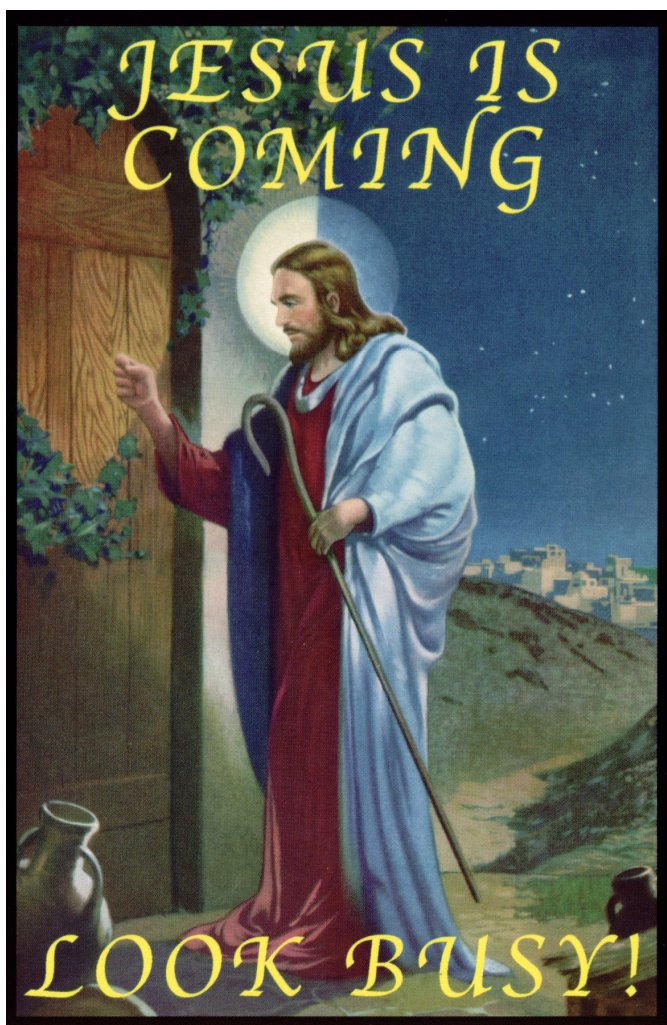


Introduction

I wrote this introduction with Purcell's King Arthur playing softly in the background. I chose the Overture (no.1 on the CD) as the backdrop for the introduction to this thesis. I explain my use of music further in the text.



I smiled when I came upon this postcard, remembering many similar pictures from my childhood in psalm books, schoolbooks and on my bedroom wall. I used to be fascinated by the exotic clothes and landscapes, and by the serene expression of the people in the scenes. At the same time I had a vague sense of threat. Jesus, I knew, was watching me, so I had better be a good girl, "seen but not heard".

“Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned”

(Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992)

This thesis tells the story of my inquiry into becoming an organisation consultant. I would like to start it by introducing myself and the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP). I will also give you some guiding comments for reading this thesis.

Introducing myself

Within the qualitative research paradigm authors have argued against the prevailing norms of scholarly discourse which requires scholars to write in a third-person, passive voice (Weil 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Smith (1994) argues that every text is in fact a bit of autobiography, a statement that carries an individual signature, and that therefore all writing should really be in the first person, reflecting that individual voice. Ellis and Bochner (2000) complain that the ‘I’ usually disappears after the introduction in academic texts and that authors rarely become characters in their scholarly writing. In the next chapter I explain how this thesis is an account of my living inquiry, in which all aspects of my life have been potential areas for inquiry and learning (Torbert 2001). It seems appropriate therefore that I situate my inquiry in my life story.

I grew up in a small but affluent market town in Belgium. It was a child’s paradise with its river, endless fields of flowers (horticulture being one of its many sources of wealth) and excellent recreation facilities. But it was also a narrow-minded, petty place, with a strict social pecking order and a vitriolic grapevine. As an adolescent I began to find the combination of small town life and a strict Catholic upbringing rather suffocating, and my decision to study at the University of Louvain was largely influenced by my desire to get away from it all. I knew what I wanted to get away from, but I didn’t have a ‘master plan’, a grand design for my future. I studied

education, because I was deeply disturbed by some of my own experiences as a child, and I wanted to contribute to changing things for the better.

Studying adult education, I became involved in one of the first Women's Refuges in Belgium (1970's). Our work was grounded in a socialist-feminist perspective, which had a deep impact on me, and my university years were coloured by profound reflection and change. I became constructed (even more) as a rebel in my family and home community, a status I secretly treasured, despite the arguments and the pain of feeling disconnected.

In the early eighties I met John, a wandering philosopher, who brought light and clarity in the confusion of my life. We married in 1987 and decided to live in London, to the disappointment and disapproval of friends and family. Since few people feel compelled to leave the fourth wealthiest nation in the world, my family had no reference experience for family members leaving the province, let alone the country, with the exception of my uncle colonialist.

My first years in the UK were rather unsettling: adjusting to a different culture and a very different working environment proved more difficult than I had imagined. As I began to feel more settled I was struck down - quite literally, since I could hardly walk for over a year - with Rheumatoid Arthritis. It marked the beginning of an intensive search for healing, through psychotherapy, homeopathy, meditation and Tai Chi. It was with surprise and delight that I discovered that those various strands of inquiry were not only considered *valid* research topics, but were positively encouraged within a post-modernist research paradigm (Reason and Marshall 1987). Thus my inquiry became a faithful companion on my journey to finding my voice as a healthy woman, a consultant, a partner, friend, daughter and sister. I crossed many of the narrowly constraining, but well-intentioned boundaries I grew up with and found myself overtaken by fear on occasions, as I violated the injunction "Not to be heard".

It is perhaps not a coincidence that I am finding my voice in a language that is not my mother tongue. I feel 'at home' in English and enjoy its richness. But writing my

diaries, and this thesis, I have noticed how I am occasionally lost for an English equivalent to what I know how to express in Flemish. The experience, although frustrating sometimes, has been a happy reminder of the boundaries I have crossed on my journey.

I have been surprised, sometimes confused, by the way in which this inquiry has unfolded, as if it had a momentum all of its own. Once I became comfortable with first person inquiry my research focussed on the question “How do I contribute to a place where people can flourish?”. Not surprising perhaps, since I had found ‘human flourishing’ so sorely lacking in my childhood. As I discovered the work of feminist writers such as Miller (1986), Gilligan (1993), and Fletcher (1999) I began to formulate a tentative answer, excited by their conceptualisation of a way of working which I had intuitively aspired to. Continuing to explore the potential and limitations of a relational approach to my consulting practice is my challenge ahead.

In the next section I would like to introduce you to CARPP and the different phases of the post graduate research process at the Centre, since they take a prominent place in this thesis.

Being a post-graduate student at CARPP

I have come to think of CARPP as a container for my research. It was the place/space to which I returned, over the years, both physically (as in the University of Bath, Judi Marshall’s office, meeting rooms) and metaphorically (the process of challenge and support between fellow post-graduate researchers which I describe below).

In my first year at CARPP (1997), I joined the 4th cohort of post-graduate research students, known as CARPP4. We typically spent two days together, about every six weeks. During the first day and morning of the second we had seminars, with input from faculty, in the large group. On occasions the seminars were open to other

members of the CARPP community (from CARPP 2 and 3 mainly), which added richness, and for me a sense of awe with others' progress and knowledge, to the process. The afternoon of the second day we shared our personal stories, questions, and inquiry process in small 'learning groups' which consisted of various configurations of participants facilitated by a member of faculty.

By the second half of the first year we were invited to self-select into permanent learning groups, each again facilitated by a member of faculty. I felt it helped to develop a deeper understanding of others' work and begin to see developing themes and cycles of inquiry.

The work undertaken in the first 15 months culminated in a 'Diploma', an account of our inquiry practice in the course of that first year. Some colleagues left after the diploma stage. Some of us went on to the MPhil stage. Many of us progressed, at varying pace, from MPhil to PhD. As two of the four members of my CARPP 4 group graduated, the remaining colleague and myself joined CARPP 6, to form a new learning group.

The transfer processes (from Diploma to MPhil, and from MPhil to PhD) were in themselves interesting cycles of inquiry: taking stock of our research to date and presenting it to our learning group and members of faculty in a transfer meeting. I include an account of my experience of the transfer from MPhil to PhD in Chapter 5.

Meeting in different configurations of learning groups, at the start of the CARPP programme, gave us an opportunity to find out more about others' work, their personal style, as well getting to know the facilitation and research approach of various members of faculty. For me it was also the opportunity to get feedback on my work as a change agent and to begin to explore the territory of 'action research'. As we settled in a permanent group, I brought more writing to the group and began to work more actively with the feedback I received. I taped our meetings, and after a while began to transcribe the tapes so that I could extract recurring themes. Gradually I prepared more proactively for our meetings, reflecting on the kinds of questions I hoped to address, reviewing and following through feedback from

previous meeting, and eventually experimenting with different forms of representation such as images and music.

I can hardly overstate the importance of the continued support I received from my CARPP group. The careful attention to my writing, the feedback, suggestions, questions, kept me going when I was at risk of losing heart. But most of all the firm belief of my colleagues that I could actually do this and their unstinting support carried me through this challenging process.

Reading this thesis. Some guiding comments.

Like Ellis and Bochner (2000) I am readily bored by de-personalised, anonymous writing. Similarly I enjoy writing only when I have an audience in mind. In some way this thesis could be thought of as a long letter, at first addressed to my CARPP group and ACL colleagues, later to a wider audience. In the process of crafting this thesis a different voice emerged, as if I looked up from the page and offered comments to my readers about my process of preparing for or writing a chapter, or added comments to the material I was working with, remarks in the margin. *The resulting text is formatted in a style I have called 'thoughts' and is situated on the left pages.*

I include diary extracts and reflective accounts of work with clients in this thesis. In my diaries and accounts I often worked with different typefaces to distinguish reflections from the story line. I have kept the original typefaces where possible. To highlight those extracts I have coloured them **violet**.

I have made every effort to disguise the identity of clients and colleagues throughout the thesis, except where explicitly stated otherwise. Thus I have called my employer from the first years of my research the "Health Professions Agency" (HPA). My current employer, Ashridge Consulting Limited (ACL) was happy to be identified, provided I protected the identity of my clients.

Many of the conceptual frameworks are introduced in Chapter 2, on other occasions I have inserted an explanatory textbox on the left page. Tables and figures are numbered per chapter (1.1; 2.1 etc.).

In this thesis I have used what Eisner (1997) calls “alternative forms of data representation”, including “artistically rendered forms” such as poetry and images. From using (poetry and) images as a means to convey a quality I found hard to capture otherwise, I began to work with images as a process of inquiry in its own right (more about this in the next chapter), a practice I continued whilst crafting this thesis. You will find many of the images in the text, with comments of how I have used them and why.

Music was my faithful companion throughout my research. I paid attention to the impact of the music on my reflections and often actively sought out particular composers for specific purposes. I have commented on the music I worked with throughout this thesis. I chose a specific track to accompany every chapter and attached a CD with the selected tracks. You will find comments on my choices in the text. You may enjoy listening to the CD as you read.

In the next chapter I explore the territory of action research and situate my own inquiry in that field.