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8. A LIFE OF MY STORY

This inquiry is based around a personal story that I originally wrote as part of an autoethnographic dissertation. I do not claim that there is anything of more interest in my storied life than in anyone else's, but this particular story made me curious. My curiosity was not about the events the story narrates, which have been well-known to me for many years, but about the way the story appeared; the way it continues to interact with me and with others. I want, if I can, to uncover more about the life of this story.

As a starting point for inquiry, I situated myself primarily in the position of autoethnographic researcher, following the approach developed and promoted by Ellis and Bochner (2000). However, in the act of writing, I have become increasingly aware that my positionality of self-as-researcher is only one of a range of selves that has been interacting with the story. These multiple selves include myself as student; myself as gay man; and myself as vulnerable human, each providing only one perspective of a narrative whole. This awareness of multiple selves has been described by Ochs and Capps, who argue that personal narratives are always apprehended by partial selves, and that such narratives can only provide a fragmentary view (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Ronai (1992) similarly observes how she has 'facets,' which are framed by a culture that demands she frames each separately from the others, but finds that no one facet is more authentic to her 'true' self than others; rather, the self exists as a dialogue between them. The interaction between my multiple selves and the story also interests me: I want to know about the extent to which the story exists as separate from my apprehending selves, like the fabled elephant being encountered by the three blind men, or whether my identity and the story are engaged in a process of co-creation, each intimately bound up with the other, to find whether, as Eakin puts it "the self is being defined and transacted through a narrative process" (Eakin, 1999, p. 101).

Representing fragmented, partial selves within the context of a single first-person narrative represents a stylistic challenge and I have considered alternative ways of achieving this. Blumenthal (1995) offers one approach by providing question and answer exchanges indicative of different roles contained within one person. Other writers, including Ronai (1992) and Chawla (2001) have used an alternative approach that allows layered and multiple voices to be interwoven by using a narrative form in which voices are separated by physical signification of the narrative discontinuity on the page. I have adopted this latter approach and have used a series of three asterisks to represent the disjunctions in chronology, as well as attitude and style of writing that follow.

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J. Speedy & J. Wyatt (eds.), Creative Practitioner Inquiry in the Helping Professsions, 59–68.

It is May 2007 and we have arranged to meet to discuss our dissertation proposals as an Action Learning Set. The three of us agree that the terrace of a city pub is a better venue than the basement seminar room we had booked and that is how Alison, Beth (not their real names) and I come to be sitting together in the sun among the umbrellas and hanging baskets that Spring afternoon. When it comes to my turn, I describe my chosen dissertation topic: an autoethnographic exploration of my identity construction as a gay man and a professional manager. Alison and Beth are my friends, close enough to be honest with me, and I really want to know what they feel about my topic. We agree to record the conversation and before long, Beth comes out with her view:

Beth: I find it uncomfortable, because I would never in a million years want to discuss with anybody else, issues of my sexuality. Issues of who I have sex with or why. To me, I feel uncomfortable about someone who is gay wanting to talk to me about those issues, when I wonder why you feel as though you have to explain those issues, because I really don't mind what you do in bed …

Me: 'Do.' So you see my sexuality as a doing thing do you? That's interesting … It's relevant to how I research it.

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Anger can keep me awake like nothing else. My anger comes in gusts of imagined dialogue …

"How dare you dismiss my experience by saying you don't care what I do in bed?"

"How *very* dare you!" … "No, I can't say that, it sounds far too camp."

"So what's wrong with camp? What are you scared of? That it's old fashioned? That it's inauthentic? That you wouldn't be taken seriously?"

"I'm angry. I'm fucking seriously angry!"

"But what will being angry do for your dissertation? Will it make you irrational? Is it OK for a researcher to be motivated by anger?"

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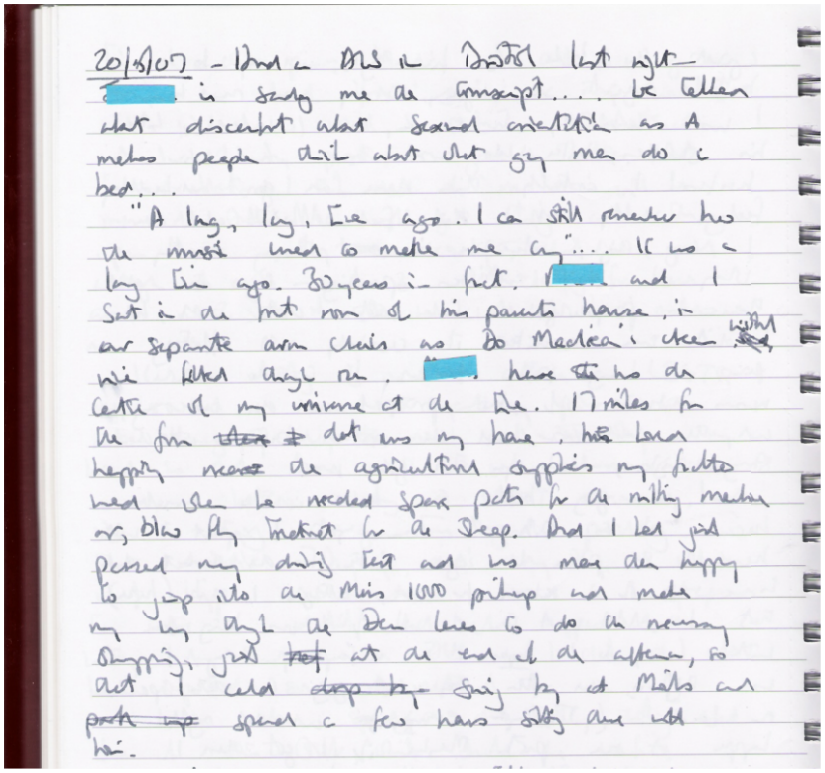
The birth of this story happened early one morning in the grey light of the back bedroom, sliding in a trail of wet ink from the nib of my pen. As soon as I saw the words spidering across the page, I knew they were fundamental to me, as much a part of me as the hand that wrote them; I even think I fell in love with them on the spot. It wasn't that they described new thoughts; they were all events that were well within my conscious memory. But they had never been linked up like that before, tracking events across thirty years and two continents. An effortless flow of words, needing little conscious crafting; quite unlike my usual tortured efforts to get words down on paper.



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Why did that story appear on that day, when the events that formed the plot had been available to me as memories for so long? I have a strong sense that all I was doing that day was finishing off: committing to paper a story that had already assembled itself at a subconscious level to communicate something important to me, an example of what Eakin describes as the 'double construction' of autobiographical writing, where writing is a late phase in a life-long process of identity formation (Eakin, 1999).

Given the deeply personal issue of sexual orientation that lies at the heart of my story, it is also interesting to note Eakin's view that autobiographical memories are socially and culturally constructed, with storytelling constrained by social sanction. The years that my story spans saw changes in societal attitudes to sexual orientation more dramatic than I could have imagined (Nardi et al., 1994; Sandfort et al., 2000; Seidman, 2004; Weeks, 2007). Is it possible that these external changes have affected the way in which I have remembered my own past? It is difficult for me to imagine that the story would have been tellable ten years ago, or

even that I would have wanted to tell it, particularly in the context of an academic inquiry. I can only conclude that the story appeared because something told me the time was right…

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"A long, long, time ago. I can still remember how the music used to make me …." What is the next word? Is it 'smile,' or is it 'cry'? I can't remember. Anyway, it was certainly a long time ago. Thirty years in fact.

Chris and I sat in the front room of his parents' house in our separate armchairs. The house was the centre of my seventeen-year-old universe, sixteen miles away from the farm that had been my home all my life, at the opposite end of the school catchment area. The attractiveness of any place on earth could be measured very simply back then, in terms of its geographical distance from where Chris lived. The best mate I'd ever had.

Happily, Chris' house was also very near the agricultural suppliers that my father used and I had recently passed my driving test. My father was delighted at my willingness to leap into the Morris 1000 pickup and drive through the Devon lanes on an errand to pick up some udder cream, or blow-fly treatment for the sheep. I usually managed to time my trips towards the end of the afternoon, just before the warehouse shut, so that I could pick up the requested supplies and then just swing by Chris' place to spend a few hours in his company.

I can't remember what we talked about that day. I remember the window, looking out onto the garden; the nick-nacks on the mantle-piece; the smell of the carpet. Mostly, I remember the heat of his thigh, burning the skin on my arm from six feet away, where he sat in his chair. But the only words I can remember were the wistful words of Don Maclean, singing away on the stereo-gram "… and them good old boys, were drinkin' whisky in Rye, and singin' this'll be the day that I die …."

Before I left that night, I remember going up to the bathroom and seeing his worn shirt, slung across the towel rail. I sat there, buried my face in it and breathed. Just to take in the full sense of him.

Soon after that, I went off to university, and like a slick, slow-fade slide transition, Chris slid from view, and was replaced by Tom. Shock-haired, toothy, energetic, Tom, my rock-climbing buddy. Sheffield University was a great magnet for climbers in those days. Roped and harnessed together we clambered and clanged over Stanage Edge, Froggat Edge, Millstone Edge and Lawrencefield. I still have the climbing guide on my shelf, with the bloodstained pages and the ticked routes of our conquests. Later we expanded our horizons, went off to the Lake District and spidered our way up Shepherd's Crag and Pillar Rock and went skinny-dipping in the icy water of Stickle Tarn after an early morning climb up the warm rock of Pavey Ark.

Tom married young, and I was an usher at his wedding, just after we graduated. But by that time I was off to start my post-graduate course in agricultural

engineering and was sharing a house with Ed. Laughing, rugby-playing, spliff-smoking, Joni-Mitchell-listening, Ed.

I was very fit at the time and was training for the 1982 London marathon. On Saturday afternoons we would both be out, him playing rugby and me running. Increasingly, my running route took me past the rugby pitch, but I don't think he knew that. Sometimes he would be home before me and would be up in the bath by the time I got back. When that happened, I always knew immediately, because I could see his jock-strap slung off the radiator on the landing as I walked through the front door.

Ed thought that having a gay mate was cool. And I was a good mate, always up for a pint or a curry. He didn't know that I would have cheerfully left my Grandmother's deathbed if it increased my chances of hanging round on the off chance that he might fancy some company at the pub.

Just before we completed our post-grad course, I got a posting with Voluntary Service Overseas as a water engineer in Uganda. When I told Ed, he thought that was cool as well, and decided to apply. We were posted to the same place. A small, dusty town in Acholi, near the Sudanese border. And so the sweet agony jumped a continent. I carried on being his cool, gay mate, of course, until he fell in love with a Ugandan girl and, after a brief but intense affair with her, returned the UK.

But the slow-fade slide transition soon kicked in, and Fergus came into view: tall; blond; Canadian; kind. We worked together out in the Acholi villages during the day, and spent the evenings sitting on the veranda of my house, drinking beer and comparing lives. After a while, Fergus got re-posted down to Kampala, but a few weeks after, I had a message from him. He hoped I was doing OK and said he was really looking forward to seeing me down in Kampala, as he had something he very much wanted to say to me.

I was, of course, soon visiting Kampala and arranged to meet him for a meal in a restaurant just off the busy main drag through the city. From the moment he arrived, I could tell he was pleased to see me and that the thing he wanted to tell me was important. His eyes were shining, and he spent the first two courses nervously trying to choose the right moment to say the words. Then he told me. He told me that he had fallen in love with a woman who was a mutual friend of ours and wanted to know if he should marry her.

I was great that night. The best mate you could have hoped for. We talked about the excitement and the difficulty of his situation; about the importance of being honest with yourself and following your own heart, but also remembering how feelings can change as time moves on.

A couple of months later, we went on leave together to climb Mount Kenya. I still have the pictures from our four-day trek. We started in the wooded foothills, climbing up through the heather and spongy moss, among giant lobelia and on up to the bare, upper slopes. Late on the second day, we arrived at the Austrian Hut, on a col, at almost 5000 metres. We spent a few hours there, dozing on an alpine bunk, before setting off in the cold darkness, kicking steps in the snow up to Point Lenana. At the top, we jumped and whooped and hugged each other; in the pristine

snow, above the clouds, as the sun rose over the rim of Africa. And it is one of my saddest memories.

I saw Fergus with his wife and kids last year, while they were on a lay-over for a few hours at Heathrow. He is the last link in the chain of special mates.

If the meaning of being gay is what you do in bed, then the meaning for me of being gay, across all those years, was nothing whatsoever.

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Okely and Carraway (1992) have commented that traditional academic research often leaves us in the dark about researcher motivation. This is one criticism that clearly does not apply to autoethnography. Published examples that explicitly expose researcher emotional motivation are easy to identify; whether tangled emotions of love and grief (Ellis, 1997); political resistance (Kideckel, 1997), or the struggle for acceptance (Berry, 2007).

However, even within the field of autoethnography there remains debate about the extent to which the emotional/evocative presence of the author within the text is legitimate. Writers such as Anderson (2006) and Delamont (2009) are critical of autoethnography that looks inward at the personal and emotional life of the ethnographer-as-author rather than looking outward to an intellectual constituency informed by social theory. Ellis and Bochner (2006) disagree with this view and argue that it is the presence of the author at the heart of the text that characterises the strength and uniqueness of the autoethnographic approach.

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Feedback from my dissertation assessor, October 2007:

> You 'show' rather than 'tell' us about the anger really well at points, but at other times I feel you defuse or hedge around that anger in a way that this reader let the pressure drop too … I would have liked encouragement to inhabit the outraged space a little longer. There is part of me that feels you are letting me off the hook of inhabiting the full rawness of your experience, by offering the relative comfort of social science story-telling.

So my assessor had had no difficulty in detecting two partial selves in my work: the social science student and the angry man. And interestingly, he described his reaction as attributable to his own partial self, 'a part of me,' rather than to himself as an integrated whole. I had become familiar with the voices of two of my inner selves during the writing process: the social scientist was confident and comfortable with his well-defined, socially validated role, while the angry man was vulnerable and less certain about whether he should be speaking up at all. But I found that the feedback validated and changed the angry man, reflecting what Ochs and Capps describe as the concept of a fluid, evolving, identity-in-the-making. As they put it: as narratives are apprehended, they give rise to the selves that create them (Ochs & Capps 1996).

My assessor had not talked of my outrage, but of 'the outraged space'—the space between us that we had both occupied. This had been a performance space, occupied by me as performer and him as audience. However, as Conquergood (1995) argues, audiences are neither pure voyeurs, nor passive recipients of a performance, they are witnesses of the performance and performers of their own interpretations (Conquergood, 1995). Was it possible that the performance had changed my assessor too?

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It is March 2008 and I have embarked on a Diploma programme in Narrative Inquiry. It is 8pm on the second day of a taught module and by tomorrow morning I need to come up with a short performance to make to my fellow students. This makes me feel anxious.

I trawl my notes and the reading list, head empty of ideas, stomach in a tight knot. But suddenly a story comes into my mind, one that has already appeared in written form, but that has never been be performed out loud before. I don't have a copy with me and there's no time to go home and get one. If I stand up there in front of the audience, with the video camera rolling, will I be able to remember it? "A long, long, time ago, I can still remember…" Yes, of course I can. I might even sing the first bit.

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It is 11.30am. I am on my feet surrounded by the performance space. My audience have no idea what I am going to say. They will witness the story creating itself again, word by spoken word. And I know that as I speak them, the words will change, they will no longer be the memories in my head, but part of a new shared experience.

But this is not a one man show. There is a cast of characters to muster:

Member of learning community?

… Hi there, I'm OK.

Nervous performer?

… Shoulders are a bit tense, but I'll be alright when I get started.

Vulnerable man, talking about emotions?

… I'm not feeling that vulnerable with this audience, just intrigued to know what happens.

Angry man? Angry man, are you there?

…

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In live performance, an audience has little choice in their embodied engagement. As Cooper Albright puts it: "the audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction with the history of their own bodies" (Cooper Albright 1997, quoted in Spry, 2001, p. 716). This raises a moral question of whether it was right for me to impose embodied engagement of an audience in such a story. Denzin argues that performance cannot avoid enacting a moral stance: it is always enmeshed in moral matters, asking an audience to take a stand on the performance and its meanings (Denzin 1997). If any unease about that engagement did exist in the room that day, it was not apparent to me. As we packed our bags to leave, some colleagues shared things with me about themselves that were far more personal than anything that had previously been spoken, even over a beer in the pub. Coffey (1999) argues that the confessional voice can be therapeutic, not only for the reader, but also for audiences, who are invited into complicity with penetration of the private self. I found myself wondering if my performance had offered a confessional voice that had liberated my fellow students to say things and perform their identities in a different way.

As Denzin puts it, we are all co-performers in our own and other peoples' lives (Denzin, 1997), but I am wary of assuming that my experience of the performance was shared by others. Speaking for myself, my embodied experience was strong and positive. Immediately after it, I felt different; the feeling was not dissimilar to my experience of reading my dissertation assessor's feedback, but it was more immediate. I almost felt that I had glimpsed my partial selves in the act of changing their relationship: the decreasing anger of the gay man, the growing confidence of the student, the human more at more ease with his own vulnerability.

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Sitting at my laptop; typing up my inquiry; performing my identity through a story into which is threaded a familiar series of events as I struggled to come to terms with my own sexuality. But yet again, the story has changed: the memory of sitting with Chris in his front room in Devon 1977 sits alongside the memory of sitting with my friends outside a Bristol pub; of writing and receiving feedback on my dissertation in 2007; and of standing in front of my student colleagues in March 2008. But today I find that the confident self that was energised by a live performance experience has been joined by someone new: a critic who questions whether all this personal writing is of any real value. The critic feels vindicated by Delamont (2009) who argues that autoethnography has no analytic mileage and tells readers nothing of social scientific or pedagogic interest. The critical voice is a strong one and could easily drown out the others, providing arguments to justify a decision to close down the story, avoid the risk and vulnerability of self-exposure in the public domain.

But Delamont's manifesto of objections to autoethnography as a genre is so uncompromising that I also experience a reaction that I can only describe as stubborn resistance. I take some comfort in the knowledge that the battery of arguments about the ethics and epistemological validity of autoethnography have

been faced down by many before me in debates which go back over many years (Sparkes, 2002; Holt, 2003; Ellis, 2004, 2006).

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So, what does the future hold for this story? Is its role in co-constructing my identity complete? Does it have a role to play in influencing the way anyone else might perform their own identity? The act of publication, of putting it 'out there,' will render it an artefact, interacting with a world well beyond my knowledge or control. Claiming it as legitimate academic inquiry will expose it to the possibility of highly critical interaction with those who would doubtless claim that it has nothing of value to offer anyone else and amounts to little more than self-obsession. The risk of facing such criticism undeniably places me in a vulnerable position. I have protected others who appear within the narrative by anonymising them and the only way I could get similar protection would be by anonymising myself, but that to me would be self-defeating, and I find myself strong enough to accept the risk. My experience suggests to me that personal stories are more powerful than the harshest critics of autoethnography might believe. The assertion that such a story has no role in creating new knowledge for anyone else is a bold one to make and one that my inquiry leaves me unable to accept. The act of reading this will be sufficient to reveal to a reader whether the story or their own interaction with it reveals anything new to them or not. For some, it won't; but for others, at least some parts of my fragmented self think that it might.

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