

Interlude II

Sunday 8th October 2000

The space between

Today I am very conscious of writing as a physical activity stretching out over time. One of the poems in *The Men's Room* was written as long ago as 1993. Other portions of the text were written at various times since joining the CARPP programme in 1997. I began putting this thesis together in May 2000 and I anticipate that it will take another year or so to complete. The process is developing its own rhythm and flow. Sometimes I am so energised and excited by the act of writing that I can hardly sleep. All I want to do is bring the pen into contact with the page and let the words tumble out. At other times, I know that writing would be futile. I need to be doing other things; to be inquiring in other ways, earning a living, engaging with others, resting.

I have been in just such a space since finishing *The Men's Room* about six weeks ago. It has been a hard and painful space as Sara (my ex-wife) and I learned that our sixteen-year old son Tom had been diagnosed with Freidreich's Ataxia, a genetic condition leading to progressive degeneration of the nervous system. Hard and painful but not bleak and barren because there has been great richness and joy among the tears. Tom's maturity and courage in the face of this life-threatening and debilitating illness are quite inspiring. Whatever rancour Sara and I still felt towards each other following our separation and divorce has melted away as we come together to support Tom and I am rejoicing in a renewed sense of family. It seems all the more appropriate, therefore, to write next about the struggle to live with greater authenticity and integrity, and to find joy, in loving relationships. There is, perhaps, no more important and challenging arena for "living inquiry".

The space has also been one of reflection upon what I have already written and of preparation for the next phase. Despite what I said in the first paragraph about the kairatic ebb and flow of the writing process, I

had rather naively expected to complete one chapter and move straight on to the next. In fact, as soon as *The Men's Room* was finished, four questions came to mind and I have been mulling on them ever since in dialogue with Jack Whitehead and on my own:

- What question(s) is the text seeking to answer?
- What claims to knowledge am I making?
- By what standards should the text be judged?
- How is this inquiry Action Research?

The questions bring the nature of the text and of living inquiry sharply into focus and I need to bear them in mind as I go on so that the writing itself continues the process of inquiry. I would also like to share Jack's responses with you and use them as a springboard from which to articulate my own understanding of these issues – particularly in relation to *The Men's Room*.

What question(s) is the text seeking to answer?

Jack writes: As the text is being submitted for a doctoral degree it must contribute to an answer to a question of the kind, 'How am I expressing, defining and communicating my originality of mind and critical judgement in living my life of inquiry?'

For me your text answers many other kinds of question, such as: What forms of representation can communicate my spiritual, aesthetic and ethical values? How can I communicate my life of inquiry in a way which makes sense to my reader and makes an original contribution to knowledge?

I decide to pursue this further by reading Collingwood (Collingwood 1939) on the logic of question and answer. Writing with admirable clarity, this distinguished philosopher identifies the inability of a propositional logic to distinguish between "true" and "false" answers without knowing the question(s) which the propositions address.

Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself (p33)

What, then, are the correlative questions that *The Men's Room* seeks to answer? In the physical sciences we might expect to deduce the answers from pre-existing questions but in the more approximate, non-linear world of human inquiry, where motives and causality are always unclear and disputable, we must also allow a more intuitive, inductive process to lead back to questions which help to make sense of our lives (and of our texts).

Jack identifies questions of representation and communication; questions that are essentially located in the text. I find this very helpful and acknowledge my desire to find appropriate forms of representation and to communicate effectively. Yet, behind them lies a deeper, more existential question, which is prefigured in my prayer to Hermes in the *Prelude*: "How can I live well as a man?" Of course, *The Men's Room* only offers tentative and partial answers. My emphasis there is on being a man amongst men - and living well as a man involves much more than that.

What claims to knowledge am I making?

Jack writes: I need to see the whole thesis to give an answer to this question. In the text you make very few claims to knowledge. You do make the following claims, which could helpfully be explicated:

"I learned that the process of such a collaborative inquiry itself, rather than the findings it may produce, can be a significant organisational intervention. Experiencing this first-hand had transformed my understanding of 'research' and its potential for promoting cultural change"

“I claim that I and many men are, paradoxically, marginalised from our own lives by oppressive notions of masculinity – such as those I believe to prevail in the police service”

I agree with Jack, to the extent that I have made few explicit claims to *propositional* knowledge, though I have made substantial claims to living knowledge embodied in my practice as a man. Some of these are included in the extract from Navigator (Traeger, Daisley et al. 1999) in *The Men’s Room*. For ease of reference, I shall paraphrase and number them here.

1. To find a solid sense of my masculinity that is grounded in my own life and values
2. To gain a new outlook on work and life based on what I truly want for myself
3. I now relate differently to other men; more open, loving and accepting of who they are, less competitive and fearful.
4. I am less confused in my dealings with women – and less reliant on women for emotional and physical support.
5. I now recognise and honour my own creativity in painting, poetry, prose and dance
6. I am living a life with more integrity and authenticity. I am developing a sense of who I am in the world, and accepting my unconditional right to be.
7. I am opening myself more to the universe, and I am beginning to make contact with my own spiritual nature.

I believe that there is evidence in *The Mens Room* to support some of these claims – specifically 1,3,5 and 7. *Police Stories* speaks to 2, and I anticipate that the next chapter on *Postcards from the Edge* will address both 4 and 6.

I also realised in conversation with Jack that, in expecting my letter to Chris “speak for itself”, I had omitted an important claim to knowledge: that experiencing a mutually loving and accepting relationship with another man has opened me to “other” more generally. I believe that much of the hostility that finds expression in sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of intolerance and oppression has its roots in men’s fear of other men.

Learning – through healthy male contact – that such fears are mostly groundless is possible and may be an essential precursor to genuinely embracing difference and diversity in our society.

By what standards should the text be judged?

Jack writes: By standards which both show an appreciative and engaged response to your own standards and meet standards of scholarship of inquiry appropriate for the award of a PhD degree. For me, these standards include spiritual responses to the life-affirming energy embodied in your text. They include aesthetic responses to your expressive arts in communicating some of the most profoundly important emotional responses in living a life of inquiry. They include standards of practice and judgement in relation to ethical values of being a professional police officer.

I’m judging your text in relation to Boyer’s ideas on scholarship where he argued for an extension of the idea of scholarships of teaching, application and integration. I think you fulfil each of these kinds of scholarship with the important addition that you are contributing to a scholarship of inquiry.

I particularly value Jack's recognition of the spiritual, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of my living inquiries. I am also clear that I wish to make a contribution to the scholarship of inquiry. Reflecting on *The Men's Room*, I would add two additional standards by which I invite you to judge the text.

The first of these is the extent to which you are able to engage with my stories of living inquiry and, in so doing, the extent to which they resonate with and support your own "will to meaning". In using this phrase I am drawing on Viktor Frankl's classic work *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1984) in which he adds to Freudian notions of "the will to pleasure" and Adlerian notions of "the will to power" with his own formulation of the "will to meaning" (defined as the striving to find concrete meaning in personal experience - p106) as a primary existential drive. I do not seek, in any way, to constrain your own search for meaning – least of all to define your inquiries in my terms. But I do write in the belief that sharing my stories (sometimes very personal stories) can help others – both men and women - towards a deeper understanding of their own.

The second additional standard recognises Patti Lather's (Lather 1994) strategy of ironic validity in which: The text is resituated as a representation of its "failure to represent what it points toward but cannot reach" (p41). To what extent do I succeed in creating evocative and engaging forms of representation whilst simultaneously acknowledging that they neither are, nor do they describe, an objective reality. Put another way: as a storyteller, can I put my heart and soul into telling a story and be clear that it is "only" a story? I have to be able to do both of these together if I am to avoid either colluding with a modernist objectification of the world or becoming paralysed by postmodern relativism.

I am conscious of feeling that I do not want to pre-determine all the standards by which the text should be judged. It seems to me that such

standards must emerge in the course of the creative process and I agree with Lyotard (Lyotard 1984) that they are inextricably bound up with each other:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [sic] writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. (p81 – original emphasis)

Issues of validity and appropriate standards of judgement will therefore continue to arise throughout the thesis and I expect to give them particular attention in the chapter I intend to write on *Living Inquiry*.

How is this inquiry Action Research?

Jack writes: There are many definitions of Action Research. I take action research to be an inquiry which expresses originality of mind and critical judgement in the creation and testing of one's own living theories of one's own learning through practice and reflection. One of the early definitions from Carr and Kemmis was that action research involved an attempt to improve one's own practice, the development of understanding and attempts to improve the social context in which practice was located.

I think your text clearly meets these criteria in a number of ways. Your inquiries are grounded in your living practices and reflections in an intimate relationship between your personal and professional relations and activities. You have engaged in action research which meets criteria of both collaborative inquiry and participatory inquiry without being constrained by their "methodologies". One of the reasons I like the ideas of living contradictions, living inquiries and living theories is that they focus attention on the originality of mind and critical judgement of each

individual in creating their own contributions to “educational” knowledge.

I notice that early in *The Men’s Room* I claim, in hindsight, to have undertaken a “significant personal inquiry into men and masculinity”. Over a period of nine years (1992 – 2000) I chart various activities traversing Heron’s (Heron 1992) four epistemological domains – experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. The fact that it required hindsight to identify the form of the inquiry might be taken to preclude it from “mainstream” Action Research methodologies most of which seem to require a systematic contribution to practical knowledge through some variant of the original Lewinian research cycle: acting, observing, reflecting and planning.

However, Jack’s response helps me to realise that whilst I identify with the broad aims of an action research approach, I do not adhere to any particular methodological formulation. Indeed, what fascinates me is to trace the parameters (if there be any) of my own more holistic processes of inquiry. Thus, I think I can justifiably claim that my inquiries into men and masculinity accord with the principles outlined by Reason and Bradbury (Reason and Bradbury 2000):

[Action Research] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities

whilst trusting the emergent, developmental form of my own methods – intense involvement, slow mulling on experience, creative representation, occasional articulation of my understandings and personal action in the world – to take me where I need to go. Because I am strongly kinaesthetic, I feel my way forward, probing and testing, to find the grain of the inquiry, to follow the unfolding path of my life in the belief that living and inquiring are one and the same.

Once again, there is much more to say – though the wording of the original question now seems unduly restrictive. Perhaps a better question would be; “What is the nature of my inquiry?” In any event, I will hold the issue in mind as the thesis develops. I sense that I need to explore other aspects of my living inquiry before attempting a fuller answer to the question.

My next chapter will focus on inquiry in the context of loving relationships; not from some detached perspective but through narratives of the self from early childhood to the present day and I am conscious that doing so will take the thesis into some highly contentious areas. Writing about living her life as inquiry, Judi Marshall (Marshall 1999) speaks about the “edge” she encounters around personal stories:

There are therefore boundary issues about how personal to be as I articulate my perspective and paths of sense-making... These boundaries are not clear-cut; finding and articulating them is itself an aspect of inquiry... I do not want to tell “confessional tales” to no purpose (but they sometimes may be to valuable purposes) or to make myself or others vulnerable.

On first reading this passage I could not imagine placing such limits on my stories. “No taboos,” I cried in a fit of bravado. Now, with Tom’s illness, I begin to see the point. I need to work this “edge” with awareness and sensitivity. Some stories are simply not mine to tell and some that are have no place in this thesis. I need to balance their relevance and contribution to this discourse against their potential to cause harm to those I love (and their right to a degree of privacy).

Another recent article also challenges my intention to move more deeply into such personal territory. Writing from a social constructivist position, Alan Bleakley (Bleakley 2000) is dismissive of the “personal-confessional” genre and of the humanistic values underpinning teleological notions such as “growth” or “development”.

This high-humanist-existentialist version of autobiography as confession offers a pretence of “wholesome sincerity” and constructs identity as unique, where life’s programme is to strive for authenticity. (p22)

My response is ambivalent. On the one hand, I am sympathetic to his aesthetic and ethical criticism of the superficial and naïve storytelling of the confessional television chat show and the glib, unreflexive assumptions of selfhood embodied in so many new age “self-improvement” books and workshops. On the other hand, I do not go so far as to say that the self is merely a product of the “deep structure of language” and social practice.

To present the issue as a straightforward dichotomy between a self that is either determinedly unitary (modernist) or irredeemably fragmented (post-modernist) seems to me too simplistic. My sense of self is multi-faceted. Through living inquiries I seek to reveal some of these facets and find connections between them. I strive to embrace the apparent paradox of the one and the many and to live as if “I” matter. I think of my inquiries less in terms of “growth” or “development” and more in terms of “healing” – making whole. My understanding is always shifting and the more I discover, the less I know.

In any event, I’m not sure that the stories of living inquiry presented here do fall within Bleakley’s “personal-confessional” genre. I see them rather as *postcards from the edge*¹ - messy texts emerging from my creative self through which I inquire and through which I hope to help you engage with your own inquiries. I am prepared to take the risk that these personal experiences are worth sharing and also to subject them to Bleakley’s test... “that [such] stories need to be interesting, they need to have aesthetic depth as well as ethical focus” (ibid. p23). We shall see.

¹ A phrase borrowed from the title of actress Carrie Fisher’s autobiography