

CHAPTER THREE: disconnection

Introduction

In chapter three I document a further deepening of my inquiry into fundamental questions concerning vitality and change in my 50s, such as how can new things be brought into my life – what will it take for this to happen? I probe for the questions that have felt life energy behind them, and directly engage with what it takes to make room for the new in my life.

I explore the discordant and disruptive aspects of clearing a space in a life that is, in many ways, full of assumed competence and taken for granted truths about myself, and the world more generally. I have to face the fact that I am not so competent as I thought I was as a process consultant, and in other ways. The stability of my successful middle-aged life is disrupted, questioned, turbulated¹. In the course of one piece quoted in this chapter I use the metaphor of pruning to ask, what things in my life need to be pruned back to make space for the new? This aspect has some of the feel of being stripped naked; I shiver and try to cover myself. I feel humbled.

Holding myself in inquiry during this phase of the journey is not an easy matter. I discover the discipline of *persevering* despite an inclination to turn away towards what is comfortable and known. My supervisor encourages me by telling me that she discerns some energy and strength to keep my inquiry going despite my difficulties. I have a real experience of trying to do what Torbert asks of us as inquirers (and which was so easy for me *to say*):

What does it take to wish to see and participate in every one of our moments, both the attractive and the unattractive, dispassionately, compassionately, and passionately? (Torbert, 2001: 251)

I discover that it is not so much clear answers that sustain me in the struggle to keep attending, for there are precious few of those. Inquiry, at this stage at least, is not motivated for me by results. Instead I discover that the energy to continue comes from an emerging, felt sense of being connected to the world differently, more fundamentally, than I had understood before. This connection intrudes as confusion and bewilderment; my struggle is to keep turning to the other side of bewilderment, to lift my head and wonder. As I move from feeling bewildered to wondering I discover other dynamic forces with a similar bilateral structure or form: opening/closing; offering/withdrawing; showing/hiding.

In this chapter I highlight one incident in my supervision group that was disturbing for me. This has symbolic as well as practical significance,

¹ To reduce the lift of an aircraft wing the airflow may be disturbed which causes the craft to sink down. This deliberate “turbulation” may be caused by air brakes on the top of the wing or by lifting the front of the wing to the point where the airflow begins to break away thus inducing a stall. In some sense during this period I am losing the lifting confidence of my life and descending back to some more original space.

because at its heart was a decision I made to withdraw from my group to listen to them talk about me, and my work. The cleverness of the idea seems to bring down hubris. I learn painfully what it is to belong and to separate. I also have an experience which, when I have time to assimilate it, teaches me more about the potential for standing back in order to get closer. I gradually push into the inquiry about what it means to be deeply and sensually connected, *and* to seek to stand back from this connection. As I begin to understand more fully what it is to be situated I understand that standing back from the world is also standing back from myself, and I come to a deeper understanding of what Mangham spoke of as “alienation” in the previous chapter.

What I turn back to as I seek to simultaneously connect and detach with my life world are the most intimate parts of that world: my love for my wife and my situation in my body. I try to describe what it is like to be curled up with Bridget in our bed; I describe a brush with cancer in my doctor’s surgery, and an experience of a yoga session in the garden of my home. These accounts are not well integrated into the surrounding text: they appear as spasmodic bursts of intimate description. I remark again, in the course of the chapter, on how they appear to be at once highly personal and at the same time happening to someone else. Towards the end of the chapter I try to use the same descriptive method in respect of someone else. Later, when I encounter Kathleen Stewart’s work (Stewart: 2005), I fancy that I can see myself trying to stay close to the source of emergence of feeling and experience – accompanying its emergence. At the time I did not have this awareness. It looks as if in my inquiry in 2002 I was turning to foundational aspects of my life world; primordial aspects of my situatedness (this is my current self speaking – I would have just said “my life” before – I’m still trying to find the right words for a life that is in the world, and not just in me). Through expression I seem to be seeking, intuitively, to bring to life (or inquire after the life that is there) my deepest connections to my world: body, wife, children.

My primary mode of inquiry continues to be through written expression. Most of the time it *is* “through” just like I live *through* my body, reaching out a hand without noticing the hand that reaches, only what it reaches for. But there are times when I deliberately turn my attention to the form and shape of my writing. For example in my struggle to express my feelings I turn to writing a poem, which leads me to reflect on the relationship between artistic forms of writing and social science writing (Richardson & St Pierre: 2005; Stewart: 2005; Van Manen: 1990; Marshall: 2007). My personal motivation in writing as inquiry is not *clearly* revealed to me in this chapter (or anywhere else for that matter). I seem to be drawn to the mode of writing without really knowing why. I speculate on why I chose the written form in the specific instances of this chapter, but it is inconclusive and even unsatisfactory; the reasons I contrive don’t seem sufficient to honour the felt depth of the urge to write. I guess at least part of the reason is practical: I can’t draw, I can’t sing, and anyway I have chosen a developmental route that demands writing. My upbringing has *equipped* me

to do this tapping and scratching – perhaps it is no more complicated than that?

As I have explained in the Introduction, and in the preceding chapters, my method of proceeding with the thesis provides me with a store of documentation concerning my life world. I return to that store in this chapter to use it to re-create aspects of the journey, and also to inspire fresh reflection as I write the thesis. But returning is no simple matter. I find that I have forgotten vital details about the context for the writing; also that sometimes I find familiar feelings and thought in the words, but that sometimes there are new things to be discovered. I struggle with, what actually happened in my group meeting? I wonder at things I didn't remark upon at the time, but I'm also capable of being inspired again by my old texts: how I love my wife's body – that mysterious, warm, enraptured space we can create as we nestle into each other; it returns to me as I read my old words. To return is to *re-discover*. It does indeed feel like Eliot claimed: "to arrive where we started/ and to know the place for the first time." (Eliot: 222). Which is to say that this period was not all pain and disturbance. I cemented friendships in this period, I touched the joy in my life as well as the trouble, and I began to feel an animation to return more fundamentally to the joys, and challenges of my first engagement with Gestalt – but that is to start to describe the next step. I must not jump ahead, for the journey is important in this thesis, and predominantly it is a journey scratched and tapped out in text.

These then are the things that may be discovered here in this chapter. But there is something else arising in me now as I revisit this introduction on the 23rd March 2007. Some desire to try to wrap the whole in words. To bring together in some way the parts described above. What did this time in the doctoral journey feel like as a whole? Recently I was revisiting Antoine de Saint-Exupery's short book "Wind, Sand and Stars" trawling for memory. I had first read the book when I was seventeen and wanted to fly like my father. I came across this description of a journey. Guillaumet has crashed in the middle of winter when trying to fly his mail plane through the Andes from Chile to Argentina. He is given up for dead but eventually walks out to safety. Saint-Exupery encloses the following in speech marks² as though it was an account taken down directly. This extract does not say everything about the period 2002/3 as far as I am concerned, but it does capture an important part of it – especially the feeling that I was journeying back to something more fundamental and, in the course of the journey, that I was somehow being simultaneously stripped and prepared.

'I could tell from the signs that the end was coming. For instance, I had no choice but to stop every two hours or so, to cut my boots open a little more, to rub snow on my swelling feet, or just to rest my beating heart. But in the final days my memory was going. Each time I moved on a long way before

² Although, he does so rather erratically. It's not clear towards the end of this extract whether Guillaumet is quoting someone in his account, and Guillaumet's voice seems to merge with that of Saint-Exupery.

it dawned on me: after every stop I had forgotten something. The first time it was a glove, and that was serious in that temperature! I had put it down in front of me, and set off without picking it up. The next time it was my watch. Then my knife. Then my compass. With every stop I was becoming more destitute. ‘What saves a man is to take a step. And another step. It’s the same first step repeated...’ (Saint-Exupery: 27)

It strikes me as male imagery: the journey of hardship and loneliness. As I say above this would be only part of my own story – maybe, in the end, it is not the main part. Having said that, now in 2007, I am energised by the heroic aspects of Guillaumet’s account. It lends an aspect of compassion and understanding to my reading of the events of the period covered by this chapter, and helps me to read again what happened. I feel my heart stir, and I know that some part of my energy to keep writing, even when I’m in a turmoil, lies in here – where I stand up and face what comes. Push my chest out and ball my fists like my father taught me to do all those years ago.

In this chapter I refer to the work of Merleau-Ponty even though I do not discover his writing until several months after the events related here in this chapter. This clearly presents an issue of continuity in so far as the thesis seeks to describe a journey. I repeat here what I have said earlier that this thesis seeks to be a continuing inquiry as well as a description of a journey, and Merleau-Ponty is brought forward in service of this ongoing inquiry. My engagement with his ideas, and with those of phenomenology more generally, have changed me and I cannot completely return to my previous state. What I can add is that the stimulation of the events described here provides some of the energetic interest in myself in the world that, in the summer of 2003, finds a resonance in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the embodied subject. This conjunction provides part of the story line for the chapter that will follow this one.

This Chapter is divided into four sections:

- Section One, *An event in my supervision group*, describes the consequences of an experiment with form that I conduct in my supervision group in March 2002. This description is supported by an e-mail exchange with my supervisor that is commented upon by fellow students in the group
- Section Two, *Written contact...and detachment*, presents the way in which I respond to the feeling of crisis that results from the event in my supervision group through writing a poem that starts to examine my connectedness to life.
- Section Three, *Voyeur?* Describes how I simultaneously write more intimately and continue to detach myself, providing examples of my writing to illustrate, and reflecting on my motivation.
- Section Four, *Writing/re-approaching others*, describes experiments with writing as an attempt to contact others.

The detailed sequence of events in the period March to May 2002 is shown in Exhibit 3.1 below.

Exhibit 3.1 Sequence of events March to May 2002

12 March 2002 I publish first draft of *Experimenting with Accounts* including the account of a consulting assignment with a woman colleague in Sweden, and personal material about myself.

20-21 March Supervision Groups at Bath University. During my supervision session on the

21st March I introduce a process of sitting out and observing the group discuss my work which has unforeseen consequences.

25th March my Supervisor writes to me in respect of my behaviour during the group meeting.

26-27th March I write a poem about my experience, and include it in a revised version of *Experimenting with Accounts*.

26th March I respond to the mail from my supervisor.

27th March my Supervisor responds to my mail.

1 May I re-publish a revised version of *Experimenting with Accounts* which includes the poem and the e-mail exchange together with comments from my supervisor and fellow students.

14-15 May at this meeting of my supervision group I receive handwritten comments to my paper from my supervisor and fellow students which I subsequently type into a final document to keep for my records. I quote from this consolidated document in this thesis.

3.1 An event in my supervision group

This section provides an account of the incident that occurred in my supervision group in March 2002 around which this chapter is based. As a result of this incident I begin to re-think my competence as a process consultant and to wonder at how I am engaging with others and life more generally.

This account is laced with the mess and threat of an interpersonal encounter, and personal embarrassment at what I did and how I handled myself. Even now four years later as I re read and edit this story I am wondering about whether to excise the whole chapter. However, it seems to have had such a significant effect on what follows (in particular my turn back to Gestalt and the discovery of phenomenology) that the thesis would be rendered much less comprehensible if I was to leave it out. There really is no alternative but to plunge ahead. Such is my embarrassment at some of the details that it would be tempting to change the story in some way; however the core of what happened is recorded in an e-mail exchange between my supervisor and myself, which acts as a record to keep me honest in this regard. Why does this incident continue to be so embarrassing?

It seems to me now to be at least in part due to the element of hubris in the whole affair. I have started my doctoral journey by producing my own published material. I call myself a process consultant, meaning by that label to pronounce my proficiency in matters of human process. There is an element of boasting involved in the process intervention that proves to be my “undoing”; it is a successful intervention with a major Corporate client that I chose to introduce here in Supervision. Finally there is a kind of brutal reversal in the fact that the experience I have which so unsettles me is one that I was submitting my clients to. It is no wonder that it is in the course of this meeting that C refers to me as the “Big I am”. Yet this “cringe element” to the affair is not the whole story. My clients did not have the same experience with this process that I did on this occasion, and that in part is due to the skilful way in which I supported them and facilitated the process. By inadvertently suspending any facilitation or support I came to see (eventually) some of the contribution I make to my clients experience. The incident also leaves me feeling, for perhaps the only time, inadequately supported by my supervision group. I don’t say this out of blame, for the way in which I rapidly rolled out my experiment with no preparation or warning must have caught them by surprise; also because (and this becomes one of the significant points) the effect on me is apparently out of all proportion to what actually happens. What is released in me by the incident has as much to do with my own history and life themes as it has to do with the shape or design of the process, and my own confident entry into the experiment gave my group no inkling of this at all. Nevertheless, the event does lead me into thinking of the *situational differences* between this use of the process and the one with my corporate client, and this also proves to be a line of inquiry for the doctoral journey as a whole. So what happened?

This story begins on the 20/21 March 2002 when I conducted an experiment with the form of my session in the Supervision meeting we had scheduled for two days at the University. I had prepared a piece of writing, and sent it in advance to group members as well as my Supervisor. This piece included an account of a consulting assignment in Sweden with a woman colleague, and the first draft of some personal writing about myself in my domestic setting³. At the meeting I announced that I would like to set the meeting up in a particular way that was borrowed from a process I had been using with client managers in a large Corporation. I had (first moment of “cringing” coming up!) christened this “gossiping”, and the way I had worked it was as follows. With a manager who I knew well I had conducted a 360 degree process by having him witness a facilitated conversation about himself. He had invited his boss, two colleagues, and three members of his team to a meeting that would be “in support of M’s development”. I had then explained that my plan was to have a conversation with them about M that I would facilitate, and that he would witness by sitting separately, listening and (if he wished) taking notes. There was clearly some nervousness about this but this seemed to be calmed in conversation when I explained how I was going to facilitate⁴ and that no one would be required to say anything they did not feel comfortable in expressing. M would then have the opportunity to tell us what he had heard and to ask any questions. The person who would decide what use to make of the information revealed in the conversation was M. In practice this worked remarkably well. I found that I only needed to ask a few questions to start and then keep the conversation on track. I started with a question that elicited positives about M that enabled the visitors to apparently overcome any initial feelings of discomfort. At least I deduced this from the way they seemed to rapidly pick up what was required; as far as I could see they were modulating honesty with respect. M reported the whole experience being very useful and revealing on several counts that we subsequently discussed in a series of coaching meetings. M and I had also discussed another agenda for using this process. It was a culture of engineers and, although 360 processes were well established, they were paper based and ponderous: this lighter touch seemed to us to be making a contribution to opening the system up to more organic feedback processes. We had reckoned that any loss caused by the correspondents playing to the gallery of the boss, or M, was likely to be

³ Somewhat confusingly I retained the same title for the writing I was producing before and after the meeting of the 20/21 March: “Experimenting with Accounts.”. after the meeting this writing is developed by adding in the poem I write shortly afterwards and also the e mail exchange together with the associated commentary from myself and also from my supervisor and fellow students.

⁴ I kept it very simple building the discussion around three questions: what do you find most useful about M’s leadership? What seems to you to be underdeveloped or not present sufficiently in his leadership? If you could have one thing different what would it be? The conversation lasted about 40 minutes after which we heard from M about his conclusions. There was then a brief discussion about the process itself – about 20 minutes.

outweighed by the social value in getting 360 processes on the map in this relatively quick and direct form. The positive response from M (he still talks about it as a direct and memorable experience) encouraged me to count it as a success⁵.

So that was the consulting experience in outline. I introduced it into supervision because I had noticed that it was difficult to really get discussion going around my written work and I thought that this would help. I was thinking that my presence as author might be constricting the conversation in some way and was interested in seeing if the group would have a different experience if I extracted myself. I sat apart from the group and asked them to have a discussion about my work. In the event not everyone had read the work I had produced and this encouraged the discussion to be as much about myself as the writing. I believe the subject matter of my writing also encouraged this. I had written about a piece of work I was doing in Sweden with another consultant. I had spoken about my feelings for her and the group were obviously interested.

The effect of sitting witnessing this conversation caught me completely off guard. I found that not being able to join in as they discussed me (particularly as I had given permission to enter personal territory through what I had written) sent me further into myself so that I felt completely dislocated and objectified. Looking back I can see some situational features, which helped to achieve this effect. I did not prepare my supervisor, or any one in the group for that matter, with what I intended. I did not think through the personal implications of not having a prepared facilitator, or of suddenly springing this on the group: with hindsight remarkably care-less. As I think about it now I think the reason for such carelessness was that I was trying to impress the group. I thought this was an original idea and I wanted to show it off. Also I remember wanting to encourage us to experiment with the form of our supervision and I thought that this would encourage such experimentation. It seems obvious now that I should have been more careful about assuming such a purpose and using such a process – at least to have been more explicit about what I was doing.

As I see it now I approached the session casually in almost arrogant disregard of the sensitivity and potentiality of the very changes to human process that I professed to be so skilfully aware of. I can best summarise the

⁵ I can trace some of my thinking behind the design of this process back to the doctoral programme. I had felt myself encouraged on the programme to find ways to situate clients more within their social contexts. For example a fellow student C had suggested that I read David Campbell's book on "The Socially Constructed Organisation", and this had helped prompt me into thinking of practical ways of introducing social constructionist ideas into my consulting. This particular intervention was also socially constructed in the sense that the idea came originally out of a conversation with my partner Bridget as we reflected on the bureaucratic paper based 360 systems being set up in some of our major clients. Bridget and I continue to use variations on the process described above.

effect on me with an extract from the e-mail exchange that I will examine in more detail in a moment:

....the triggered emotional reaction to what was happening was of a terrible loneliness and sense of rejection based on being judged and found wanting. In this state what would have been quite small things, such as people not reading the paper, became magnified into further anomie: it comes to me as a desolation / isolation that is difficult to describe. A sort of arid desert. (Experimenting with Accounts, 2002: 1)

As the email exchange reveals the consequences of this “experiment” continued to reverberate through out the session. I did not “say how it was” for me. I pulled back from contact, and started to unintentionally disrupt the proceedings of the group with childish needy behaviour that was indirectly calling out for some kind of support. In retrospect it seems that the harder I tried to be included the more I compounded my negative contribution to the group with egotistical, self-referential behaviour. This was not a therapy group. The main purpose of the CARPP supervisory group was to support a doctoral journey. As a consequence, the immediate cause of my distress was not addressed, and within the scope of the doctorate, this proved to have beneficial effects as the energy released from the exchange was funnelled into the formulation of inquiries that reached beyond my own personal issues or problems into considering my situation, and the situated nature of my experience. This at least is how I come to see it now, but it was not my experience at the time as the e-mail exchange shows.

An Exchange of e-mail

I will set out the e-mail exchange in full including the comments that are subsequently added by my supervisor and fellow students. I have italicised the comments made by others on the mails in order to make a clearer distinction between these comments and the original words of the mail.

In the first mail my Supervisor initiates contact, offering a mix of what she saw, what concerned her, together with an invitation for contact. She approached her student (me) in the second person, as a member of the learning group offering feedback; also in the third person as a Supervisor within an institutional framework. From my perspective this wove together a second and third person presentation: she appeared to me as Judi and Supervisor, leaving me with decisions about how to orient myself and to respond.

Judi is writing to me on the evening of Monday 25th March 2002 three days after my session at the supervision meeting on the 21st March 2002. A month after this exchange, on the 20th April I prepared another piece of writing, which included this exchange of mail, and sent it to my supervision group. I received an almost immediate response from fellow student K who had typed her comments into her copy and returned it to me. I then took this modified copy made some further changes and sent it to my group on the 1st May 2002. As a result I received a further layer of commentary from Judi

and from fellow student C. I have reproduced the email exchange here together with the comments on the exchange added by my supervisor and fellow students as this was subsequently revealed to my supervision group⁶. This is what Judi wrote:

Dear Rob

I wanted to email after my reflections as I drove home after CARPP last Thursday.

I want to say this clearly, but keep it 'light' (as in not a fixed interpretation) and open..... please help me in this as you listen. By the end of the two days, I was picking up impressions of possible dynamics which I wanted to reflect back to you in a questioning way.

I felt that you had been offering bits of information about yourself, or ideas which had been sparked for you (there was quite a self-oriented tone in my impression of what you were doing), but often doing this as the time for that 'slot' was finishing or had finished.

This made me conflicted about responding. I could not do so, because that would have pressured the time boundaries still further. But not doing so felt like rebuffing sought connection of some kind (and after Thurs am group exercise, [*This refers directly to my experiment*] seemed that it might feed an impression that you had that people were not interested in you, might even seem rejecting. Whereas I felt a bit 'set up' by your timing to seem rejecting or disinterested.)

I can only now remember the Chris Farlowe and Van Morrison incident on Thursday am. [*I had sought to open up a conversation about the 60s and my student days right at the end of my session when we were trying to move on to someone else*]

(*K: I was not there, and so have some trouble understanding what Judi is referring to here.*)

Several things about this all puzzled me:

- the self-orientation of your comments in the context in which they were said
- that you seemed not to be contributing to help the group manage time, but to be pushing against that
- that you might be contributing to a dynamic of not feeling engaged with (and as the time did slip several times during the two days, there was less slack time in which to have chatty conversations about people's lives anyway)

I did wonder afterwards:

- if you were trying a constructionist experiment of some kind!
- whether perceptions about gender were involved in any way

I will leave it there, and hope that we can discuss Chris Farlowe, van Morrison and other topics sometime in a mutual way.

⁶ In other words in preparation for writing the thesis I have collated the comments from the copies handed back to me in advance of the meeting in May.

I would appreciate your comments. Best Judi

Judi provides me with a description of what she has seen and invites my comments. She appreciates that my behaviour is not objective fact and needs exploring. It's not objective fact for me either. I'm prompted to think through what has happened. As I do, I access the turmoil of feeling that was associated with my "experiment", and start to try to make sense of it for myself as well as offering this interpretation out to Judi - and eventually to the rest of my group. I responded the following day: the 26 March 2002.

Dear Judi,

Thank you for saying something. I'm not sure I would have done on my own initiative but I think I should.

I have an idea of what was going on based on my experience and the way this connected to familiar patterns. It (my idea or theory about myself) continues to raise difficult questions for me about my adult functioning. These difficult questions do form part of my inquiry, but the territory is difficult to traverse.

Yes it does begin with something of a constructionist experiment. Well at least if you could give such a grand name to my experiment with form in my own session [*This was when I sat out and had the group speak about my work with me watching*]. I thought it up lightly without much consideration as a sort of clever thing to do. In fact the result caught me completely off guard, overwhelmed me and, it seems to me now, shaped my behaviour for the whole of the session. Learning here of course but at a cost.

(Judi: Yes)

The first thing to say is that, looked at in any rational sense, I don't think that my reaction is justified by what actually happened to me! You and S__ responded to my paper in a way which was thoughtful and with the benefit of hindsight helpful and legitimately critical. It's what the combination of circumstances triggered. In particular the way I made myself helpless by putting myself outside the group, (*C: ah!*) and the unforeseen reaction to hear the group move from my text to my self. (as if they could be separated!)

But, and this I think is the key, the triggered emotional reaction to what was happening was of a terrible loneliness and sense of rejection based on being judged and found wanting. In this state what would have been quite small things, such as people not reading the paper, became magnified into further anomie: it comes to me as a desolation / isolation that is difficult to describe. A sort of arid desert.

(Judi: I can see that possibility in you... & some sense of the bearing you have developed to stand firm even there.)

The feeling is a rare but familiar one. It occasionally catches me like this, and I still struggle to see it coming or when it happens to bring my adult self to bear.

It's familiar because it is the same feeling that the ten year old Robert had when he was sent away by his parents to live alone with his elderly grandmother, and go to a strange school. In these circumstances I was lonely and had no one to turn to - that I could access in any event. I learned quickly and deeply to rely on my own resources and that these were to be found in my own imagination not in the outside world: there really was no succour there I concluded at the time. So my adult reaction can be to go diving inward and reject any attempt to help. It sounds a bit trite but it connects for me via an emotional history.

The problem is that offers to help or understand are usually addressed to the 53 old man, but it is a struggle to put him in charge of my emotional self at the time. In short the behaviour that puzzled you could be understood better as those of a hurt and sulky ten year old. Or perhaps more accurately as the struggle of a 53 old man to get to grips with his ten year old boy.

(Judi: Yes maybe and there was a hint of attention seeking pushiness.)

It is made worse by the fact that I feel ashamed to say this: it seems so....well, underdeveloped. That is a self sealing reaction which can make things worse.

K: Underdeveloped? I am struggling with this description. Isn't part of our inquiry about reparation, I wonder? I have been so conscious lately, partly in conversations with colleagues about 'emotion work in consulting', how much of our own behaviour, and inquiry, and how much of what goes on in organisations is intimately connected with deep and early hurt, rejection, or whatever it felt like at the time... As consultant I am beginning to appreciate my own 'hurt' as a place from which I can meet people and appreciate their need for 'reparation' (Klein talks about that)... I can't quite write this well, again, find myself hoping we can have a conversation. For now I'd just like to say, don't take the pruning shears to this too quickly. It seems terribly important to me that you find a way to work with this that feels right for you, but I'd worry if – for fear of turning CARPP into a psychotherapy session – you omitted this deep reflection altogether. I think it is important in your inquiry...

My non contribution to time keeping was I think made up of two things. One the sabotage of the ten year old punishing the authority who had rejected him (sounds childish, but it is if you see what I mean!). The other thing is that a part of me knew that the way out was to speak about this so I kept hanging on to moments of contact. When you spoke about CF and VM you were heading in my direction in more ways than one: chronologically you were heading to meet my emotional self, and also by revealing a bit of yourself you were showing me the way in another sense. But then we needed to get on.....and I couldn't quite bring myself to show the need that would have arrested everyone's attention. This is the "sought conversation" I was not seeking very well but which you intuited. My occasional references to nobody being interested in me or to people judging me I think need to be understood as me struggling towards a different sort of contact.

(C: This is how I intuited that part of the conversation.)

I have omitted a paragraph here, which is about others who I have not asked permission to talk about and who I do not wish to approach on this issue. I should not have included it in the original mail.

I hope you are not to dismayed by this. I realise we are not a therapy group, and I also realise you are not my mum!

(Judi: No, & I could be a generational sibling with similar patterns I've worked on.....)

My inquiry, which I think is the "justified" part of this, is to investigate how this idea of myself impacts my adult functioning, and to hold the theory of myself open to investigation and modification. *(Judi: Yes)* I am on the case here as I think is revealed in every piece of writing I have shown you.

(C: Sounds here like you are justifying/defending yourself.)

The shame that surrounds these reactions is a kind of self sealing bind and the first barrier to inquiry. I couldn't break through with you all when we met but I will continue to investigate ways to do this that are not self obsessive in the group. The challenge is to bring the inquiry into calmer waters and not only have it in the middle of a hurricane.

(Judi: Or find disciplines that help you in the hurricane too. Don't think that you can calm it before you get there. C: eye? That's a calm place)

Judi I have just gone over this again to make sure I am not saying anything I would be reluctant to say to the whole group . And there isn't. I have an idea to publish our correspondence to the group as part of my offering to our next session. Do you think this is ok? An alternate would be for me to include my note to you as part of a piece of writing I offer. Do you have an opinion? Part of my thinking is not to lumber you with private stuff which cannot be shared in the group as I feel this would place you in an unfair position given the nature of our task / relationship.” (I sign my name to end the e mail.)

I would like to make one or two observations about my response to Judi before copying the response from Judi that closed this exchange. First is to notice that I respond to Judi in writing, which is the mode in which she first approached me. It is also a mode with which I felt comfortable; I was already beginning to present myself as a writer within this part of my life as a doctoral student. Nevertheless, Judi could have phoned me or asked to meet but she did not – she wrote, and in my response I pick up the form also choosing to write rather than to speak. With hindsight this seems a significant choice that helps to reinforce my existing inclination. After this e-mail exchange, there is a rapid acceleration in the volume of the written production I offer to supervision. Would it have been the same if Judi and I had met for a conversation about this incident?

I notice some of the qualities of the encounter with myself as they are noted in the mail. The way I seem to be caught by surprise by the loneliness that arises within me; I “struggle to see it coming”, “I am caught by it”. Also by

the way it seems to have insubstantial cause; the triggering event is not so significant for the others present for whom my behaviour remains a bit of a mystery. My feelings are troubling to me; also they do not arrive with a clearly defined meaning. I struggle to understand them as I respond to Judi's mail. The feeling, and the memories with which they are associated, are not as sharply articulated as in thought; they exist as a "sort of arid desert". In this sense the bodily state is more like an emotional resonance of loneliness; a suffusion of feeling, a sensual state, a colouring of my existence. I use these words to try to capture the vague power of what was arising. It is this vague, and in this sense "silent", power that I then seek to articulate in words/thought. What does this 'silent power' mean?

When I try to account for its meaning with a story of my childhood I seem to be recognizing that something significant is happening to me. It is this feeling of significance that now interests me more than the particular explanation I provide. In what way is this significant for me? I seem to have understood that, however mysteriously, something profound was happening and that it did have something to do with my sense of identity and my relationships with other people in this situation. What is observed by Judi, and felt by myself, is present on the surface, in this situation, due to this coincidence of circumstances; also I feel it as touching the depths of my experience of my life. I believe that this feeling of significance had profound consequences for the whole doctoral endeavor, which kind of shifts on its foundations through the attention paid to feeling and identity in this chapter. At least with hindsight that is how it now appears; an advantage of the backward glance.

Focusing on the vividness and felt significance of this experience connects it to the Sparrow Hawk in the garden and my emotional responses to Alice's illness: memory wrapped in feeling. Here though the feeling surge is complexified by its social setting. I am also, for example, having to work with feelings of shame that I could call myself a process consultant, espousing how I "say where I am when I get stuck", and then stumbling into this place of lonely introspection. These would all constitute reasons for saying "No" to this arising, and no doubt there would be strategies that would at least tuck it quickly away, and maybe also ways of deadening myself as a form of protection at ever feeling like this. But my choice is to say "Yes", and I can see how this leads me into "complying with" what arises. As Judi says I show some "*of the bearing you have developed to stand firm even there*" – in this difficult place. Being overwhelmed by an upsurge of feeling does recur throughout the doctorate. Searching for disciplines, such as writing, that will enable me to weather the storm does become a theme for me. C's comment above (C: "eye? That's a calm place.") might also be seen as prescient, in the sense that I think I do start to find a secret way into the eye of the storm, as I open to what comes and allow it to wash over, and through, me by detaching myself slightly from the experience, while still staying in touch with it: the paradoxical movement of which I have already spoken - moving away in order to get closer

Judi responds to me with this last mail in the sequence on the 27th March 2002, the day following my mail to her.

Dear Rob

I have enjoyed reading this. I have felt connected to you reflecting on that meeting and on your sense of self. And so I have felt another little step in getting to know you.... and there are alignments here, including the age bit. I was sorry not to be able to have that conversation about GM and VM more fully and indulgently!

I paused a bit over the paragraph 'I hope you are not too dismayed by this', although the sentiments it portrays are fine with me. It is not that easy to know what is in and out of research, in and out of therapy and so on....And CARPP6 is not a therapy group and I am not your mother. And your mother now is not that person back then (I have learnt this well - enough? – with my own mum and what I hold her back then responsible for).

Last week at the meeting, I was working intellectually alongside the dynamics, finding the living explorations in connection and disconnection (my shorthand, so much more there) interesting. One way I seek to accompany my more affective learning self on its journeys is by also working the channel of 'what is this about?' - like the persisting and desisting debate, which referred to life choice questions as well as more overt inquiry and ideas. I feed that channel with reading and discussion, and see the relating process. So, I wonder if that might work for you.

And I have no problems with the possibility that at this life stage unaddressed parts of ourselves can emerge to be explored, now the resources are more available, lest they become unreconciled forever parts of ourselves. And there is no reason at all why these might not be part of the territory of a PhD. (C: Yeah!)

Interesting that the gossiping form [*My "experiment with the process of the Group which at one stage I referred to as permission to gossip"*] set up so much so early. And the 'consequences' give some indications about what we are asking when we invite people to learn, and they really start to do so and go out beyond comfort zones, or into inner stuff....

I wanted to write back to you about your note.

Now to your question. I am happy for you to share the correspondence with the group. I think it will be interesting to see how you frame and narrate that, because I guess people will want to be invited in in some way, not have it all presented as a projective 'test' - I mean like rorschach.

Must go, downtown to eat and go to the theatre. And unwind a bit for a few days easter break, it's been a long term.

Best Judi

In this exchange Judi continues to show herself, and to offer connection, as she inquires into what was going on for me; she speaks of her own mother

and she offers an intimate image –being a “generational sibling”. At the same time she does not retreat or shrink from saying what she sees and feels; she notices a certain “attention seeking pushiness” for example. In so doing she encourages me to work through again what was appearing for me and to articulate it – with courage. I believe she is showing me a way of being with a difficult experience. In so doing she also indicates to me that the difficulty is part of the experience (she tells me not to expect to “calm the hurricane” for example), and she also says that she can see in me “some sense of the bearing you have developed to stand firm even there” which reassures and strengthens me.

Reflecting on and consolidating my experience

When I was writing this part of the thesis in October 2006, the emphasis being placed in the exchange of e mails on how I handled myself in a difficult experience, helped confirm the feeling that I remember having at the time (in 2002), that I had quite quickly, and in a way that was not fully comprehensible, made a problem of my life. It is hard for me to read the e-mail exchange without evoking again the slightly desperate feeling that suddenly the ground had shifted under me. I use the word “suddenly” advisedly because it did feel sudden – like a figure ground switch. I had entered the programme with great confidence, and the early adventures around my consulting work had been fun. Now I felt a kind of pit opening up. At the time I was confused, and, as I say I can still re-call this uncomfortable confusion and bleakness. Yet, with hindsight, re-creating my existence as a problem did lead into a radical review and provide the motivational energy for what was to follow.

Later I would come across something Merleau-Ponty said to his students at the College de France, which helped me make some (positive) sense out of the incident and the following e-mail exchange I have just described. Merleau-Ponty writes that when we “properly” enter into inquiry then we discover a deepening cycle, which leads us “to question further, more deeply,*life itself has become a problem*”⁷ (Silverman, 1988: 12. Emphasis added). He goes on to say that this does not damage our life but enriches it “there is no misanthropy and hatred for life, but rather another love, a ‘new happiness’ - ‘Abyss’ and ‘regeneration’– Second innocence” Although I did not have this work to hand in 2002 I wonder now (October 2006) if in some way I was intuitively in search of ‘regeneration’ and ‘rebirth’? The language is a little flowery and a trifle excessive for my English tastes, but it is also bold and, for me at least, inspirational. It lends dignity to my confusion.

In her e-mail exchange with me Judi had recognized me for working “within the hurricane” and for having some qualities that enabled me to keep

⁷ “We constantly give birth to our thoughts out of pain, and, like mothers, endow them with all that we have of blood, heart, ardor, joy, passion, agony conscience, fatality.” (Silverman: 10)

inquiring in the face of strong disruptive feelings. Not long before she had written about living “life as inquiry”:

Living life as inquiry means that I hold open the boundary between research and my life generally. Often, therefore, I am aware that a theme I am pursuing in research is also relevant to some other area of my life, and I will seek to work with, rather than suppress, that realization. (Marshall, 1999: 160)

Although Marshall is careful to make the point that inquiries that connect with our life are not bound to be joyless, she also recognizes that they might be testing. She specifies caution about including every moment of our lives saying that, “I do need to know when not to adopt a thoroughly inquiring approach and to leave life ‘unprocessed’” (ibid: 157), and she also warns against making ourselves too “vulnerable” (ibid 160). As I read this I realize that from early in the journey I was prepared to take risks with my vulnerability by showing personal aspects of my life even in an environment where I did not feel totally secure (see the next section). Can we ever feel totally secure? As I reflect on this I connect with the excitement and the feeling of substantialness that comes from inquiring into my life – pushing against my limits. It seems to me that in 2002 I was resting on what I had become, and that this had qualities of being stuck. I was so solid and established that I needed to open up to my feeling states to shake me into new possibility. Part of the inquiry of this thesis is to re visit the events from 2002 to *explore what that motion of opening really means, and how writing might, in some fruitful way, be implicated in the process of exploration.*

The feeling of being set in motion by the events of the spring of 2002 lives with me still. How am I carving kind of a channel through the silt of my life? As I write these words now, in October 2006, my eyes moisten, bodily precursor to a memory of Alice: again I am bathing her tiny new-born body. She is submitting to it all with dignity. I swoosh the water over her and she twitches little arms and legs in response, all the while staring unflinchingly into my face – those eyes, that serious stare, have left their mark on my heart. Was this a first innocence? If it was then I yearn for a second one both for myself and for her. These words cause a gentle tug into tears. My feelings come to me without my deliberate thought, and I struggle to stay with them to write the way sadness is mixed with fond warm memory. I briefly weep and hold my head. I put my pen down and turn again to Merleau-Ponty’s text. I have an uncanny feeling that he has watched this, and that he now speaks to me directly, as he quotes Nietzsche again:

What is required for living is to stop courageously on the surface, to hold on to the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, sounds, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity!*⁸

I collapse into tears again no longer clear whether it is for the memory of Alice, or because I am moved by the idea of “profundity on the surface”. I feel for that other me back in 2002. Not feeling sorry for myself then, but curious about how I seemed to follow a path without being able to articulate that path. In some ways I did seek profundity on the surface by trying to describe in words what was happening and being prepared to stay with the descriptive moment – not offering

⁸ Ibid

interpretation. Let us look together at the evidence for this claim in the next section.

3.2 Written contact....and detachment

In this section I show how I respond to the events described in the previous section by writing a poem, and publishing it to my supervision group. I resist too much interpretive effort, or contact with my group, around the poem. I seem to intuit that I need to both describe what is happening and to hold off from too much interpretation. From the overall story of the thesis, this section shows me withdrawing to attempt to describe the world as I am experiencing it. To do this I step back from interpretation and in doing so also step back from others. The two movements: stepping back from my own interpretative habit and from others seem to be necessarily correlated.

The tone of the poem is still heavily introspective but it also shows consciousness of the loneliness that accompanies my self orientation.

Before discussing the poem I frame it in the context of an overall surge in the volume and intensity of writing that occurred at this time in the Spring of 2002. How is my writing seeking “profundity on the surface” through a certain kind of articulation and sharing with others?

I channel myself into writing

It's October 2006, pour tea from a small blue tea pot into a pale cup decorated with the painting of an aubergine, take a sip of the tea, and carefully place the cup beside my lap top. I glance down at the keyboard, then up to the window. It is a dark early morning – still forty minutes or so before sunrise - then I start to tap slowly on the laptop, using the index and forefinger of each hand in an untutored and slightly clumsy fashion.

In the year that followed March 2002 I produced twelve pieces of writing constituting 130 pages of text, some of which were re-worked and re-submitted to supervision. All of this production was commented on by my supervisor, and sometimes by other members of the supervisory group. This was three times as much writing as had been offered in the first year of the programme. In this way the incident with the supervision group occurs at a time when I was engaged in an acceleration of the volume of writing I was producing. As I will explain this incident if anything supported this encouragement by reinforcing a kind of temporary alienation from the group.

In addition to increasing in volume my writing it becomes markedly *more personal* in tone and content, presenting a focus on more intimate aspects of my life as well as on what was idiosyncratic or different about myself. I seemed to be making an effort to present myself in a fuller and more rounded way to my group: as a husband, and a father with my own unique style and character. Personal revelations were not unusual in the supervision Group. What was more unusual was the consistent focus I was starting to bring at this time in 2002 to personal revelation *through writing*. For example M would frequently move us with highly personal stories but produced little writing. C wrote but did not pass all her writing through

supervision as I did. K and S produced writing for all of us periodically, but this was less frequent than mine, and increasingly focused on re working specific chapters in their theses (They were further down the road having started their doctoral studies before the formation of this supervision group). The writing produced for the supervision meeting on the 20/21 March was the most personal I had attempted to date. (Another reason why the process I elected to use was inappropriate). Why had I been inclined to see my doctoral journey as such an *intimately revealing* written journey? Why I was focussing on writing as the chosen vehicle to explore complex identity issues? Why had I not just raised my feelings directly with the group?

In part this is a function of my feelings towards the Supervision Group at this time. I was feeling distanced from them by certain aspects of my experience:

- One of the group members and I had a difficult relationship that we did not seem able to resolve on our own; all attempts a discussion seemed to make matters worse. This difficulty was left over from the MSc programme where we had been fellow students. I seemed to evoke in her all that was wrong with white middle aged, middle class men, while I felt resentful that I was being stereotyped.
- There were no men in the group at this time. There had been two other men at the beginning but one had left quite quickly while the other had gradually lapsed into not coming very often. This left five women and myself. I felt my minority status and this confirmed a feeling I had of being stereotyped – de personalised. Also the departure of the men from the group contributed for me a slightly fractured feeling to the group.
- Two of the group members (S and K) had transferred into our group from other supervision groups and were at a much more advanced stage in their doctorates than the rest of us – they were destined to complete, and to leave the group before those who were starting, as it were, from scratch. While not a major point it contributed for me to this “slightly fractured feeling”.
- Attendance at the group was slightly erratic, partly for the reasons given above. On the day in which the following incident unfolds Judi, myself, and fellow students C, M and S were present. K was not present on this day but she was otherwise attending regularly.

One consequence of this situation was that I was constantly disappointed by my own performance in the group at this time, and this just confirmed my feeling of discomfort. I felt stuck and I felt unable to follow my advice by simply saying where I was. I realise this might give rise to a wry smile: here is the process consultant unable to do for himself what he recommends to others. One of the reasons I keep returning to this situation is because of the lesson it gave me in what it really means to be totally embroiled in a situation. I’m in this, contributing to it fully and unable, apparently to break out. At one level it is one of the most significant learning experiences from the programme: at once sobering and gripping. Later when I’m trying to grasp what it means to be truly a part of a life world then I think back to myself, the supposedly skilled process consultant stuck like this. Even now

as I write these words in March 2007 I can easily re invoke the feeling of being tangled up – a slightly deadening loss of agency. I go and make myself a cup of tea!

This situation was to gradually resolve itself not, on this occasion by being directly addressed, but by the whole group just moving on. In my transfer from MPhil to PhD in January 2005 I wrote this about this time:

An important part [of my relationship to the doctorate] was the complex way I was interacting with my Supervision Group. At the time [2002-2003] I was the only regularly attending man in the group and I was having to tackle interesting challenges about how to find a place from where I could draw support. Most unhelpful was a tendency to see myself as carrying personally the burden of responsibility for the oft-cited failings of men in the world – especially middle-aged white men. Much of my writing at the time is an effort to establish my humanity in the eyes of the group (and myself) – to show that I love and am loved, that I am a person as well as the cipher I was choosing to interpret my self as. Gradually I came to articulate some of this to the group directly, and of course found that this shifted the ground of the group and of my self assessment in the PhD process. Buoyed up by a collective move towards more reflection on our own ways of going on, we have come to know each other differently, and we have come to talk differently with each other: out of this I have found more nourishment with my colleagues. This has slowly released me to bring a healthier energy to locating the source of my interest in the doctoral journey.

My perceived difficulties with my supervision group intersected my gathering interest in writing as a form of expression as I described in the last chapter. The choice I made was a determination to write, to write personally and to share the writing with my group. My choice was to not (at the time) address my feelings of alienation from the group directly, but to approach thoughtfully and more obliquely (than directly confronting them in the group for example), by offering a fuller, or at least a different, reading of myself. Literally a reading! Let us move onto examine how I worked with these feelings in writing, and what exactly it was that was offered. This will also involve examining what was offered back by supervisor and fellow students as a form of dialogue ensues around my text. In so doing I will also illustrate my experiments with the process of writing. Let us start by returning to the question, what happened after the e-mail exchange?

I write a poem

The following paragraphs introduce the poem I wrote, explain how I handled it at the time it was published in 2002 and subject it to retrospective analysis. I resist interpreting the poem focusing on the descriptive effort.

As I tried to make sense of my confused understanding immediately after the incident in my group I wrote a poem about my experience, which was published as a part of the paper I sent to them and then refined and re-issued on the 1st May 2002. Looking back on the whole sequence of events I'm inclined to see the poem as a continuation of my dialogue with Judi and my

supervision group – the dialogue that starts with the e mail exchange. I offer this thought as a framing device for the reading that will follow. Can we see a continuity of themes? How is the poetic form supporting their communication and further exploration? For example I have spoken of a feeling of loneliness in the e-mail does this poem now constitute a more effective way of *showing* that lonely feelings? I wrote the poem on the 26th and 27th March 2002.

Palace

*A cool breeze rustles through the palace of my being
Setting ajar the doors of long forgotten rooms
Where the dust rises in gentle, urgent clouds
Among the decaying scrolls of memory.
A shivering disturbance to nights ordered emptiness
Reverberates through the palace
As in the distance a door bangs a lonely beat
In sad accompaniment to the whispering cold.
What is written here in faded script?
Tales of warmth, hope and desire
From a time of different songs and warmer breezes.
Should someone come and clean the rooms?
Open the shutters, let in the light?
No! Who could read the stories now -the script is ancient, the meaning
lost.
And the palace stirs to a new day's gentle hum
And will soon be warmed by present sun (March, 2002).*

(Judi: Moves me. Speaks to me)

(K: Is the meaning also made, again and again, as we visit those old rooms?)

At the time I was ambiguous about offering any thinking through of the poem. I offered no explanation or interpretation of the poem at all in “Experimenting With Accounts” the written piece in which the poem was published.

Creating a gap between description and analysis

When I followed up with *Afterthoughts* on the 7th May 2002 I did make some observations, which I will re produce and comment on. Here is what I said in “Afterthoughts”.

I notice that I offered no reflections at all on the... poem I simply felt reluctant to explain what I had created, wanting it to stand as a statement on its own. On reflection I think I could be more helpful in two ways. These are both context points rather than explanations of what the poem “means” to me *which I would rather not try to explain*: it seems here that it should stand (or not) on its own. (*Afterthoughts*, 2002: 1. Emphasis added).

I am mindful here of the discussion in the Introduction to the thesis about the difference between action research and artistic writing generally. You will remember that I suggested (following Van Manen) that one way to

distinguish between the two forms was that the action researcher accepted the challenge to explicate, whereas the artist was happier to leave the meaning latent as potency, rather than realisation. The 2002 commentary, added by “Afterthoughts” shows a reluctance to *think through* the implications of the poem, and a desire to stay with the description. I wonder if there might be circumstances when this would be acceptable for an action researcher? I can readily think of two: one would be where the action researcher wants to try and express something inchoate as part of a process of reaching for understanding, but if there was to be no explicit inquiry why publish? The second is where the action researcher publishes as an invitation to second person inquiry, as an invitation to help with the process of sense making. In respect of this poem I publish, but leave my audience uncertain about whether they are invited to join me in any sense making process. At this stage separating myself from others and distancing my description and interpretation seem to be correlated.

The implicit question in 2002 (the unasked question we could say – see chapter one) is, will providing some explanation of the poem spoil its contribution/impact as something expressive and feeling full? This suggests a separation between thought and feeling together with a concern that they might *at this moment* be incompatible. There seems here to be a desire to keep thought at bay so that feeling can emerge and be appreciated. Opening a space for feeling. I say as much when I go on in “Afterthoughts” to say:

..... whatever else the poem is it is also an experiment with form in an inquiry based account. Among other things I’m interested with how the poem does or does not contribute to the account both for me and for you.
 (Judi: *does speak some of the sense of the piece in another mode, more feeling – evocative.*) (After thoughts: 2)

At no time do I speak of “us” or of any joint processes. I speak of “me” and “you” separately. In the next section I will quote my supervisor and a fellow student both speaking explicitly about *not knowing whether they are being invited to comment*. It would seem at least plausible that my reluctance to *think through* the implications of the felt state, also amounts to a reluctance to enter into dialogue. In saying I don’t want an interpretation I also seem to be saying that I *don’t want contact*, or that I want to carefully modulate the contact. So can a publication under such reservations amount to a process of action research, or is it reserved for the poet in his garret?

Well on the one hand I do like Van Manen’s no nonsense distinction between art and social science, but I am also aware that the boundary is becoming increasingly porous. For example the latest edition of the Handbook of Qualitative Research includes a new article by Kathleen Stewart on “Cultural Poesis” in which she describes herself as seeking to describe felt emergent moments. I am drawn to the way that she describes what she is doing:

..... the writing here is committed to speculations, experiments, recognitions, engagements, and curiosity, not to demystification and

uncovered truths that snap into place to support a well-known picture of the world. I ask the reader to read actively – to follow along, read into, imagine, digress, establish independent trajectories and connections, disagree. ... I suppose the writing gropes towards embodied affective experience. (Stewart, 2005: 1027)

Stewart is unworried about having direct dialogue around her expression. She offers it out in the hope that it will stimulate the reader. By focusing on description – on attentional discipline- and not on uncovering or “demystification” is she providing a kind of response to the statement offered by Merleau-Ponty at the end of the previous section: what is required for living is to stop courageously on the surface?

I believe I can see Stewart paying attention to the fine-grained detail of the moments when things emerge and situations unfold, as being the *first movement* in inquiry. Things are emerging and unfolding for her. She stays with the sensual moments when her body experiences the acts of emergence. She defers her sense making in the same way that a gourmet will defer eating for tasting. In this move of staying sensually present she moves her writing closer to the source of emergence, whilst distancing or deferring her own sense making; in this double moment of detailed accounting, and refusal to speak she seems to me to open a space, and to stay profoundly on the surface. Am I intuitively trying to return to the first movement of inquiry as a way of reconfiguring myself?

I respond to this question with an image borrowed from yoga I have of helpfully stretching out, and deliberately slowing down a process. *Is it through stretching out and slowing down the movement from sensual encounter to sense-making that I can I honour affect?* This question seems to build on the type of understanding that was present when feeling states have been considered earlier in the thesis: for example the encounter with my daughter’s illness. What is being implicitly asserted in these accounts (think, for example, of the thoughts that surround the Sparrow Hawk incident) is a connection between thought and feeling that is circular in the sense of being mutually reinforcing. What is being added now is more detail about how writing might *open up the sensual encounter*, and also the importance of *not rushing too quickly into sense-making*. I wonder if this could be conceptualised as a development of the idea of writing as a bowl or hollow for emergence? I imagine that writing of the sensual encounter is the moment that opens the writing out – presents it as a bowl within which things, and situations, may be gently held. That the move to sense making is a kind of closing movement in the writing, during which things and situations are taken hold of more firmly?

This section shows how my reluctance to engage in interpretation with my supervisory group is part of a disconnection or detachment from the group. This “disappearance” of myself is not caused by the events of March 2002. These events merely bring to the fore a quality of my way of being in the world. I respond in my own distress by withdrawing – it is a familiar pattern. The poem reveals some of the qualities that constitute this capacity

for withdrawal. Reading the poem now it seems to me to resonate with three aspects of myself: a) loneliness; b) self-centred introspection; and c) a confused desire for contact and “warmth”. These features of my self are present throughout the doctoral journey. I have assembled into Exhibit 3.1 (below) examples from three periods during the research journey to illustrate this point. The feedback adds to the poem, observations on the consequences for others of being who I am. The painful last sentence from my wife, and the irritated outburst from my colleague C- “what is your purpose?” are particularly noticeable to me now. These qualities of myself do not leave me during the thesis – there is no “cure”. However, I claim that I do find a way of beginning to use my “disappearing” self in a more generative and healthy way. In part this has to do with transforming disappearance into a healthier detachment, which I then ally to a capacity for describing what is happening for me. The discovery of a new approach to writing was a significant start on the road to re-working my way of being in the world. In the following chapters of the thesis I will show how my expressive capacities are given further encouragement by the discovery of phenomenology, and how this changes the way in which I see myself in the world of others.

In the following sections I will provide further evidence to show that from the disturbances of mid 2002 I began to create some space within which to start to address fundamental aspects of how I saw myself as a person of and in the world.

EXHIBIT 3.1: FEEDBACK ON DISAPPEARANCE

November 2002. Feedback from colleagues in CARPP

First respondent: I would not have said that you were not advocating your needs but that the way you did it was a bit more *attention seeking* sometimes. Not in a highly negative way but it was multiple. You were asking to be affirmed in a way that was sometimes difficult to do in the space that you chose to do it. The image (Pause) I have the feeling that this assertiveness before was held, and held, and held, whereas this last two times it feels as if this assertiveness has been made and held and released, and made and held and released. And that feels freer to respond to. And in that way before I would have said you advocated for what you wanted, *but at some process level or energetic level I was not sure what you wanted but now I feel I am clearer about what you want because of the energy phase in that*"

Second respondent. When you start to speak you hold my energy and I'm listening. Then I'm waning after a while, and *I'm wondering where is this going, what is he saying and then it's gone. Dissipated. I've lost attention. My attention is not as it was when you started.* I don't know why. (Conversation me and the world, 12th November 2002:9-10),

November 2006. Feedback from Bridget Farrands

You have become more patient. More interested in what others have to say. Even if you don't agree with them. It's a powerful mode of contact with others.

You are more forthright with clients. Holding your authority more clearly about what you believe. Taking a stance and being able to defend a stance in ways they often find compelling.

Give very full attention – very affirming thing to be on the receiving end of.

Disappearing psychologically/emotionally – I have found this hard to bear. I have disentangled myself from this.

January 2005. Comments written on "Body and Process" paper by fellow student C

Ideas – what practical outcomes? For what end? Your learning? What do differently? *Making a difference with your clients? To what end? Where in your life?*

3.3. Voyeur?

Feeling, identity, emergence and writing weave together in this section preparing a rich ground for attempts at sense making as the section progresses. This weave also provides the ground for a surge of synthesis, which comes emotionally to the fore as the section concludes. In the journey of the thesis this section shows me beginning to re-configure my conception of my own identity as 2002 moved into 2003.

The section also shows me continuing to visit my old texts from 2002/3 and so addresses the question, *what is the current value of my own past productions; what value is there in re-visiting my own texts with a fresh eye?* The attempt to describe and also re-visit, or re-think, produces a layering effect where what was important for me in 2002 is set alongside, or overlaid with what is important for me now in the autumn of 2006. This adds dimensionality to the inquiry – a kind of thickness arising from the possibility of seeing similarities and differences through time; also I find that it produces overlap and ambiguity, so that separating what was then and what is now becomes difficult and requires particular attention to issues of continuity.

After I had written the poem I included it in a paper with other pieces of personal writing and sent it to my supervision group ahead of our next session on the 15th – 16th May. This included two accounts of aspects of my personal life that I had slightly modified from the draft produced for the supervision session on the 20/21 March 2002.

Offering personal descriptions.

The first extract is from the very beginning of the revised piece of writing I sent out on the 1st May 2002 following the events in my supervision group and the writing of the poem.. At the top of the first page Judi has inscribed two appreciative comments about the paper and then about the first three paragraphs: “V interesting paper”, and “fascinating evocative section” In the same place on her copy C has inscribed:

I found this much more exploratory and much more writing as inquiry than your previous pieces....I like it for being messy and less polished. I like the meandering nature of this....what, in retrospect have you learned from the writing process?

I found myself encouraged by these comments; they helped to shape my next steps and in this way played a part in shaping the direction of the whole journey. As I re-read them I remember a feeling of warmth and a sense that somehow I was heading in the right direction. C’s question also reverberates as I head on with my writing now: what *have* I learned from the writing process?

Also near to the top of the page opposite the first paragraph Judi offers these comments about the overall supervisory process:

Is there enough time for all of us to speak with each other? The evening helps - but Rob away some of it – keeps separate again. (Experimenting with Account: 1)

Clearly Judi is concerned to keep the overall CARPP process useful and available. The comment about me supports and verifies what I have said earlier about my detachment from the group.

1. Prelude

On this Sunday afternoon of March 29th 2002, it finally feels as though Oxford is shaking off another English winter. Well at least that is what the queue to enter the Cold Harbour public dump would seem to indicate. A half-mile line of cars backed up down the approach road to where it intersects the Abingdon Road, all with branches or bags of grass cuttings heaped into the back, or sporting small trailers with the contents of the garden shed finally cleared of a winter's accumulation. Having filled my car to bursting with the pruned detritus of last year's growth there is little point in turning round so I sit there fiddling with the radio, and that's where it happens.....

I start to play with the idea that all this pruning and clearing could be a metaphor for some part of my life at the moment. Well to be more specific with the CARPP part. What if I was to think of doing a bit of pruning and clearing in this particular garden? [K] *Did you think about any shoots /weeds in particular? Or just enjoyed playing with the metaphor?* Do I need to strip out some of the dead or weedy shoots to make way for the strong growth? I turn the radio off, slouch down into the driver's seat, and rein in my awareness, just leaving enough to allow me to clutch slip my way to a safe distance from the forested Audi crawling forward in front of me. (Experimenting with Account: 1)

[C] *“Are you the garden or the gardener or both?”*

[K] *Nice metaphor...gives a sense of new beginnings from a rich past. I notice that you write in the present, whereas I imagine you wrote this afterwards. I like the present tense here.*

This sense K gets that I am making “new beginnings from a rich past⁹” intrigues me afresh: there is, it seems to me, a sense in which I am trying to

⁹I am drawn to a sense of the past having some dignity, some presence of its own. I wonder now if seeing the past only as a source of pain and constraint (a child hood memory that constrains the adult for example) is one way of denying the past its presence and dignity? If I denigrate the memory then I will want to exorcise it. I could allow the memory to turn under my gaze, and to show me other aspects could I not: the love that animated my parents as they sought to stabilise my education in the face of my father's peripatetic life for example?

Merleau-Ponty refers to the past as having the potential to be “mythic”, and K's (historic) voice helps me to see more clearly what this meant. The past is “rich” *because* it has its own presence or stature; because it is not subsumed completely to a present. It might live on with the ambiguity that the passage of time invests in it, but it does live on as a lost moment that was as once as “real” as my present

do precisely this as I re visit my old texts. I am re visiting these old texts together with their commentaries in order to think again - to find “new beginnings”. This brief comment of K’s also combines with C’s question to take me back into the idea of being a gardener, and to think the connection between pruning and the identity issues being raised through my encounter with my supervision group. It seems to me that K goes straight to the purpose of pruning, which is to clear space for things to flourish. The relationship of the gardener to growth in the case of pruning is an indirect one. There is a surfeit of growth; the gardener has to make choices to cut out some of the growth for other growth to flourish. We might focus on the knife, but also on *the space being opened up* by the cutting. We might focus on what is cut away, or on *what then flourishes*. Both of these aspects are present in the way that I start to think about the metaphor as I “slouch down” into my car seat. However the thinking does not, on a current re reading, explore all the potential of the metaphor. I am reminded of the potential lying untapped within the metaphor by the comments of C and K. as I re visit the text.

The metaphor of pruning confers meaning in an open rather than a tightly proscribed way. I’m interested in the developing conversation around the text. I produce it, K comments, and then I publish my original production with K’s text, which provokes another round of comment from C. K reads into the metaphor a connection between “rich past” and “new beginnings”, which raises with C another reading of the metaphor: “are you the garden or the gardener?” Both these annotations supported me in looking afresh at my own text four years after I first produced it. Is this the sense in which metaphor opens a conceptual space; a hollow in which thought comes to be? Is that the space into which K, C and I step when across time we start to think together? (Lakoff and Johnson: 3)¹⁰

moment is now: that surely is the sense in which the past may be “mythic”? If I was to only focus on the hacking away part of “pruning” then I might lose this sense of the richness and resourcefulness of the past that lies hidden in the metaphor of pruning. K helps me to see that the point is to find what has come to us from the past so that it might be given the space to flourish: this is what I take her to mean as this past voice of hers speaks of “new beginnings from a rich past”.

¹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson support the connection between metaphor and concept when they say: “ Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” Gibbs provides a more experiential and embodied aspect when he says, “our understanding of metaphor is inherently constrained by our conceptualisation of experience.” Gibbs, R. W. (1994) *The Poetics of Mind*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press. P 248-249 I take this to mean that it is our embodied experience of our world that invests meaning into metaphor and makes understanding possible. If you do not have a garden or have never pruned then you will not originate the metaphor and you will be unlikely to understand the possibilities inherent in the metaphor. The metaphor occurs to me because I have just been pruning in my garden. K knows enough about gardening to understand the metaphor and to associate it with growth and life not just cutting back plant life. Ambiguity is bound to be present in metaphor because it is inherent in the way our body engages with the world: “Actions, events, and objects are

I want next to consider another aspect provoked for me by the pruning metaphor, which will also engage me with the remaining pieces I wish to quote from this writing of May 2002. This aspect concerns the “cutting out” quality of pruning. What has to be cut away in relation to my identity and is it right to focus on the “cutting out” aspects of pruning?

Opening?

These paragraphs fit into the thesis by showing the way in which the movement initiated by the problems in my supervisory group start to resolve themselves into a self-critique and a distancing from myself. I describe and detach in order to make space.

As I speak about my intimate life in the piece that follows I seem to do it in a rather detached way. The first person style develops something akin to a third person feel. I think that I could be narrating the events in someone else’s life. This is a rather strange thing to say and it’s hard to conclusively prove it to be true, but what is it that leads me to say this? What I would like to do is to look first at the extracts and then return to the question, then you and I will have something we can look at together. Here is what I wrote for my supervision group. Just to remind you, this was written after the poem, and after the pruning piece. It was sent with those pieces in the paper *Experimenting with Accounts*. I am going to quote quite a long piece, because I want to provide a chance to feel the atmosphere produced by the text as well as see the style being used; this will support me then in what I want to say afterwards.

BLACKBIRD

understood in terms of “experiential gestalts” (i.e. structurally meaningful wholes within experience).” (ibid, 249) In line with the way I have been thinking this thesis I would say that my body experiences the garden and the motions of pruning first as a felt experience, which is a whole experience – it cannot be broken down further without moving into the arena of thought – we cannot fracture our feeling into parts; as a stage towards analysis my mind grasps the embodied experience vaguely as a metaphor. I read Judi as making these connections from her brief note in which she associates metaphor, preparing to do inquiry and the “struggle” to describe experience.

Judi makes a comment here about this piece of writing which helps me to think around the connection between metaphor and concept: “? *reflections on what is going on when we put pen to paper & struggle (metaphorically) to give an account of something.*” Then underneath “*is doing inquiry?*”, and underneath that: “*Feels=preparing to do inquiry rather than doing it – so how is & isn’t the writing inquiry?*” The quite dense cluster of questions seems to me now to connect writing, metaphor and preparing to do inquiry. Am I in this piece “preparing”? Is this the significance of the metaphor – that it opens a preparatory space for in inquiry? How is the metaphor of pruning the opening of a conceptual space? I think also the metaphorical content of the poem, and reflect on the possibilities here.

Outside on the lawn two magpies forage for nest building equipment. Amazingly black and white in the dappled sunlight, pecking at leaves and dead plant life. “One for sorrow, two for joy.” Let’s hope so. Now a black cat slipping under the bushes, but in a flash of monochrome the birds are gone.

It’s a Sunday morning, the 7th April [2002] to be precise. Bridget is at the gym; no one else will be up for a while yet. I have the quiet house to myself.

I woke this morning to the sound of birdsong, finding myself spooned around Bridget. I pull myself closer slipping my left arm over her left arm, resting my hand on her right shoulder. She murmurs and nestles her backside into my groin. I put my lips to her left shoulder and smell her smell. The familiar body. Is this as close as I can get physically? I keep quite still, wanting no movement at all. Feeling the contact as a re-charge of energy. A precious, vulnerable moment. Vulnerable because I know it will go if we move. I notice her breathing. She has a different rhythm to me, faster on the out breath and slightly quicker in overall pace. I synchronise my breath with hers. She murmurs and rolls on to her back. I notice my irritation like a buzz of electricity in my head. “Gym” she says shortly followed by “time?” I lift my left hand from her shoulder and peer at my watch “five past eight” I respond. “Mmmm. Nice here..... Gym!” she says. I nibble her left shoulder. “Gym” she says. I roll to the left disengaging my limbs from hers as she rolls to the right out of our bed. I curl back into the warm space she has left, and my mind floats free in one of those early morning reveries.

K comments: Dear Rob, I noticed my hesitation in reading the above. It is a beautiful description of an intimate moment. And I know that my hesitation comes from knowing you and Bridget (if this was a part of a novel I’d just enjoy it, without scruples) but knowing you only at ‘the periphery’ as it were. It feels a little like peering curiously into someone’s house, just to get a sense of the layout, and suddenly finding myself looking at a domestic scene, unexpectedly... and feeling an intruder against my intention... And I find myself thinking of your pruning metaphor again and thinking that this seems to me what usually get pruned in accounts I have read from you in the past. Curious.

C comments: I didn’t feel that hesitation. I liked the everyday ordinariness of the moment.

[My attention] goes to two months previously. In the doctor’s surgery: cold gloved hands prodding and stretching the skin of my torso and then examining my scalp. “Well most of this is nothing to worry about but the skin is damaged” he says. “Should I see a specialist I inquire?” “Well if you don’t trust my opinion...” So then I’m apologising “no, no, not at all” at the same time as I wonder about why I’m apologising. “Have you been exposed to a lot of sun?” he asks. I remember and recollect for him my adolescence on the beaches of Aden, airlifted out with other school kids to spend holidays with our parents. Except we never saw our parents from one day to the next, nor wore anything other than a swimsuit as far as I can recollect. That was “Revolver” time I think. “Eleanor Rigby” and wasn’t “Doctor Robert” on that LP? I resist the temptation to try and hum it, and Doctor Green intrudes: “Has this one got any darker recently?” he asks prodding a mark on my temple. “Just a bit” I say. “Mmm..” he murmurs, returning to his seat and looking at me. I return his gaze expectantly. He reaches into a draw and takes out some sheets of paper, leafing

through them before slipping one out of the bundle for us both to examine. “Efudix cream is used to treat certain skin conditions caused by abnormal cell growth including different types of keratoses, keratocanthoma, Bowen’s disease and some simple skin cancers.” “It’s a mild chemotherapy” he says, just put it on twice in one 24hr spell each week and come back in about three months. Make sure you wear gloves to apply it and only put it on the mark.” “OK” I say giving a good impression of casual – as though this was a conversation about someone else’s body. I make some remark, which I cannot remember, but I remember everything else about that moment. The smell of his plastic gloves, the picture of cows in a field drawn in improbable colours by his seven year old daughter, and his business like briskness. I think of Alice and her drawings of cows. Help me Alice.

I curl over in the bed. That was a first time: a first for that C word and this body to be associated. I wonder if this is the English way? Politely understated. Will they soon be hacking bits out of me leaving me wondering: “Just how did I get to this point? When did it start?” Enough! I roll out of bed and slip on very smelly yoga clothes, peep outside at the sun and wind, grab an extra sweater, and head for the garden. “Tell me that you’ve got everything you need dum di dum, but you don’t get me, and your bird can sing dum di dum”

Body again. Tight, stretched in Samasthiti, seeking control of my breath after the Suryanamaskaras. Regulating the out and the in. Come on! I feel my feet on the mat and stretch out my toes. The wind cools my face. I should move into the standing asanas, but I grab an extra breath. Then my blackbird is on the terrace with me, hopping about pulling away at dead leaves for a nest I presume. I keep my breath rasping through the back of my throat but otherwise hold my body still. The blackbird hops into the flower- bed, grabs some bark and flies off. I jump my feet shoulder width apart, reach down and grab my big toes..... (Experimenting with Account: 6) (I have omitted the next paragraph)

K comments: “Again, I get to meet a different Rob here, from the one I’ve so far met at CARPP, and I can’t but notice my reticence. I also know that I am perhaps more sensitised because I have just come back from John’s father’s funeral, and so families and their personal histories are a little raw at the moment. Your very personal account makes me aware of my ‘state’ at the moment, and all the memories I’ve been through in the last few days, including memories of my mother and her slow and painful demise. And I find myself wishing I could have a conversation with you ... not sure if this is of any interest, but thought I’d share it in the spirit of shared inquiry.”

In my original text the first four paragraphs take up a whole page. Ringing this page like a picture frame are my Supervisor’s comments; picture the commentary in blue ink starting at the bottom left and spreading to cover every margin:

Judi comments: “Start here. I am engaged in this section enjoying the quality of writing & attention slightly unsure about where you are taking me & how revealing it is ----- whether I am meant to know this then about you as person----- or somehow not acknowledge it.. Just as you have mentioned things about choices & B[ridget] in the past & somehow it is not in the realm where I can ask – “and how are things?” when I would be happy to, if its not too intrusive. And I feel sympathy & concern re the skin cancer & C mentions-----where are the boundaries? How are you creating them? Similar Q to mine after last

CARPP about being self – revealing but not in a situation when I feel I can respond.”

Let me return to the question I posed as I introduced this piece: where do I see detachment here? In response let me acknowledge that I see - and I invite you to see an opening and an offering of myself. It makes sense does it not to see this as evidence of trying to show a broader me? In so doing I am introducing into the inquiry group other aspects of myself. Moreover I do so with quite intimate material do I not? My wife’s backside in my groin, smelling her, synchronising our breath; then the close description of the doctor’s surgery; it all seems to be shouting out, “hey I’m human too”. But. There are I think elements of detachment here also. I think I can see myself offering and holding back, opening and closing, connecting and detaching. How am I detaching and from what? How is this dynamic a dynamic of inquiry?

Most obviously I am offering this piece without any encouragement to my group to get involved. There is no framing, no explanation of why these pieces are being produced, and no invitation to enter. As a result they feel unsure about whether they should enter to comment or to ask questions. They are being in some sense pushed, as K notices, into the position of voyeurs. Kept on the outside looking in. The obvious point about this is that it speaks to all the uncertainties of my relationship with the group. Yes, it does, but there is I believe more. What?

Looking in on my own life

Re reading the piece I am left with an uncomfortable feeling. The piece seems to me to also place me in an ambiguous relationship with the writing. The description of being in bed and of being in the surgery pays a lot of attention to describing what is happening almost as if I was a voyeur myself, watching from outside of the window, or sitting in a corner of the surgery. As I have said it is not the whole story. The piece does seem to flicker into a different life when, for example, I start to describe what I feel for my wife as we nestle into each other. However, there are whole strings of unaddressed questions littering the text to do with my felt responses. If I am so cool and detached about what the doctor says why the “Help me”? Was I also afraid? Why do I not say this directly? Why does the turn to first person direct speech (the “Help me, Alice”) feel such a jolt? Why do I leave all the questions about how serious etc unanswered? Then what is really going on in bed? You probably are not much interested, but am I? It is as if I am *playing with the idea* of being in bed with Bridget. As I have said the point is not completely convincing when argued like this because the writing does have its moments; nevertheless, as I read it again, I am left with a feeling that I am describing something in large part (i.e. it is significant) from the outside. Why does this seem important now?

Let me return to K’s metaphor of the voyeur. A voyeur would be someone who deliberately looks in onto someone else’s private life. K complicates it slightly with her example as she describes looking in for one purpose (to see

the room layout) and coming across something unexpected that induces some further feeling state – it might be shame at having looked in the first place, or it might, I guess, be something more akin to fascination laced with guilt. The feelings of “guilt” and “shame” seem to me to arise from the observer feeling their own strangeness. They do not have permission, they are prying; perhaps the other being observed would not want to be seen like this? As I look again at the metaphor I connect with the other essential aspect of being a voyeur, which is the strong image of an outsider looking in. Thinking with K now encourages me to turn a quizzical eye towards myself: how am I voyeur to myself? It seems to me that the offering *onto the page* of these aspects of myself is an important aspect here. I publish them and as I do I detach them from myself. I could have spoken them in conversation and this would have had some of the effect of opening myself up; however a conversation would keep me in closer contact with what ensues. I am present to correct “misunderstandings” etc. The *writing* of these intimate pieces seems to place them at a greater distance from myself – to open more of a gap. They float into the world beyond my ability to control how they are received – in this sense they are more of an offering because they are written. Why though do I not just keep the description as private writing? What is the significance of publishing? It seems now, as I look back, that it was important that I was going further in giving these intimate elements of myself an independent status. Through *publication* they acquire more of an independence, which enables a more detached stance towards myself. Is this the sense in which I can become voyeur to myself; in which writing helps me to detach from aspects of myself?

There is another aspect of being a voyeur that I would like to return to in a moment, but before I do I want to reinforce the theme of detachment from identity a little more. The seeing of myself from a distance that I have described above seems to me to correlate with an increased awareness that I am not transparent to myself; that my reasons may be only partially known to myself. I have spoken of this already in the thesis, most recently when examining the exploratory aspects of the poem, which gains its epistemological value from the fact that it expresses more of the ambiguous state that precedes clear understanding (“...not the kinds of things you can get your hands on or wrap your mind around, but things that have to be literally tracked to begin the labour of knowing.” (Stewart: 1040-1041)). If my reasons were clearly understood before I acted then there would be no need for self-reflection. I would understand exactly why I acted as I did because, in this sense, I am already detached from myself. I do not know myself and cannot completely eliminate the ambiguous penumbra that surrounds my action in the world. Part of the reason for this ambiguity around my own reasons is that that my behaviour is not completely a function of my own reason. As this thesis has shown I am coming to a fuller understanding of the way in which *my reason is entwined within my relationships and my situation*. As my experiences with my movement to tears or to poetry have shown, and as Merleau-Ponty and Rilke have helped to illuminate, this situation includes a feeling-full connection to a world that far exceeds my comprehension. In this period of the doctoral journey I come

to glimpse *how I am a creature of the world and not of "myself"*. This growing realisation stimulates my search for resources that might help me to understand this more fully.

A part of this is to turn away from myself as a relatively fixed identity and begin to see myself as thoroughly situated with others. Phenomenology helps me to bring together the understanding that whilst things emerge *for me* they are also *for themselves*; have a dignity and independence of their own. I wonder if an intuition about this is what leads me to keep reporting my glances up out of the window and the natural world I see there? Does some part of me recognise a home there with the blackbird as well as here in with my "I"? Not only recognise it, but somehow know that this will be in some way important? Writing this is accompanied by a quite small but significant surge of feeling; my eyes moisten slightly, and I have feeling of warm realisation that sends my clumsy fingers punching away at an increased rate. Is this a felt accompaniment to a moment of synthesis within the thesis? I am for me, for you and for the world. I cannot know myself fully. To believe that I could is to not understand my situation. To believe that I am a fixed entity to be uncovered would be to similarly misunderstand. What is discovered is not a failure of understanding (i.e. of self) but a realisation of being a part of others in a social world, and of nature also. In a deeply significant and profound way I am not and cannot be alone; to believe such a thing possible is to commit an ontological error. There, I have kind of splurged it out of me! I have raced to the end. An end I did not know until this moment of short sentences; adamant advocacy. What does it mean to push this out, fighting back the tears?

I have to go on and unpick some of this. Explain it. What do these punched out statements mean to me? How have they arisen from my inquiry? How will they become incorporated into practice. To do this I need to go deeper into how Merleau-Ponty helped me to understand my situation in a cultural and a natural world by introducing me to phenomenology; also to show how this very movement towards understanding was an intertwined movement that involved friends and colleagues, feeling as well as thought. I feel impelled by my commitment to action research to struggle to show and tell the journey – the process – as well as the destination; and in so doing to acknowledge what is implicit - that "destination" is in fact a "way point" on a continuing journey. I notice this late coming feeling of synthesis in the previous paragraph. What came next in my journey as 2002 moved into 2003/4 suddenly makes even more sense.

3.4. Writing/re-approaching others

This closing section shows that my move towards detachment was not the only direction my inquiry was taking during 2002/3. The same descriptive attentional disciplines I was using to help me detach from a particular self-configuration, and fixed relationships, were also being turned towards trying to gain a richer conception of how others were also situated in the world. How could I connect with others from a distance? How could I break free from a narrow conception of others and see them more in their total situations?

What are the revelatory possibilities of writing when it comes to other people or events. I want to show my technique of showing myself through my writing being deployed in writing about others. I am going to use writing to try to evoke feeling; to try to enter the feeling space of another. When I first wrote this in the Autumn of 2002 I referred to it as “projection”, but now I wonder at the choice of words. “Projection” implies that I am just putting into the other what I am myself. The ontological stance that would go with this would be one of separation: I am a separate being who cannot know other directly. I can only know by analogy as it were – which is surely what projection is? This seems to me now to be a partial truth; moreover a dangerously partial truth. Why is it partial and why is it dangerous?

It seems partial because it denies or backgrounds, at least, what we share. Merleau-Ponty will have more to say to me about this in the next chapter. For now we can notice that we share certain physical relations to the world: up, down, front back for example. We take these for granted but they must surely feed a shared sense of having a future that diminishes in clarity with distance and a receding “back side” that also diminishes with distance. We also know from our earliest experience that there is a world of common objects with characteristics that others share with us. The hot fire is hot for others as well as me. The crunch of the thunder evokes a touch and an expression from my mother that tells me she understands my startled jump. As a child I wake to see a barn owl on the windowsill. I cry out in fear and the owl takes flight; I know startle and I know flight; and in that moment of flurrying movement the owl seems to know what I know; *we, the owl and I*, know fear. Does “projection” do justice to the shared sense of being in a world together? This is a question that I will investigate more fully in the next chapter. Let me here show how I was working with this theme back in 2002 before I even knew what phenomenology was or had any inkling about Merleau-Ponty.

Describing another

Here is a piece I wrote in November 2002 about a member of my supervision group, who I choose shall remain anonymous in this account. On this occasion my colleague is feeling overwhelmed and shows it by gently crying in the supervision session. She does not want to spend time with us exploring exactly what is going on with her. She just shows herself,

gathers herself, offers a brief explanation (which I don't repeat here), and we all move on. The parts of her situatedness I try to deal with in this brief piece is her feeling self – *the way she is situated in her own body*. Here though is the extract, which shows me trying to *detach myself from myself* by trying to float into the body of another, and in so doing making some attempt to move from my *thought about* my colleague into a *feeling of* her. This is the kind of third person description we might find in a novel where the novelist has the omniscience of being the creator; it is, I submit, unusual to see it in the context of action research.

[She] sat still in the dying light of the January day and began to cry. Gently and with dignity she permitted the tears to flow holding her body and face intact: no shudder or collapse. She held the competing pressure of human and professional interest unto herself, tightening her abdomen, controlling her mouth, feeling the tensions unwinding with liquid pressure, like an old mill wheel. Finally she breathed and offered some explanation to the patient watchers spinning a cause out of her own tiredness within the context of the rich and strong experience of the day. We breathed with her and began to speak. (Writing the Self, and Other: Appendix)

Judi writes alongside this a question. “Any link to street child’s in ability to see all or any of situation?” This referred to another piece of the writing where I had explored this type of writing to try to understand more fully someone (a street child in Sao Paulo), who could not speak to me about the extent of her feeling state¹¹. Judi’s question provokes the connection I made above between not knowing ourselves and not knowing others; to the similarity in the situation of self and other. She reinforces this at the bottom of the page when she offers the question: “can any of us see beyond our own frames?”

¹¹ “As the afternoon sun moved higher so S migrated with the other children from the giant tip into the relative cool of the city streets. As she slipped warily past the plate glass of the Central Bank she was caught by the reflection of herself; matted violent hair, torn dirty slip and pale face. Momentarily transfixed she saw her mother in the face that stared back. The ensuing wave of sadness passed quickly, aided as it was by the growl of the approaching security guard...” (Writing the Self, and Others: 12).

In Writing the Self and Others I also produce my inspirational source. Here is Henry James describing a woman waiting for her father:

“She waited, Kate Crory, for her father to come in, but he kept her waiting unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him. It was at this point, however that she remained; changing her place, moving from the shabby sofa to the arm chair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once – she had tried it – the sense of the slippery and the sticky.” (Writing the Self, and Others: 13)

The attention to detail reminds me of Stewart’s injunctions to pay attention to the emerging detail. It seems amazing to me how much James crams in about the life world of this woman. We can sense in her slightly haughty distaste for her father’s chair something of her attitude towards him.

This piece has an interesting history. I was unsure about writing it and certainly about publishing it. I did produce it for a supervision group session in November 2002, but produced it late so that it had not been read properly when we met. Subsequently I erased this piece as I re worked another version of the writing, because I felt uncomfortable with its personal description of someone else. My colleague subsequently sent it back to the group with her own comments. Why was I “uncomfortable” about writing and publishing this piece? It seems to me that hesitancy might be based on the narrow line that I am treading with this type of writing: there is a risk that what I am presenting as detachment from myself is simply a colonisation of the other. This is the value of the “projection” account to which I referred earlier. In this account I assume my own feelings and thoughts into my colleague, and in this way deny her difference – this emphasises the need to check back and validate with the person being described. There seems to me to be no complete answer to this. We may know something of the other, but, even more than with ourselves, this is ambiguous. How would I know if I was denying or facilitating the difference of the other?

Part of the answer seems to lie in the way this piece came to life and was sustained. I show it to my colleague, she comments, I withdraw, she brings the piece back. The offering is tentative and the writing is available for dialogue. It seems to me that the implicit respect and consent are what validates this mode of writing in the context of action research. My colleague consents to its publication by retrieving it, she comments on it and in this way contributes to the sense making that goes with the piece. The writing involves objectification of her and she has to consent to this when working within the action research frame; put another way this is what validates it.¹² This is not the whole story though as I say above. My colleague does not “validate” what I offer against a completely known set of reasons about why she is crying in that moment. As she acknowledges in conversation she does not fully understand why she cries then. Her own

¹² There has been a recent (September 2006) flourishing of this type of writing in relation to public events. The playwright Peter Morgan has explored the limits of dramatic licence as he has portrayed events, which are private, but have public significance such as a private meeting between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair on the premiership of the country (“The Deal”), or where the personal motivations and feelings are hidden but important (“Frost/Nixon”). In this writing the author relies on published records and documents to found a fuller inquiry into the personal encounters that includes detailed descriptions of interpersonal dialogue that are fiction. The audience is helped to think the relationship between the wider and current political situation (in the case of Brown and Blair) and the personal relationship issues. Such a strategy is not unusual in fiction generally but it is more unusual to see it done with living people. If it were fed back to the protagonists and if their comments were made part of the drama then would this found a claim for the drama to be action research? It seems to me that it might well do so. Of course if they refused permission to publish then this would present the researcher with a dilemma. I submit that there would be no hard and fast answer to how to respond to such a refusal. It would depend on their grounds and also on the total situation (e.g. these are politicians living, to a considerable extent, in the public domain).

views about why she acted as she did, if they were offered, would be open to challenge or to alternate explanations. There is a gap in her understanding and it is this gap that provides a point of entry for my *writing of her*. I offer my own felt sense of her back to her.

In the example I have just given I sought to enter the field of my colleague's felt experience and to sing back what I experienced. I struggled with the language that might express this – that might be *adequate* to the experience. As I struggled I found myself describing the world as I thought it was appearing for her, occupying, as I did, an ambiguous hinterland of possible shared experience. The light is “dying”, the watchers are “patient”, and, with even more licence, the other group members start to “breathe with her”. If I paid attention sufficiently, I seemed to be saying, then I could notice what is shared between us. Did these things not provide a common ground for us? Is it the *world as it emerges* that offers the chance of connection for us – does it then emerge *for us* in some way? In my attempt to describe her world I felt the shared world as an opportunity for contact. What does this mean? Can this shared nature of existence enable us to say that we are not alone? Is to say we are alone then to fail, quite literally, to understand *our situation* in the world. Perhaps it is our mind that removes itself into a lonely vigil of oversight? While our feeling body always “knows” its partness? These kinds of questions are still alive for me now, but they were first emerging in this form back in 2002. In the next stage of my doctoral journey I came to understand identity as less about a set of ideas and concepts, in the sense of relatively fixed traits or mental frames, and more about my involvement in the world as a historic and situated being. In this next stage I was increasingly supported by Merleau-Ponty towards a new intellectual understanding of what this might involve..

Looking Ahead

What Merleau-Ponty adds to my understanding of my identity is an account of identity as an embodied habitual performance – a *style of being* that is a function of bodily engagement with the cultural and natural world. For me this brings identity out in to the light of day where it can be seen as a function of the complex situation that has historic and “in the moment” aspects. It also provides, what I found to be an enlightening account of stable pattern as well as local responsiveness in relation to identity. I am not totally unpredictable and nor is anyone else that I know. It is not as if each situation reveals a completely unique response from myself. How do I account for these familiarities and repetitions in my way of being in the world? Squaring an answer to this question with the continuing development of a more “in the world”, or “on the surface”, explanation of human being is one of the main themes of the next Chapter.

I feel as though in the period documented in this chapter I have been “pruned back” to reveal some of my deeper foundations, and that in the course of this a lot of my comfortable competency had been challenged. It seems that at this stage of my life my competency is at best a mixed blessing. There is a risk that my ability to cope with most things is itself a

barrier. How might I be decentred? Opened up to the richness of existence? Stirred afresh out of comfort and competence? Make some room for new growth, new life? I emerge from the experiences described in this chapter confused and bewildered. (I am still gripped with feelings of shame and exhaustion as I think of this period.) I approached the summer of 2003 putting one step in front of the other, but without really knowing any larger purpose. Yet, of course, this is not the whole story. I also feel that what I have shown in this chapter is that I was also preparing/being prepared. New things can only come if some space has been made ready, and this “making ready” cannot be a perfectly smooth process. What was it that then came?