such interventions, I recently looked to Lakoff and Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) for a deeper understanding. They argue that metaphor is far more than a linguistic device and, after a detailed analysis of how we use metaphor to give coherent structure to our experience, they conclude:

... metaphor is a matter of *imaginative rationality*. It permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities. (p235)

The close relationship between image and metaphor to which I alluded earlier is here stated quite unequivocally. Both are intrinsic to the practice of my inquiries.

### *Choose life*

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<sup>7</sup> A fellow member of Jack Whitehead's CARPP4 supervision group

At the time, I saw myself struggling to live with greater authenticity and integrity. The two words, problematic as they are in terms of a post-modern or constructivist view of the self, were nevertheless very important to me. I defined them very simply in my Diploma/MPhil transfer paper:

By integrity, I mean wholeness – being able to retain my essential sense of identity in all aspects of my life. By authenticity, I mean being true to myself – to live in accordance with my needs, values and desires (as I understand them) whilst striving to minimise the adverse consequences of this for others.

I am less attached to them now. I can better see how they feed into a stereotypical male agenda – typified perhaps by Denys Finch-Hatton’s speech from *Out of Africa* at the head of this chapter:

Karen, I’m with you because I choose to be with you. I don’t want to live someone else’s idea of how to live. Don’t ask me to do that. I don’t want to find out one day that I’m at the end of someone else’s life. I’m willing to pay for mine... to be lonely sometimes... to die alone if I have to... I think that’s fair.

It is a heroic vision of a life lived on one’s own terms (which I still find attractive despite greater awareness of the social and familial forces that produce such conditioning) but *Out of The Frying Pan* is not a “victory narrative” (MacLure 1996) or a heroic tale. It is a story of indecision, deception, backtracking and uncertain outcomes. As an act of self-presentation it is partial, fragmented and biased. The only voice that speaks directly to you is mine. Alison (my lover) and Sara (my ex-wife) speak little, and only through me. Our children’s voices are not heard at all. It is an example of living inquiry and also a story of “unreasonable behaviour” sufficient to constitute grounds for divorce. And yet...

And yet, what still rings clear and true for me (even acknowledging our human capacity for self-deception) is my commitment to move in the direction of life-affirming energy, no matter what the cost. I was once told that a baby stays in the womb until it becomes toxic, until the choice is between risking being born or dying. I don’t know whether or not it is true, it doesn’t really matter. It is still a powerful metaphor. I had spent years finding temporary ways of reducing the toxicity of my surroundings at home and work,

just to get by. This time, I chose to make things so bad that something had to happen. It was a painful and cackhanded way of doing it but it was a choice for life.

In *Out of the Frying Pan*, and other texts, I find evidence to support the claim that my living inquiries (whether first, second or third person) are directed towards the pursuit and encouragement of life-affirming energy. Thus, I can happily endorse Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Reason and Bradbury 2000) when they say:

... the primary purpose of action research is not to produce academic theories based on action; nor is it to produce theories about action; nor is it to produce theoretical or empirical knowledge that can be applied in action; it is to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world.

At another point in *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen says, "Sometimes, if the Gods want to punish us, they give us what we most want." Having got what I wanted, an independent life, I had to learn afresh what it means to be in, and out of, loving relationships – especially with our children. In the next section I want to explore how I came to realise as Carole Gilligan says, in marked contrast to the quotation at the head of the chapter, that:

The truths of relationships, however, return in the rediscovery of connection, in the realisation that the self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships. (Gilligan 1993) p127

### **Into the Fire**

Sara and I separated in June 1997 and divorced the following year. Four years after these events, I live on my own – more or less contentedly – at Bramshill. The anguish and bitterness have dissipated and we are, if not friends, at least on friendly terms with each other. Relationships with the children have also healed. They seem happy to spend time with me and I find that I can give them a quality of attention that I had not been able to give when we lived together. Then I felt claustrophobic and resentful of their demands. Now I look forward to being with them and do my best to be an active and engaged father as they enter adulthood (Nicky is 26, Jamie 23, Georgie 19 and Tom 18 years old).

The intervening years have been full of mistakes, clumsy efforts at reconciliation, moments of tenderness, acceptance and forgiveness. Much of my waking (and dreaming) time has been spent puzzling about how to re-establish loving relationships with those whose trust and confidence I betrayed in order to “become my own person”. I want to write about this partly because it reflects my deepening understanding of “second person inquiry” but mostly because the story demands to be told. Much has happened since 1997 and I cannot bring myself to leave us all stranded at the end of *Out of the Frying Pan*. I need to come full circle to complete the gestalt.

How to tell the story, though, is problematic. Like Erv Polster (Polster 1987), I feel:

... [somewhat] overwhelmed by the problem of extracting a simple account of something that matters out of a universe of gradual developments. In a sense, life goes by very slowly while stories - even the longest novels - are quick. The story is an organising agent, selecting a few events from the many which happen and giving them coherence (p69).

I am conscious that I must select carefully since:

the mere writing down of that meagre remainder of all that could be written guarantees that it will be given special significance (p14).

After much thought I have decided to focus on what seem to be key turning points; shifts in perception, changes in behaviour, memorable events. I propose to do so without much overt theorising, joining together pieces of original texts (journals, creative writing, and reflections) with new material to form a mosaic revealing some of the “rediscovery of connection” in this phase of my living inquiry. I like this metaphor of a new picture made out of old scraps and fragments: a picture in which the images are clear but the outlines indistinct – the *bricoleur* as creative artist.

### ***Doing time***

The first eighteen months were the hardest. I was guilt-ridden, frightened by the force of Sara’s righteous anger and deeply affected by the children’s distress. Jamie said little, Georgie refused to speak to me and Tom could not bring himself to visit for several

months. He was barely fourteen at the time and I vividly recall feeling both distraught and proud of his courage when he rang up to tell me that he loved me but that he was too angry and upset to see me for a while. He promised to let me know when he felt differently and, true to his word, called about six months later to say that he was ready to see me again (though not to stay in my flat). Jamie was cool and distant. Nicky made a positive effort to accommodate the change; “I love you Dad. I hate what you have done but I do not want it to spoil our relationship.” She asked to meet Alison and did so twice, without incident, before deciding that was enough.

Sara and I did not set eyes on each other for three years and avoided telephone contact except when absolutely essential. Our lawyers fought each other over the financial settlement, their negotiating ploys escalating our mistrust and mutual suspicion. We each supported ourselves through short term counselling. I went alone to Relate for advice on the practicalities of separation (8-10 sessions in all) which helped me identify that I wanted a divorce and suggested ways of maintaining contact with the children (phone calls, letters, small gifts) even when they did not want to reciprocate. “Just keep on letting them know that you love them and wait for them to come round,” advised Jane, the Relate counsellor. Sara returned to a gestalt therapist we previously worked with and I am sure she found this helpful in coming to terms with the separation.

The divorce came through in September 1998, by which time Tom and I were back on sufficiently good terms to go to Disneyland, Florida for a week. After a couple of uncomfortable days expecting him to adjust to my pace and preferences, it was clear that we were not really enjoying ourselves. I had a long, hard, talk with myself. “Who is this holiday for?” The answer was pretty obvious, “Tom.” From that moment on, I slowed down and put myself in service of his needs. The more I asked what he wanted and listened to what he said, the more considerate of my wishes he also became and the more fun we both had. It may seem strange to you, especially if you have children of your own, but that simple self-evident truth came as a revelation to me. When I genuinely engage in dialogue with my children they almost always astonish me with their intelligence, maturity and generosity. Things generally go wrong when I think I know best.

### *A Bridge Too Far*

Despite our wonderful holiday, things were still a bit tense between Tom and me and the situation with the others was unchanged. By the spring of 1999, I was becoming frustrated by the constant fragmentation of my life as I shuttled between Bramshill, Brighton and Harpenden to ensure that Alison and the children did not meet accidentally. I sometimes felt like the farmer ferrying the fox, the geese and the corn back and forth across the river to avoid them eating each other.

Eventually I raised the idea of meeting Alison with Tom. He acknowledged the possibility, though without much enthusiasm, and I began to think how I could bring this about. I talked to divorced and remarried friends about this dilemma. Should I take the responsibility for doing this? Was it fair to leave the decision to Tom? It would be difficult for him to agree without feeling disloyal to Sara. If I unilaterally arranged a meeting, at least he would not have to shoulder that burden. Sometimes, I reasoned, parents to have to take such decisions on behalf of their children. My friends supported this view and I persuaded myself that it was the right thing to do. He would be able to handle it. It would be OK.

A few weeks later, I arranged for Alison to call by unannounced while Tom was visiting me at Bramshill. He was shocked when I told him that she would be arriving in fifteen minutes. Tears welled into his eyes; "You might have told me," he said. You should have given me some notice. I would still have been here." "Sorry," I said. "I should have told you. I did not want you worrying about it. Will you be OK?"

After that it seemed to go quite well. The three of us went to a pub for lunch, Tom and Alison chatting animatedly about his new computer. At one point he turned to me, *sotto voce*, "I think I'm handling this pretty well Dad, don't you?" "You are amazing", I replied. I was so proud of him. He had displayed great maturity and sensitivity and we had cleared an important hurdle together... or so I thought until I telephoned my oldest daughter Nicky a few days later.

She was incandescent with rage, accusing me of a complete betrayal of trust. She told me that Tom had been very upset when he got home, tearful and hurt. She tore into me. She and Tom had done their best to support me in my new life and I had betrayed their trust. What possible reason could there be for introducing Tom to Alison apart from my own convenience? He had the absolute right to decide himself if and when he wanted to meet

her. She hardly ever saw me, nor did Tom. How could I make time for Alison and not for them. "You are mad, completely mad".

I was shocked. Clearly I had made a mistake, a serious error of judgement. Upsetting Tom was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to refute her accusations, yet they contained some kernels of truth. I had put Tom in a difficult position. He had not had any choice in the matter. I did spend very little time with them. I tried to hold my ground without being either defensive or aggressive towards her. I thanked her for letting me know Tom had been upset - otherwise I would not have known. Then I put the phone down and waited a few minutes to gather myself before calling Tom.

"Nicky tells me that you were very upset when you got home on Saturday"... "Yes, I was."... "I didn't know, I thought it all went OK. "... "You must have known - I was crying."... "I saw you were a bit shaken when I told you Alison was coming, but I thought you handled it all brilliantly."... "I didn't want to be rude, I couldn't say anything." I apologised for not giving him the chance to decide for himself and promised that there would be no more surprises. I asked if he knew what he wanted to do about seeing me again and he told me he would think about it. I said, "You know I love you Tom, don't you?" "Yes, I do." he replied. I felt obliterated. How could I have got it so wrong? How could I have misunderstood so completely?

I suppose it is pretty obvious in hindsight. Yet again I had tried to sort things out myself: lots of "first person inquiry" – seeking advice, reflecting, making decisions – but failing to realise that I had to meet Tom halfway, had to really listen to his point of view. In my frustration I had forgotten the lessons I thought I had learned with Tom in Disneyland only six months previously. My good friend Peter Neall tried to comfort me; "The main thing is that your kids do express their feelings to you. You acknowledge making mistakes. You let them know you love them. You did not run away. You should be proud of them and of yourself." I was proud of them but ashamed at my own stupidity and lack of consideration.

### *All kids are beautiful*

A short time later on holiday in Cortijo Romero, the upset with Tom and Nicky was still weighing heavily on my mind. Instead of breaking down barriers, my intervention had



thrown our relationships into chaos. Surely this was the nadir, things had to get better? I wondered what could I do to put them right.

During the week I ran a short writing workshop for fellow guests with a freefall writing exercise beginning; “Orchids are beautiful but I prefer...” Several members of the group had heard me say instead; “All kids are beautiful but I prefer...” I wondered what my own spontaneous response would have been to that opening so I took up my pen and wrote the following without stopping:

All kids are beautiful, but I prefer... the sound of my own voice, the freedom to live uninhibited by their presence. I prefer my own company, I prefer to be with Alison, to go on holiday, to work, to write, to study. All these things and more I do and (maybe) as a result, I spend very little time with my own children. I arranged my life to suit my own priorities and the truth is, in practice (though not in theory) they come pretty low down the list. I have seen Tom only once per month and seen Nicky only twice since Christmas, the last time being in February. She is right to upbraid me. I'm missing out on her pregnancy and she's missing out on my attention. How to be a good enough father after divorce? I left Sara (and our children) in order to change my life, in order to have the space (physical and psychological) to be my own person - whatever that means - and, after two years, I have not worked out how to re-relate to them. All kids are beautiful ... especially my own. My life is poorer for being with them so rarely. If I really mean this, I have to change my priorities to put them first more often.

The answer was staring me in the face. If I really wanted to “re-relate” to my children I had to reach out to them, to love them unconditionally. I had to be willing to meet them on their terms, on their ground. I was determined that this would be the turning point. I would do everything in my power to repair the damage I had done to our loving relationships and the starting point would be to reframe these as our relationships with each other and not simply my relationships with them.

I wrote to them all from Spain, a letter each, explaining why I had manoeuvred Tom into meeting Alison and apologising for my mistake. I told each of them – Nicky, Jamie, Georgie and Tom – that I love them and expressed my longing for closer contact. I made no demands of them and bided my time. After several weeks of telephone contact, Tom said that he wanted to see me again (I promised no more surprises) and Georgie said she would like to meet for dinner.

We met in Harpenden in late July, at the end of the school term and I took her out to an Italian restaurant, feeling very proud of my beautiful, grown up (seventeen-year-old) daughter. She brought me her school report to show me and I gave her a copy of an article I had just had published (she had asked: “What do you do now Dad?”)

She asked some very direct questions about the separation and told me that when I left home for Bramshill she knew I would not be coming back. She could not understand what I had done and felt as betrayed and abandoned as Sara. This was tough stuff to hear, but honest and clearly justified by events. I could not argue or defend what I had done – simply repeat that I loved her and that I had done the best I could (even though it had been a terrible mess). After that, she occasionally came out to the car to say hello when I went to Harpenden to pick up Tom and talked to me, rather than pass me straight on to Tom if she happened to pick up the phone when I called.

Tom asked me if he could stay with me at Bramshill during the summer holidays. He wanted some work experience and I arranged for him to work in the Communication Unit, paying him a regular wage out of my own pocket. It was a good time for both of us. We took a week off together and I drove him and a friend to Centreparks in Sherwood Forest where I became the sole cook, bottle-washer, general factotum, entertainment manager and “team coach”. Tom’s movement disorder makes many physical activities difficult. Nevertheless, he is very competitive and, together, we won the Pairs Ten Pin Bowling contest, beating fifteen other couples for our “gold” medal. That is probably the only award he has ever won for sporting achievement and winning it together is something I will never forget.

### *New Life*

As I write, I have a picture in front of me – my stepfather Harry, cradling my granddaughter, Poppy (his great granddaughter). The image is both joyful and poignant. Although the baby smiles and looks up at him, he is blind and cannot see her. I know he is saddened by that loss, and I feel it too. Mostly, though, I experience enormous joy from looking at the picture. The photograph was taken in my flat at Bramshill last November (1999) when, against all expectation, my elderly parents travelled from Toronto to welcome Poppy into the world.



A day or two after their arrival, Nicky and Poppy came to stay and I also invited Tom, Jamie and Georgie to visit along with my Uncle Tony and Aunt Jean for lunch and general celebration. That is when the photograph was taken, while they were all gathered under my roof; the first “normal” family event I had experienced for three years. I was quite surprised when Georgie accepted my invitation to visit the flat. I guess she thought the others would provide some moral support. It cannot have been easy for her – my flat is right next door to our old family house at Bramshill. “I like your flat”, she told me. “I thought it would be all cold and lonely but it’s not”.

Jack Whitehead says that he can detect some special quality of energy when I speak about Poppy. There is no doubt that her vibrant and demanding presence lies close to the heart of this movement towards family reconciliation. We all adore her, so we all have that in common and that shared love brings us all closer together. Thinking of her gives me a wonderful sense of pleasurable anticipation about the coming years. I imagine myself playing with her, telling her stories, giving her little gifts and treats. Looking forward in this way contributes enormously to my sense of well being in the world and of the joyful possibilities of elderhood.

Poppy’s arrival even began to thaw the frost between Sara and me. Though it was some time before we would be ready to meet face to face, we could at least acknowledge, on the telephone, our joy and delight in seeing our daughter blossoming into young motherhood. “Whatever went wrong, we must have done some things right,” I thought.

### ***Reconnections***

The children and I continued to have closer contact. I took Jamie out to dinner, at his request, to celebrate his twenty-first birthday and we spent the occasional weekend together. I visited Poppy and Nicky in her London flat, drove regularly to Harpenden to see Tom on Friday evenings and spoke to Georgie whenever I could. By Christmas I began to hope that Sara and I would one day come together again as parents and grandparents.

In May (2000), at Cortijo Romero once more, another shift occurred. Creative writing again stimulated an important insight about how I had withheld myself in our marriage and what I needed to do to become more open and available. I had written a piece about

looking through a collection of family pictures that my mother had kept from me as a child. I understood that it had been too painful for her to share them with me after my father's early death but I still resented her "stealing my childhood" in this way. It meant so much to me to see for the first time, at thirty-five, pictures of my father holding me and playing with me in the water.

As I read what I had written to the other members of the group, I suddenly remembered that I too had a hoard of unseen photographs and it sent a shiver down my spine to realise how closely I was reproducing the patterns of secrecy learned as a child. I had always taken family snaps on high days and holidays but there came a time during the last five or six years of our marriage when I stopped getting them developed. The rolls of film steadily accumulated in a desk drawer until there were thirty or forty of them and even I thought it was a bit strange. Perhaps I could not bear the contrast between these selectively happy images and my own misery. When I moved out, the rolls of film came too, like so many family ghosts following me to my new home. I determined to break the pattern. I would get the films developed and share the pictures with Sara and the children – after all, whatever images they contained belonged to them as well.

Returning from Spain, I took a carrier bag full of films to Boots and waited a week for the hundreds of pictures to be printed. Then I sat down and went through them one by one; images of Sara and me laughing together, of excited children dressed for parties, of old friends now out of contact, of familiar domestic scenes. It was enough, more than enough, to penetrate my armour. For the first time I allowed myself to feel the loss of our marriage. We had loved each other once, in our own way. Not all those twenty-five years were bad. We had built a house, a home and a family together and I needed to grieve the passing of half a lifetime spent under the same roof.

I had fifty or sixty of the best pictures copied for myself and then sent all the originals to Sara with a letter saying what they meant to me and inviting her and the children to enjoy them too. She did not reply straight away but thanked me a few weeks later on the phone. Her tone had changed – or perhaps I was now ready to hear the softness and affection that had always been there. Gradually the warmth returned to our conversations about the children and her new home until today when, literally as I write these words, the phone rings and she is asking me to bring her some cuttings of from my rosemary plants for her

garden. How apt, I think. In Victorian “flower language” rosemary stands for remembrance.

In August, Sara invited me to her house for Poppy’s first birthday party and we have met frequently since then, driving children back and forth while both Tom and Georgie stayed with me for the summer, at Bramshill. Together, we are facing up to the implications of Tom’s diagnosis with Freidreich’s Ataxia and I am experiencing a renewed, and much happier and healthier, sense of family. Things will never be the same as before – I don’t think anyone wants that – but paradoxically, now we are separate, I realise how much these relationships mean to me. I begin to see the children as people in their own right and I see again the qualities that drew me to Sara in the first place. I hope that we become good friends.

I close this chapter with a poem by Alfred D’Souza passed to me by a friend about three years ago when I was writing *Out of The Frying Pan*. It seems just as appropriate now as I reflect on subsequent events.

For a long time it seemed to me  
that life was about to begin - real life.  
But there was always  
some obstacle in the way.  
Something to be got through first,  
some unfinished business,  
time to be served,  
a debt to be paid.

Then life would begin.

At last it dawned on me  
that these obstacles  
were my life.

### Commentary

In this commentary on *Postcards from the edge*, I focus on another three of the twelve distinctive standards of judgement and criteria of validity described in *Chapter One: Living Inquiry*, exemplifying their embodiment in, and emergence from, my practice of *living inquiry*. I have chosen Reflection and Reflexivity, Change and Transformation, and Courage as particularly, though not exclusively, relevant to this chapter and I invite you to bear them in mind throughout your reading of the thesis.

**Reflection and Reflexivity:** As John Dewey<sup>8</sup> tells us, it is reflection that differentiates the continuous flow of experience, identifying and giving coherence to what is significant and this whole text is characterised by multiple layers of reflection and reflexivity. In *Postcards from the Edge*, for example, there are at least three layers (with this commentary as the fourth, perhaps). Each layer of reflection takes me further away from the immediacy of the events themselves but I think you will also see how each perspective also enriches and deepens the process of sense-making.

First, there are retrospective narratives such as *Out of the Frying Pan*, written to document and make sense of the events surrounding my separation and divorce. Another example is *All kids are beautiful*, a piece of “freefall” reflective writing so powerful that it spurred me into immediate action to re-engage with my estranged children.

Second, there are further reflections on these experiences which make explicit the embodied qualities and practices of my inquiry process. In this chapter, the sections following *Out of the Frying Pan* where I identify and explore several such issues exemplify this. Another good example is the section *Transformative spaces* in *Chapter Four: Healing Journeys*, where I reflect on the experience of a particular ritual to speculate about how it might inform my educational practice.

Third, there are reflections in which I seek to extend my awareness of the frames from within which I am writing. For example, in *Postcards from the Edge* and in

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, J. (1958). *Art as Experience*. New York, Capricorn Books.

*Interlude II: The space between*, which precedes it, I engage with a social constructivist critique of “confessional” writing to clarify the basis on which I offer such a personal narrative.

**Change and Transformation:** I make a distinction between these terms to emphasise the difficulty of breaking old patterns of living and establishing new ones. I think of change as differences in outward form (doing different things) and transformation as an inward shift in our being (doing things differently) and regard both as essential attributes of *living inquiry*.

It is almost a cliché to say that beliefs and behaviours shaped by early childhood experiences can persist unawares into adulthood, particularly in the context of intimate loving relationships. In *The Dragon Rider's Son* I trace the origin of some of the beliefs and behaviours that have caused me to struggle to find happiness and fulfilment in loving relationships. In *Out of the Frying Pan* and *Into the Fire*, I think you will see how I seek both to change and to transform my loving relationships through separation and divorce, whilst trying to stay close to my children. It is a messy process and far from a “victory narrative” but I make some claim to have forged a qualitatively different, more honest and satisfying, way of life.

**Courage:** There are many forms of courage and fortunately, although living a life of inquiry carries some inherent risks, it rarely calls for heroism. For the most part I am thinking of moral rather than physical courage though that too may occasionally be called for. I exercise courage when I allow myself to “feel the fear and do it anyway” – whether that be stepping into conflict, letting go of the known and the familiar, consciously trying something new or deciding to stay with a difficult situation instead of running away. In *Postcards from the Edge*, there are times when I fail to meet this standard, taking months to “come clean” about my relationship with Alison for example. But there are also moments when I do face my fears: when (in *Out of the Frying Pan*) I finally tell Sara about my extra-marital relationship, when (in *Father's Day*) I plunge into the river to embrace my father's “ghost”, when (in *Into the Fire*) I persist in trying to rebuild relationships with my children despite their rebukes and my own sense of guilt.

There is a kind of courage too in putting so much of myself into the public domain in this text. Although I do not invite either approval or condemnation for the choices I have

made in loving relationships, I am aware that in submitting this thesis for academic scrutiny I am also making myself vulnerable to judgements of a more personal nature. Perhaps that is an inevitable corollary of offering my *living inquiry* as a contribution to scholarship.