A Long Goodbye to the 'Good Girl': An Auto-ethnographic Account

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Coming to the end of a working life is a peculiar thing. I've chosen to stay working full time past the age when I could retire. However, I now—finally—seem to have a stronger sense of being able to choose what to do, when, and why. My approach—until now largely unspoken—has been to do enough of what is required in the institution and only that. The remainder of the time I fill up with the teaching, research, and writing that I want to do. I am of course in the fortunate—read privileged, senior, and permanent—position of being able to make this choice. And it no doubt helps that what I want to do is largely of use to the institution. At the very end of my career, it seems I have finally shucked off a lifelong practice of doing the right thing.

This chapter is an impressionistic auto-ethnographic account of the production and then the rejection of doing the right thing, of being a 'good girl'. I take as my starting point the understanding that all of us arrive in higher education from somewhere else and that that somewhere else is important. In the first half of the chapter, I address the notion that

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a second wave feminist's moral duty was and is to become 'a leader' and change the world. The second half of the chapter covers the strategies I have developed to work in higher education and to divest myself of most of my good girl habits.

Becoming Femocrat

The early 1970s in Australia were heady times. Women teachers were not allowed to wear trousers to school. Some staffrooms were segregated along gender lines, as were schools. Senior leaders in all but single-sex schools were overwhelmingly male. There were few women teaching Maths and Science. This discriminatory picture was mirrored in most fields of employment and women took action to change it. After a long struggle, women were legally granted equal pay. Birth control became freely available. This was a time to reject the moral trappings of the state—marriage, male surnames, denial of sexual pleasure, compulsory heterosexuality, the assumption that any job was beyond a woman's capacity.

Global issues, such as women's inequality and exploitative labour markets, always have local inflexions and nation-state specific solutions (Robertson 1995) and in the seventies, and as a direct result of feminist activism, a distinctly Australian political solution was effected—femocracy. Femocrats were women appointed to public service positions who were tasked with leading the shift away from discriminatory gendered working practices. Femocrats worked hard to get more women into leadership positions across the board—in public organisations such as schools and hospitals and in private companies and boards. Every woman in a senior post was counted a victory against the old male-dominated system.

I was a good femocrat. I was in a school leadership position from 1975 on, working first in an alternative community school and then a full-service school: in 1984, I took over a K-12[1] 'all-through' school. All three schools served communities that were struggling in a rapidly de-industrialising state economy. As one of the few women principals in such a school, it was hardly surprising that I was invited onto state and national policy making committees and boards. I ticked a number of 'equity' boxes. I was both amenable but also somewhat 'bolshie' about

system leadership in an education system that was demonstrably highly inequitable. I was in a bind that was familiar to femocrats and to anyone who attempts to change systems from within:

- I/we needed to be good at our jobs. I/we couldn't be the one who showed that those concerned for equity were all ideas and practically incompetent. I/we had to know the game and play it, even if I/we wanted to change it at the same time. And, in reality, I/we were strongly committed to a public education system and wanted it to be much better than it was. I/we cared about the notion of public good. It wasn't a stretch to ask me/us to do a good job for the communities we served. That was my/our purpose, we argued. I/we had to do the job well.
- Changing the game from within meant more than mounting critique. It also meant devising and implementing innovative approaches which showed that more equitable ways of doing school were possible. This was ironically also and at the same time, playing the system game, working for its betterment—being a good corporate citizen of an inequitable organisation (Thomson 2010).
- Change isn't an individual effort. In order to effect change, I/we worked collaboratively with many others, including those who were outspoken critics. In my case this meant being associated with the teachers' union and with other 'identity'-based organisations. This sometimes led to open conflict with the system in relation to working conditions, salary, and so on.

Through this moral-ethical-political tangle, I/we were simultaneously positioned as both good and bad girl(s). A burr under the saddle. An 'effective' leader, even 'outstanding', but one who needed to be managed. Someone to be kept in the tent but in her place.

However, when I somewhat reluctantly joined the South Australian Secondary Principals Association in 1984, there were still only three women. I made it four. I was met by the then President of the Association with a handshake and the words 'Welcome to the club'. At the time it did feel, just as the femocrat strategy suggested, that there was something important about breaking into male leadership ranks. While it didn't necessarily advance the cause of women teachers or teaching assistants or girls, there was something significant, highly symbolic, morally right,

about making it to the top of the school leadership tree. Becoming a woman school leader was carrying on the feminist campaign, showing that women could do the job as well as any man, that gender was not a marker of innate authority and/or competency.

But senior women were expected to be superhuman. They had to be better than good at their jobs. They had to seamlessly manage family responsibilities in order to show that these were not, as the old orthodoxy suggested, going to prevent her doing her job. Every senior woman was expected to support and mentor other women to follow the same path. This was the right thing to do. Becoming a woman in leadership was the new way to be a good girl.

Nevertheless, I was very uncertain about the inevitability of continuous promotion out of schools and into head office, even though that was the move I made. Despite misgivings, I made the move out of school into head office at a time when serious budget cuts were being made at state level and when the federal government was demanding a national curriculum and a comparable national data collection. More feminists were moving in all the time, even though femocrat politics were on the wane.

My ambivalence was often on show in the way that I dressed. I largely refused to be suited and booted, only donning the jacket and heels when it would have shown the school in a poor light if I hadn't. I often had eccentrically dyed and styled hair, experimented with 'small designer' clothing, and wore a lot of handcrafted silver jewellery. I was perhaps able to be pigeonholed as 'artsy'—I certainly didn't fit the mould of senior bureaucrat. My external and internal matched—I was an uneasy 'fit' in the system—they were an expression of the ambivalent position of being both good/not so good at the same time.

The disjunction between my politics and day job increased over time as the school system became more wedded to corporate approaches. New public management with its emphasis on 'human capital', new forms of budgeting, and political accountability accompanied the turn to school self-management (Thomson 1998).

When I entered higher education in the late 1990s after an apparently highly successful career in schools, I was in part abandoning the idea that I would one day run the state education system, become its first woman Chief Executive. This was not an entirely unrealistic notion. The last two of my 27 years in the school system were spent in head office in a very

senior position, and it seemed entirely possible that my career could peak by finally attaining the top job. And other people were always telling me this was what I *should* do. But fate intervened via the vicissitudes of organisational restructuring, and I decided instead to pursue further study.

Reflecting back on this part of my career is to see an over-optimistic sense of how easy it might be to change systems, the naivety of the time. Nancy Fraser (2013) has argued that feminists generally placed too much trust in the nation state and were caught napping when politicians abruptly embraced neoliberalism. This is certainly the case in Australia. Australian femocrat strategies that focused on changing outcomes in health, education, and welfare were arguably remarkably easily sutured into emerging and more noxious neoliberal audit practices. My career in school education could be seen as a tiny instantiation of what Eisenstein (2009) suggests was the appropriation of feminism by politics and capital through seduction. Seduction depends on the interpellation of the desires of feminism/feminists to make a difference and the rhetorical congruence of a moral narrative of the rights of women to equal pay and position. It is not only women's productive and reproductive labour that are exploited by contemporary capitalist states but also their ideological and political labour too. This is certainly what happened to me and many of my peers.

However by the 1990s when I moved into higher education, the femocrat strategy had weakened under the combined assault of neoliberalism and a vituperative misogynist backlash. I was no longer convinced that simply going for the top job was a good strategy, nor that wholistic organisational change was straightforward.

A Second Career: Higher Education

I don't want to labour the story of my PhD and entry into higher education. It is enough to say that I finished off the prerequisite tome quickly and successfully. I was seconded from the school system into a local university to establish a new professional doctorate for existing and aspiring school leaders. This allowed me to develop a renewed sense of what a good girl might do. I often fantasised that this professional doctorate was my revenge on my employer—supporting school leaders to read, to critique, and to develop their own research would mean no more naïve readings of

policy. And being in 'the university' meant allowed a 'gloves-off' approach to questions of education and equity. No longer constrained by being a femocrat reformer from within, I found it very comfortable mounting a well-argued and well-evidenced critique from 'outside'. It seemed that I had finally been able to leave the requirements to be good behind. The move into higher education had apparently resolved all my ambivalences.

Alas. Being a good girl is about a disposition, not a locus, a context, the place you are employed. Being good is an embodied desire to always do what is required—and then some. By the time, I went into higher education in my late forties, I was well schooled in understanding what was required of me. This was an essential part of my being—I had taken on and taken up the notion of performing well. I not only wanted to meet expectations but also exceed them. I'd been doing this pretty well all my life, despite some rebellious flourishes along the way.

In using the term disposition, I have invoked a Bourdieusian perspective. Bourdieu argued that the habitus—a constellation of lived dispositions—is formed firstly within the family in a general field of power (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu argues that subsequent immersion in fields, such as education, adds further dispositions, some of which might be in tension with those in the primary habitus (Bourdieu 1987). I have suggested that the women's movement supported a with/against disposition of working for change by both challenging and conforming to the logics of the education field. This was the case for me in schools and subsequently in higher education.

Bourdieu suggested that both lack of 'fit' between field and habitus, and 'habitus clivé', a clash between the primary habitus and later dispositions, could prompt radical critical reflexivity (Bourdieu 1990). Archer (2007, 2012) set out to offer an alternative view grounded in empirical investigations of 'internal' and 'ethical' reflexive conversations; these showed the ways in which individuals thought about and through both everyday issues and crises. In similar vein, Sayers (2010) suggests that it is necessary to modify Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity through:

> (1) a modified concept of habitus that allows room for individual reflexivity and includes ethical dispositions; (2) a focus on emotions as intelligent responses to objective circumstances and as indicators of well-being; (3) a

broader understanding of normativity that avoids reducing it to either the pursuit of self-interest and various forms of capital or outworkings of the habitus; and (4) an acknowledgement of human vulnerability and our relationship to the world of concern.

I have dealt with aspects of ethics and emotions in this chapter but along the way. It is important to the second part of my story to bring them more into focus, as Sayers suggests.

First there is pleasure. There are not simply normative, political, or dispositional reasons to work hard being a 'good girl'. Work in education brings its own pleasures and rewards. Teaching can be challenging, but it can also be a source of satisfaction, inspiration, and imagination (McWilliam 2000). Classrooms, lecture room tutorials, and staff rooms are often places for 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 1998), moments of intense sociability, and reciprocity. A collective sense of purpose *and* enjoyment is an important reason to 'do well'.

There are more negative emotions too. Desire to be a good girl. Enjoyment at being noticed and rewarded. Shame in wanting to have approval and position. Anger at being so apparently compliant with the system. Pride in accomplishments. Competitive—with other leaders in other schools and with applicants for jobs. … I could not entirely resolve these dilemmas arising from the disposition to do the job well, to aspire to change the system, and to reject it.

When I moved into higher education, I thought that the ethical-emotional dilemmas had all been dealt with, but this was not the case. However, I also brought femocrat dispositions and learnings with me, and these provided a basis from which I could assess my new surrounds and what I might do.

Living in and with Higher Education

As a femocrat, I had learnt that one of the key early tasks in an organisation was to understand its modus operandi. In Bourdieusian terms, this now meant becoming aware of the higher education game and its doxa. Fortunately, I did not have to work this out entirely for myself.

There is a considerable literature on higher education, its purposes and practices, and I eagerly delved into this corpus. My early reading ranged through sociological and philosophical theory—for instance, Bourdieu's explanations of the (re)production of particular forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1988; Bourdieu et al. 1995), Foucault's explication of how knowledge and ways of knowing produce subjects, social relations and practices and moral 'truths' (Foucault 1972, 1977), and de Certeau's notions of 'the scriptural economy' and resistances to it (de Certeau 1988). I married this social theory with readings around the performativity of higher education (Blackmore and Sachs 2007) and its corporatisation and marketisation (Marginson and Considine 2000). I also read empirical studies around higher education pedagogies, the experiences of 'nontraditional students' and academic writing and publishing.

This reading may have positioned me to think rather negatively about what I was about to take on in my new university position. How would I deal with the kinds of demands to 'perform' and to the regular audits, performance management meetings? Would my old disposition to succeed, lead, and meet the all of the expectations take over? Or would I be able to adopt a more nuanced position and one somewhat less uncomfortable?

Two fortuitous accidental meetings made a great deal of difference to my entry to higher education and the ways in which I took up the intellectual resources I'd garnered from my reading.

The first serendipity moment oriented me to academic writing and to change. As a school principal, I had maintained a pedagogical interest in language and writing and usually taught a class of reluctant readers and writers. As I enrolled in the PhD, and in those days enrolment did mean physically being present in the institution, I bumped into Bill Green, an academic I vaguely knew through the English subject association. When I told him my doctoral intentions, he said 'Just think of it as a genre'. There were almost no books on doctoral writing at the time, but I knew what a genre was. I took from his comment that I needed to read some doctoral theses and work out their family textual characteristics. I did this and this lead to reading the then emerging work around research and narrative theory (Riessman 1993), texts as representations (Hall 1997), and the artistic possibilities of academic publication (Winter 1988). I grasped

early on that while there were conventions in academic writing, there were also moves to disrupt (Stronach and MacLure 1997) and change them (Richardson 1997). However, the interest in academic writing that stemmed from that accidental meeting gave me a position from which to speak in the academy and to speak back to it. It gave me a particular ethical politics to stand for, as I will explain.

The second accidental meeting occurred after I had completed the PhD and was asked to speak as a 'successful graduate' to doctoral researchers. I chose to discuss the writing choices I had made in my thesis text; my Big Book had married a fairly orthodox sociological argument with visual and fictive interleaves. In my talk I argued that too little attention was paid to academic writing except in the technical sense and that this ignored the importance of scholarly communication and conversation. At the end of my talk, Barbara Kamler, an academic staff member at the university, rushed up to me, sharing her own views on academic writing and the lack of attention paid to it (contemporaneous with Rose and McClafferty 2001). We began a conversation about academic writing that then went on for 15 years, numerous workshops, a handful of refereed papers, and four books (Kamler and Thomson 2006/2014; Thomson and Kamler 2013, 2016). This partnership has been the backbone of my academic life, a source of great pleasure, and a primary reason for being in higher education. I return to this point later.

However, I also understood the doxa of university and grasped the basics of the logics of its practice. And I met them as much as I needed to. Academics were expected to publish. No worries. Publish I would. A few critical chapters about equity and schooling to start with and the odd essay review. Then the book of the thesis (Thomson 2002). Then refereed papers and books in a steady stream. Grants? Win money? No worries. Of course. After four years in the academy I had written and earned enough to be invited to interview for a job in the UK—a position I hadn't applied for and hadn't even thought about. The combination of street cred and upward academic trajectory seemed to have paid off in a preretirement adventure. Pack up house and home and move to the other side of the world.

The move to the UK offered more research funding, many more opportunities to publish, and more immediate connections with scholars

with similar interests. Mobility was good to and for me. But I have had to learn about a new school system and its history. For the first couple of years I was at Nottingham, I didn't write anything about the UK, and England in particular, in case I got it badly wrong. Even now, 14 years later, I still often check my version of events with home-grown colleagues. In the UK, I was interestingly already known and also unknown. I was able to reestablish myself, my credibility and authority. I built new co-research relationships and a research agenda based in my old loves of the arts and creativity. I was able in part to establish myself as a different kind of person without all of that history of school leadership and success. Not such a good girl.

But higher education in the UK is not without its difficulties and debates (e.g. Barnett 2010; Macfarlane 2004). There are league tables for everything. Universities are dominated by the need to do well on student satisfaction surveys, research income, citations, and in tables purporting to show world status and prestige. And schools of education are subject to an annual manipulation of dwindling teacher education places and regular inspections. The ongoing spectre of the research audit scheme, currently called the REF (Research Excellence Framework), produces a performative and forensic culture in which individual academic research income and publications are continually monitored and compared to arbitrary internal and external norms.

As a senior member of staff, I have—quite rightly—been expected to take my share of leadership and management. But because I was less than enthusiastic about general oversight of the school, and no longer in thrall to the notion of being the 'top girl', I refused to even consider a role as Head of School. This was a considerable step away from my past as I previously would have been both flattered and felt obligated to meet such an expectation. There was of course no escaping corporate duty entirely. I was asked to take up the position of Director of Research in my school. I thus found myself responsible for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This brought me straight into the micro-politics of sorting and sifting staff performance and the historical gap between education researchers and many teacher educators.[2] I was fortunate in that the RAE funding formula favoured an inclusive approach; it was possible for me and my colleagues in the professoriate to focus on getting work from

everyone into the count. This experience was in stark contrast to the highly selective approach which dominated the subsequent REF, for which I was not responsible. I had by then moved on to a research leadership position across the faculties of Arts and Social Sciences. There my focus was on funding and on public engagement and impact activities.

Both of these leadership positions were focused on institutional and individual performance. Demands for increased and/or better numbers were directed from above, through my positional level and down the hierarchy. I was at a performative pointy end. Attendance at university meetings focused on the financial and reputational consequences of doing badly in audit terms: this emphasised the critical importance of collective effort in the current policy climate. Even if we were critical of the publication and funding agendas, we would collectively suffer if we as individuals didn't pay the game.

Here then was my new ethical dilemma. How much should I buy into the press for publication and research income? How much should I turn a blind eye to those who were trying to avoid the issue? How was I to deal with colleagues whose strength wasn't in publication and research but in teaching? How could I mediate the informal culture of naming and shaming those who apparently failed the scholarly productivity test? Being a good girl meant having to find an ethical way through this dilemma, not simply doing what I was bid. I guess I managed this somehow, although I do rather suspect some of my colleagues still feel obliged to talk about their latest book or progress on a paper when they bump into me.

Finding a Place to Be Good Enough

As I now approach the end of my second career, I often find myself pondering the conjunction of my own inclinations and that of the university. The contemporary university relies on academic staff who are ready and willing to be highly productive. We must publish widely and for a range of audiences, including for audit. We must attract funding, work in interdisciplinary teams, produce demonstrable research impact. We have to teach face to face and increasingly online and be judged better than

satisfactory by our students. I continually ask myself—Does it really matter that my love of reading and writing and subsequent publishing satisfies me and also helps the university and meets neoliberal performative agendas? Can I do my civic scholarly duty and also do what I want? (Where does I want come from?) Can I not work with and against toxic policies at the same time, as Patti Lather (1991) suggests?

The answer it seems to me now lies somewhere in the two happy accidents that led me to a focus on academic writing and publishing and on co-researching and writing. It is fortuitous that the place where I landed in higher education was academic writing and publishing. Even though this is still not my primary area of funded research, the focus on writing allows me to work on areas that the institution thinks are important, as do I, although for somewhat different reasons.

While institutions care a great deal about the work that academic publication does in audit and reputational league tables, there are other views. My own is that:

1. Reading and writing is enjoyable and one of the pleasures of academic life—the time to read and reflect as Bourdieu (1988) notes is a privilege of the position, and
2. The job of a scholar is to be scholarly, serving the public good through teaching, research—and writing. This view is perhaps more attune to a reworked Humboldtian ideal, rather than the neoliberal view of the university as an engine of the knowledge economy (c.f. Holmwood 2011). The role of a Professor is to profess, not simply their own research interests but that of scholarship more generally.

I can and do promote these alternative moral reasons to write and publish. I can happily argue that writing and publishing aren't simply a capitulation to performativity.

A focus on academic writing and publication has allowed me to carve out an area through which I can support other people to play the academic game but also to see it for what it is and isn't. My talks, workshops, and my writings about writing build from those very early conversations with Barbara Kamler, where we decided that we would not simply present 'how-to-do-it' workshops. We would always discuss writing as a

situated practice, as integral to higher education histories and policies, as part of disciplinary mores and assumptions, as a craft and an art form. Our approach is acceptable to the institution, and I am able to be both working for and working to change it at the same time.

The most obvious example of this with/against position is my blog on academic writing and research education. I started patter (patthomson.net) in July 2011. At the time the university marketing team hadn't cottoned onto blogs, and it was easy for me to set up on a commercial platform, with no institutional affiliation. To begin with, the posts were simply a way to write about the kinds of things I found myself talking to doctoral researchers about. These were often issues that weren't in the academic writing and method books. They weren't big picture. They were often about detail. Most posts fell into the category of the game—the 'secret academic business', the unwritten rules of the academy that early career scholars are expected to pick up simply through immersion in the mores of scholarly/disciplinary culture(s).

Over time, and in ways that are still somewhat mysterious to me, the blog has grown. I've managed, with the help of a few guest posts, to post twice a week, without running out of things to say. The blog has had well over two million views and has over 17,000 followers. This is by no means remarkable for an academic blog, but it is nevertheless at the numeric level that is noticed by university people who care about such matters. I have recently been asked, on several occasions, why I don't switch over to the university blogging platform. 'Not interested', I say muttering to myself about the dead hand of university marketing, 'I like to control how the blog looks and what goes on it'. In saying this, I position the university as able to enjoy some reflected credit for something I do but having no direct control. As long as I stay within the bounds of what might be considered to be 'professional' conduct, the university has no reason to intervene. I'm simply exercising my 'academic freedom of expression' and 'right to publish' online. I contribute to a gift economy and if the university can bask in some reflected glow from that, well and good. However, my autonomous blog and URL is also a political rejection of blogging as marketing and an endorsement of social media as a scholarly pursuit.

I now give academic writing support to organisations and events that support early career researchers, as well as conduct research that I hope

might show that other ways of education are possible. I write only as much audit-friendly material as I need to. I've largely given up fretting about how and why I got to be a good girl. The individual is the social, I know, and we second wave feminists have been disposed to overachieve and overcompensate for our gender. We were socialised early to be obedient, then positioned as both disobedient but also better than 'the men'. This chapter may be the last iteration of the worry that this is a problem that can ever be resolved.

However, this is not quite the end to the story. Integral to my academic writing and publishing has also been work with others. As already mentioned, I have had a long-term partnership with Barbara Kamler focused on academic writing. I have also co-researched all the time I have been in the UK with Christine Hall, a colleague at Nottingham (Hall and Thomson 2017; Thomson and Hall 2017). While these relationships are of course different, both are collaborations that offer something very particular and special.

It is no accident that both my research and writing partners are also second wave feminists, generationally disposed to believe that there is strength in solidarity, joy in the kinds of intimacy that shared experiences can bring, and power in bringing more than one mind and body to an activity. Working together is a safety net, a way to get things done, but also an ongoing source of inspiration and support. But long-term research and writing relationships are more than simply instrumental. They require trust built on shared values, beliefs, and experiences. They bring satisfaction in joint achievement, comfort in the face of institutional unreason, moments of revelry, excitement, and mirth. They are, to be somewhat trite, shelter in the higher education storm.

When I now have to give advice to early career researchers, for good reason concerned with the need to publish, get funding, network, engage with publics and become known for something, I often focus on these two things—finding a place to speak for, speak with and speak back to the institution and finding a 'lost twin' to work with. While these two are not answers for everyone, they are perhaps strategies that resonate particularly with women who are both critical of higher education but also want to do well enough in it to do what they both need and want.

They are certainly what has allowed me to say my long good bye to the need to be good and what keeps me hanging on.

Postscript

I have found writing this auto-ethnography difficult. While I have explicitly used pieces of my own experience in other writing, I have never actually made myself the subject of a paper. I am acutely aware of the critique of auto-ethnography as narcissistic, ultimately an assumption by the researcher that readers will find them interesting (e.g. Delamont 2007). Auto-ethnography is accused of a homogenising feminism that ignores minority lives (e.g. Ty and Verduyn 2008). It perpetuates a notion of a singular unitary self (Done 2013). At the same time, there is also a strong feminist support for the tradition of women's diaries and autobiographies that show the social importance of the everyday and personal (David 2016).

I seem to be concluding that auto-ethnographic writing has been an interesting experiment, but probably one of a kind. I am heartened that other women of my age, seniority, and privilege find that they too are at the point of making the decision to do what they fancy and stop worrying about what they think this is right and proper. I am perhaps therefore not the only good girl ceasing to fret quite so much… And perhaps I would not have clarified this if I had not written to find out that that's what I think.

Good girl? Well yes. Well no. Well and good.

Notes

1. A school that caters for 5 year olds (K) to 18 year olds (Year 12).
2. Teacher educators are generally employed for their recent school experience. Many complete a PhD while they are teaching at a university. Some begin and don't finish. The organisation and requirements of teacher education make it difficult to build a research and publication profile.

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