

Interlude IV

The point of no return

Saturday 3rd March 2001

I'm scratching at the page feeling impatient, frustrated that I do not seem able to write with ease and fluency. That will come again I'm sure but, just now, I am physically and emotionally drained as I struggle to manage all the competing demands on my time and resources; a new Director at work, multiple projects, attempts to influence the future of leadership development in public services, writing articles, research, consultancy, friends, family, relationships. I want to celebrate the healing effects of integrating linguistic, conceptual and propositional forms (logos) with spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of inquiry (mythos) in *Healing Journeys*, but my body cries out for rest, fresh air and healthy exercise and I weep for my son Tom whom I love but cannot cure. Continuing to write this thesis is dangerously close to becoming an unwelcome chore and I must pause to see where I am going.

Perhaps everyone feels like this at some point in such a long and demanding process. It is four years since I joined CARPP and ten months (and 60,000 words) since I started writing this thesis. I am approaching the point of no return. The thesis is taking shape – as much by what I omit as by what I include – and I must decide whether to commit myself to this emerging form and go on or go back and either give up or start again. Friends ask me how the writing is going and I generally make a point of saying that I'm writing the thesis I want to write and that time will tell if it is to be judged worthy of a PhD. I used to be rather pleased with this somewhat cavalier response but as it gets closer to completion, my earlier naïve confidence is tested (and sometimes shaken) by the prospect of having to satisfy examiners that my thesis meets the university's criteria – particularly as to the extent and merit of the work.

Since writing *Healing Journeys* I have begun to address this issue in “electronic dialogue” with my supervisor Jack Whitehead. The following exchange gets to the heart of the matter:

From Jack Whitehead

17th February 2001

Hi Geoff. Just thinking about our last chat when you were saying about Peter [Reason], Judi [Marshall] and me having ‘strong frames’ which you didn’t want to ‘fit into’. I couldn’t agree more with this commitment of yours to create your own frame. What I’m curious about is whether your thesis will be making an original contribution in relation to ideas about living inquiry, living theory, living (educational) standards of practice and judgement, and/or whether your originality of mind and critical judgement will be comprehensible in relation to other ideas.

What I’m both excited and fascinated by is the process through which you appear to me to be sharing both your own living educational standards of practice and judgement. What I mean by this is that you are showing/explaining the processes of your own “valued” learning (your higher education) as you engage in the creation of your own curriculum vitae which I understand to be the course of your life.

From Geoff Mead

19th February 2001

Hi Jack. I don’t want to give a flip response to your email... because it prompts some serious thinking. I am confident however that, by the time I finish the thesis – especially the chapter I am going to write on Living Inquiry – that I will have been able to articulate my contribution clearly and position it in relation to the ideas of others. I could describe what I am doing as showing my learning as I create my own Curriculum Vitae but I want to find the words and forms of expression that emerge naturally from out of my own process of inquiry rather than adopt someone else’s terminology!!

I notice my familiar resistance to constraining my emerging understanding within other people’s conceptual frames and to adopting

other people's language instead of coining my own. Yet I also acknowledge the central point in Jack's e-mail, that in creating my own conceptual frames I am also responsible for making them intelligible to others. One way in which I believe I already do this is by engaging authentically with the ideas of other writers, researchers and practitioners in my own text. Thus, whilst I eschew "sandbagging" (Bassey 1995) my writing with unnecessary academic references, I do acknowledge sources that have influenced my thinking and my practice and I explore points of similarity and of difference between them. I draw on theoretical resources as and when I need them rather than to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of a particular field of inquiry. Having said that, I also want to focus much more closely in due course, on how what I am learning about the nature of Living Inquiry might contribute to an emerging Scholarship of Inquiry.

On reflection, I feel reasonably confident in my ability to develop my hard-won ideas about Living Inquiry and make them comprehensible to others – though I still need to check that my belief in the emerging form of the thesis is well-founded and not mere pig-headed obstinacy. I share my "doubts" with Jack Whitehead in a further e-mail exchange.

From Geoff Mead
26th February 2001

Jack, I think I need to take my "doubts" seriously as important data. Rather than brush them aside it feels important to confront them now in the light of your comments about whether my originality of mind and critical judgement will be comprehensible in relation to other ideas and in the light of who I would like to examine my thesis.

From Jack Whitehead
26th February 2001

Hi Geoff. I do like what you say about taking your doubts seriously. My own feeling is that in living inquiry your questions change as a necessary part of the

learning which is taking place in the inquiry. I feel that there is something constraining now in your question [What is it to ask what this thing – “Living Inquiry” – is?] It seems to me to have served its heuristic influence and you are now ready to modify it to more fully represent your living inquiry.

My own feeling is that you are not just asking a question – you are asking, researching and answering different questions about the nature of your life of inquiry as well as using your “What is it to ask...?” question as a “frame” for your whole inquiry. Maybe it is time for your question to move on?

Ouch! This is a serious challenge to my thinking. What is wrong with my question? I was delighted to find this way of framing my inquiry when I read Peter Mellett’s paper (Mellet 2000) because it seemed to offer a way of inviting you, the reader, to join me inside my exploration of living inquiry. Yet, in subsequent conversations with colleagues at Bath (Jack Whitehead and Jackie DeLong), I realise that “I” am missing from the question. It is phrased impersonally, in the third person – “a distant academic exercise that boring people would do.” It is a clever question but not an engaging one, nor does it adequately convey my tremendous sense of excitement about whole-life inquiry.

It would have been easier in many ways to have followed a more conventional route, perhaps to have focused on just one area of inquiry – masculinity, loving relationships, self-healing, or educative influence. In drawing on the diversity and breadth of all these living inquiries, there are inevitably limits in terms of the depth to which I can follow any one of them within the confines of the text. But the challenge I have set myself is to inquire into the interwoven personal and professional practices through which I create my living standards of practice and judgement and, as Jack suggests, this necessitates asking, researching and answering many different questions about the nature of my life of inquiry. Some of these questions are implied in the prayer to Hermes in the *Prelude*.

- How can I live well as a man in the world?

- How can I enter more fully into loving relationships?
- How can I find healing for body and soul?
- How can I exercise my (educative) influence for good?

Whilst other, more collaborative questions are emerging as I write, for example:

- How can I work with others to heal ourselves through storytelling?
- How can I work with others to create “transformative spaces”?
- How can I work with others to improve our own leadership practice?
- How can I work with others to influence leadership in public services?

I shall not attempt to list all the questions here. The important thing for me is to recognise that whilst some questions persist, Jack also makes a crucial point when he says: “... in living inquiry your questions change as a necessary part of the learning, which is taking place in the inquiry.”

I am content that the overarching question: **What is it to ask, what this thing - “Living Inquiry” - is?** has served me well up to now as a robust container for my thesis; one that has both encouraged further questions to emerge and provided a useful framework for the text.

It is a question that demands a dialogic and reflexive response of the kind apparent in much of my writing – for example as I reflect upon my experience of ritual in *Healing Journeys* and as I engage with others through my practice as storyteller, consultant, educator, police officer etc. It is also a question that enables me to treat the writing process itself as a form of inquiry with cycles of action (in writing the full chapters) and reflection (in the interludes between the chapters). Of course, these are not mutually exclusive activities but their form does offer a pleasing congruence with the intrinsic pattern and flow of Action Research.

But I do wonder why I lapsed into such an abstract way of expressing myself: one that seems so much at odds with my intentions. I guess I feel

some self-imposed pressure (despite my earlier strictures) to conform to more conventional academic modes of thought, to render my inquiries within a known (and therefore acceptable) framework. Yet, I am appalled by texts which distance the author from the process of knowledge creation and I passionately strive to embody what I espouse within my practice. So I need to think again about how I represent and give coherence to my learning. Instead of an abstract question of the kind privileged by the “post-agricultural mind” I might look to the kind of powerful image or metaphor demanded by my leaning towards the ways of an “epistemological hunter-gatherer” (Brody 2001)

I stand at the point of no return and I am ready to go on, trusting that others will be open to the frames I am creating, just as I remain open to a wide range of ideas from academic and other sources. In Richard Winter’s wonderfully liberating phrase, I shall continue to pursue my living inquiries as a form of “improvisatory self-realisation” (Winter 1998) offering them in the hope that Jack Whitehead was right when he said to me in a recent email.¹:

I think you are creating an appropriate form of communication which will “speak” to others in ways which will influence their own learning about how to live their values more fully in their practice

I am ready to go on and extend my inquiries out into the world, to see how I can use my energy and influence to help others learn and heal. This exactly mirrors where I am in my life right now, focusing outwards as well as inwards, needing to put all the “inner work” to good use, developing new educational processes and collaborating with others to influence social formations such as the police and other public services for good, through my practice as an educator.

Thinking of myself as an educator is a relatively recent shift in self-perception, though I have designed and lead educational programmes for

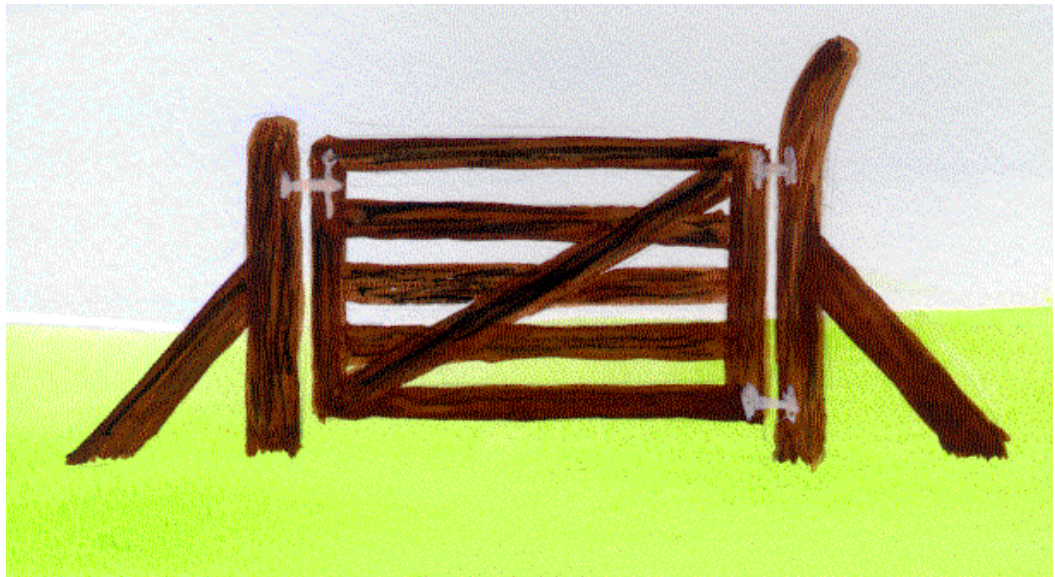
¹ E-mail from Jack Whitehead, 15th February 2001

many years, both as a private consultant and in the police service. I can identify quite precisely when I embraced this new identity. A journal entry on 17th February 1999 reflects on an experience of being challenged at a workshop on *Stepping into Leadership with Henry V*, run by my friend Richard Olivier, to identify my purpose in life.

In a guided fantasy during the workshop, floating on the river of imagination, I found the image of a five-barred gate, standing closed but unlocked in the middle of a sunlit field. When I got back from the workshop I painted the image over and over again until it became clear enough to speak to me. My purpose seems to be about unlatching and opening this gate so that I (and others) may pass through. In doing so we pass between worlds. Each time the gate opens we somehow subtly redefine our position in the world. We are renewed and the world changes. In Gestalt terms, they are “aha” moments that unlock old patterns of understanding and behaviour and open up new meanings and thus new possibilities for choice and action.

I find my joy, my bliss in “midwifing” these moments of rebirth. I know that I am not alone in this. I guess such bliss is shared by all educators - all those who “lead others out”. What is it Kahlil Gibran says of being a teacher?

If he [sic] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind (Gibran 1926)



Some have chosen the way of therapy. I have chosen the way of work and organisations - but (Jack - how long have I resisted this idea?) I am an educator, though not solely and not necessarily a police educator.

My purpose - that which I serve - is learning and I realise that there is something about the way in which I am using the word “learning” that embraces both “life” and “love”. The kind of learning I value is that which is life enhancing, increasing the possibilities for being and doing in the world and which also leads to a fuller expression of loving relationships. Despite bitter experience and much evidence to the contrary I have not lost my optimism or my faith that these are possible in the domain of work. I seem to be finding my vocation.

I am moved to quiet tears as I re-read this and connect with the profound sense of service that this vocation represents. As George Bernard Shaw said in *Man and Superman*:

This is the true joy in life; this being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one. The being a Force of Nature – not a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances constantly complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

Perhaps this vivid image of the five-barred gate will serve to give coherence to the stories of my living inquiries. I offer it in the spirit of what Hugh Brody calls “Hunter-Gatherer knowledge”:

Hunter-gatherer knowledge is not dependent on absolutism or dichotomies. It is inductive and intuitive; its conclusions emerge by allowing all that has been learned to process itself. Reasoning is subliminal, and therefore has the potential to be more sophisticated, more a matter of assigning weight to factors, than can be the case with linear logic. It is a way of gaining and using knowledge that also seeks for continuity and renewal. It is not tied to attempts to control or change the world. (Brody 2001)

I invite you to join me as I step through the gate once more to inquire into my practice as an educator.