

Prelude

Go I know not whither, bring back I know not what

Origins

9th December 2001

If the *Abstract* (which you may have just read) can be said to represent the pinnacle of the thesis in terms of my current understanding of its nature and achievement, then I ask you now to return with me to the foothills of the *Prelude* where, nearly two years ago – after many years of living my life as inquiry – I contemplated the prospect of writing a PhD thesis. Writing the *Prelude* was an essential precursor to setting out on that demanding journey. Reading it will give you some idea of the ground from which I write and, I hope, whet your appetite for what follows.

Why write a PhD thesis?

31st January 2000

Why would I write a PhD thesis? Not for the same reason that I inquire. I live my life as inquiry because I must. Writing a PhD is an opportunity to affirm the value of a single life, to claim the right to take myself (myself) seriously and to support and encourage others to do likewise. It is a tremendous act of self-affirmation. I am honouring myself by claiming the authorship of my own narrative/stories.

Pattie Lather (Lather 1994) speaks of “victory narratives” – implying progression, movement towards a destination. But glimpses of transcendent unity which swim and recede before our eyes in the midst of our struggles to live a good life do not represent such “victories”. Rather, they are simply what give us hope to go on.

Sometimes, I experience such moments through storytelling – through what arises between teller and listener as the tales (particularly wonder

tales and sacred stories) fire our imaginations and stir our souls. In those moments we are changed in some subtle, yet powerful, way. We have opened the gate and stepped through for an instant beyond everyday dualities into our own Buddha-nature. Again, as an educator/consultant there are times when something arises between me and other in that liminal space that is (in the European tradition) the domain of Hermes. It is such fleeting moments of magic and possibility that fascinate me.

I want my inquiries to spring out of the necessities of my life, to be real and meaningful to me and others, not mere instrumental means of “capturing data” which can be written up for a PhD. Joseph Campbell (Cousineau 1999) encouraged us to “follow your bliss” and that is what (at its best) this work represents – my stumbling attempts to walk my own path.

It is the act of engaging in inquiry that makes the real difference – though it is also good to celebrate moments of discovery and learning. It follows that, to be congruent, my thesis will be fragmented rather than coherent, unfinished rather than complete, flawed rather than perfect, episodic rather than comprehensive, plural rather than singular, and swirling rather than linear. It will not be fully articulated because I do not understand everything.

It will also incorporate the media I actually use to explore and to express myself – i.e. stories, poems, pictures, sculpture, audio, even video – as well as more conventional text. I am not interested in challenging the boundaries of academic representation for the sake of it, only in so far as it serves my need to engage the reader (listener, viewer) authentically with the research “that is my life”.

Feeling Stuck

5th April 2000

Back at my dining room table again, tense, nervous, agitated, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, ache in my jaws, tremor in my hands, holding the pen too tight, breathing unevenly... fear. I have been avoiding... now my hand stops... physically avoiding starting to write my thesis. I have done plenty of other writing, read half a dozen books, made notes... but I have been avoiding the big issue – to start writing for my PhD.

Why am I so scared? Well... this is the crunch. Can I really do it? Am I good enough? All the old self-esteem issues return and self-belief falters. I read others' stuff – Paul, Jacqui, Eden, Jonathon ¹ – and think: “I couldn't write like that... so self-assured, erudite, penetrating.” How can I possibly do justice to the stories I want to tell of my own living inquiry? Do I really want to put my life on the page to be pored over, critiqued and criticised, judged as worthy or not worthy for a PhD? How can I hold both the drive to express my creative intuition and the need for conscious structure? Will a form emerge from the writing itself that can contain and express the nuances, complexity and depth of what is within me?

Why should I (or you) expect a seamless, brilliant whole rather than the more fragmented, scattered original? That is where the real inquiry lies – the real time, real life inquiry... the “improvisatory self-realisation” (Winter 1998)...the “living contradiction” (Whitehead 1993)... the authentic struggle. In bringing these ingredients together, I do have to decide what to include and what to leave out and how to mix and blend them – but I do not have to adhere to a given recipe. I can follow the pattern and flow of the writing process and allow the emerging form to guide me.

¹ Colleagues at the Centre for Action Research into Professional Practice (CARPP)

I want to find that place of “simplicity beyond complexity” that Oliver Wendell Holmes speaks about ² or, as Labouvie-Vief (Labouvie-Vief 1994) puts it, of “emancipated innocence.” I want to write a “healing fiction” (Hillman 1983) not a false one. I want to write to honour the journey of inquiry rather than striving for the destination of a PhD. I want to let go of too much expectation, to allow the writing to be a pleasure, not a chore. I want to be as fully present as I can be when I write, to speak my truth and my doubt as clearly as I can, to listen to my own responses and those of others and to stay open to outcome until it emerges naturally rather than force a conclusion.

² Scott Peck attributes the following remark to Holmes: “I don’t give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would die for the simplicity on the other side” Peck, S. (1997). The Road Less Travelled and Beyond. Sidney, London, Rider Press. p244

Invoking the sacred

13th May 2000

Thus far, my attention has generally been fragmented among the many. I have written sporadically about events, issues and ideas at the forefront of my mind (in Gestalt terms, figural). Now, I am also beginning to get the feel for the one. For the stories to emerge as relevant and interesting, I have to write with a view to the whole (in Gestalt terms, the ground). This, I think, will demand working in a "third space", a place of coming together, of dialogue between disparate elements, of seeking to find the patterns that form as the parts coalesce and of seeking to exemplify and test generalisations with particular and concrete experiences.

Although, of course, I am writing to satisfy the requirements of the PhD examiners, at another, deeper level I am writing for myself. In the spirit of my friend Richard Olivier's remark to me that a PhD is a "westernised, sanctified initiation", writing the thesis is an opportunity to discover the project of the rest of my life. I can both articulate and affirm what I have learnt over the past 5 to 10 years and learn afresh from the process of writing itself.

To that end I have been thinking about the elements of a ritual to initiate the process. Going to Osel Ling³ does not seem so important. Ritual depends more on intentions and commitment than it does on place. On Tuesday, I sketched a pile of stones (for Hermes), a candle (for light and clarity), some flowers (for growth and creativity) and a mirror (for objectivity and reflection). Whether here in Spain or back at Bramshill, I will find an opportunity to invoke the spirit and energy of Hermes - God of magic, guide of souls, creator and transgressor of boundaries, creative essence, and dweller in liminal spaces - always at the edge.

In Hermes we have a figure who signifies a union between an innate tendency on the part of the psyche to create boundaries and define spaces, to etch lines in the panes of perception (an archetypal process),

and the instinct of creativity. It is this particular combination of archetype and instinct that makes Hermes so interesting psychologically. He signifies the creative instinct at work in the psyche in a particular way. A specific type of creator God, he is the creator of new spaces. It is in the creation of new spaces, novel spaces, inventive spaces, and especially psychologically subtle spaces that Hermes shows his special nature and genius. Trickster and magician are suitable epithets, for often these are secret places of subtle interiority. (Stein 1983)

I intend to make a small shrine at home using these objects (stones, candle, flowers, and mirror) before which to seek blessing for my writing, since I write for a sacred purpose. I have become clearer about the purpose of my writing but still ask "For whom apart from me?" It will help me, I am sure, to have a strong sense of audience. I can write for Jack Whitehead⁴ and, to a lesser extent, for the other members of the supervision group - but that is not enough. Maybe I should ask the question closer to the point of writing - it seems to make little sense now in the abstract. Richard also asked me what gift (sacrifice?) I would make at my ritual, and I'm still wondering. It needs to be more than a trivial offering. Perhaps I should give up something that gets in the way of my writing (alcohol, for example). As I think of it, being celibate feels right. My libido or creative energy can then be concentrated on the writing. A combination of celibacy and a relative abstinence from alcohol would be a fitting personal sacrifice. As a gift I could make a practical donation to some suitable cause.

A ritual to seek blessing for my work

18th May 2000

This morning I walked up into the hills north of Cortijo Romero as far as I could go. The track ran out after climbing for about three-quarters of an hour and I went on past a small square dwelling, over a rill and up into some olive trees on the other side. They were unkempt, terraces

³ A Tibetan Buddhist retreat centre near Cortijo Romero, Southern Spain

⁴ My supervisor at CARPP, University of Bath

crumbling. The ground underfoot was covered with a shaggy matting of grasses and wild flowers half way to my knee.

At the highest point of the olive grove was a flat-topped boulder and there I stopped. I gathered some small stones (flattish, palm-sized) and heaped them into a cairn on top of the boulder – a shrine to Hermes.

Acknowledging the friendly spirits who dwell in this place – may they remain undisturbed – I invoke the god himself. My purpose is to seek his blessing and assistance as I write my PhD thesis. Pouring a libation of fresh sweet water over the stones, I say a prayer, out loud:

Open me, let me be a channel so that the one and the many are brought together in my work. Help me write in the spirit of learning and help me make a difference in the world. Help me to improve my practice as an educator, to live well as a man, to enter more fully into loving relationships, and to find healing for body and soul.

A large, delicately patterned cream and brown butterfly swirls round my head and I follow it to a bare rampart of earth where I watch it settle on the bright, blue blossom and then flit to a similar plant, dusting it with pollen. I pause, fascinated by the beauty and symbolism of its behaviour. Psyche is the Greek word for both butterfly and soul. I see the butterfly pollinating plants and my intuition tells me to receive this as the answer to my prayer. By letting my imagination free, I will make the “right” connections, ideas will be fertilised and new understandings will grow.

Simple, undramatic and beautiful. The magic is always there, waiting for an open heart and discerning mind. I offer silent thanks to the god and continue down the mountain to Cortijo Romero, filled with enthusiasm, anticipation and quiet confidence in the way ahead.

Making a start

24th May 2000

The immediate problem is not “Where to begin?” but “How to start?” At this point I cannot possibly know where to begin. How do I know what kind of acorn/egg I need until I know what kind of oak/chicken it grows into? I recall Jack Whitehead telling me that the opening section of a thesis probably needs to be written last. By that time, hopefully, the text will reveal the questions it is (implicitly) seeking to answer. I rather like this teleological view of the creative process. As TS Eliot famously said in *The Four Quartets* (Eliot 1944):

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from...

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Or, as Edward Said says more prosaically in his book *Beginnings* (Said 1985), beginning is essentially an act of returning, of going back and not just a departure point for linear progress.

So, this is not the beginning. That will come later. It is however where I have chosen to start writing my PhD thesis. I have written tens of thousands of words during the past three years but I now I face a different kind of challenge – to produce a convincing account of my research, something substantial that meets the criteria of originality of mind and critical judgement. I want to do this as creatively as I can but I do need some clear intentions and loose frameworks by which to navigate as I set sail on a sea of stories, an ocean of notions as Salman Rushdie puts it in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie 1991). Albeit I will almost certainly drift, run aground, tack before the wind and decide to change course several times to explore new lands or merely to keep afloat. To stretch the metaphor a little further I shall try to avoid treating my present intentions as fixed stars and my frameworks as admiralty

charts. As someone embarking on a voyage of exploration, I will have to find my own landmarks.

As I contemplate the journey ahead, three questions come to mind. What inquiries do I want to write about? How do I want to write about them? and (the question upon which my answers to the first two seem to depend) What sort of inquirer am I? From a consideration of these questions I hope to articulate some provisional intentions and frameworks. I shall then attempt to produce a concise description (title, themes, methods) of my intended thesis – which I expect to revise, possibly frequently. It may be that none of these words end up in my actual submission. As long as they serve the immediate purpose of getting started, I do not mind.

What sort of inquirer am I?

The first and most obvious response is that I am a mid-life inquirer – a fifty-year old man. The tasks and quests of mid-life are very different from those of my earlier years. As a young man I knew (or thought I knew) what I had to do. Get married, have children, get promoted. For the most part, other people told me what they wanted from me and I did my best to satisfy them – the classic “hero quests” of so many myths and fairy tales. Bring back the stag with the golden horns, win the hand of the princess in marriage, succeed to the throne, live happily ever after. But, somewhere between 35 and 50, I discovered that there is life beyond “happy ever after” and, in my case, it was not happy.

It seems that there are fewer rules and rubrics for the quests of mid-life. Indeed, finding one’s own path seems to be of their very essence. This dilemma is wonderfully portrayed in the quest undertaken by Fedot in the traditional Russian folk tale *Go I know not whither, bring back I know not what*.⁵ To accomplish his quest, he must go to the ends of the earth. To guide him on the first part of his journey he is given a golden ball which rolls before him and which he must follow. The image of the golden ball fascinates me. What could it represent for me as a mid-life inquirer searching I know not whither for I know not what? Perhaps it stands for those core values which drive us and against which we validate our practice. In my case, the values that I know have most influenced me in recent years are those of authenticity, integrity and (latterly) joy. Seeking to live these values in all aspects of my life has both lead me into tribulations and through them to greater fulfilment.

Later in the story, Fedot is aided by an old frog who guides him to a mountain ringed by fire where he finds a tricksterish spirit, Schmat Razum who becomes his companion and helper as he returns to his own land to begin the next phase of his life. The frog, of course, is a creature of both the water and the land. As such, we might say that she (for the

⁵ As retold by Chinen, A. B. (1993). *Beyond the Hero*. New York, Tarcher Putnam.

frog is female in the story) brings together the elements of mythos (water – territory of the soul and the unconscious) and logos (land – territory of the active principle and the conscious mind). This may be where my story intersects with Fedot's. In writing this thesis, I am seeking to bring mythos and logos together, to work in that creative, playful (and deadly serious) “third space” where they overlap. There I hope to find my Schmat Razum and to discover the next phase of my life's work.

As an inquirer, also, I am intuitive – catching sight of possibilities out of the corner of my eye and trusting the unconscious wisdom of my peripheral vision. So my inquiries have taken many twists and turns. Events and experiences that originally seemed completely unconnected, later (sometimes much later) begin to inform each other – the kaleidoscopic fragments turning in the light and hinting at deeper patterns of meaning.

My inquiries, too, tend to be committed, passionate and deeply experiential. If, for example, I want to understand more about the power of stories to create and transform meaning, then I learn and practise storytelling by attending workshops and giving public performances. With a solid experiential grounding I am ready, and better able, to understand other peoples' theories and ideas in books and articles. Although I have, occasionally, been moved to act by particular texts, for the most part my understanding comes out of action and reflection.

I am also (as will already be apparent) always conscious of myself at the centre of any inquiry. This is not to say that I do not value second-party and third-party research (Torbert 1997) or that I neglect the “we” and the “they” (Reason and Marshall 1987). Rather, it is that I begin and end with “I”. Begin - in the sense that I am motivated to inquire by my own discomfort with a situation or my desire for change or improvement. End – in the sense that I seek to be congruent in my own practice with what I might hope for in others. Bringing the inner and outer worlds together in this way highlights the gaps between espoused values and actual

practice – a state Jack Whitehead calls “living contradiction” (Whitehead 1993) but which I think of as living and learning “inside out”.

One result of locating my “I” at the centre of my research is that I really care about my inquiries and I inquire into what I really care about. My research literally is my life. Hence few if any aspects of my life are out of bounds, though I am conscious of having a responsibility to respect others’ confidentiality and vulnerability. This is a delicate area to which I shall have to pay careful attention in making my inquiries public.

I seek to cultivate a capacity to let go of familiar patterns of understanding and behaviour. “Unlearning” and “unknowing” are, I believe, crucially important to transformative inquiry. Others have spoken of “research as ruin” (Lather 1994) and “entering the void” (MacLure 1996). I have been toying with the notion of “Eleusinian Inquiry”. The polarities of Apollo (formal, rational, planned) and Dionysus (informal, intuitive, chaotic) offered by John Heron (Heron 1996) provide a useful and intriguing continuum for practising inquiry. However, looking back, as I have recently, at inquiries stretching back fifteen years in some cases, they seem to require different archetypes to describe them.

Turning once more to the Greek literature and mythology I love, I find that the pattern of the seasons embodied in the story of Demeter and Persephone and elaborated in the Eleusinian Mysteries (Otto 1955), the most sacred in the ancient world, into the eternal cycle of life – death – rebirth, is much more evocative of my inquiry process. My heuristic has frequent periods of confusion, doubt and uncertainty – even despair. I regard these not as aberrations but as places of subterranean germination and growth, which I can only enter by letting go of existing ways of being.

I am coming to realise that, though my inquiry process may not appear systematic when viewed close-up over a short period, the pattern is much

more obvious over a longer time frame. The major themes are quite apparent when viewed from a distance. I contend that I am a systematic inquirer, though the rhythms are slow and the currents run deep. I am tentatively calling my approach “living inquiry” to indicate both that the process of inquiry needs to be alive and vital, and that I wish to live my whole life with an inquiring spirit. In the thesis I will extend my exploration and articulation of this “methodless” method.

Finally, in answer to this first question, I also recognise that I have been profoundly influenced as an inquirer by the five years I spent in therapy and training in Gestalt psychology. Latterly I have found the work of Robert Bly, James Hillman and Noel Cobb and others in the field of archetypal psychology enormously powerful. I have drummed and danced and deepened my experience of ritual with Michael Meade, Malidoma Somé and Richard Olivier. I have sat at the feet of outstanding storytellers Ashley Ramsden, Sue Hollingsworth and Bernard Kelly. I have explored the mysteries of new science and complexity theory with Fritjof Capra, Ralph Stacey, Patricia Shaw and Paul Roberts. I have both participated in and contributed to a wide range of “menswork” events and activities. I imagine that all these, and maybe more, will appear from time to time in the accounts of my inquiries.

What inquiries do I want to write about?

Having sketched out how I see myself as an inquirer, I feel more confident about returning to my original question. I did as Jack Whitehead suggested and brought all my writing – papers, journals, articles – and other material – tape recordings, photographs and paintings, video – together in one place. It took me three days to produce a chronology of the major events and inquiries in my life going back to 1986. I stopped there partly because of the paucity of material but mainly because that is when I began to “wake up”, began to question the

order of things and to search for different and better ways to live and work.⁶

Four major themes stand out quite clearly:

- A deep exploration of my identity as a man – particularly in relationships with other men
- A struggle to find happiness and fulfilment in authentic loving relationships – with my partner and children
- A journey in search of healing – physical, emotional and spiritual
- A shift in my professional identity away from mainstream policing towards an educative role – in relation to leadership development in the police service

The focus and emphasis has changed over time with the ebb and flow of my energy and interest, but the themes have persisted, interweaving and overlapping. The connections between them and their mutual influence are not immediately obvious but, as I write the thesis, I hope the narratives will “speak” to each other in ways that clarify how they relate to each other.

I have paid particular attention to my work as an educator since I joined the CARPP programme in 1997, with a well-documented Action Inquiry into developing police leadership from 1998 to 2000. I am conscious that CARPP stands for the Centre for Action Research into Professional Practice and I want to locate a substantial proportion of the thesis in my professional practice. What the balance will be I do not know. I think it will have to emerge in the writing. It will depend on what stories demand to be told.

⁶ See *Police Stories* in which I write about this sense of “waking up”

As I explicate my methodology I will, no doubt, need to justify the use of narrative forms. Suffice it to say, here, that what I am interested in is authentic stories. No story can be said to represent the absolute truth. Every story I tell, every narrative I write will be a construction. Where it is possible and seems appropriate, I will seek to include other voices and perspectives. Nevertheless I will be both author and editor of this text so I must be alive to the possibilities of omission and distortion. By authentic stories I mean much the same as Connelly and Clandinin (Connelly and Clandinin 1999) when they talk about “stories to live by”. They contrast these real, unsanitised stories of teachers’ actual practice with the “cover stories” they sometimes tell to protect themselves and preserve their freedom and choice in the classroom in the face of the “sacred stories” – the dictates and theories and policies that might otherwise constrain them. At their best, I believe that such stories can:

... honour the unrealised self by releasing the poignancy, sadness, frustration, sweetness, love, fury - everything that belongs to the confirmation of a person’s existence (Polster 1987) p20

They help define our identity and find meaning in the world. Polster (ibid. p21) quotes the novelist EL Doctorow:

People think and make judgements from the confidence of narrative; anyone at any age is able to tell the story of his or her life with authority. Everyone all the time is in the act of composition, our experience is an ongoing narrative within each of us.

Again, what these stories will be I cannot yet say. Part of the excitement and anticipation I feel about writing the thesis is my expectation that hitherto untold stories will emerge as I write.

How do I want to write about my inquiries?

The preceding paragraphs point to some of the ways I want to represent these inquiries. Stories and narrative forms will play a large part. The

nature of the particular inquiries will determine the forms these will take. Some essentially self-reflective, others - such as the Action Inquiry into police leadership - more dialogic. Whatever forms the text takes, I shall strive for an open and accessible style. I dislike texts that are too dense, obliging the reader to wade through the opacity and obfuscation of unnecessary jargon. My aim is to create a thesis that is interesting and enjoyable to read. If you are finding it difficult or dull then I will have failed to express myself.

I agree with Elliot Eisner (Eisner 1993; Eisner 1997) that we face a crisis of representation as we seek to account for aesthetic and spiritual values. As my own living inquiries have touched on these issues, I have found conventional (academic) prose inadequate either to express or explore them. At such times I have spontaneously turned to other media – drawing and painting, photography, sculpture, poetry and creative “freefall” writing. I shall look for ways to include these forms of representation where they are integral to the inquiry process. However the aesthetic quality I seek is one of “simplicity beyond complexity” (Peck 1997) or “profound simplicity” (Schutz 1979) so I will forego the temptation to create an overly complex, hyperlinked, electronic text.

A second major concern is to what extent I should include existing texts, material that I have written over the past few years. “Cut and paste” is not a very satisfactory process either for creative or critical writing. For the most part, therefore, I shall treat existing papers as source material, records - which I can examine hermeneutically to build an overall picture of the inquiries. However, there are some pieces, especially creative writing, which only make sense entire, in their original form. *Police Stories* is an example of these. Describing the professional context in which I have worked for nearly thirty years, it is a backdrop to all four areas of inquiry and I am inclined to include the whole piece (See *Appendix A*).

In thinking about the actual process of writing, I am very grateful to Jack Whitehead for pointing out Seamus Heaney's (Heaney 1999) reflection on Tolkein's (1936) paper on Beowulf:

Tolkein assumed that the poet had felt his way through the inherited material – the fabulous elements and the traditional accounts of an heroic past – and by *a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring had arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order.* (pxi - emphasis mine)

It seems to me that this exactly fits my desire to bring *mythos* and *logos* together, and to do so in a way that keeps the mythic element fresh and the logic clear. The process that seems to offer the best prospect of achieving this is, initially, to concentrate on writing rich and evocative representations of the inquiries themselves, to focus phenomenologically on the things themselves (Benz and Shapiro 1998). Then and only then, to subject these accounts to a more critical scrutiny, a deeper level of reflection and theorising to position the research conceptually and in relation to the literature. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive activities, but with Peter Medawar (Medawar 1968), I recognise that they are different and that each must be honoured in turn.

In an earlier passage, I invoked the spirit of Hermes to aid me and there is, indeed, before me as I write a small shrine of the sort I described. There are also two pictures, made at different times over the past ten

